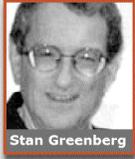


CO-EDITORS:



William Galston



Stan Greenberg



Ruy Teixeira

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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THE
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
WHITE PAPER

**HOW DEMOCRATS CAN KEEP
AND EXPAND THE SUPPORT OF THE
YOUNGER WHITE WORKING-CLASS
VOTERS WHO VOTED FOR
OBAMA IN 2008**

BY ANDREW LEVISON

While white working class voters as whole supported John McCain, there was a significant movement of younger white working-class voters to Obama. If this trend can be sustained by the Democrats in future elections, it could derail any Republican attempt to rebuild a Reagan coalition and eventually insure a stable long-term Democratic majority.

If the Democrats do not take prompt and energetic steps to support and reinforce this trend, these young voters could very easily shift back to their more traditionally pro-Republican stance within the next 18-24 months.

A TDS STRATEGY WHITE PAPER:

How Democrats Can Keep and Expand the Support of the Younger White Working-Class Voters who Voted for Obama in 2008

By Andrew Levison

There are two facts that dramatically indicate the critical urgency of this challenge for the Democratic Party:

- While white working class voters as whole supported John McCain, there was a significant movement of younger white working-class voters to Obama. If this trend can be sustained by the Democrats in future elections, it could derail any Republican attempt to rebuild a Reagan coalition and eventually insure a stable long-term Democratic majority.
- If the Democrats do not take prompt and energetic steps to support and reinforce this trend, these young voters could very easily shift back to their more traditionally pro-Republican stance within the next 18-24 months.

The stakes, therefore, are extremely high.

Looking at the overall picture from the exit polls, white working-class voters (defined as those with less than a college education) supported John McCain rather than Barack Obama by a margin of 58-40. The level of support for Obama, in fact, was not greatly different from the levels of working-class support John Kerry and Al Gore received.

But this general trend masks a critically important change. While according to a recent Pew Research Center study white working-class voters over 30 supported McCain by 60% to 38% percent in 2008, younger workers divided 50-50 (the exact percentage reported was 50% to 48%). For younger white working-class women, this level of support for Obama represented a 30 percent increase over their level of support for John Kerry in 2004. For younger white working-class men, their level of support represented a 14 percent increase over their Kerry vote (data from Democracy Corps).

This represents a very significant change for a group that has tended to vote in culturally and politically conservative ways for a number of decades. If this shift can be sustained among future cohorts of young working class voters as they reach voting age, and particularly if the pro-Democratic shift among young working class men could be brought even a small degree closer to that of women, it would gradually undermine any Republican hope of rebuilding a broad-based conservative coalition. A 60-40 split among working class voters as a whole makes them a major Republican stronghold; a split gradually trending toward 50-50 will make them a battleground.

Yet there are powerful reasons to think that this change is profoundly fragile and could be easily reversed. The very dramatic Democratic and Republican party conventions, the

There are, in general, compelling reasons to use education rather than income to define social class – a view most persuasively advocated by political demographer Ruy Teixeira. In this particular case, moreover, a definition based on education is the only one where the currently available survey data makes possible direct comparisons between younger and older white working- class voters

debates, the campaign ads and other events of the 2008 election broke through the “information bubble” of talk radio and Fox news that usually shields many working-class voters from Democratic arguments and ideas and provided them with several months of relatively intense, balanced exposure to Democratic and Republican messages. Moreover, Obama turned out to have an extraordinary personal appeal to younger voters while the financial crisis profoundly reinforced doubts about Republicans.

Now that campaign is over, however, the flow of Democratic information to working-class voters has declined once again to a trickle, most of it filtered through conservative sources like talk radio and Fox News. From now on young working-class voters will be receiving a constant stream of negative stories interpreting all of Obama’s actions as attacking the interests and values of ordinary working people. At the same time, the complex economic problems Obama confronts will not provide him with many easy opportunities to reward his new young working-class supporters.

Without a strong and coordinated Democratic effort to present these voters with an alternate perspective, it becomes very likely that their currently favorable opinions of Obama and the Democrats could very rapidly decay, declining sharply well before the 2010 elections.

In order to figure out how to retain and extend the support of these young white working-class voters, Democrats need to take two immediate steps.

First, Democrats must quickly seek to develop a more rounded, three-dimensional vision of these young workers, one that allows them to present the case for Democratic candidates and policies more effectively than they have done in the past.

Second, Democrats must begin to incorporate additional techniques and methods for better understanding and communicating with these key voters into the development of Democratic political strategy.

This TDS Strategy White Paper presents a two-part analyses that addresses both of these issues:

- I. A brief overview – “How Democrats Can Do a Better Job of Communicating with Young White Working-Class Obama Voters”
- II. A longer review – “How Ethnographic Field Studies can Contribute to the Development of Democratic Political Strategy.”

Andrew Levison is the author of two books and numerous articles on the social and political attitudes of blue collar workers and other ordinary Americans.

Part I. How Democrats Can Do a Better Job of Communicating with Young White Working-Class Obama Voters

Democrats urgently need to figure out how to more effectively communicate with young white working-class voters. But as long as this group is only defined in terms of abstract demographic categories like “non-college graduates” or “low socio-economic status voters,” they remain impossible to visualize as three-dimensional human beings.

“Non-college graduates” live and work in such a wide variety of circumstances that the term offers no clear visual image of who they are or what they do. If all one knows about a person is that they are white and have only a high school diploma, no clear and specific image of a job, home, family or community immediately comes to mind.

Back in the 1950’s, in contrast, Democrats had a fairly clear visual image of their typical working-class supporter. He was an automobile or steel worker who worked in a large factory and lived in an urban neighborhood in a northern city. He was a member of a trade union and thought of the Democrats as being the party of the “ordinary guy” or “average Joe”.

The decline of the traditional mass production industries after the 1960’s made this image increasingly obsolete, but no comparably clear image arose to replace it. Even if one looks at men and women separately, the rise of new “grey collar” and other non-factory working-class jobs has made visualizing a “typical” working-class voter in 2008 extremely difficult.

