



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

**DEMOCRATS:  
THE POLLING DATA THAT SHOWS  
“WHITE MIDDLE AMERICANS” STARTING  
TO TURN AGAINST TRUMP  
DOESN'T TELL YOU HOW TO WIN THEIR SUPPORT.  
FOR THAT, YOU HAVE TO SEE THE WORLD  
THROUGH THEIR EYES.**

BY  
ANDREW LEVISON



**TDS STRATEGY MEMO:**

**DEMOCRATS: THE POLLING DATA THAT SHOWS “WHITE MIDDLE AMERICANS” STARTING TO TURN AGAINST TRUMP DOESN’T TELL YOU HOW TO WIN THEIR SUPPORT. FOR THAT, YOU HAVE TO SEE THE WORLD THROUGH THEIR EYES.**

By ANDREW LEVISON

In the last three months opinion polls have shown a dramatic decline in support for Donald Trump and growing support for Joe Biden among a wide range of white “middle Americans”—the overlapping categories of white working class people, the elderly, non-professional women and Red state voters.

The decline in support from these groups has deeply shaken political strategists in the Republican Party because they know that they have no serious chance of making up any of this decline by gaining support from other groups like people of color, youth, urbanites and college educated professionals. Without overwhelming majority support from “middle America” not only Donald Trump but GOP control of the Senate and State governments across America is in serious jeopardy.

As recent reports indicate, Trump and his circle of close advisors have clearly decided on a two pronged strategy for their coming counterattack this summer and fall.

First, maximize the enthusiasm of Trumps rock-solid base voters—racial bigots, the religious right, the passionate ideological conservatives and bottom line oriented businessmen and executives—all of whom see the re-election of Trump and the GOP as vital to protect and advance their agendas.

Second, frame the election as a profound life or death cultural clash between the white working class, small business owners, small town and rural red state voters of “middle America” on the one hand and the diverse elements of the Democratic coalition—minorities, young urban dwellers, professionals and educated liberals on the other.

A key element of this strategy will be to highlight—or if necessary create—examples of Democratic attitudes that show contempt for Middle America and its working people. The goal will be to convince these voters that Democrats see them all as ignorant and bigoted “deplorables.”

The truth is that condescending attitudes are sufficiently widespread within the Democratic coalition to provide plenty of raw material for such attacks and this strategy can indeed succeed if Democrats fail to convince these voters that they will genuinely represent them. This is especially true for the white working class voters whose defection from the Democrats in 2016 was the key to Trump’s victory.

---

Andrew Levison is the author of *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*. He is also a contributing editor of *The Democratic Strategist*.

---

The essential problem is that what is required for Democratic victories are candidates who can not only present objectively pro-worker proposals but who can also convince white working people and other middle Americans that they are genuinely *“on their side” “will fight for them” “understand their problems”* and *“share their values.”* These are characteristics working people consistently say they consider important in choosing a political candidate.

In fact, the central obstacle that many progressive candidates and their supporters face, unless they actually come from the communities where they are running for office, is how to genuinely become accepted in the culture and community where they are campaigning and to learn to see the world through the eyes of the people who live there.

In fact, it must be admitted that a substantial number of urban, college educated people have difficulty imagining why middle American culture and community is something that working people deeply value and even consider superior to the culture of those above them. From the outside, the urban fringes of major cities, the Rust Belt small towns and the rural areas across the country where white working class people live can easily appear to outsiders like sad, declining areas with stagnant economies, rampant drugs and little to recommend them.

But the people who live in these communities deeply feel the importance and the value of their neighborhood, friends, communities and home. To them the tractor pulls and rodeos of the West and the country music bars, motorcycle rallies, church socials and state fairs that go on across the country are as valuable and meaningful to them as the art galleries, receptions, sushi bars, bookstores and coffee shops of “hip” urban areas are to the educated and affluent.

And integrally connected to these physical aspects of community are shared and distinct rooted in traditional middle American and working class culture—a respect for hard work and common sense, a commitment to simple honesty rather than subtle wordplay and a belief that genuine friendship and personal integrity is more valuable than wealth or status.

The problem can be stated simply: a progressive Democratic candidate who tries to run a campaign based on an elegantly detailed agenda of issues and policies but who cannot communicate a personal connection and emotional identification with the culture of the voters he or she seeks to represent will rarely succeed.

## **The Streets of Gatlinburg**

To understand why this is so it would have been instructive if a person had happened to visit Gatlinburg, Tennessee before this spring, when the city was still in full operation. Gatlinburg is a regional vacation center, the gateway to the Smokey Mountains, the home of Dolly Parton’s “Dollywood” amusement park and a major recreation area for people who can only afford to take modest vacations, especially working class people from around the Southeast who drive to the area from their homes.

The people who come to here to visit are very visibly part of the America that Trump claims as his base. Some are overweight, others smoke, still others walk with a cane or the distinctive kind of limp that comes from injuries sustained at work. Harley Davison motorcycles roll down the street, not expensive mountain bikes or electric cars. There are no women wearing leggings

---

or designer jogging suits or men wearing NorthFace or Patagonia vests walking the crowded streets. Instead one sees leather vests with “Sturgis Motorcycle Rally” patches, belts with large western belt buckles and boots with inlaid “cowboy” designs.

