

Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority

THE DEMOCRATIC
strategist



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

**DOES THE DEMOCRATIC COALITION REALLY
NEED THE WHITE WORKING CLASS?**

BY
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One of the most striking aspects of the Democratic convention last week was the degree to which traditional Democratic appeals to white working people were completely absent. Conservative columnist Mark Thiessen was entirely accurate when he wrote:

“There was literally no effort to win back the white working class voters who voted twice or Barack Obama but defected to Trump in 2016...If you were a working class Obama-Trump voter watching this week’s convention you heard a lot about gun violence, racial justice and climate change but not much directed at you. The message was “Democrats are not interested in your support.”

This was underlined by the list of major speakers. Among the wide range of African-Americans, Latinos and Latinas, young people, women, LGBTQ individuals and prominent figures from business and society who spoke there was not one who represented and appealed directly to white working class Americans. In only a handful of the shorter segments did workers, farmers or any other ordinary white Americans even appear.

There was a practical argument for making this choice: with only ten weeks to go before the election it was reasonable to decide that highest priority should be to excite the Democratic base—African Americans, Latinos and Latinas and other people of color, youth, women, LGBTQ and college educated voters. And it was equally reasonable to predict that most of the people who would actually make the effort to watch the four day convention, aside from late Thursday when Joe Biden was scheduled to speak, would be people who were already partial to the Dems but who needed to be energized and inspired to make sure that they would actually vote on election day.

But this choice also reflected a very deep and pervasive attitude among many activists in the Democratic Party—an attitude which holds that the future of the party lies with the new “Obama Coalition” voters and that Democrats should not try **and in fact should not even want** to include the white working class in their coalition.¹

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¹The term white working class includes a large and heterogeneous group of less than college voters. Along with older, often male traditional blue collar workers, many of them in small towns and rural areas, this group also includes a large number of younger, often female workers in service jobs in urban areas. This must always be kept in mind because the younger, more female, service sector/urban group is generally more likely to be among the 30-35% of the white working class that does tend to vote Democratic. But even with the significant differences within the white working class, the 65-69% of the less than college educated whites who voted for Trump in 2016 are still an important sector of the electorate that behaves as a distinct electoral group.

The advocates of this view generally offer three basic lines of argument:

1. The Democratic coalition does not need white working class voters. The “Obama Coalition” is sufficient to insure a majority.
2. Literally **every single** white working class Trump voter and, in fact, the vast majority of all white working class people in general are basically too reactionary, too ignorant and too racially bigoted to ever be an acceptable part of the Democratic coalition. It is, therefore, a misuse of resources to even try to seek their votes. As one commentator put it, “[seeking white working class votes] is a waste of time, effort and breath.”
3. It is impossible for Democrats to win the support of the white working class because the Democratic Party refuses to offer the radical programs and solutions that would be required to achieve this goal. Until this changes, there is simply no hope of winning their support.

But debating the role of the white working class as if it were a distinct question that can be discussed in isolation from the broader issues that face the Democratic coalition is the wrong way to approach this issue. On the contrary, it is part of the larger debate about overall Democratic political strategy—a debate that is usually described as being between a “big tent” and “small tent” coalition—and the proper way to consider this question is therefore to directly and systematically compare the alternative political strategies that have been proposed by both sides in this debate.

The Big-Tent Strategy

The argument in favor of a big tent strategy that includes the white working class can be expressed in terms of four propositions.

1. America is facing a threat to democracy unlike any the nation has ever seen since the defeat of the Axis in the Second World War. The unprecedented anti-democratic extremism of the modern Republican party means that even if Trump is defeated and actually leaves the white house after a close election, a narrow Democratic win will not allow any significant improvement if the Senate and many State Legislatures and Governorships remain in GOP hands.
2. As a result, Democrats need to win a sufficiently large majority to clearly win the Senate and enough state governments to be able to prevent further right wing attacks on democracy from succeeding and to enact meaningful progressive legislation. This political objective is properly called the goal of achieving a “broad” or “commanding” Democratic majority.
3. In order to have any hope of achieving this goal, it will be necessary to win the support not only of Democratic base voters but also of people outside the base. A commanding Democratic majority cannot be assembled without winning the support of some people who do not at this time already agree with the progressive Democratic perspective.
4. There is a group of white working class men and women who voted for Trump but who can be convinced to vote for Democrats. They have two key characteristics: (1) They have generally “traditional” cultural attitudes regarding religion, patriotism, the military and the values of small business. They are not, however, committed to any broad or coherent conservative ideology regarding these subjects. On the contrary, they hold a