This presents a tremendous problem for all Democrats and particularly for Democratic speechwriters, advertising designers and other communications professionals. When major commercial companies are designing a new product, they will frequently create elaborate fictional profiles of their “target customers”—profiles complete with fictionalized biographies, photos, drawings, images, sketches of home furnishings and lists of other kinds of consumer products the imaginary consumers own and what they do on their weekends—all designed to assist the ad writers and others to better visualize the people who they are trying to convince to buy the new product. These profiles are often hung on the walls in ad agencies and design studios so that product and ad designers can continually refer to them as they work.

This is an area where ethnographic field studies of working-class Americans can add substantial additional insight and information to the opinion surveys and focus groups that Democrats currently use to understand political opinion. The best sociological and anthropological field research can provide precisely the integrated, three-dimensional picture of an individual or a groups’ home, work, community and attitudes that other research tools cannot.

In order to adequately visualize the working-class “target voters” they need to reach, Democrats need to have at least a half a dozen (and preferably more) distinct, fact-based profiles of both male and female workers in a range of different occupational groups and settings—in traditional blue-collar jobs like construction workers, warehouse and loading dock workers, automobile repair and service workers and “grey collar” equipment repair and maintenance workers as well as in service sector working class jobs like restaurant workers, hotel workers, janitorial workers, hospital and health care workers and lower-level sales and

clerical workers. These profiles also need to depict a number of different residential and community environments where these workers live—the rust belt, the South, the West, urban, small town etc.

At this moment, however, there is simply not sufficient ethnographic data to construct a full series of profiles of this kind. New research desperately needs to be conducted. One of the key questions such research needs to study, for example, is the reason for the significant difference between young working-class men's and women's level of support for Obama and the Dems. Opinion poll data can indicate where working-class men's and women's opinions differ, but not why their opinions differ.

As the first of these profiles, however, the available studies do make it possible for Democrats to begin the visualization process by looking at one common and particularly influential type of young working-class voter—a “worker-contractor” in the single-family home construction industry. The specific individual profiled below is actually a real person, but the characteristics noted about him tend to also be quite representative of his broader occupational and demographic group

- He is 28 years old, married with one two-year old child. He is a skilled carpenter who acts as the general contractor on some jobs and as a sub-contractor on others. In all cases he works as the head carpenter on the job and never as a hands-off supervisor.
- He has one permanent partner—who is also a close friend—and he hires another skilled carpenter he knows well when large jobs come along. He also hires one or two unskilled laborers for each project, rarely keeping them on for more than one or two jobs. When working as the general contractor on a job, everyone else he brings in to work is treated as an independent sub-contractor, bidding the job and supervising their own crew. Many are also personal friends.
- He owns \$30,000 worth of tools and equipment as well as his truck. He earns \$35,000-\$40,000 in a normal year, \$55,000 in a good year when he finds basically continuous year-round work. He keeps a separate bank account for his business, his wife does all the business bookkeeping and they file a schedule C small business tax return.
- He calls himself both “workingman” and a “small businessman” depending on the context and does not see any contradiction between these two roles. His perspective is a mixture of both identities, and varies depending on the particular issue. He does not have health insurance or a retirement plan and wishes he did. But he also wishes that hard-ass building inspectors, most zoning rules, IRS payroll tax reporting and workman's compensation paperwork would all just go away.
- He lives 20 miles outside the city limits of a large urban area on a two acre lot with a small, one story house. He calls himself “basically a country boy” (or sometimes a “redneck” when he is among friends, feeling assertive or drinking beer) although he has never actually lived in a genuinely rural area.

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- He used to do serious dirt bike racing when he was in his early 20's, but a second metal pin in his leg after another racing accident and a new-born child made him give it up. He still works with the pit crew on many weekends and goes deer hunting during the season with his father.
 - He did not attend church regularly when he was in his early 20's, except for special occasions, but he and his wife have now started to attend because, with their child leaving infancy, they feel that "kids have to be part of a church so they can learn good values while they're young."
 - He listens to rock music on the radio when he is working alone and he and his partner go to local concerts. But he also listens to country music and puts the radio on a country station whenever there are other workers around. He never gets into serious discussions about politics sitting around at lunch or at other times on the job. He just accepts "born again" Christians, Rush Limbaugh talk radio fans, troubled military veterans and a vast variety of others as all part of the normal social world of the job. He does not personally know a single liberal or firmly partisan Democrat, however. "There just aren't any of them around here," he says.
 - He has no problem with any of the African-American and Latino subcontractors he works with regularly. He has several black friends going back to his high school days and occasionally goes to after-work bars and rock concerts with them when the occasion arises. In general he prefers to hire Latino as temporary laborers rather than African Americans, however, because he considers them better workers.
 - He is basically bored by politics and pays very little attention to any political news and debates. He has voted Republican ever since he registered to vote, largely because everyone else in his circle did and because he felt that the Democrats "just always seemed crazy, like they were living in a different world." He voted for Obama this year because Obama seemed "smart", "cool" and "really ready to deal with all the problems" while McCain seemed "out of it" and "too old" (He thought Sarah Palin was also "cool"—and at the same time "pretty hot"—but he also thought she was "just not ready to run the county")

This is precisely the kind of voter that a wide range of Democrats—from communications professionals to campaign field volunteers and local candidates—all desperately need to better understand. There are many other kinds of young workers—both men and women—but this kind of voter is sufficiently common that his distinct perspective cannot be ignored.

In the short run, to prevent the Republicans from regaining this voter's support in the next 18-24 months, Dems must:

1. Develop an economic message and approach that speaks clearly and directly to this worker-contractor's particular issues and needs. A Democratic appeal cannot be just the traditional package of progressive kitchen-table

issues and trade union/populist promises spiced up with some clichés of respect for small business tacked onto the end. The approach has to authentically reflect this voter's very distinct "*both a worker and a small businessman*" world-view and offer a convincing set of policies that he sees as addressing his most pressing needs.

A successful approach along these lines will require two basic underpinnings (1) what working-class voters like to call a "philosophy"—a set of basic values and principles that will underlie the Democratic approach to government (basic values like a sensible balance between individual freedom and the common good and between individual responsibility and a social safety net) and (2) a basic narrative that explains how these basic values and principles are reflected in the presidencies of Thomas Jefferson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John Kennedy.