To someone coming from the streets of Cambridge Square or Brooklyn Heights, at first it appears a very alien world. And it is, indeed, a profoundly different culture.

But a careful observer would also notice something else; it does not look or feel like a Trump rally.

There is not a sea of red “Make America Great Again” baseball caps. In fact, there are very, very few. The cars driving by are not filled with anti-abortion or anti-Democratic bumper stickers. Both elderly and young African-American vacationers mingle comfortably among the circulating crowds.

It is easy to dismiss the significance of this impression by suspecting that “deep down” many of these people completely agree with the fervent supporters who attend Trump’s rallies and, to be sure, a large percentage of the people one sees on the street did indeed vote for him. But the absence of “Trumpist” paraphernalia—hats, bumper stickers and buttons, despite Trump’s constant attempts to encourage public displays of support—suggests that the crowds are simply not passionate political partisans seeking every opportunity to display their commitment.

In fact, if one looks in the windows of the many stores that sell tee shirts with slogans emblazoned on them, shirts with “Trump 2020” or other slogans supporting him are a very minor part of the total. This is notable because these stores constantly update and revise their displays to highlight the most popular items.

What one sees instead are a vast array of slogans asserting “cultural traditionalism”—the values of a coherent and traditional “middle American” cultural perspective.

A substantial proportion of the slogans honor military service. For the elderly there are hats and tee shirts that declare them to be a “*Vietnam Veteran*”—often including their particular branch of service. For the younger there are hats and tee shirts and caps that declare “*Veteran – Desert Storm*” or “*Operation Enduring Freedom*.”

Other slogans and dramatic images printed on tee shirts vividly honor military sacrifice: “*All Gave Some, Some Gave All*,” “*Never forget the ones who died to keep us free*.”

Other slogans assert an emphatic patriotism: “*I’m glad to be an American*,” “*land of the free*,” “*I stand for the flag and kneel for the cross*,” “*If you don’t love this country, you can leave*.”

There is also a strong presence of traditional religion. There are stores on the main streets of downtown Gatlinburg that are specifically devoted to religious merchandise—small statues, paintings and biblical quotes framed for mounting on the wall. There are few bitter anti-atheistic bumper stickers or buttons available although the sentiment is not far away. On the highway entering Gatlinburg from the South, a billboard tells visitors, “*If you want to get rid of God don’t worry, he won’t be there in hell when you arrive*.”

In the main tee shirt stores there are also shirts with a variety of pro-second amendment slogans “*An armed man is a citizen, an unarmed man is a slave.*” There are a range of regional slogans as well— “*American by birth, Southern by the grace of god.*” “*Southern pride will never die.*”

It is easy to think that these are expressions of conservative opinions—“dog whistle” appeals to racism, militarism, theocracy and bigotry.

But the reality is that they are not.

**The Military.** What the men and women who walk by the window displays think as they see shirts with military slogans and logos is not about their opinion of the wars in Asia or the Middle East but rather a series of memories. Memories of a picture of an older brother or sister in uniform that is proudly displayed on a living room wall. Memories of a father or uncle falling silent and choking back tears when thinking about a long-ago war. Memories of themselves at nineteen, feeling for the first time a unique sense of belonging and dignity in sharing the values of ruggedness and bravery, teamwork and group solidarity, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. The memory of the pride they felt when someone on the street said “Thank you for your service” as they walked by.

These are not “opinions” and they are not “right” or “wrong.” They are memories deeply woven into the fabric of a person’s life and they define the kind of person that they are today.

**Religious faith.** As the tourists walk by the store windows crowded with framed biblical quotes and simple images of Christian themes the thoughts that are evoked are not opinions about Roe vs. Wade, prayer in school or what Jerry Falwell recently said but the recollection of similar framed quotes and images on the wall of a well-loved grandmother or elderly aunt’s home, now faded and greying with time. It is the memories of Sunday morning sermons and church picnics and the flavor of fried chicken and watermelon. It is the memory of the minister in the twelve-step program who helped a person to overcome addiction and gain the hope that they might be able to find forgiveness for all the pain and sadness they had caused. It is the reverie of the long-haul trucker driving a dark highway and thanking God for the beautiful baby who is waiting for him back home.

**Love of country, freedom and independence.** As the tourists file past the tee shirts with slogans like “America – land of the free” they visualize freedom as they experience it in their own lives—in their jobs and communities. Beyond the basic freedom that comes from living in a democracy, for working people today, many of whom are independent contractors or work for them the traditional concept of independence is tied to the value system of small business. Traditional working-class values like pride in craftsmanship, the character-building value of hard work and self-discipline are now intertwined with values like owning your own business, individual initiative, and pride in making that business a success. Love of country and patriotism are also tied to a sense of the place and culture that they come from—to memories of their youth and nostalgic cultural images of an idealized South or the West, of small towns and farm communities.

