

*Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority*

THE DEMOCRATIC  
**strategist**



**TDS STRATEGY MEMO:**

**DEMOCRATIC STRATEGISTS ARE ASKING THE WRONG  
QUESTION ABOUT THE WHITE WORKING CLASS**

BY  
ANDREW LEVISON



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## DEMOCRATIC STRATEGISTS ARE ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION ABOUT THE WHITE WORKING CLASS

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If you were a Democratic political strategist with a multi-million dollar budget for opinion research about the white working class, which question would you want to investigate?

1. How can Democrats convince the white working class to vote Democratic?
2. How can Democrats identify a distinct, persuadable sector of the white working class and then convince members of that specific group to vote Democratic?

The second question is obviously far more practical and more likely to lead to useful political strategies than the first. After all, in 2008 rough estimates suggest that around 40% of “less than college white voters” voted Democratic. This then declined to around 36% in 2012, 31% in 2016 and then rebounded slightly to 33% in 2020. Other more precise definitions of the term “working class” produce a somewhat higher but still similar pattern of results.<sup>1</sup>

If Democrats could simply regain the white working class vote share that they won in 2008, this would be adequate to win many elections that Dems now lose. As a result it is not necessary for Democrats to try to win a large majority of all white working class voters and certainly not to try to win passionate Trump supporters. It is just necessary to regain perhaps 10-15% of the white working class vote that once voted Democratic and now goes Republican.<sup>2</sup>

*The problem, however, is that virtually the entire Democratic strategic discussion in the media today asks the first question above rather than the second.*

One dramatic example is the current debate about the white working class versus a “new” coalition of People of Color and pro-Democratic college educated whites. The debate, which has flowed from the New York Times, The Atlantic and the New Republic to a range of progressive blogs, Substacks and other media, has pitted leading political data analysts like Nate Cohn, Ron Brownstein, Tom Edsall, Ruy Teixeira, David Shor and others against various advocates of the “new coalition” strategy.

The debate has ranged from arguments for and against emphasizing the Sun belt rather than the Rust Belt, for emphasizing infrequent, irregular voters rather than consistent voters and young voters rather than older voters but as Ron Brownstein notes, these debates are basically

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*“...a proxy for democrats central demographic debate—whether Democrats place more priority on recapturing non-college educated whites or on maximizing turnout among their more recent coalition of young people racial minorities and college educated white voters, particularly women.”<sup>3</sup>*

(Note: this new coalition is often inaccurately described by its advocates as including “people of color, youth, women and college educated liberals” – an impressive list but one that if added together without removing the enormous overlaps between the various groups would represent around 140 percent to 150 percent of the electorate. When the “new coalition” is more accurately defined as “People of Color Who Vote Democratic Plus Non-Working class Whites Who Vote Democratic (a category that automatically includes within it non-working class whites who are young, female, college-educated, liberal, progressive, gay, trans, urban, coastal, student, woke, hip, Bernie-Bro and post-modern),” it sounds smaller and substantially less impressive).

When the debate becomes more specifically focused on whether the support of white working class voters can be won, arguments are then posed over whether white working people actually pay attention to Democrats’ specific policy proposals or if extreme policy positions actually do profoundly antagonize them.

These debates echo long standing intra-Democratic arguments that have been fought again and again since the 1970’s: For example, “can white working people’s support be won by emphasizing economic “kitchen table” issues and avoiding social issues or alternatively by moderating liberal stances and offering “Republican lite” positions on such topics.” Since Donald Trump became a candidate in 2016 a more recent debate has been whether white working class Trump voters are primarily motivated by legitimate economic discontents or by racial resentment and the loss of “white privilege.”