2. Democrats must become significantly more active participants in the local and community life of working-class America. Democratic campaign field workers and local candidates need to be present in working-class communities on an ongoing basis and not just right before elections. They need to communicate an ongoing sense of the Democrats' genuine interest in keeping these workers' support and to lay the foundation for appeals for their vote in 2010 and 2012. Democrats should also seek to continually secure statements of support from people who are already genuinely respected in the community. For working-class "country" voters, one of the most significant endorsements of 2008 was country music legend Ralph Stanley's radio commercial endorsing Obama. Democrats need to secure a steady flow of similar expressions of support to help establish and continually reinforce the perception that they are an active, accepted and legitimate part of the community.

Although the 2008 election is just over, time is already very short, and this effort has to start now. The Democrats need to have an active outreach effort to young working-class voters in operation within 6-9 months. If they wait two years, it could easily be too late.

Part II. How Ethnographic Field Studies can Contribute to the Development of Democratic Political Strategy.

Summary

1. Ethnographic field studies provide information about attitudes observed over an extended time period and in a real-world setting. This can provide a level of depth and context that cannot be extracted from polls or focus group sessions alone. Such studies can also offer an integrated vision of workers' attitudes about both the work environment and the community. David Halle's 1984 study, *America's Working Man* best exemplifies the added level of understanding well-conducted field studies of working-class America have the potential to provide.
2. Since the publication of Halle's book, however, the change in the reigning intellectual paradigm in academia—from "social class" to a tripartite framework of "class, race and gender" as overlapping modes of social stratification (a change apparent in most college course and textbook titles since the 1980's) has made it substantially more difficult for researchers to sympathetically "take the side" of working-class Americans. This is because a tripartite framework of "class, race and gender" unavoidably tends to produce a vision of white working-class men (and, to a lesser degree, white working-class women) as simultaneously victims and victimizers—"collaborators" with the system in the metaphor of "society as prison" that is popular in critical theory. This has led to a tremendous decline in the number and quality of field studies devoted to working-class Americans.
3. One valuable recent study, *Working Construction* by sociologist Kris Paap highlights the difference between the assembly line workers of the 1950's and the construction workers who have become the most distinctive occupational category within working-class America today. Many construction workers are actually "worker-contractors" who are a complex mixture of blue-collar workingman and small businessman and whose ambivalent and sometimes inconsistent social identity and outlook was much better understood (and manipulated) by conservative commentators like Rush Limbaugh than it was by progressives and the Democratic Party.
4. The ideology promulgated by the conservative media is transmitted and reinforced by the social dynamics of the construction workplace. Faced with the constant need for cooperation and teamwork, construction workers generally avoid political disagreement and simply adjust to accommodate the range of opinions that happens to exist in a work group at any given time. In this kind of opinion environment, conservative talk-show ideas that are expressed by highly opinionated workers quickly become integrated into the overall group perspective, particularly if they are not contradicted. A similar mechanism has been documented in studies of social influence in trial juries.

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5. Paralleling the Democrats' difficulty in understanding the job-related attitudes of modern working-class voters, Dems have also had difficulty visualizing working-class neighborhoods, communities, community life and attitudes. Aaron Fox's ethnographic study "Real Country" delineates the way in which working-class culture and "country" culture have intersected, replacing the northern, urban blue-collar "average Joe" of the 1950's with hard-working "ordinary folks" whose culture is a complex fusion of working-class and country elements.
 6. Joe Bagaent's highly personal, journalistic study "Deer Hunting With Jesus" details the extensive degree to which Democrats and progressives are simply not seen an organic part of working-class communities and are very often perceived as hostile outsiders rather than friends and neighbors. This represents a critical problem for Democrats in their efforts to communicate with working-class voters.
 7. The academic community does not currently provide adequate support for young ethnographers who wish to do socially relevant research on working-class America. This research is of such substantial importance for the design of Democratic strategy that the Democratic Party and the trade unions should consider commissioning, subsidizing and publishing such studies themselves.

Part II. How Ethnographic Field Studies can Contribute to the Development of Democratic Political Strategy

For many years, the more methodologically sophisticated polling organizations that study social and political opinion—notably Pew and Democracy Corps—have supplemented standard polling with tightly integrated focus group research.

The benefits are quite visible. The focus groups provide an independent confirmation that the yes-no answers to survey questions correctly reflect what the respondents actually mean to convey and provide a sense of the passion and intensity with which opinions are held. Focus groups also give some initial clues to the way in which specific opinions are cognitively structured and linked. Democracy Corps' studies of working-class voters in Macomb county Michigan this spring, summer and fall provide a particularly good example of the additional insights the integration of polling and focus groups provides.

Ethnographic field studies can make a similar “add-on” contribution. They provide information about attitudes observed over an extended time period and in a real-world setting. This can provide a level of depth and context that cannot be extracted from polls or focus group sessions alone. Such studies can also offer an integrated vision of workers' attitudes about both the work environment and the community

The additional level of insight ethnographic field studies provide is dramatically illustrated by what is generally considered one of—if not the—best ethnographic field study of working-class Americans since the 1970's—David Halle's 1984 study of workers in a New Jersey chemical plant—published under the title “America's Working Man.”

Halle's study was extraordinarily detailed .He spent 7 years from 1974 to 1981 observing and socializing with his subjects on the job and in their homes as well as at taverns, racetracks, sporting events and fishing trips. His analysis of working conditions on the job included highly detailed sketches of work areas, control panels, plant equipment, work flow and work procedures while his analysis of the communities where the workers lived included extensive photos of individual houses and detailed maps of specific streets and neighborhoods. As Halle noted, it was only through such sustained and intense participant-observation that he was able to listen to workers talking casually and spontaneously about politics and social issues in a variety of different settings and over an extended period of time.

What Halle found was that the workers he studied actually had three distinct social identities that were operative at different times—one on the job, a second in the community and a third as citizens and Americans.

On the job, Halle found that the difference between the blue collar jobs in the plant and those of professional and managerial employees was fundamental. The working-class jobs were distinguished by four factors. They were primarily manual or at least physical in some sense (as the London Economist recently put it, in the modern economy, working-class people are all those who “either work with their hands or stand on their feet all day”). In addition, the jobs tended to be repetitive and dull, offer little chance of upward mobility and be closely supervised.