As a result, to the outsider the tee shirts in the stores can indeed seem to reflect the assertion of an explicit conservative philosophy. Understood more deeply, however, they actually express three major traditional values in white working-class culture: respect for religious faith, respect for military service, and respect for the character traits encouraged by small business, honest

---

labor, and hard work. Each of these traditional values is supported by the person's community social institutions like the church, the military, and the business community, and is continually reinforced by family, friends, and neighbors as a working person grows up in his or her community.

The proper description of this interlocking set of values is *cultural traditionalism*. It is often confused with conservatism because the politicians who promote ideological conservatism very often uphold and glorify traditional cultural ideas to further their own ideology. But cultural traditionalism is a distinct concept from conservatism, one that refers to a set of basic social values and not to specific social or political views. Within this set of basic traditional social values, various perspectives can exist, perspectives that can range from firmly conservative to strongly progressive.

A key area where this division between conservative and progressive can be seen is in regard to the currently explosive topic of race and racism. When white working people who consider themselves to be "moderate" or "middle of the road" as opposed to "conservative" are gathered in focus groups they express a distinct perspective on race that is very different from either the racist or the left-progressive view.

In focus group after focus group they sincerely assert that they judge people by their character, not by the color of their skin. They say that they know some "good" African Americans and some undesirable ones as well, and they feel no embarrassment in categorizing African Americans in this way. They express the same perspective regarding immigrants. They know one Mexican co-worker who is a "fine family man" and another who is "trouble" or "a bad dude." They do not share the liberal view that categorizing non-whites in this way represents a perpetuation of stereotypes or reflects an unconscious racism. They believe that they judge white people according to the same standards that they use for non-whites and consider themselves entirely admirable because they choose to view and treat people in this "color-blind" way.

Some progressives believe that statements of this kind are simply a smokescreen for an underlying racism, and that unless a white person explicitly recognizes the reality of systemic racism and acknowledges his or her own position as the beneficiary of "white privilege," statements such as "I judge people as individuals" represent little more than rationalizations to justify racial bias. In fact, some will even argue that whites who express overt bigotry are preferable because they admit their bias rather than conceal it.

A vast number of commentaries have been written regarding this debate, and it will not be resolved in this discussion, but when it is viewed from the specific perspective of Democratic political strategy for 2020, one fact is inescapable: virtually no genuinely bigoted individuals are going to vote for Democratic candidates under any circumstances, while some white workers who hold this "*I judge people as individuals*" view can, in fact, be convinced to vote Democratic. Categorizing all white workers who hold an "*I judge people as individuals*" view as essentially indistinguishable from overt racists unavoidably represents a decision to abandon these potentially winnable voters to the GOP.

In a wide variety of focus group sessions, held long before the current wave of protests over the police emerged this spring, the important difference between this "color-blind" perspective and explicit racism emerged most dramatically in regard to videos of police mistreatment or the unjustified shooting of African Americans. Unlike the reflexive "support the police"

attitudes racists and firm conservatives will usually express, the white “middle of the road” people in the focus groups very firmly agreed that in some cases the video clearly showed that the police officer was totally wrong and his conduct utterly inexcusable and indeed criminal. Their only objection was that such misconduct should not automatically be assumed to always be the case, and that all police officers should not be blamed for the actions of the perpetrators. It is precisely this distinction that has increasingly shown up in the opinion polls conducted this Spring which show wide criticism of police misconduct and support for “black Lives matter” protests among many “middle Americans” but also deep opposition to lawless behavior like looting and vandalism.

It is beyond the scope of this memo to describe the concept of cultural traditionalism in full detail and explain how it can have both intolerant, conservative expressions as well as more tolerant, progressive expressions. The following articles discuss this in greater detail:

1. Andrew Levison, “Winning Some Middle of the Road Working Class Whites”, *The American Prospect*<sup>1</sup>
2. Andrew Levison, “What Democrats Still Don’t Get About Winning Back the White Working Class”, *The Washington Monthly*<sup>2</sup>
3. Guy Molyneux, “Mapping the White Working Class: A deep dive into the beliefs and sentiments of the moderates among them”, *The American Prospect*,<sup>3</sup>

The way that this underlying cultural traditionalism becomes reflected in voter’s political choices is complex and has dramatically changed since Donald Trump’s election. As a result, it is vital to understand the change that has occurred.

## Lunchtime on the Construction Site

To do this, the place to begin is during lunchtime at a building site where eight to twelve construction workers are eating the sandwiches that they purchased from McDonalds or Hardees or that they brought with them from home. During the four to six month period when a large single family home or small commercial building is being constructed a variety of different tradesmen flow through—foundation excavators, cement workers, carpenters, masons, laborers, roofers, electricians, furnace and air conditioning equipment installers, insulation and sheetrock workers, painters, trim carpenters, cabinetmakers and landscapers.