***What all these debates have in common, however, is that they are focused on the first question above rather than the second. They discuss “The White Working Class” as if it were an entirely homogeneous group and do not seek to distinguish distinct persuadable and non-persuadable sectors.***

This tendency to treat the white working class as an entirely homogeneous group comes in three variations. The simplest is the popular stereotype that describes literally “all” white working people as racists and right wing extremists. A more sophisticated version views white working people as all basically similar in outlook but as arrayed along a linear scale from less to more extreme.<sup>4</sup> A third view is based on studies of “political moderates.” These studies point out that this group actually includes people with widely differing, idiosyncratic opinions many of which are not in the slightest degree moderate (e.g., one person is passionate about ending abortion but indifferent to illegal immigration while another is the opposite). When these distinct individuals’ extremes are averaged together they produce a composite result that appears to be near the political median. In similar fashion, in this perspective white working class people are conceived of as individually idiosyncratic but in aggregate fitting the familiar profile.

The only source of data that provides extensive empirical information about major persuadable and non-persuadable sub-groups within white working class Americans are the field reports from grass roots progressive organizations that do door to door organizing. The group that does the most serious and organized data collection and analysis of its door to door canvassing is the

AFL-CIO community affiliate, Working America which conducts tens of thousands of front door and living room discussions every year with white working class people in various states across America.

Karen Nussbaum, for many years the director of Working America, summarized the groups' conclusions in the following way:

What we have found is that one-third of the people we talk to are already with us and one third will never be with us. Working America therefore concentrates its organizing efforts on the one-third in the middle who are open to persuasion.

At first glance this may seem like a little more than a loose, completely "off the cuff" generalization but it actually has a certain empirical basis. White working class support for Democratic presidential candidates has hovered in the mid-30 percent range since 2008 and a range of different opinion studies have also estimated the percentage of white working class "firm Trump supporters" or "strong conservatives" at a similar level. The one-third, one third, one-third division that Nussbaum suggests thus has a rough empirical foundation.

***But the key insight that emerges from door to door canvassing is that white working people are neither a monolithic group with uniform outlooks and perspectives nor are different white working class individuals so widely diverse and idiosyncratic that no generalizations are possible.***

On the contrary, even before the Trump administration, in-depth observers of white working people repeatedly found that they were divided into several quite distinct groups. Some individuals were indeed "Rush Limbaugh/talk radio" conservatives and others were sincerely devout, conservative Christians. But there were also many other non-ideological workers who asserted old-fashioned, "traditional" but not philosophically conservative attitudes and still others who were entirely focused on their daily life and completely uninterested in larger issues of any kind.

Many in this second group as well as the first supported Donald Trump in 2016 but it was still possible to distinguish two distinct perspectives among them—on the one hand workers who clearly and energetically embraced extreme views and strongly supported Donald Trump and the other hand people who can be described as "cultural traditionalists"—men and women who support traditional folkways and social views but reject many extremist views and only partially or ambivalently supported Donald Trump.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, specific individuals do indeed vary quite widely and idiosyncratically but advertising agencies have frequently sought to overcome this difficulty by using field research to create a few broad profiles or "biographies" of different kinds of key "target audiences" that copywriters and ad buyers can then use to guide their work. When a major business corporation like Ford or Apple begins to plan a massive ad campaign for a new product like their latest model car or home entertainment system the company's ad agency usually starts by doing a substantial amount of focus group and interview research in order to prepare a series of "target customer



*profiles*” – detailed descriptions of different segments of the intended audience. The goal of these documents is not to create a totally objective psychological profile but rather a picture of how these customers perceive themselves and how to use this information to sell them goods.<sup>6</sup>

This same basic approach can also be used to create two basic “customer” profiles that suggest some of the key characteristics that Democratic campaign strategists can use to distinguish between two distinct groups of white workers and define targeted ways to appeal to them:

Extremists	“Cultural Traditionalists”
<p>These individuals assert openly negative or bigoted views of non-white groups. While not necessarily asserting explicit racism they are willing to express a clear distaste for “others” and support policies that discriminate against them.</p>	<p>These individuals sincerely insist that they judge people as individuals and know some minority individuals who they like and respect. They consider their attitude to be both correct and admirable because it is “color-blind”</p>
<p>These individuals endorse versions of Christian faith that reject any deviation from particular doctrines and assert that those doctrines should be sanctioned by society and legally imposed by law.</p>	<p>These individuals express their personal commitment and respect for “old fashioned” religion and traditional moral values but do not insist that their beliefs be imposed by law or social pressure on other groups or view others as necessarily immoral or evil for holding views different than their own.</p>
<p>These individuals assert a version of patriotism that conceptualizes conservative values and Republican candidates as being identical with the “<i>American way of life</i>” while, in contrast, “<i>liberalism</i>” is defined as a literally alien and subversive ideology.</p>	<p>These individuals assert a vision of “<i>The American way of life</i>” that conceptualizes patriotism as a basic love of country and support for the American form of government but which simultaneously accepts the existence of diversity, tolerance and pluralism as an inherent part of the American ethos.</p>
<p>On a psychological level these individuals exhibit a high level of intolerance toward different views or behaviors across a wide range of issues and topics and display irritability and a short temper as major personality characteristics.</p>	<p>On a psychological level these individuals express a generally tolerant attitude across a range of issues and topics and display a generally more “easy-going,” “live and let live” outlook on life.</p>

<p>These individuals pay close and sustained attention to news, commentary and analysis that is produced by extremist sources including talk radio, Fox News, and social media.</p>	<p>These individuals do not closely follow either partisan or mainstream national news and commentary beyond paying relatively casual attention to newspaper headlines and local news.</p>
<p>These individuals perceive Democrats as literal subversives and traitors who are inspired by alien ideologies and are intent on undermining the traditional American way of life.</p>	<p>These individuals perceive the Democrats as a political party that primarily represents social groups like educated liberals and racial or ethnic minorities while having little interest, understanding or concern for ordinary white working people like themselves.</p>
<p>These individuals view government, government policies and programs as always inherently pernicious and destructive and as an essentially alien force that must be resisted.</p>	<p>These individuals view government as often deeply corrupt and government policies and government programs as frequently harmful or unresponsive to the needs of ordinary people but not as inherently bad or evil.</p>

At the same time, both white working class extremists and cultural traditionalists share a number of basic cultural values in common.

- Pride in their Culture, Background and Community
- Respect for Tradition
- Love of Freedom
- Belief in Personal Responsibility, Character and Hard work
- Respect for Law, strict Law Enforcement and the Right of Individual Self-Defense.

To repeat, dividing the white working class into the two distinct groups above is an oversimplification. Not all supporters of the religious right are bigoted, for example, and many white supremacists have little or no commitment to religion. Many white workers will support one populist economic proposal but not another. But the broad distinction above between extremist and cultural traditionalist groups within the white working class is far more accurate and useful than the stereotypes that are now common about what “*all white working people*” think or do.

*Most important, this distinction between white working class cultural traditionalists and extremists provides a basis for developing progressive strategies that are designed to specifically reach the more persuadable sector of the white working class.*

In fact, in two major ways recognizing the existence of this division profoundly clarifies the current intra-Democratic debate.

First, it fundamentally invalidates both the crude “they’re all a bunch of racists” stereotype and the slightly more subtle “all white workers basically think the same way but some are just more extreme than others.” Both these notions are based on the idea that white working class people can accurately be viewed as a basically homogeneous group and when it is recognized instead that two distinct sectors exist it renders both the views above too superficial to be of any use in the serious discussion of Democratic political strategy.

Second, it broadens the scope of strategic discussion beyond a narrow focus on “issues” as the sole force that guides white working class vote choice and adds the role and influence of values, community and culture. It is notable that none of the key distinctions indicated above between extremists and cultural traditionalists involve opinions on specific political issues. Instead, they deal with differences in basic social values like tolerance, compassion, empathy and open-mindedness and personal characteristics like psychological rigidity and obsessiveness. While these characteristics are resistant to change, they clearly divide the white working class into distinct sectors that are more and less persuadable.

And equally important is the sense of basic cultural identity that both sectors share—shared working class norms, values and experience that create an intensely felt sense of community. In the same way that a progressive will feel “at home” on a university campus, a bookstore or hip urban neighborhood, white working class people will feel “at home” in their own communities—whether on the urban fringe, small towns or rural areas. Extremists and cultural traditionalists may think differently about various social values but they share a deep sense of membership and identification with their cultural community.

And one of the most important findings from recent research by Stan Greenberg and others is that white working class people today feel an intense sense that their community and culture is under attack.

