



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

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POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND NEED A NEW POLITICAL
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BY
ANDREW LEVISON



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THE STRATEGIC DEBATES OF THE 1990'S ARE NOT RELEVANT FOR TODAY. DEMOCRATS NOW LIVE IN A DIFFERENT POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND NEED A NEW POLITICAL STRATEGY TO CONFRONT IT.

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Recent columns by Ron Brownstein and Tom Edsall¹—two of the leading American political analysts—have both concurred in describing the intra-Democratic debate of today as representing a return to the strategic debates of the Clinton era – a battle that was then between “centrists” and the left, between advocates of a “Third Way” and 1980’s Democratic liberalism.

As Brownstein says:²

For years, Democrats have rarely cited Clinton and the centrist New Democrat movement he led through the '90s except to renounce his “third way” approach to welfare, crime, and other issues as a violation of the party’s principles... but now a loose constellation of internal party critics is reprising the Clintonites’ core arguments to make the case that progressives are steering Democrats toward unsustainable and unelectable positions, particularly on cultural and social questions.

Just like the centrists who clustered around Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council that he led decades ago, today’s dissenters argue that Democrats risk a sustained exodus from power unless they can recapture more of the culturally conservative voters without a college education who are drifting away from the party. (That group, these dissenters argue, now includes not only white Americans but also working-class Hispanics and even some Black Americans.) And just as then, these arguments face fierce pushback from other Democrats who believe that the centrists would sacrifice the party’s commitment to racial equity in a futile attempt to regain right-leaning voters irretrievably lost to conservative Republican messages.

The parallel between today’s strategic debate and the debates that occurred in the 1990’s is far less than exact, however. For one thing, some of the key political strategists that Brownstein cites as major critics of the modern, university-based “woke” or “Brahmin” left—Ruy Teixeira, Stan Greenberg and David Shor, for example—do not advocate a return to 1990’s Third Way centrism. Their current views more closely resemble those of the traditional trade union Democrats who rejected the Third Way approach. As Bernstein clearly notes:

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¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/08/opinion/trump-democrats-republicans.html>

²<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/12/democrats-lose-culture-war/620887/>

As Teixeira told me, most of today's critics reject the Clinton/DLC economic approach, which stressed deficit reduction, free trade, and deregulation in some areas, such as financial markets.... "You don't see that kind of ideological divide between tax-and-spend Democrats and the self-styled apostles of the market like you had back in those days."

But more fundamentally, the idea that the current intra-Democratic debate can be usefully compared with the debates of the 1990's requires that one makes two underlying assumptions.

1. That, like the 1990's, working class voters today still basically make their choice between Republican and Democratic candidates by comparing individual candidates' positions on major social and economic issues.
2. That working class voters still evaluate individual candidates separately from their evaluation of national party platforms. This implies that by taking specific stances an individual Democratic candidate can successfully distinguish himself or herself from the national Democratic Party.

In 1992 these assumptions were already under stress but were still plausible. The Fox News demonization of the Democratic party had not really begun in earnest, ads by political candidates still generally focused on specific issues and "ticket-splitting" by working class voters between local Democratic candidates and the Party's national candidates remained a significant political reality in many districts.

But by the time of the Obama administration the two assumptions above had become substantially less plausible. Obama made massive efforts to be moderate in both style and policy (the health care bill, for example, was famously based on a private sector based plan from the Heritage Foundation) yet in response the GOP successfully gained control of congress in 2010 and 2014 by advancing extremist conspiracy theories like the famous "death panels" and "socialist central planning" supposedly embedded in Obamacare. Glen Beck emerged as the most influential Fox News commentator in 2009, overshadowing other already extreme talking heads of Fox News while many of the successful "Tea Party" political candidates based their campaigns on demonizing Dems as an alien, anti-American force rather than by debating any specific political issues.

The transformation then became complete with the emergence of Donald Trump who elevated loathing of Democrats to a chilling, visceral degree. On one level he framed the conflict in racial terms as a clash between whites and people of color but on a deeper level his attack was based on social class. Trump's core message to working class voters was that all Democrats—literally all—were affluent elitists who profoundly despised them and held them in contempt while Trump was their one and only great champion.

What this change implied was that both of the assumptions noted above had become profoundly unsustainable and that Democratic political strategy needed to be reformulated based on two new assumptions that are precisely the reverse of those above:

1. That a working class voter's loyalty to the Republican Party is now more powerful than their views about individual candidates. Most white working class voters have become like the working class voters who supported the Labor Party in

post-World War II England. The vote for Labor in that era was above all an assertion of class pride and class identity. The choice between Labor and the Conservatives was a choice between “us” and them.”

2. That the working class vote which is now decided by class identity does not allow the voter to pick and choose individual candidates based on their specific platforms and positions. Even if an individual Democratic candidate rejects the Democratic party's national position today the GOP will still blatantly lie and assert that the Democrat actually supports the most extreme positions within the Democratic coalition – and this accusation will be widely accepted.