This particular group of workers is entirely composed of white men. Latino workers have become a significant part of the construction business and hold a range of attitudes toward Trump. White working class women also, particularly younger, unmarried women and those who live in urban areas, have attitudes About Trump that vary widely. But it is among white working class men like these that one finds Trump’s firmest supporters.

Ten years ago, or even just five, one could reliably distinguish four distinct political attitudes among construction workers like these.

---

<sup>1</sup><https://prospect.org/power/winning-some-middle-of-the-road-working-class-whites/>

<sup>2</sup><https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/08/07/what-democrats-still-dont-get-about-winning-back-the-white-working-class/>

<sup>3</sup><http://prospect.org/article/mapping-white-working-class>

Several would be firm Rush Limbaugh/talk radio conservatives who would resolutely and occasionally belligerently repeat the latest notions they had absorbed from their car radios or Fox news commentators on TV. Some—but not most—would make comments that suggested a conscious, explicit racism while others would firmly deny they personally felt any overt bigotry.

Another distinct group were firm **and in some cases** ostentatiously pious Christians. Some would make repeated references to “my Savior” in conversation or indicate their disapproval of vulgar language. In conversation men like these quickly made it plain that their religious faith was the dominant force and perspective in their life.

A third group were men who liberals might reflexively classify as “conservatives” but who actually did not hold or express explicitly ideological conservative views. Rather, they were “cultural traditionalists.” They simply considered themselves deeply patriotic and pro-military, “Sunday school” religious, firmly in favor of “small business” and “old-fashioned” moral values.

A fourth group was composed of men who were strongly and resolutely apolitical. They were indifferent to the daily news, entirely focused on their immediate personal circumstances and consistently unwilling to assert any broad opinions or views. If the lunchtime conversation turned to politics or current affairs they would very quickly withdraw with a mumbled “*don’t matter to me*” or “*I don’t pay attention to that stuff.*”

Obviously, none of these groups are what most Democrats would consider “liberal” or “progressive”, but they did reflect a significant range of attitudes.

One attitude, however, they held in common. They viewed **all** politicians—**all**, regardless of party—as utterly dishonest and corrupt. If a lunchtime conversation about a topic became uncomfortably heated, the most common way the situation was defused was for everyone to cynically agree that, ultimately, politicians were all liars and that no-body “*up there in government*” really cared about the ordinary person.

Equally, while the men in the last two groups perceived College Educated liberals, Silicon Valley millionaires and Wall Street financial wizards as all elites who lived more affluent lives and had little concern for them, on a day-to-day basis they did not feel any fierce and active hostility to them.

And there was one other, vitally important distinction between these men—a difference in basic personality and temperament. Some were basically bad-tempered, easily angered and generally irritable. These same individuals were most often also the most intolerant of people who were different from themselves or of ideas contrary to their own.

On the other hand, others were basically relaxed, even-tempered, friendly and easy-going and, as a result, generally tolerant of different people and ideas—usually ready to “live and let live.”

While precise generalizations are impossible, one general pattern was that men in the first two groups above tended to be the more intolerant while those in the third and fourth groups were more likely to be more tolerant in their basic attitudes.

And, critically, a sufficient sector of these more tolerant men had been willing to vote for Obama in 2008 and 2012.

Since Trump's campaign and election in 2016, however, circumstances have profoundly changed—and changed in a way that has shifted the political terrain dramatically against the Democrats. The difference can be stated simply: when white construction workers now sit around for lunch and the conversation turns to politics, Trump now completely defines and shapes the conversation. Every discussion quickly becomes framed in terms of what they agree with or disagree with about what Trump has done and said. They may have a range of opinions about specific policies and issues, but it is always Trump and his actions that defines the terms of the debate.

This was a result of Trump's extremely successful strategy in 2016. Even as some working people feel disillusioned by Trump today, he succeeded in imposing his framing of all political issues as *"It's Us" versus "Them."* Trump—vile and dishonest as he may be—very successfully tapped into a deep mental and emotional perspective in white working class life—a distinct kind of modern class consciousness, class resentment and class antagonism that is generally unacknowledged in current discussions regarding how to reach these voters but plays a critical role in their political thinking.

## How White Workers See Social Class

There is, of course, tremendous resistance among social scientists and historians to the idea that American white workers can be said to have anything like a "class consciousness" at all. In most social commentators' minds, the term "class consciousness" can only refer to a radical mode of thought that sees society in Marxist terms as sharply and fundamentally divided between labor and capital.

But from the point of view of white working class Americans themselves, there is a quite different sense in which the terms class consciousness, class resentment and class antagonism are very deeply and powerfully meaningful. It is that from their perspective, society is indeed sharply divided between, on the one hand, *"people like them"* and on the other hand three distinct and separate elites who in different ways *"screw"* them. While this distinction does not have a clear terminology in American politics, in Mexican slang there has always been a distinct set of terms for this very specific form of class consciousness—it is between *"los chingones"*—"the people with power who screw others" and *"los chingados"*—"the ones who get screwed."