Halle found that the workers whose jobs exhibited these characteristics shared a distinct social identity within the plant. They defined themselves as “working men” (sometimes “working guys” or “working stiffs”) and shared a clear sense of group solidarity. They were firmly pro-union and deeply distrustful of big business.

In the community, on the other hand, the workers Halle studied tended to call themselves “middle class” and saw themselves as suspended “in the middle” between the rich above them and poor minorities below.

This perception accurately reflected the reality of their everyday lives. With the rise of the automobile, the predominantly working-class urban neighborhoods that had surrounded the industrial areas of major northern cities had increasingly given way to more occupationally and socially heterogeneous suburban communities. As Halle noted, on one typical street where his subjects lived there were homeowners with the following occupations: a factory worker, a gas station owner, an electrician, a delivery driver, an independent truck driver, a storekeeper and a restaurant owner. Halle noted that “there is little reason for blue-collar workers to view these areas as working-class” and he used photographs to illustrate that there was “no such thing as a blue-collar house”. Since the earnings of the blue-collar and the other families also overlapped it was entirely reasonable that the workers Halle studied tended to see themselves as “middle class” or “middle American” when thinking in terms of their homes and communities.

(Halle also discerned a third social identity among his subjects—a national identity as Americans. This was a populist identity that counterposed “the people” to big business and the politicians who “ran the show.”)

Halle’s meticulous research offered clear explanations for a variety of apparent anomalies that arose in standard opinion research (such as why working-class respondents sometimes defined themselves as “middle class” and at other times as “working-class” or “workingmen” on surveys).

More important, it provided an explanation for how the working-class voters of that era could support Republican politicians like Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan in some elections while also continuing to support traditional new deal Democrats for many other offices (Halle’s answer was that in certain contexts and situations the workers’ community identity as “middle class” or “middle Americans” was activated while in others their self-definition as “workingmen” was operative).

“America’s Working Man” was the most impressively detailed ethnographic study of American workers up until the time of its publication. But ironically, rather than sparking an increase in such research, it marked the beginning of a massive decline. The chart below shows the dramatic fall-off that occurred in ethnographic studies of the American working-class after 1985.

Ethnographic Field Studies of Working-class Americans

(Note: where possible, studies are grouped by when the research was conducted, not by the publication date. Further details (i.e. authors) are provided in the appendix)

	1970–1985	1986–2000	2000–Present
Worksite Studies	America's Working Man Manufacturing Consent Cultures of Solidarity Longshoremen: Community and Resistance on the Brooklyn waterfront Work on the Waterfront Chaos on the Shop Floor Royal Blue On High Steel A year in the Life of a Factory Blue Collar <i>The Cocktail Waitress</i>	One Sunset a Week Cutting into the Meatpacking Line <i>Talking About Machines</i> The Union Makes Us Strong Working the Waterfront <i>Kitchens: the culture of restaurant work</i> <i>Dishing It Out: Waitresses in NJ</i>	Working Construction
Community	Blue Collar Community Blue Collar Aristocrats Hard Living on Clay Street Norman Street Ways With Words Working-class Heroes	Getting Even	Real Country Deer Hunting with Jesus
High School – Working-class Youth	Starting Out Learning Capitalist Culture Jocks and Burnouts Working Class without Work New Jersey Dreaming	Class Reunion	
Plant Closings, Joblessness	The Magic City Rusted Dreams	Farewell to The Factory The End of The Line	
Racial Attitudes	Canarsie The Inheritance	Racial Situations Working-class White	The Color of Class

It is worth noting that in the specific category of workplace studies the decline in studies of blue-collar workers is even greater than the chart initially suggests. In the 1970-1985 period there was only one study of “pink” or “grey” collar, rather than traditional blue-collar, work environments. From 1985 to the present, on the other hand, fully half the studies have been of “new” working-class job environments. While studies of the “new” working-class job environments are important, they should logically supplement rather than supplant new studies of traditional working-class work environments that are still major employers.

What accounts for this startling change?

Lois Weis, author of “Working-class without Work” and “Class Reunion”—two substantial ethnographic studies of working-class youth—notes the following:

Discussion of the working-class and of social class in general has been tempered if not altogether ignored since the 1980’s as scholarship targeted more specifically to issues of race and/or gender as well as to broader issues of representation has taken hold. Such scholarship, while critically important, has often delved into issues of race, gender or representation irrespective of a distinct social class referent, much as earlier scholarship on social class ignored gender and race...

...paralleling the eclipse of the working-class in prime time television (in the 1980’s) academics simultaneously participated in the production of our collective ignorance around issues of social class.

In fact, the change was not simply a decline in attention. The studies of the 1970 and early 1980s were substantially motivated by a desire to delve below the clichés of “Archie Bunker” and “hard-hat conservative workers” and to sympathetically try to understand the forces that were motivating “the white backlash” and resistance to woman’s rights. But the change in the reigning intellectual paradigm in academia—from “social class” to a tripartite framework of “class, race and gender” as overlapping modes of social stratification (a change apparent in most college course and textbook titles since the 1980’s) made it substantially more difficult to analyze white working-class Americans sympathetically.

The reason is that using a tripartite framework of “class, race and gender” unavoidably tends to produce a vision of white working-class men as simultaneously victims and victimizers—victims of class injustice and perpetrators of racial and gender injustice. In the “society as prison” metaphor popular in critical social thought since the 1980’s white working-class men seem to naturally fit into the role of quislings or “stoolies”—collaborators given special privileges by the guards in return for helping to maintain the status quo.

Once within the tripartite framework, it is hard to escape from the consequences of this kind of cognitive schema, a fact which the following more pointed example makes clear—in the same way that as it is much harder to make a sympathetic case for pornographic literature (based, for example, on the first amendment or the literary merits of D.H. Lawrence) if the topic of a debate is defined as “pornographic literature, aggression and violence toward

women” rather than simply “pornographic literature,” it is similarly much more difficult to develop a sympathetic approach to the analysis of white working-class men if the defining framework is “class, race and gender” rather than simply “social class.” The underlying categorization framework exerts a profound “context effect” that shapes and constrains the subsequent discussion.