As Greenberg says:

“[white working class GOP voters] are deeply angry with a government, the media, and social media companies that they believe are taking away their freedom... According to them, “cancel culture is destroying our history and the American way of life, making it very hard for white people to have a future.”<sup>7</sup>

While it is almost impossible for many Democrats to seriously imagine that any white Americans could actually be afraid of this result, there is no question that it is indeed deeply felt by many white working class people. While Democrats envision a progressive future America as being an exciting, culturally and ethnically diverse, multiracial country in which there

is general tolerance for diversity, white working class and small town people imagine a society dominated by urban elitists in which they have no place. To understand how this vision can seem entirely plausible, one has only to consider how rarely small town life or manual labor are portrayed positively in TV commercials and other media as part of the golden future that lies ahead. In slick advertisements and magazine spreads “the future” always looks like a world of gleaming office towers, smartly dressed professionals, hip young people in bustling urban centers and “country” as a place that people drive to in late model SUVs in order to go rock climbing or mountain biking and not as “my home,” or “where I belong.”

***For Democratic political strategy, it is therefore vital to recognize how the exploitation of both the differences between the two sectors of the white working class as well as their areas of shared perspective now play a central role in political campaigns in heavily Red State and GOP district areas.***

The traditional academic and journalistic view was that voters compared the candidates’ views on various “issues” and chose the candidate with whom they better agreed. In this perspective both Democratic and Republican campaigns would first consolidate their base voters during the primaries by taking deeply partisan positions but then “move to the center” to capture “swing voters.” More recently, more militant activists in both parties have argued for the alternative strategy of attempting to maximize base turnout by “doubling down” on vivid partisan positions.

There is still a core of validity to this model, but it is vital to recognize that there is also an entirely separate level on which the GOP competes today in Red States and heavily white working class districts. It is based on inflaming cultural divisions with its message to the two distinct sectors of the white working class.

Instead of moving to the center in general elections the current GOP strategy—most dramatically displayed in the 2020 elections—is now to define the contest as, at base, a fundamental cultural conflict that presents white working class people with a basic choice between an alien culture and their own.

The typical Republican TV commercial in many elections in 2020 featured a bogus picture of the Democratic candidate Photoshopped together with Nancy Pelosi, Bernie Sanders and AOC along with vivid images and narration that attributed the most lurid positions to them – “The Democrat will let rioters control the streets,” “The Democrat will let teachers brainwash our kids.” These accusations had no relationship to the views of the candidate who, in most cases, had rejected policies like “defunding the police” or “open borders.” Instead the GOP simply defined any Democrat as the representative of an alien philosophy and argued that white working class voters should support Republicans because they would defend the traditional culture that is valued by both the extremist and cultural traditionalist sectors of white working class society.

***To effectively respond to this Democrats cannot succeed by simply pointing to their actual stances on specific issues. Instead they must directly respond to the cultural attack by insisting that there is a profound difference between the extremist and cultural traditionalist perspectives and that they, rather than the extremists, are the genuine defenders of traditional American values.***



Successful Democratic candidates in Red State areas and districts have done this in a number of major ways. First, some, like Montana Senator Jon Tester, a working farmer for most of his adult life, personally embody traditional culture in their background and experience and inherently refute the “alien culture” attack. Second, successful non-extremists present an alternative model of traditional culture and values that firmly rejects political extremism and offers instead a model that, while in many respects conservative, includes tolerance, open-mindedness and “old fashioned” common sense. John McCain was an example of this latter style.

*(Note: a list of resources that describe in greater detail how Democrats can appeal to cultural traditionalists is included at the end of this memo.)*

In red state districts Democratic candidates need to proudly embrace white working class culture and then consciously and intensely attack their Republican opponents as being “extremists” who do not embody the decent elements of traditional American culture and values. Here are a few examples that suggest how this can be expressed:

*“The America that the extremists are fighting for is not the America I grew up in.”*

*“I love the American flag as much as any American but I would never use a flagpole flying our flag as a club to assault other Americans that I call my “enemies.” That is not the American way.”*

*“The values I grew up with are good values and I want them to endure. But the values of the people who want to turn Americans against each other and divide our country are not my values.”*

*“Decent people can stand up for traditional American values without turning America into something that is deeply un-American.”*

In short, the strategy must be to directly challenge the extremists for the right to claim traditional American values and insist on the idea that there are two definitions of “traditional American values” and that the Democratic candidate and not the extremist is the real champion of those values.