This is a different form of class consciousness than the traditional radical conception but it meets the key characteristic of the term—a perception of society as sharply divided between ordinary people and elites and a sense of resentment those below feel at the treatment they receive from those above.

A key difference between the modern white working class conception and the traditional radical view is that white working people do not visualize a single dominant “ruling class” or “power elite” above them but rather see three different and distinct groups, none of which totally dominates society but each of which in one way or another mistreats them and holds them in contempt.

The first group is the political class and as anyone who has ever listened to focus groups or has actually spent time with white working class Americans can attest many working people do indeed see politicians as a *completely distinct, utterly corrupt and entirely parasitic* class that lives in complete isolation from ordinary people in a rarified environment of fancy ballrooms and expensive restaurants, big money contributions and backroom deals that invariably end up screwing ordinary Americans.

The second group is the “Wall Street” financial elite that makes decisions in faraway office towers that destroy local community jobs and mom and pop businesses. They reside in fancy gated communities filled with mega-mansions and send their children to private schools with country club entrance procedures that would never allow the children of ordinary workers admission even if those workers could afford the tuition.<sup>4</sup>

The final group is the “liberal” elite—the heterogeneous group of college professors and students, Hollywood actors and producers, music and fashion producers and TV, newspaper and magazine columnists and commentators. They are not seen as a financial ruling class but rather as a social group that dominates and controls the culture—what one sees on TV and in the movies, what is taught in colleges and universities, what is written in editorial page commentaries and what is produced and sold in the fashion and music industries. They are perceived as affluent urban dwellers who live in expensive, gentrified urban communities or in charming college towns. They drive “sophisticated” costly cars, drink Lattes, casually travel to Europe on vacations and wear Patagonia vests and Birkenstock shoes to subtly announce their discernment and sophistication. They are also seen to exercise substantial political power, using the Democratic Party as their vehicle. This power to impose their “liberal” agenda is obtained through a cynical alliance with minorities who are bribed to vote for Democrats by various kinds of “handouts,” special government programs or preferential treatment.

Working people have distinct feelings about these three different groups but see the members of all three as living in worlds that are economically and sociologically high “above” them and who resemble each other in their indifference to the needs of ordinary people and their contempt for them as human beings. All three groups are emphatically perceived as “them” and not “us”.

This “class consciousness” and “class resentment” is a complex perspective that cannot be easily tracked by standard opinion polls and for this reason until Trump it was often overlooked in the discussion of progressive political strategy. But it is vividly evident in focus groups with white working class Americans, in the discussions that occur during progressive campaigns of door to door canvassing in white working class neighborhoods and in the interviews

---

<sup>4</sup>This view of the economic elite does not extend to small businessmen and women. With the decline of mass industry, many workers—from construction to retail—today work in smaller businesses where they know and relate directly to the owner. Working people do not see the owners or managers of these small businesses as part of the elite but rather as people who are generally like them and who share their outlook and values.

conducted during ethnographic field studies. Its centrality is revealed in the very titles of the major sociological studies of white working class Americans that have appeared in the last several years: Catherine Cramer's, *The Politics of Resentment*, Jennifer Hochschild's, *Strangers in Their Own Land* and Justin Gest's, *The New Minority*.

This perspective provides a key explanation for why many Democratic workers gravitated toward Trump rather than Bernie Sanders during the primaries in 2016 when they had a direct choice between the two "outsiders": **Sanders and Trump were offering two profoundly different narratives about the relationship of white working people to the elites above them.**

Bernie Sanders did not present his view of social classes in the same terms that white workers themselves saw them—as three separate elites arrayed above them. Instead, his progressive populist approach argued that white workers needed to accept a radically different definition of class consciousness—one that portrayed the "*Wall Street billionaire class*" as the "real" and hegemonic American ruling class—the one that ultimately controls and manipulates the economy, the politicians, the media, the schools and all the other major institutions in society to the detriment of everyone else. In this conception liberals are not an elite group socially above white workers but rather potential allies in the struggle against the billionaire class. This perspective implies that white working people need to recognize the benefit of joining in a broad coalition with liberals and minorities against the plutocratic "one percent."

A white worker who examines the webpage of Bernie Sander's organization, Our Revolution, sees this immediately. Along with an admirable range of solidly progressive economic planks in the groups' platform, there are also separate planks devoted to "*Combating Climate Change to Save the Planet*," "*Insuring Racial Justice*," "*Fighting for Women's Rights*," "*Fighting for LGBT Equality*," "*Ending the Humanitarian Crisis in Puerto Rico*" and "*Empowering Tribal Nations*."

For many progressives, these are entirely logical and necessary elements in a broad coalition platform none of which can be compromised or ignored. But to an ordinary white working class voter, they unavoidably indicate that the progressive conception is that they need to completely accept and embrace this entire set of ideas without any exception and join this broad and diverse coalition rather than expect to find a progressive political representation that specifically embodies their distinct needs and outlook.