range of often progressive views on a variety of economic issues and hold a similar range of relatively moderate or tolerant “live and let live” attitudes on many social issues. (2) Regarding race, they tend to hold the now “old-fashioned” philosophy of judging people as individuals. While this view is no longer considered adequate by many progressives in general these men and women form a very distinct group from the explicit bigots, theocrats, and Ayn Rand/Tea Party conservatives who are the passionate and wholehearted supporters of Trump and the GOP.

While the exact size of this “persuadable” group is difficult to estimate, an approximate idea can be gained by comparing the white working class vote for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 with the vote for Trump in 2016. In 2008 approximately 40% of the white working class supported Obama. In 2012 this declined to 35-36% and then dropped to around 30% in 2016. There is, therefore, a swing group of somewhere between 5 to possibly as much as 10 percent of the white working class that can potentially be convinced to vote for a Democrat if appealed to correctly.

(A more complete description of the characteristics of this very distinct sector of the white working class is provided by the sources listed in the footnote below)²

The central question that must be asked about this “big tent” political strategy is not simply “*is this strategy right or wrong*” but rather “*What are the alternative political strategies that are being proposed by those who reject this approach and how do those other strategies compare with it?*”

There are three basic strategies that are proposed as alternatives to the “big-tent” strategy above:

1. The Demographic Strategy

This strategy holds that the “Obama Coalition” of youth, minorities, single women and educated professionals provides a sufficient base for the Democratic Party.

This strategy is based on ideas that were first presented in John Judis and Ruy Teixeira’s 2003 book *The Emerging Democratic Majority* although in that book they explicitly rejected the idea that the white working class was unnecessary.

In a recent article Teixeira presented his current view of the demographic political strategy.

In 2002, John Judis and I published *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. In our book, we argued that Democrats should take advantage of a set of interrelated social, economic and demographic changes, including the growth of minority communities and cultural shifts among college graduates.

²a. Andrew Levison, “[Winning Some Middle of the Road Working Class Whites](https://prospect.org/power/winning-some-middle-of-the-road-working-class-whites/)”, The American Prospect <https://prospect.org/power/winning-some-middle-of-the-road-working-class-whites/>

b. Andrew Levison, “[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/)”, The Washington Monthly <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/08/07/what-democrats-still-dont-get-about-winning-back-the-white-working-class/>

c. Guy Molyneux, “[Mapping the White Working Class: A deep dive into the beliefs and sentiments of the moderates among them](https://prospect.org/economy/mapping-white-working-class/)”, The American Prospect <https://prospect.org/economy/mapping-white-working-class/>

But we also emphasized that building this majority would require a very broad coalition....It would have to include a significant minority of the white working class, a group that—though its numbers were in decline—would continue to constitute a very large electoral block for the foreseeable future. (In 2008, 51 percent of eligible voters belonged to the white working class; in the 2020 elections, 44 percent will.)

Many Democratic pundits, operatives and elected officials have falsely come to believe that demographics are destiny. The new Democratic majority, they believed, had already arrived. All they had to do to win election after election was to mobilize the growing segments of the electorate, and the demographic changes that favored them would take care of the rest.

If Democrats don't correct their misunderstanding of what it takes for them to win elections, the next decade could turn out to be just as bitter as the last... Demographic and economic changes *are* favoring Democrats. But to capitalize on these changes, **Democrats need to retain the votes** of a significant portion of the white working class.³

Teixeira is, in fact, one of the authors of what is by far the most comprehensive and detailed analysis and projection of both national and state-by-state political-demographic trends—the **States of Change project** that is produced by the Center for American Progress. The data presented in these reports convincingly support the conclusions Teixeira expresses above.⁴

The advocates of the demographic strategy generally respond in two ways:

1. They either limit their discussion to the size of the vote that is necessary to narrowly elect a Democratic president or they discuss politics in relation to extremely long term (10 or 20 year) demographic trends. Both these arguments avoid confronting the challenge of achieving a stable senate majority and gaining control of state governments within the next 5-8 years. Implicitly, they accept the reality that neither of these two objectives can possibly be achieved based on demographic change alone.
2. They point to the large number of people in the "Obama Coalition" who are non-voters and suggest that if this group could be convinced to vote for Democrats this would tip the scales in the Dems favor. Most political-strategic analyses of this group, however, find that the non-voting group includes many conservatives as well as progressives and that they are all extremely difficult to mobilize. As Ron Brownstein noted during the 2020 primaries:

Bernie Sanders often says that the principal reason he can beat President Donald Trump in a general election is that he will massively increase voter turnout. But very few Democratic strategists, from across the ideological spectrum, agree... few serious analysts in the Democratic Party believe he could win by burying Trump under a tidal wave of new liberal voters.

³What Progressives Got Wrong About The Emerging Democratic Majority--And How Joe Biden May Get It Right
<http://www.theoptimisticleftist.com/2020/07/what-progressives-got-wrong-about.html>

⁴The States of Change Project
<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2019/06/27/471487/states-of-change-3/>

During the 2020 primaries the Sanders campaign made the most extensive effort in recent history to mobilize non-voters but, as Brownstein demonstrates, achieved only very limited success.⁵

2. The Ideological Conversion Strategy

This strategy rejects the idea that culturally traditional white workers as they are now can be an acceptable part of the Democratic coalition but argues that they can be converted into genuine progressives by various kinds of persuasion.

There are two distinct ideas about how this can be done.

A. The “Radical Conversion” or “Epiphany” Strategy

The study of how sudden dramatic changes in a person’s overall outlook and philosophy occur has its roots in sociological research in the 1950’s into the sudden, life-altering ideological conversions that were experienced by former communists who suddenly “lost their faith” because of the revelations about the evils of Stalinism. Similar radical changes in philosophy were also studied in individuals who lost their religious faith because of some traumatic personal experience like the death of a child. In the 1970’s a distinct body of research was also developed that studied the effectiveness of attempts to “de-program” youths who had been “brainwashed” into joining various kinds of cults and extremist groups.

In all these cases, the kind of conversion that was studied was a sudden, powerful insight, a total *“Oh my God what a fool I have been all these years”* kind of realization.

There is no current theory of political persuasion that proposes how this kind of dramatic insight can be triggered in conservatives or cultural traditionalists in order to convert them into progressives or radicals. Instead, the widely shared progressive belief that it is indeed possible comes from a deep, personal “gut” feeling among many progressives and radicals that *“If I could just sit down with one of these guys over a kitchen table and slowly explain all the facts to him step by step, I just know that he would finally see that we are right.”*

The existing empirical social science research on political persuasion is much more narrowly focused on attempts to change specific opinions or political choices rather than broad philosophical perspectives and it consistently shows that it is an extremely slow, hard and time intensive process. The most rigorous social and political science field research carried out during actual real-life political campaigns has been conducted by the political scientists Joshua Kalla and David Broockman. As they say:

We examined results from 49 field experiments conducted with real-world political campaigns. We ourselves conducted nine of these experiments, working with Working America, the community organizing affiliate of the AFL-CIO. The approaches we tested in this partnership are much more precise than earlier efforts.

What do these experiments show? Across the 40 existing studies and our nine new studies, we find that in general elections where a Republican is running against a Democrat, campaign contacts almost always fail to persuade

⁵Sanders could not beat Trump simply by mobilizing turnout. [Here’s why.](https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/26/politics/bernie-sanders-turnout-trump-2020/index.html)
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/26/politics/bernie-sanders-turnout-trump-2020/index.html>

meaningful numbers of voters. Our best estimate of the direct effects of campaign contact on Americans' candidate choices in general elections is essentially zero. Our findings throw cold water on the notion that it is easy, overall, for campaigns to persuade voters.