The underlying problem is that social scientists educated since the 1980’s have no personal experience with any of the prior forms of working-class consciousness. None have personal memories of the dedicated and passionate union organizers of the 1930’s and only a few can remember the solid working-class “union men” and “new-Deal democrats” of the 1950’s. With a personal historical memory that does not extend back beyond the “white backlash” years, it is understandable why, to them, the attitudes of white working-class men should appear to be fixed and unalterable results of their social position rather than more fluid and potentially malleable opinions shaped and conditioned by the contingencies of recent U.S. history.

Nonetheless, although there are only a handful of ethnographic studies that have been conducted in recent years, two of them are of exceptional depth and utility—Kris Paap’s “Working Construction—Why Working-class Men Put Themselves—and the Labor Movement—in Harm’s Way” and Aaron Fox’s “Real Country—Music and Language in Working-class Culture.” Both studies provide quite significant insight into the reality of contemporary working-class workplace and community life.

Construction Work and Workers

Construction work is of unique importance in contemporary working-class culture. With the decline of factory labor in industries like steel and auto, Construction work has become not only the most important locus of classical working-class jobs but also the most important single center of the distinct occupational traditions and value systems of working-class America. Although as many or more blue-collar American men may work in warehouses and loading docks as on construction sites, the quintessential “working-class” American today is the construction worker.

Kris Paap spent two and a half years, not simply observing construction workers as a sociologist, but actually working as a full-time union carpenter on three different kinds of construction sites. As a woman in a male-dominated industry, this provided her with an absolutely unique perspective.

One key insight that actually working in construction rather than simply observing it provided Paap was something that anyone who has actually worked on construction sites understands—that the powerful sense of group solidarity and identity as a worker that construction workers feel—a deep sense of “us vs. them” membership—is rooted in the raw, literally physical sense of strength and mastery that comes from years of hard physical labor—a kind

of strength and endurance that is utterly different than the kind of muscularity developed in a health club or using an exercise machine . As Paap says:

“I was aware of a “vitality,” a very physical joie de vivre that emerged from the collective interactions and implicit cultural celebrations of what it meant to be a working man among working men. Put most simply, I had “sensations” of being masculine, manly and a man among men and that these sensations were positive.” (p.118)

As Paap notes, men do not consciously perceive this sensation as being specifically “masculine.” Rather, it is felt as being simply “strong and manly”, in contrast to weak and “wimpy” desk-bound workers. It is an insight that explains a great deal of the powerful sense of distance and alienation that many workers feel toward middle class liberals and political candidates who try to communicate with them. Deep down, many feel—in an intensely literal and physical sense—that “guys like that will never understand how me and my buddies really feel.”

Paap worked in a variety of settings—large scale building projects where large numbers of carpenters’ worked together to build massive plywood forms for pouring wet concrete, commercial buildings (retail malls, restaurants) where the carpenters’ main task was to nail up the vertical wall studs and 4x8 panels of sheetrock that comprised the walls and smaller, single family home residential jobs that required fine “trim” carpentry.

One of Paap’s central concerns was to understand why construction workers seem surprisingly supportive of their employers and identify with their interests instead of seeing them as “bosses” whose demands should be resisted. She quickly identifies one critical factor:

Union employers have the ability to send workers back to the union hall (that is, to lay them off) without providing any warning or justification beyond the statement that “work is slow”...[This] creates a tremendous vulnerability—essentially a total lack of protection from arbitrary firing—for the workers who are thus dependent to a greater and lesser degree upon the goodwill of their supervisors. The pressure is on to prove oneself as a good, worthy and cost-efficient worker. (p. 6)

She later adds:

...because of the transitional nature of worksites, the need for [management] goodwill is significant...construction workers no sooner start working on one job than they worry where the next will come from. Thus the goodwill of one’s employer and the ability to “get on steady” with an employer (be retained across building projects) are no small matters. (p.34)

Paap’s subsequent analysis then attempts to trace how this structural insecurity underlies and generates many of the racial and sexual attitudes construction workers display.

A second factor (one that Paap also notes), however, is that in construction, unlike in large factories, there are a network of close and personal social relationships between workers and supervisors on various levels. As Herbert Appelbaum wrote in his 1982 study, "Royal Blue—the Culture of Construction Workers".

Many [construction workers] are friends or drinking buddies with their foremen. Construction workers do not view foremen as instruments of all-powerful corporations as might be the case in the auto or chemical industries. [Moreover]...Each foreman or superintendent tends to set up a circle of friends or relatives who become a labor pool from which he hires...a journeyman who expects to work steadily must make himself known to as wide a circle of foremen and superintendents as he can. (p.27)

This is powerfully reinforced by the relationships that develop between the myriad of contractors and subcontractors who have to work closely together on a construction job. As Applebaum says:

Subcontracting also leads to family-like relationships between the general contractor and his family of subcontractors. Many general contractors use the same group of subcontractor firms over the years. General contractors like to repeat with good subs. If the relationship is continuous over a protracted period, the general contractor and his subs will often develop a close personal relationship. They will socialize and engage in recreational activities together. Similarly the workers will come to know each other and will work well in the field. Many of them will become close friends. (P. 116)

When one adds to this the powerful sense of teamwork and collaboration that is a fundamental part of construction work, it becomes clear why even unionized construction workers do not respond to their bosses with the "us vs. them" perspective of union factory workers in the 1950's.

The same considerations are even more powerfully relevant in the vast non-union sector of construction that is responsible for most individual single family homes and small commercial buildings in the South, West, Southwest and other areas of the country. This sector is entirely comprised of small contractors and subcontractors connected by personal relationships and word-of-mouth reputation. This vast web of small contractors includes not just electricians and plumbers but bricklayers, stucco contractors, insulation, sheetrock and heating and air conditioning contractors, grading and foundation contractors, paving installers, trim carpenters, welders, glaziers, roofers, stonemasons, cabinetmakers, landscapers and security and home entertainment system installers. Even after construction is complete there remains a still-vast network of lawn and garden contractors, equipment repair technicians, exterminators and other providers of ongoing services, all of whom work as independent contractors rather than salaried employees.