## Trump's Seductive Appeal

In sharp contrast, in 2016 Donald Trump's appeal to white working class Americans emphatically and specifically reaffirmed their basic class outlook and promised to represent **them and them alone**. He said, in effect, "Your point of view is absolutely right. You have been horribly mistreated by all three of the elites above you. They have never given a damn about you and have been screwing you for years."

On the one hand, when describing the economy in his rallies, Trump used language that could have been directly taken from progressive speeches and publications:<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>The quotes that follow are taken from two valuable sources:

1. "Trump's Electoral Speeches and His Appeal to the American White Working Class," *The British Journal of Sociology* <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1468-4446.12315>
2. "The Emotional Politics of Making America Great Again: Trump's Working Class Appeals," *The Journal of Working Class Studies*, <https://workingclassstudiesjournal.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/jwcs-vol-2-issue-1-june-2017-schrock1.pdf>

Right now our economy isn't growing practically at all. . . Many workers are earning less today than they were 18 years ago. They're working harder, they're working longer, but they're making less and in some cases, they're working two and three jobs, but still taking home less money. It's ridiculous. [The economy is] the worst since the Great Depression.

'This is not a rising tide that lifts all boats. This is a wave of globalization that wipes out our middle class and our jobs. We need to reform our economic system so that, once again, we can all succeed together, and America can become rich again.'

In Trump's narrative, however, the villains included not only business but all three social elites. In fact, in his telling, the loss of jobs was not directly caused by the Wall Street Billionaire class but was rather more specifically the fault of the political class. He said:

'The political class in Washington has betrayed you. They have uprooted your jobs, your communities, and [t]hey put up new skyscrapers in Beijing while your factories in Michigan were crumbling. These are our politicians...'The political establishment has brought about the destruction of our factories, and our jobs, as they flee to Mexico, China and other countries all around the world. Our just-announced job numbers are anemic . . . Take a look at what's going on. [politicians] stripped away these towns bare and raided the wealth for themselves.'

In this revisionist narrative liberals were major villains as well:

We are living through the greatest jobs theft in the history of the world... What our politicians have allowed to happen to this area [and] all areas of our country, NAFTA, TPP, they want to approve. A disaster. Ohio has lost one in four manufacturing jobs since NAFTA—a deal signed by Bill Clinton and supported strongly by Hillary. Remember, every time you see a closed factory or wiped out community in Ohio, it was essentially caused by the Clintons... We've lost 70,000 factories since China entered the World Trade Organization. Another Bill and Hillary backed disaster.

Trump thus presented himself as an independent gadfly and the only real champion of the ignored working class in their struggle against all three of the interlocking social elites.

[My election] is going to be a victory for the people, a victory for the wage-earner, the factory worker. Remember this, a big, big victory for the factory worker. They haven't had those victories for a long time. A victory for every citizen and for all of the people whose voices have not been heard for many, many years. They're going to be heard again.

While my opponent slanders you as deplorable and irredeemable, I call you hard-working American patriots who love your country and want a better future for all of our people. You are mothers and fathers, soldiers and sailors, carpenters and welders.

He explicitly identified himself with the working class rather than the wealthy.

'I've spent my professional life among construction workers, bricklayers, electricians, and plumbers. I feel more comfortable around blue collar workers than Wall Street executives

...And that's why the steelworkers are with me, that's why the miners are with me, that's why the working people, electricians, the plumbers, the sheet-rockers, the concrete guys and gals, they're all—they're with us. And I like them better than the rich people that I know. I know a lot of rich people. It's true. [the working people] are better. I like them better.<sup>6</sup>

The result was that white workers heard Trump reaffirming their own basic social perspective. *"None of the three elites give a damn about you."* Trump was saying, *"And all of them hold you in contempt."*

For a huge number of white working Americans this was tremendously exciting and indeed profoundly cathartic. For the first time they were hearing someone in the political system saying what they had felt and thought very deeply for a long time but had never heard any major figure clearly express. It produced an enormous sense of vindication and relief—a feeling similar to that which gay men and women felt when they first heard it asserted that their sexuality was actually something normal and not a thing to be ashamed of.

This explains a key characteristic of white working class Trump supporters that progressives have always found utterly incomprehensible—why they would vehemently insist that Trump was *"telling the truth," "telling it like it is"* or being more *"honest"* than other politicians when it was obvious that he was constantly and brazenly lying. The *"truth"* that white working Americans were referring to was not any set of specific facts, but a social outlook and perspective that they were deeply thrilled to finally hear expressed.

Of course, white workers who are bigoted toward Latinos, immigrants and Muslims also perceived Trump's overt and bitter racist rhetoric as *"telling the truth"* and being *"honest."* But there were also many white workers who were more attracted to Trump because of his *"pro-worker"* rhetoric than to his bigotry.

In fact, what Trump had actually created was an ideological synthesis that was new to America but not to Europe—one that included scapegoating racial minorities, belligerent nationalism, attempts to undermine democratic institutions and demagogic promises of prosperity for the working class.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>It is notable that in his speeches Trump almost completely ignored the "new," heavily female and service sector working class and focused almost exclusively on traditional blue-collar male factory, construction and mining workers. His supporters however considered that his invocation of the traditional trades was meant to embrace "ordinary people" in general and did not interpret it as exclusionary.