But our experiments have uncovered some exceptions to this general finding. Our findings show that when campaigns conduct field experiments to identify pockets of persuadable voters, their persuasion can make a bigger difference. Early experiments in Working America's campaigns for presidential, Senate, and governor's races found some elections with pockets of persuadable voters. By conducting early rigorous field experiments, Working America was able to dramatically improve the efficacy of their persuasive efforts. In one state, using the experimental results to guide their targeting allowed them to generate an additional 5.6 votes per 100 conversations in the presidential race, compared to a blind targeting informed only by polling, past experience, and intuition.⁶

In other words, conversations that attempt to persuade voters during door to door canvassing using the typical campaign "voter file" methods to choose which houses to visit have almost no detectable effect. It is only when such efforts are carefully and systematically focused by research on just the most "persuadable" sub-set of voters that any measurable success can be obtained, and even in this special case, only one out of every 20 of these conversations actually results in a more successful persuasion than typical door to door canvassing.

As a result, while targeted canvassing can play an important role in close elections Kalla and Brookman's research strongly argues that it cannot achieve large scale changes in voters' political behavior.

B. *The Material, "Kitchen-Table Interests," Strategy*

This has been the most common progressive political strategy since the New Deal-Democratic coalition began to fragment in the late 1960's. Unions and other progressive groups argued that white workers could be convinced to vote for progressives who held views on racial or social issues with which they disagreed so long as the candidates also offered programs and policies that workers recognized as being in their best economic interests. The implicit assumption was that workers would say to themselves something like: *"Well, I may not agree with a bunch of this guy's crazy liberal views but as long as he and the Democrats look out for my economic interests I'll still vote for him."*

In the era when trade unions still had a substantial influence on workers political decisions, this approach seemed to be viable. Solidly liberal politicians like Teddy Kennedy continued to receive white working class support even as workers resentment over welfare, bussing and crime was dramatically increasing.

By the late 1970's, however, Republicans began winning an increasing number of elections by taking conservative stances on social and racial issues and portraying themselves as "real" Americans as opposed to the "crazy" liberals and minorities in the Democratic coalition. In the early 1980's Stan Greenberg coined the term "Reagan

⁶What Election Campaigns Need To Learn To Persuade Voters About Candidates And Ballot Measures
<https://scholars.org/contribution/what-election-campaigns-need-learn-persuade-voters-about-candidates-and-ballot>

Democrats” for the white working class voters who were increasingly abandoning the Democratic Party.

By far the largest and most important test of the “material interests” approach in recent years was Bernie Sander’s primary campaign in 2020. As the primaries began, Sanders supporters energetically argued that Bernie’s radical economic platform would be vastly more appealing to white workers than would Biden’s “ordinary guy” cultural appeal which was based on his “boy from Scranton Pa.” “Middle Class Joe” image. The primaries were, in fact, predicted to provide clear proof of the superiority of the “material interests” strategy.

But as an [article in 538](#) noted:

We found that much of Biden’s success in the primaries can be explained by his dominance in areas with larger shares of white voters without a college degree...In fact, Biden won 83 *percent* of the counties that Sanders carried in 2016, meaning that Sanders held onto very little of what he won last time around.

...In the 10 states that voted in March for which we have both 2016 and 2020 exit poll data, Sanders edged out Clinton among white voters without a college degree in 2016, 54 percent to 44 percent. But in 2020, Biden beat Sanders, 40 percent to 33 percent in those same states.

Even though we don’t have complete exit poll data from Michigan, the result there may best capture just how much ground Biden made up with white voters without a college degree...Four years ago, Sanders won the state by about 1 point in a huge upset. He carried 73 of 83 counties while winning 57 percent of white voters without a college degree, but in 2020, Biden won every county in Michigan en route to beating Sanders by nearly 17 points. The partial Michigan exit poll also found the former vice president won a majority of white voters without a college degree.⁷

In retrospect, many analysts noted that Sanders’ degree of success with white workers in 2016 was actually to a large degree based on those voters’ intense dislike of Hillary Clinton rather than a positive approval of Sanders agenda.

As a result, there is quite strong evidence that neither a “radical conversion” or a “material interest” persuasion strategy can actually be sufficient to allow the Democrats to win a commanding majority in the foreseeable future.