Many of these small contractors and subcontractors work alone. Others hire a small number of steady helpers—often family members and relatives—and on other occasions employ short-term laborers for particular jobs.

Republicans would like to imagine that these “worker-contractors” are a new class of typical Rotary Club/Chamber of Commerce small businessmen like the traditional Republican real estate brokers and used car dealers. But, in fact, these “worker-contractors” are quite different. As Joe Bageant says in his keenly observed book, *Deer Hunting with Jesus*:

A self-employed electrical contractor is not a small business person or an entrepreneur. He is a skilled worker whom construction companies refuse to hire because they do not want to pay social security or workers comp or health insurance for employees. Instead they contract with him and he assumes the cost of those programs and takes orders from a manager and shuffles through the farce that he is one of America’s ever-growing crop of dynamic, self employed entrepreneurs. (p. 12)

Bageant is correct that these worker-contractors do not act or think like typical small businessmen. But neither do they think like the unionized automobile or steelworkers of the 1950’s. Their perspective is a mixture of working-class and small business views that are not completely integrated but rather compete and interact in complex ways. In many respects, their ambivalent social identity and political outlook is cognitively similar to the kind of ambivalence that Halle found between the worksite and community views of his working-class subjects.

Democrats have generally taken little cognizance of the distinct social outlook of these worker-contractors and have continued to appeal to them using the language and rhetoric of the 1950’s. Throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s the dominant Democratic approach was to repeat traditional, trade-union/populist slogans and promises even though it was becoming increasingly apparent that these messages were growing more and more remote and unresponsive to the day-to-day problems and needs of these new “worker-contractors” as they themselves perceived them .

Conservatives like Rush Limbaugh, on the other hand, had a much clearer understanding of this sector of working-class America. In a recent *New York Times* profile, Limbaugh explicitly credited his success to his ability to act as a “small business advisor” to these blue-collar small businessmen, offering them a mixture of cultural conservatism and simplistic small business philosophy in a language they easily recognized and understood.

In fact, while Democratic advocates often seemed like very alien, white-collar and college-educated outsiders—the kind of people who workers immediately recognize as those who “never did a hard day’s work in their life”)—not only Rush Limbaugh but Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity and many of the other talk radio hosts actually seemed like very familiar figures to their working-class audience. It is only necessary to visualize Limbaugh, O’Reilly and Hannity dressed in short-sleeved white shirts, wearing very clean, undented hard hats on their heads and holding clipboards in their hands in order to imagine them giving orders on a construction site. They all have the very distinct, “pushy”, “no nonsense”, “take-charge” style and approach of typical supervisors and general construction managers.

This influence of the conservative talk-show hosts was then reinforced and amplified by the small group dynamics of the construction industry. More than in many other fields, construction requires teamwork and collaboration among the various craftsmen involved—a teamwork that must be constantly renegotiated as new sub-contractors cycle through a construction project.

As a result there is a widespread attitude of “go along to get along” in the construction industry. Political or social arguments are generally avoided and the group simply readjusts to accommodate the range of opinions that exists at any given time. When a strict “born-again” Christian joins the group, for example, other workers temporarily cease swearing or making jokes about the topless bars. When minority workers are present, racially prejudiced workers temporarily refrain from making derogatory comments.

In this kind of opinion environment, conservative talk-show ideas that are expressed by highly opinionated workers simply become integrated into the overall group perspective. Workers who disagree are much more likely to simply mumble “whatever” and wander off rather than to initiate a political debate.

In previous eras, these conservative ideas would not have remained unchallenged. In the 1930’s a group of workers eating lunch would have often included an intense and passionate union organizer energetically preaching the gospel of solidarity and union brotherhood. In the 1950’s such a group would often have a good “union man,” ready to argue in favor of his local and defend the Democratic Party as the party of “the working man”.

Today, in contrast, there are no such ideological counterweights, and the result has been evident in the one-sided dominance of conservative ideas in working-class America since the 1980’s. Progressives and Democrats frequently puzzle over why conservative ideas have such sway over groups like construction workers but, in a nutshell, this is the basic answer, one that has always been as clearly evident to observers “in the field” as it has been invisible to those outside.

Working-class Community and Culture

The value of ethnographic field studies is not limited to the examination of the worksite, however. Such studies can provide equal insight into the profound changes that have occurred in the neighborhood and community life of working-class Americans. Since the 1950’s, the decline of the traditional factory work environment has been paralleled by two changes in working-class community life—first the decline in the urban ethnic neighborhoods that were once the cultural center of working-class America and their replacement by occupationally heterogeneous lower-middle class suburbs and then—coming in the 1980’s

It should be noted that, while this discussion of the unique characteristics of “worker-contractors” has been limited to construction workers, many of the same social dynamics reappear in many other modern working-class environments. Recent TV “reality” shows that depict working-class work environments—like Discovery Channel’s *Deadliest Catch* (about crab fishermen), *LA Chopper* (about custom machine shops that make specialty motorcycles), *Dirty Jobs* (which profiles a wide range of working-class occupations) and similar TV shows that depict metalworking shops, long-haul truckers, tattoo parlors and other blue collar work environments—all reveal very similar patterns to those found in contract construction.

and 1990's -- the subsequent economic devastation of many of these same communities by plant closings and deindustrialization.

Several well-conducted ethnographic studies have examined the effect of plant closings on working-class communities in Ohio, Wisconsin and New Jersey. They include Gregory Pappas' *The Magic City*, Kathryn Dudley's *The End of the Line* and Ruth Milkman's *Farewell to the Factory*. Pappas' study presents the most finely observed and detailed description of the day-to-day effects of unemployment and the struggle to adjust while Milkman's study provides the best description of the unique and powerful working-class culture that existed in the factory life of her subjects and the profound psychological effects of its disappearance on the unemployed workers.

What have been much less studied, on the other hand, are the vast range of working-class communities and areas outside the older industrial cities of the Northern "Rust Belt." Even though such "non-rust belt" communities have been a major arena for the struggle between Democrats and Republicans for the loyalties of working-class Americans since the Reagan era, many Democrats still cannot even form a coherent mental image of what such communities are like.