<sup>7</sup>The American press generally calls this particular package of policies "populist" and "authoritarian" but, in any introductory textbook in political science or 20th century European history it is immediately recognizable as the ideology that is defined as *"fascism"* or *"neo-fascism"*. The reluctance to use these entirely accurate terms in American political discussion is not because there is any serious doubt among non-Trump supporting commentators that the terms are indeed applicable but rather because in the US media there is an unwritten prohibition that one may not call a U.S. politician a fascist until they have grown a mustache and murdered several million people in a campaign of mass genocide. An entirely accurate definition of this absurd and ultimately cowardly stance is the *"if he's not every single bit as bad as Hitler, you can't call him a fascist"* rule in U.S. political journalism.

But the key to developing a strategy to increase the level of support among white working class Americans is to recognize that there actually is a profound difference between passionate Trump loyalists and cultural traditionalists and between people who are intolerant and those who are tolerant. The former groups are beyond Democratic persuasion, the latter groups are not. And despite the ugly image of all Trump supporters that emerges from his rallies, the loyalists do not represent his entire coalition.

## Heartland Democrats

The clearest evidence for this assertion is the ability of various “heartland” Democrats to win elections in areas that also strongly supported Donald Trump. Senator John Tester and Governor Steve Bullock of Montana, Sherrod Brown of Ohio and a range of Democratic candidates in smaller congressional and state legislative districts in 2018 are examples of candidates who were able to advance a moderately liberal or progressive platform while still convincing a sufficient number of white working class, small town and rural voters that they shared the basic traditional cultural values of their constituents.

In recent years, within the Democratic coalition the success of moderate progressive Democratic politicians like these has often been dismissed as reflecting some unique personal charm and political skill rather than a demonstration that there is indeed a distinct and coherent approach to politics that can combine basic Democratic values within the framework of Red State cultural traditionalism.

But historically, progressive Democratic candidates who have succeeded in white working-class, small-town middle American districts have tended to display two common characteristics:

First, they firmly asserted and embraced many key traditional values and what sociologists call “cultural markers” of middle American even as they staked out relatively moderate or liberal stances on key issues. They would endorse common-sense gun regulations, for example, but also treat gun ownership as legitimate and categorically support the rights of citizens to own guns for personal home defense. They would reject the notion that America should impose Christianity on all Americans, but they would equally firmly assert that Christian faith is a positive force in many Americans’ family life, including their own. They would support a variety of populist economic measures but at the same time endorse the virtues of small business and individual initiative as an inherent part of American life. (In this regard one need only think of the vast number of worker-contractors in construction who are at the same time both construction workers and small businessmen).

Second, they would frequently embody traditional working-class values in their own personal life and history. Many attended church on Sunday; others had served honorably in the military or had a background in a working-class occupation or as the owner of a small business. Many went hunting on fall weekends, listened to country music in their car, and were able to talk with firsthand knowledge and personal experience about the day-to-day problems of the working-class or rural people in the neighborhoods and communities they represented. In their personal lives they refuted the accusation that they were educated urban elitists with no connection to or understanding of ordinary peoples’ lives.

One well known Democratic politician who embodies these characteristics is Senator Jon Tester of Montana. As an article in the *Washington Post* noted:

Tester may be tricky to brand, as he has already established one here. He still works on his family farm, sports a flat-top haircut and isn't bashful about telling the story of how he lost three fingers in a meat grinder as a child. ... "Our guy can take out a transmission on a John Deere tractor, okay?" said Tester supporter Geoff Gallus, as he sat at the bar at the Silver Dollar Saloon here in Butte. "That's meaningful."

The 2018 elections saw a range of Democratic candidates in Red State districts succeed with this approach and most projections show that if Democrats can maintain the same level of victory, it will insure the defeat of Donald Trump and several Republican senators.

It is important to note that, although these politicians do not consider themselves to be socialists or radicals, they cannot accurately be dismissed as "centrists"—they do not advocate neoliberal economics, support for "big money" financing of elections, coziness with the Wall Street/Davos elite or propose "republican-lite" policies—all of which are the defining traits of political centrism as an actual political ideology and strategy. On the contrary, an examination of the websites of Sherrod Brown and Jon Tester, for example, reveals that, while there are subtle differences in their platforms, both advocate policies that are clearly "progressive" and not "centrist." They can accurately be called "reformists" or "gradualists" to distinguish them from the firmly radical or explicitly socialist wing of the Democratic Party but they are simply not "centrists" if that term is supposed to have any serious meaning as a description of a specific political ideology and strategy and not just a general purpose insult for any politician unwilling to clearly define himself or herself as a radical.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

It is extremely important to recognize that in any era the specific shape of progressive-left strategy is always deeply rooted in the experience and lessons of the campaigns and movements that directly preceded it. The current generation of leftists are young men and women now in their 20's and 30's who formed their conceptions of political strategy based on their knowledge and experience with the most recent progressive struggles—the feminist movement, the GLBT struggles, the "storm the gates" movement in 2000's and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the early 2000's.