3. The Autonomous Zone Strategy

In radical politics there is a long history and tradition of efforts to attain control of specific geographic areas or particular organizations and institutions. Geographic areas where such control has been achieved have generally been called “autonomous zones”—a term recently popularized by protesters in several U.S. cities. Historically such zones have been established in areas where the larger society is unable to impose its rules and authority.

⁷How Is Joe Biden Remaking The 2016 Primary Map?
<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-is-joe-biden-remaking-the-2016-primary-map/>

One of the first and most famous “autonomous zones” in legend and history was the remote base Robin Hood and his men created in the depths of Sherwood Forest. In recent Latin American history, on the other hand, the largest and most enduring radical autonomous zone has been the territory of the Marxist FARC guerrillas in Colombia who controlled a very substantial area with a large population in the southern jungles of the country and ran their own schools, hospitals, government and civil administration since the early 1960’s completely independently from the central government in Bogota.

Autonomous zones in geographic areas and institutions have also been established at various times in major urban centers. In Europe, the most common have been university campuses occupied for long periods by students and housing occupied by squatters.

In the U.S., although there have been a variety of attempts to create autonomous zones in urban areas recently, the far more significant political strategy of the autonomous zone approach has been to gain ideological authority over various organizations and institutions such as newspapers, magazines, website listservs, university departments and other institutions. Once achieving such authority, the goal is then to accomplish two things: (1) Establish strong default radical positions that are not permitted to be questioned within the organization. (2) Remove or transfer staff, writers, editors, professors and others within these organizations who do not agree with the newly established left positions, opening up those positions to people who do agree with the new perspective. This strategy is most visible in the college and university environment but is also visible in various other areas of American society.

The autonomous zone approach has no specific strategy for influencing electoral politics. In fact, in many cases its advocates explicitly dismiss electoral politics as useless. Rather the advocates seem to endorse an implicit strategy that assumes radical autonomous zones can provide a visionary model or inspiration for the rest of society. Autonomous zones are generally inspired by left-wing ideologies and in Europe have often described themselves as “Islands of socialism in a sea of capitalism.”

Incorporating Culturally Traditional White Workers into a Democratic “Big Tent” Coalition

What the first two of the “Small Tent” strategies above—the demographic and persuasion strategies—have in common is that they clearly reject the idea of accepting culturally traditional white workers as a legitimate part of the Democratic Coalition. White working class people either do not belong in Democratic Coalition at all or can only be accepted if they first adopt a firmly progressive perspective.

At first glance one might expect that there would be serious and extensive evidence-based debates between the advocates of “big tent” and “small tent” strategies for the Democratic Coalition—debates that would carefully compare their empirical foundations in order to decide which strategy was more likely to succeed.

But in fact, most Democratic strategists are not at all surprised by the lack of any serious and systematic debate between the “big tent” and the three “small tent” strategies other than dueling op-ed commentaries and short articles. They understand that there is an underlying attitude and philosophy that is what actually shapes the support for “small-tent” political strategies rather than an analysis of the political and demographic data. It is an attitude which holds that

as a matter of basic principle culturally traditional white workers simply do not belong in the Democratic Coalition. In this view, the Democratic Party should be organized like a left-of-center European parliamentary party—a party with a clear left-progressive ideology and a detailed platform which all supporters are expected to accept.

Parties organized this way make sense in parliamentary systems because there are specific mechanisms built into those systems that allow ideologically pure parties to participate in larger coalitions. Smaller parties can offer “critical support” to larger parties in “second round” voting (roughly comparable to run-offs in the U.S.) and can participate in drafting “common programs” when they participate as part of governing coalitions after election campaigns.

In the United States there are no comparable mechanisms that can allow ideologically pure parties to form larger coalitions. As a result, if the Democratic Party refuses to incorporate culturally traditional white workers into its “big tent” Democratic coalition, they will either vote Republican, for a third party or not at all.

One approach to overcoming this limitation of the American political system would be to extend the existing caucus structure in the Democratic Party to create a very distinct caucus for culturally traditional white workers and other small town, rural and Red State voters—a caucus that is moderate-progressive on economic issues and tolerant on social issues while still being respectful of traditional white working class, rural and small town culture. It could be called the caucus of “Heartland Democrats.”