***It is necessary to be clear: this will not win a majority of white working class voters.*** But it can split off a critical segment of the persuadable, culturally traditional sector of white working class voters sufficient to allow a Democrat to win in a GOP state or district.

It is also true that a significant sector of the Democratic activist base will furiously reject this approach. In essence, they will argue that the cultural traditionalists described above are no better than the extremists and that it is preferable for a militant progressive Democrat to go down in defeat rather than win by appealing to such people.

There is little hope that leftists who do not already perceive the need for a broad alliance to defeat the GOP extremism that now threatens America’s democratic institutions will be swayed by argument but the simple electoral reality is that in the Red State and heavily GOP districts where this strategy is appropriate, they are a negligible force. Elections since last

November in New York, Cleveland and elsewhere have shown that, when given the choice, Democratic base voters will, in general, choose candidates with broad appeal rather than those who offer the most radical platform.

## Articles and Books That Discuss Cultural Traditionalism versus Right Wing Extremism in The White Working Class

### Articles

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Does the Democratic Coalition Really Need the White Working Class?

[https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_SM\\_Levison\\_Do\\_Dems\\_need\\_WWC.pdf](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_Do_Dems_need_WWC.pdf)

Democrats' Critical Challenge: Seeing the World Through Red State Eyes

<https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/2018/06/democrats-critical-challenge-seeing-the-world-through-red-state-eyes/>

Modern-day "Class Consciousness" and "Class Resentment": the unacknowledged—but vitally important—perspective that is necessary to understand why many non-racist white working class voters voted for Trump—and might do so again if Democrats don't figure out how to respond.

[https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_SM\\_Andrew\\_Levison\\_Class\\_Consciousness.pdf](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Andrew_Levison_Class_Consciousness.pdf)

Can the Democratic Party Be White Working Class, Too?

<https://prospect.org/economy/can-democratic-party-white-working-class-too/>

What Democrats Still Don't Get About Winning Back the White Working Class

<https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/08/07/what-democrats-still-dont-get-about-winning-back-the-white-working-class/>

Winning Some Middle of the Road Working Class Whites

<https://prospect.org/power/winning-some-middle-of-the-road-working-class-whites/>

The Obama coalition may be able to beat Trump or Cruz in November but in order to fight the larger threat of GOP extremism we still need more support from the white working class

[https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_SM\\_Levison\\_still\\_need\\_WWC\\_vf.pdf](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_still_need_WWC_vf.pdf)

Democrats: it's time to consider targeted strategies to undermine Trump's white working class support

[https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_SM\\_ALevison\\_Beat\\_Trumps\\_WWC\\_support.pdf](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_ALevison_Beat_Trumps_WWC_support.pdf)

To Prevent the Triumph of GOP Extremism Progressives and Democrats Must Develop a Strategy for Separating Extremist from Non-extremist White Workers in "Deep Red" Districts—and None of the Traditional Democratic Strategies Can Do The Job. It is Therefore Now Vital to Seriously Consider Alternatives.

[https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_levison\\_Thinking\\_Outside\\_the\\_Box.pdf](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_levison_Thinking_Outside_the_Box.pdf)

### Books

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*The Politics of Resentment*

Katherine J. Cramer

*The New Minority*

Justin Gest

*Strangers in Their Own Land*

Arlie Russell Hochschild

*Trump's Democrats*

Muravchik and Shields

*The Left Behind*  
Robert Wuthnow

*Exit Zero*  
Christine Walley

*Harvest the Vote*  
Jane Kleeb

*Beyond Contempt*  
Erica Etelson

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup><https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/14/trump-didnt-bring-white-working-class-voters-republican-party-data-suggest-he-kept-them-away/>