Different analysts will disagree on exactly how accurate these new assumptions are compared with those that were accepted in the 1990's but as an exercise in strategic thinking it is worthwhile for Democratic strategists to provisionally accept these assumptions as accomplished facts and consider what the implications are for Democratic political strategy if they are indeed completely valid.

1. Democratic candidates who want to reach working class voters now need to have a clear and distinct political identity that is separate from the National Democratic Party or the woke, social justice left. This cannot be achieved simply by offering a set of specific disagreements over policy, even if these disagreements are expressed in the most fierce and polemical way. What is rather required is a clear and distinct political identity that genuinely aligns the candidate with the culture and perspective of the working class. Political strategists continually study this aspect of working class opinion by testing survey questions that ask: “How important is it to your vote that a candidate is *“On your side,” “Will fight for you,” or “Cares about people like you”?* The answer that consistently emerges is that working class voters describe these factors as deeply important for their vote
2. This new identity cannot be created just for the candidate as an individual but must rather locate him as a member of distinct and coherent political force. In a parliamentary system this is a problem that has a direct solution. A heterogeneous party whose voters combined a wide range of opinions from moderate reformism to militant leftism and a broad range of divergent social groups in their base would quickly split into two distinct parties each with a separate platform and image. If the two parties gained a legislative majority between them in a general election they would then conduct formal negotiations to agree on a common coalition platform for governing.

This cannot be done in the American political context but it is still possible to make a substantial move in this direction by creating a distinct political coalition that might define itself as “Heartland, Common Sense Democrats.” In same way that Bernie Sanders 2016 campaign consolidated and then became the basis for a vigorous left coalition of democratic socialists and “woke” or “social justice” Democrats, a “Heartland, Common Sense” coalition of working class, small town and rural Democrats needs to emerge as a comparable force within the Democratic Party.

The sociological basis for creating this new political formation resides in the fact that the white (and to a lesser degree Latino) working class is divided into two distinct sectors: Cultural Traditionalists and Extremists and that the Heartland, Common Sense Democratic coalition

could very self-consciously define itself as the distinct voice for the traditionalist group within the working class.

(Note: the empirical evidence for the fact that there is indeed a distinct culturally traditional but not extremist sector of the American working class is presented in the memos listed on the right sidebar.)

This “Common Sense, Heartland Democratic” coalition would be defined by two things.

1. A deep and passionately Identification with the culture and community of the working class. This identification must be genuine, authentic and sincere and not the phony PR campaigns that dress a Republican used car dealer or corporate executive in a plaid shirt and hands him a shotgun to hold while he stands in front of a flatbed truck or a cattle ranch. The sources on the right describe what this entails in more detail.
2. A coherent set of “Common Sense” positions on divisive issues. These would not be defined by launching attacks on the Democratic left but rather by defining the new coalition as a “common sense” middle ground between the “crazy” right and the “radical” left that would combine a respect for working class culture and community with tolerance rather than intolerance and a willingness to accept sensible and necessary change.

For this approach to gain any significant political influence a new coalition of this kind will have to create for itself a distinct national image. In the same way that traditional political parties historically defined themselves in national conventions, a Heartland Common Sense coalition would have to find the means to capture the attention of the national media. Candidates in red state districts across the country would have to identify with the coalition and insist on its importance. Individual candidates would have to identify themselves with the national “brand” in their speeches and advertising.

The GOP will inevitably fiercely attack any initiative of this kind as a “false flag” operation of the perfidious radical Democratic elite. But this will also have the paradoxical effect of affirming the existence of the Heartland Common Sense “brand.” The more fiercely the Republicans deny the authenticity of a Heartland, Common Sense coalition, the more they simultaneously affirm that such a coalition does indeed exist.

The Democratic left will also say that a coalition of this kind is counterproductive; that it will demoralize the young, infrequent voters who need radical candidates to excite them and overcome their generally low turnout on election day. There are very serious empirical questions about to what degree non or infrequent voters can actually

Democratic Strategists are asking The Wrong Question about the White Working Class https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_Memo_Levison_asking_wrong_questions_WWClass.pdf

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

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/>

be mobilized by radical candidates but even if it is conceded that there is to some unknowable degree a trade off, the neo-fascist threat is so strong today that this should be sufficient to motivate young voters who pay any serious attention to political issues to vote on election day. It is now impossible to deny that the GOP is now explicitly and openly committed to undermining American democratic institutions.

There have been many attempts in the past to create “centrist” or “middle of the road” political formations within the Democratic coalition but they have invariably foundered because they defined themselves as a home for conventional politics and conventional politicians rather than as the advocate for a distinct social class. The creation of coalition of Heartland Common Sense Democrats is instead a response to the challenges Democrats now face and the new situation in which they must now operate.