A caucus of this kind could provide a distinct base and political identity within the Democratic Party for culturally traditional white workers as well as small town, rural and Red State voters in the same way that the Progressive Caucus or the Black Congressional Caucus provide distinct group identities for other sectors of the Democratic Coalition.

In order for such a caucus of “Heartland Democrats” to be successfully established within the Democratic Coalition, however, there are two significant obstacles that would have to be overcome.

1. The Heartland Democratic caucus would have to very clearly and categorically distinguish and separate its perspective and ideology from 1990’s-style “Centrism.”
2. The democratic left would have to place limits on some of its members’ current embrace of extreme “left-wing sectarianism.”

1. Distinguishing Heartland Democrats from “Centrists”

There are some superficial political commentators who use the word “Centrist” simply as a synonym for “moderate” or “middle of the road.” But, more accurately, “Centrism” is a specific political philosophy that gained prominence in the 1990’s. It has three key elements.

- a. “Neoliberal” or free market economic policy.
- b. Political campaigns financed by large contributors.
- c. Conservative, “Republican-lite” policies on social issues.

It is immediately apparent that this package of policies is entirely compatible with the needs and interests of the sector of the Wall Street/high tech financial and business elite that has consistently supported and provided substantial funds to the Democratic Party. During the second Clinton Administration in the late 1990's Neo-liberal economic policies were followed in many areas including financial deregulation, trade policy, deindustrialization and worker protection. At the same time Democratic candidates generally accepted the system of financing campaigns with large campaign contributions despite the resulting obligations it created to the large contributors.

It was at first ignored that this strategy was generating tremendous resentment and discontent among both the growing progressive wing of the Democratic Party and also among youth and working people as well. The financial crisis and collapse in 2008 profoundly discredited this philosophy and it now has only extremely limited support among the vast majority of rank and file Democrats.

As a result a Heartland Democratic caucus would need to clearly and explicitly reject "Centrism" as an acceptable perspective in order to reassure the rest of the Democratic Coalition that it would not become a "Trojan Horse" for the return of Centrism. This should not be vastly difficult to insure since (1) many of the key Democrats who would best represent Heartland Democrats are figures like Montana Senator Jon Tester and Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown who are unmistakably progressive politicians rather than centrists and (2) there is virtually no grass-roots support or interest in 1990's centrism among the persuadable sector of the white working class.

2. Limiting Left-Wing Sectarianism and accepting a "Big Tent" Democratic Coalition

The other necessary element that would be required to bring persuadable white workers into a Big Tent Democratic coalition through a "Heartland Democratic" caucus would be the need for the leaders of the left/socialist wing of the Democratic Party to place limits on the exclusionary, "left-wing sectarianism" that has gained increasing influence within the American left in recent years.

The problem does not reside in the perspective of the most serious and respected leaders and strategists of the Democratic left. Bernie Sanders, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Jacobin Magazine editor Baskar Sunkara and Data for Progress director Sean McElwee have all made clear their recognition that left participation in a "big Tent" coalition is compatible with their outlook and is indeed indispensable. Consider the following quotes from these leaders of the Democratic left:

*"I will work with progressives, with moderates, and yes, **with conservatives**, to preserve this nation from a threat that...our heroes fought and died to defeat [in WW II]."*

– Bernie Sanders

*"Politics isn't about virtue-signaling or wokeness, it's about how we **build a majority** in progressive Democratic politics,"*

– Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez

You've probably heard socialists won't vote for Biden: we may not like him, but we don't want Trump to win. Contrary to stereotypes, we are not pushing a third candidate or eager to see Mr. Trump's re-election.

– Baskar Sunkara, Editor of Jacobin Magazine

*If you're not seriously trying to attract a [broad] majority to your vision, it leads to this view that you don't need to persuade anyone, you just need to lock in the base and mobilize new voters. That's setting yourself up for failure...When we shut ourselves off from conversations about how to persuade voters, we're making it a lot harder for progressives to win elections and deliver on progressive policy goals. **Talking about which policies could work politically in Trump districts is not a fun conversation to have, but we need to have those conversations.***

– Sean Mc Elwee, Director of Data for Progress

Rather than in the intellectual leadership of the Democratic left, the problem resides in the fact that a substantial number of people on the left have embraced a method of competition for status and control within many organizations that is based on delegitimizing the proponents of a wide range of progressive opinions and then filling the resulting void with supporters of their own specific view. In the history of socialist movements in the 20th century this strategy was defined as “left-wing sectarianism.”