<sup>2</sup><https://newrepublic.com/article/113380/why-democrats-still-need-working-class-white-voters>

<https://theliberalpatriot.substack.com/p/there-just-arent-enough-college-educated?fbclid=IwAR2d3i6Kf3Ib42wNYlowvi4L1OR0N8h7oDtQJhGJD9YkJvPpEPJsZ2uIA>

[https://theliberalpatriot.substack.com/p/the-power-of-the-working-class-vote?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=share&token=eyJ1c2VyX2lkIjoyNDA5MzAxMSwicG9zdF9pZCI6NDI1NzA4OTQsIl8iOiJPMkJTUyIsImhhdCI6MTYzNTM0NzAxMCwiZXhwIjoxNjM1MzUwNjEwLjpc3MiOiJwdWltMjM5MDU4Iiwic3ViljoicG9zdC1yZW-FjdGlvbiJ9.LhQbljzhV6\\_W8\\_v7xNc7sJQ6Nvq9Jpiz8DwdjMmsTBs](https://theliberalpatriot.substack.com/p/the-power-of-the-working-class-vote?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email&utm_content=share&token=eyJ1c2VyX2lkIjoyNDA5MzAxMSwicG9zdF9pZCI6NDI1NzA4OTQsIl8iOiJPMkJTUyIsImhhdCI6MTYzNTM0NzAxMCwiZXhwIjoxNjM1MzUwNjEwLjpc3MiOiJwdWltMjM5MDU4Iiwic3ViljoicG9zdC1yZW-FjdGlvbiJ9.LhQbljzhV6_W8_v7xNc7sJQ6Nvq9Jpiz8DwdjMmsTBs)

<sup>3</sup><https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/10/the-democrats-future-is-in-the-west/620327/>

<sup>4</sup>A round-up article in the New York Times by Thomas Edsall strikingly illustrated of how deeply engrained this perception is. In the article a wide range of academic political scientists explained the motivations of the political extremists who attacked the capital using exactly the same set of concepts that are also used to explain all white working people's support for Trump and the GOP. As a result, from this perspective the mob that attacked the capitol simply represent the extreme expression of a general pattern of white working class support for political extremism and do not constitute a distinct social group.

(see <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/opinion/capitol-riot-white-grievance.html>)

<sup>5</sup>(For a list of books and articles that support this analysis, see the appendix at the end of the memo).

<sup>6</sup>The best published example of how this this approach can be applied to recent politics is a marketing study focused on non-extremist Trump voters that was done by a Republican firm. On the surface the book, "The Great Revolt – Inside the Populist Coalition Reshaping American Politics," is presented as objective ethnographic research. The book includes 23 extended profiles based on 300 interviews of what it calls "typical" Trump supporters. The interview subjects it presents, however, are carefully selected, basically decent Americans – heartland populists who voted for Trump out of a mixture of patriotism, legitimate economic grievance, defense of traditional values and anger at condescending coastal elites. Most, in fact, are either Obama-Trump voters or independents and not one is a firm Rush Limbaugh ideological conservative. It is organized into seven categories that clearly locate them in the familiar world of market research and market segmentation e.g. "Red Blooded and Blue Collared," "Rotary Reliables," "Rough Rebounders." These are the typical kinds of names that ad agencies give to submarkets that they intend to target with special ads and other messaging. As a result, what the book actually provides are seven detailed customer marketing profiles of carefully selected non-racist and non extremist Trump voters.

Calling these people "typical" Trump voters is, to put it mildly, more than a tad dishonest. Not a single one of the 23 subjects expresses even the most tiny, microscopic iota of prejudice or bigotry toward any group – not African Americans, not Latinos, not Muslims, not GLBT individuals. Interviewing over 300 "typical" Trump supporters without encountering a single racially biased or politically extremist individual is statistically about as likely as interviewing 300 attendees at the annual National Book Awards ceremony and not finding a single English major or interviewing 300 people at a Grateful Dead concert and not finding anyone who had ever smoked marijuana.

<sup>7</sup><https://democracycorps.com/republican-party-project/what-will-trump-loyalists-sensed-powerlessness-mean-for-politics/>