Part of the problem is that without such vivid symbols as the massive automobile factories of 1950's Detroit or the steel mills of Youngstown, Ohio to orient the observer, the communities where the more dispersed working-class jobs of today are located are harder to visualize.

One perceptive analyst of this part of working-class America is Joe Bageant, author of the 2006 book, *Deer Hunting with Jesus*. Born and raised in the working-class town of Winchester, Virginia, Bageant left the town and region as a young man and then returned in 2000, seeking to study and then sympathetically interpret his former home and neighbors to liberals and Democrats for whom it is largely an enigma.

As Bageant says:

Winchester is foremost a working-class town...you can make light bulbs at the GE plant, you can make styrene mop buckets at Rubbermaid or you can "bust cartons", "stack product" and cashier at Wall Mart or Home Depo. But whatever you do, you're likely to do it as a "team assembler" at a plant or as a cashier standing on a rubber mat with a scanner in your paw. And you're gonna do it for a working man's wage—for about \$16,000 a year if you are a cashier, \$26,000 if you are one of those assemblers.

Yet this place from which and about which I am writing could be any of thousands of communities across the United States. It is an unacknowledged parallel world to that of educated urban liberals—the world that blindsided them in 2004 and the one they need to come to understand....(p.3)

Along with the relatively insulated small town communities like Winchester, another major area where working-class Americans live today is in the vast number of relatively nondescript "shallow rural" communities that encircle all major American cities and secondary urban areas.

The most perceptive observer of this distinctly working-class environment is Aaron Fox, an anthropologist and ethnomusicologist who, beginning in the early 1990's, became deeply involved over a period of 14 years, personally as well as academically, with the people and communities around Lockhart, Texas, located on the outskirts of Austin.

As he says:

People choose to live here, "*out the country*" as they say, limping their trucks and used car lot specials thirty-five miles each way to Austin, Urbana, Savannah, Meridian and so many other cities around America. If you stood beside the state highway, you'd see them slipping back out to its margins at sunset, back out for another night of beer drinking, cigarette smoking, music playing, slow dancing, talk-heavy sociability in those windowless beer joints that line the road, shielding their patrons from the gaze of cops and passersby...

...to the stranger this is a place to pass through quickly and quietly, those fences and dogs and windowless beer joint walls telling the outsider to keep on moving, following the signs to the famous barbecue joint in town. ..

...unmistakably these are working-class people, too painfully thin or overweight or muscled or bent or broken to be any other kind, perfumed with cigarettes and beer, still sweaty from the day's labor or dressed-up in Chinese-made western-style clothes from the Wal-Mart. (p.80)

He then offers a more detailed description of the areas' very distinctly working-class character.

Most of Lockhart's working-class citizens are not farmers or employed directly in agriculture. A significant number travel to work in Austin, San Marcos, and San Antonio, where wages for both skilled and unskilled labor are higher and jobs more plentiful. For men this means jobs as truck drivers, electricians, factory and construction workers, and state and federal employees (e.g. road maintenance workers, postmen). For women this means jobs as nurse's aides, cleaners, waitresses, school bus drivers and clerical workers and assembly jobs in the high-tech factories of south Austin. The local economy includes a number of small manufacturers...More stable, if dirty and dangerous, jobs exist in the oil and agricultural services sectors (drilling equipment maintenance, feed lots and trucking). Many men operate informal small businesses in trucking, auto repair, or the building trades ...many women supplement family income with transient work as barmaids, supermarket checkers, waitresses, and cleaners. In a pinch, as in the case of an illness in the family, a divorce or a breakup, or the loss of a business, minimum wage jobs at convenience stores and fast food restaurants are a frequent resort. (p.66)

Fox was not just an anthropologist. A professional country musician, he was deeply involved in the culture of “real country” music in Lockhart and across West Texas. Over a period of years he performed and spent his time in the neighborhood honky-tonk bars that are the central social clubs and neighborhood institutions in the community, the location around which much of social life revolves.

Fox describes the way the people he was observing defined themselves and their social identity—a self-definition that is widespread not only in the South and West, but in all regions of the country and in working-class communities across America

“Most considered themselves to be “middle class” or “working people” in the pervasive language of America’s post-war class compromise....For most of these people, however, “country” was the clearest and most resonant term with which they summarized their political and cultural identity as hard-working and underpaid manual laborers, as prototypical independent and free Americans and as members of a functional local community. The phrase “we’re just country people” recurs frequently on my tapes and in my notebooks...“Country” simultaneously named the real and imagined place where they lived....

...tomorrows exhausting shift at the plant—or the nursing home or driving the school bus—is the looming horizon of “the real” toward which working-class Texans constantly look...but one can detect the faint outlines of an imagined paradise... a “rural” past both distant and close, both mythical and clearly remembered...(p.32)

As Fox perceptively explains in his study, country music is actually the unifying thread and major repository of modern working-class culture, even in northern states and urban areas. It expresses a distinctly working-class philosophy and outlook on life and happiness—a set of attitudes about work and family, about the meaning of being a “man” or a “woman” and the distinct fabric of dreams and disappointments, triumphs and regrets that arise from a culture deeply rooted in hard work and economic limitation. This is why since the 1960’s country music has completely transcended its original rural and Southern roots to become a basic part of the overall national culture.

Fox does not directly examine the way in which politics is understood and processed in this culture, but Joe Bageant, on the other hand, considers this question in detail. One of his key insights in this regard is the fact that Republicans are familiar and active participants in local working-class community life while liberals and Democrats are not.

As he says:

Republicans everyday lives seem naturally woven into the fabric of the community in a way that the everyday lives of the left have not been since the great depression... working-class people encounter Republicans face-to-face at churches, all-you-can-eat spaghetti fund-raisers, fraternal organizations

like the elks club and local small businesses....The GOP has a huge number of grassroots operatives. They turn up everywhere—at city council meetings and in the letters column of local newspapers...the nationwide grassroots network of zealous conservatives...recruits manpower for the entire GOP. At the humble level of the small towns, local candidates are raised and groomed for state and national office...and it is from these local grassroots GOP business-based cartels that the army of campaign volunteers, political activists and spokesmen springs. (p.86)

Bagaent offers a vivid portrait of one of these Republican grass-roots operatives:

On a evening like this one you find people like Laurita Barr drinking a few beers with the proles at the [local] tavern...Laurita is one of the town's bigger – but by no means biggest – landlords, with two or three hundred residential units, many of them in the blighted North End. And she is of course a realtor...