Although the strategy of delegitimization began with arguably plausible demands to ban speeches and ideas that were explicitly pro-fascist or utterly and overtly racist the range of opinions that can be denounced as “completely unacceptable” today has been gradually widened until it can be used to embrace virtually any opinion that is contrary to a particular sectarian perspective.

The existence of this powerful current within the left puts the more far-sighted leaders of the movement in a difficult position. On the one hand, they want to maintain unity within their wing of the Democratic coalition but on the other hand when, as recently happened, a [highly respected African-American Marxist scholar](#) is unable to deliver a speech about his analysis of the working class to a socialist organization like the Democratic Socialists of America because his perspective is denounced as “racist” by one faction within the organization it becomes clear that every single one of the strategists above can just as easily become the next target whenever one of the sectarian factions decide they are in a position to mount a challenge to them.⁸

As a result, at some point—and preferably sooner rather than later—the more serious political strategists on the left will be forced to conclude that they have no alternative except to firmly and openly oppose and reject left-wing sectarianism.

⁸A Black Marxist Scholar Wanted to Talk About Race. It Ignited a Fury.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/us/adolph-reed-controversy.html>

Conclusion

The **political** arguments for the urgent need to build a broad or commanding “big tent” Democratic majority are well known:

- a. Without winning the Senate and State Legislatures as well as the presidency Democrats will not be able to prevent more attacks on democratic institutions or advance an agenda that can win them enduring popular support.
- b. With Trump’s demagogic claims that the election will be stolen, even a very solid Democratic victory in the popular vote and the electoral college will be rejected by many Trump supporters. To gain legitimacy, a Democratic victory will have to be so clear and decisive that it convinces even Trump’s supporters that it is valid.

But beyond this, there is a deeper sociological reason why a big tent coalition is indispensable. At the present time America is deeply divided between educated, diverse people living in urban, metropolitan areas on the one hand and overwhelmingly white working class people, many living in Red States, rural areas and small towns.

This deep separation creates the sociological foundation for political extremism. When people live in the same areas and communities and share schools, sporting events, parks and streets they tend to see each other as neighbors. When a deep social distance divides them, they can easily come to see each other as aliens and strangers.

So long as the Democratic and Republican parties shared a fairly wide degree of consensus, as they did in the post-World War II era, people saw members of the opposite party as “normal” people who were their friends and neighbors and with whom they socialized in daily life—at PTA meetings, Little League games and a host of other shared activities.

As the social and demographic character of Democrats and Republicans began to diverge in the 1970’s and 1980’s, on the other hand, it became easier for right wing demagogues in the GOP to portray Democrats as subversive, sinister and even evil rather than as fellow Americans with whom one just happens to somewhat disagree.

Each successive stage of this evolution has been more grotesque than the last. In the 1990’s Fox News, Bill O’Reilly and Rush Limbaugh began the process of demonizing the Democrats, but the resulting militia movement remained a fringe phenomenon, especially after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1998. After Obama’s election new and more extreme demagogues like Glen Beck and Breitbart provided the ideology for the much larger Tea Party movement. Now Trump has legitimized the worst extremism ever seen in America, ranging from the conspiracy theories of Q-anon to the proud and open neo-fascists marching in Charlottesville and his own paranoid fantasies.

In this context, increasing the presence of culturally traditional Democrats in white working class and Red State districts across America is crucial for reducing extremism. Right now in many districts Republicans win 70 or 80% of the vote, making Democrats essentially invisible. Reducing the Republican advantage to 60 or 65% may seem irrelevant in purely electoral terms but in

sociological terms the effect would be profound. If your next door neighbor or the captain of the baseball team is a Democrat, it becomes harder to believe conspiracy theories that claim Democrats are secret degenerates running child sex slave rings.

As a result, winning a sector of the more moderate culturally traditional white working class voters to the Democratic Party would profoundly undermine the social foundation of the current GOP extremism. This is the most important reason why a “big tent” and commanding Democratic majority is vital not only for Democrats but for the future of America.