---

<sup>8</sup>Many commentators on the left will understandably resist setting aside the term "centrist" for their opponents because it allows them to identify anyone less radical than themselves with utterly discredited figures like Mark Penn, Dick Morris and the Wall Street insiders who populated the economic team of Clinton's second term. This has an undeniable polemical value—but it comes at the price of making the term entirely devoid of any serious meaning or use in intelligent political discussion today.

At first glance, the term "reformist," while vastly more accurate, is less attractive because it seems somehow less devastating when hurled as an accusation against one's opponents. This however is actually quite wrong. If one reads the bitter exchanges that occurred within the sectarian left of the 1960's or 1930's it quickly becomes apparent that the term "reformist" can be hurled with just as much sneering, bitter and cynical contempt as well as snarling, withering condescension as the term "centrist." The term also works equally well with the full range of nasty modifying adjectives -e.g. "cringing reformists," "shameless reformists," "Big Money beltway reformists," "groveling reformists" and so on. In short, it has the virtue of being able to be employed in just as bitter and lethally venomous way as the term "centrist" while simultaneously being more empirically accurate).

This new left is largely composed of college educated young men and women and their language and way of thinking about politics and social movements reflects the unique culture of the university—a culture that is profoundly different from the culture of the white working class. In this culture a newborn baby boy is properly described as “*assigned male at birth*” and Latino men and women correctly referred to as “*Latinex*” although few Latinos themselves use or even recognize this term. Even more directly, white working class men, even those with extremely low incomes, are expected to acknowledge that they are the beneficiaries of “white privilege” compared with all non-white groups and can face extraordinarily fierce and bitter criticism if they refuse to accept this idea.

In contrast, there are only a small number of people in today’s “woke” left who were old enough to have actually participated in the Southern civil rights movement of the early 1960’s and there are literally just a handful who ever learned and internalized the lessons of the trade union movement, either from their parents or from actual participation in union organizing campaigns.

This is unfortunate because the struggle to organize trade unions actually holds the most directly applicable lessons for Democratic candidates’ and campaigns today and there are several key lessons that the organizers who built the trade union movement were taught that hold important relevance for winning the support of working people and middle Americans in the 2020 elections.

In training sessions for union organizers in the 1930’s there were three key lessons that were taught.

First, the men and women who were training to be union organizers were taught that they could not expect to win the support of the workers they sought to organize until they had first won the workers’ trust. They had to work in the factories and live in the communities where they were organizing for years if necessary in order to be accepted by the workers as “*one of us.*” In organizing classes they were told “*your first job is to learn—not to teach, not to preach and not to lecture. The workers know their problems better than you do and they know what solutions they truly need. When you organize, first listen and then shut up and listen some more. Only after that should you start to talk.*” The underlying principle was that a successful organizing campaign must be based on the real daily needs and struggles of the workers—as they themselves experience and understand them—and not on any abstract principles.

In fact, in many of those training classes they quoted a marvelous slogan – “*Never, ever blame the workers if an organizing campaign fails. It is not because they weren’t smart enough to understand what you said, it’s because you didn’t understand **them** well enough to explain it right.*”

Second, while many of the organizers were socialists themselves, they were taught that workers should not be expected or required to accept a radical perspective as a whole from the very beginning. In fact, one of the most difficult struggles the industrial union movement faced in the 1930’s was winning the support of racially prejudiced white workers who deeply objected to the idea of treating Negroes as equals in the union. In the training sessions the rule that was taught was “*workers cannot be convinced to accept racial equality by words. It is only in the shared struggle for common goals that they will learn in their own way to understand why racial equality is right.*”

---

Third, organizers were taught that if you want to represent workers, remember that your job is to genuinely represent **them**, not to think that you have been elected to “lead” them where you think they ought to go. This is true even when sometimes they are wrong.

In the 1950’s there was an excellent independent movie made about a strike of miners in New Mexico. At one point in the film the mine owner tells the union organizer, *“Tell your men to go back to work”*

The union organizer replies, *“I can’t tell them to do anything. They don’t work for me; I work for them.”*

In short, organizers were taught that they may not always agree with the views and decisions of the people they represent but they must never forget that they are committed to represent them.

Each one of these three lessons, taught to union organizers over 90 years ago, has direct resonance to the battle against Trump and Trumpism today. It is possible to hold a principled radical perspective and yet at the same time appreciate and apply the lessons of the trade union movement about how to reach people who live in a different culture from your own and convince them that it is your candidate and not some Trump supporter in the GOP who is their real ally, most sincere representative and genuine defender.

It is not simply a matter of offering them the best platform and programs. If that were all that was necessary Democratic and progressive majorities at every level of American government would have been achieved years ago. The profound challenge we face today is to figure out how to apply the lessons of the trade union movement to the challenge of regaining the support of the people who once saw Democrats as the party of the common man.