...Laurita, age fifty, wears sharp business suites during the day and sports Max Studio and Nordy's casual afterwork wear...She runs the family real estate and rental business like a machine. "I do not fool around. The eviction process begins the minute they are late enough on the rent to start the paperwork" she says taking a sip of Sam Adams...

...She is a twenty-four hour-a-day Republican operative and enforcer. Along with her ceaseless activism in city hall against tenant's rights and property taxes ...she also spends some bar-time bad-mouthing progressive politics and anything remotely related to the Democratic Party. Which is what she is doing this June evening. (p.88)

Bagaent's observations form a critical foundation for any Democratic strategy to contest Republican dominance of working-class America. So long as Democrats are essentially invisible in the day to day life of the local community, the battle is largely lost before it can even begin.

Conclusions

1. Since the 1980's a new type of working-class voter has emerged—one who is significantly different than the traditional image of the industrial factory worker. He or she is (or works for) a worker-contractor with a complex, ambivalent occupational identity and who identifies to a substantial degree with "country" rather than traditional working-class culture.
2. To successfully appeal to this new kind of working-class voter, Democrats need to create a substantially revised economic narrative and not just a mixture of traditional trade union/populist appeals with some additional initiatives and support for small business hastily tacked on. Democrats will

have to develop an approach that sympathetically embraces the social outlook of these hard-working worker/small businessmen and provides a coherent set of solutions to the real problems these workers face, framed in terms of an economic philosophy with which they can sincerely agree.

3. Dems will also have to find a way to appeal to “country” voters or “ordinary folks”, in a framework that—without sacrificing core democratic values—working-class voters themselves perceive to be an authentic and genuine adaptation of the Democratic message to their distinct culture and philosophy.
4. The development of a convincing message and appeal to working-class voters requires an approach that integrates workers complex identities as both workers and small businessmen and their overlapping social identities on the job and in the community. This is a task that requires the kind of information and insight that can only be obtained from extended ethnographic field studies.

Obama has unleashed great energy and dedication among college-age youth but the academic community does not currently provide adequate support for young ethnographers who wish to do socially relevant research on working-class Americans. Since universities do not provide the necessary support for this kind of research, the Democratic Party and the trade unions should consider commissioning, subsidizing and publishing such studies themselves. Considering the hundreds of millions of dollars that were spent on advertising in 2008, an investment of just a fraction of one percent could subsidize the creation of a half a dozen or even a dozen serious ethnographic studies that would dramatically enhance our knowledge of working-class voters and working-class America. This knowledge will be of particular importance for better understanding the younger working class voters who moved in a pro-Democratic direction during the 2008 elections.

Appendix 1 – Ethnographic Field Studies of Working-Class America – Including Titles and Authors

	1970- 1985	1986-2000	2000-Present
Worksite	<p>America's Working Man David Halle (fieldwork - 1974-1981)</p> <p>Manufacturing Consent Michael Burawaoy (1974-1975)</p> <p>Cultures of Solidarity Rick Fantasia (1975-1976)</p> <p>Longshoremen: Community and Resistance on the Brooklyn waterfront William Difazio (1985)</p> <p>Work on the Waterfront William Finlay (1984-1986)</p> <p>Chaos on the Shop Floor Tom Juravich (1985)</p> <p>Royal Blue</p> <p>On High Steel</p> <p>A year in the Life of a Factory Maynard Seider (1773)</p> <p>Blue Collar Charles Spenser (1977)</p> <p>The Cocktail Waitress Mann and Spradley (1975)</p> <p>One Sunset a Week –Coal Miner</p>	<p>George Vecesy (1974) Cutting into the Meatpacking Line Deborah Fink (1998)</p> <p>Talking About Machines (Xerox repairmen) Julian Orr (1996)</p> <p>The Union Makes Us Strong (Longshoremen) David Wellman (1995)</p> <p>Working the Waterfront Gilbert Mers (1998)</p> <p>Kitchens: the culture of restaurant work Gary Fine (1996)</p> <p>Dishing It Out:Waitresses in NJ Greta Paules (1987)</p>	<p>Working Construction Kris Paap</p>

<p>Community</p>	<p>Blue Collar Community William Cornblum (1970)</p> <p>Blue Collar Aristocrats E.E. LeMasters (1967-1972)</p> <p>Hard Living on Clay Street Joseph Howell (1970-1971)</p> <p>Norman Street Ida Susser (1975-1976)</p> <p>Ways With Words Shirley Bryce Heath (1969-1978)</p> <p>Getting Even Sally Engle Merry (1980-1984)</p>	<p>Working-class Heros Maria Kafalas (1993-1998)</p>	
<p>High School – Working-class Youth</p>	<p>Starting Out Steinitz and Solomon (1980-1982)</p> <p>Learning Capitalist Culture Douglas Foley (1973-1987)</p> <p>Jocks and Burnouts Penelope Eckert (1980-1984)</p> <p>Working Class without Work Lois Weis (1985-1986)</p>	<p>New Jersey Dreaming Sherry Ortner (1992-1994)</p> <p>Class Reunion Lois Weis (2000-2001)</p>	

<p>Plant Closings and Unemployment</p>	<p>The Magic City Gregory Pappas (1981-1984)</p> <p>Rusted Dreams Bensman and Lynch (1978-1982)</p>	<p>Farewell to The Factory Ruth Milkman (1986-1991)</p> <p>The End of The Line Kathryn Marie Dudley (1989-1990)</p>	
<p>Racial Attitudes</p>	<p>Canarsie Jonathan Rieder (1975-1977)</p> <p>The inheritance Samuel Feldman</p>	<p>Racial Situations John Hartigan Jr. (1992-1994)</p> <p>Working-class White Monica McDermott (1996-1998)</p>	<p>The Color of Class Kirby Moss (2003)</p>