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The Democratic Strategist has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

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DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST  
STRATEGY MEMO

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BY  
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By ANDREW LEVISON

The widespread debate about the nature of Donald Trump's appeal has largely focused on two central factors: his stance as an independent "outsider" or "maverick" who is challenging the "business as usual" approach of the GOP establishment and his overt appeal to anti-Latino sentiment. Although Trump's overall popularity among Republican Party voters seems recently to have reached a plateau, Ron Brownstein, in particular, has emphasized the fact that Trump has developed a commanding lead and probably an unshakable base of support among white working class Republicans. *As he said:*<sup>1</sup> "Trump is displaying a striking strength among the party's growing ranks of [white] working class voters without college degrees. The billionaire developer is building a blue-collar foundation."

Trump's direct challenge to the GOP establishment and his open hostility to Latinos has given rise to great concern among Republican strategists about the damage he may do to the long term prospects of the party with this key group. But Trump's rise actually poses an even greater challenge to the GOP – a challenge that threatens the party's basic political ideology and the central political narrative that it has used to unite the various wings of the party since the Reagan era.

The basic political ideology and the narrative that has unified the Republican coalition since the Reagan era rests on three pillars of the conservative value system – Christian piety, muscular military patriotism and free market fundamentalism. Each of these core elements of the Republican philosophy is supported by a vast network of both elite and grass-roots social organizations and institutions that are lavishly funded to promote the values they endorse. When combined into a single coherent narrative, these three perspectives are presented as an integrated philosophy of "American values" that are rooted in the "real America" of small towns and Red states and which stand in stark contrast to the values of the urban, college educated supporters of the Democratic Party who live in coastal enclaves like Berkeley, Boston and Greenwich Village. Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and all the candidates in 2012 essentially shared this basic narrative.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.nationaljournal.com/next-america/newsdesk/billionaire-candidate-his-blue-collar-following>

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The appeal to white racism played a major role in building the modern Republican coalition during the white backlash era of the 1970's and was the key to the Southern strategy that shifted the South to the GOP. By the Reagan era, however, the GOP ceased to appeal to overt prejudice against African-Americans and switched to a more subtle appeal based on criticism of unnamed "welfare queens" "thugs and criminals" and "undeserving beneficiaries of racial preferences" who were universally understood to be African-American. The term "dog whistles" was coined to describe these not-so-subtle appeals to the racial attitudes of the Republican base.

It became widely assumed among Republican strategists that a GOP platform based on the invocation of the three traditional conservative values combined with periodic dog-whistle appeals to racism would be sufficient to maintain white working class support for the GOP despite the steadily deteriorating economic circumstances of working Americans and the clear plutocratic bias of Republican economic policies. The GOP elites felt confident of this because they sincerely believed that deep down most white workers really did agree with the fundamental premises of free market, "trickle down" economics -- even if they did frequently express populist opinions on opinion polls. Ronald Reagan's re-election in 1984 and his continuing popularity seemed adequate proof that white workers really were economic conservatives at heart, so long as the GOP's economic policy was attractively packaged as part of "basic American values."

The strategy certainly seemed to work. Despite a vast array of 1950's era economic proposals and appeals from Democratic candidates, white working class voters in the 1980's and 1990's consistently tended to back GOP candidates and reject Dems. Even during Clinton's 1996 victory, a clear majority of white workers still voted for either the GOP or Ross Perot's third party.

The growing number of Latino immigrants in the 1990's posed a new and different challenge. As immigration increased, anti-Mexican and Latin American prejudice increased sharply within the GOP base but the backlash against California's proposition 187 in 1994 indicated that the GOP had to move carefully. By the time of George W. Bush's 2004 reelection, demographic trends clearly indicated that the GOP had to attempt an extremely difficult balancing act. On the one hand GOP candidates needed to placate the Republican base by demonizing undocumented Latino immigrants as parasites and criminals and by promising to "secure the border" and reject any "amnesty" while simultaneously denying that they held any prejudice against Latino Americans and asserting that in fact they sincerely wished to win their support in future elections.

By openly and crassly appealing to anti-Latino stereotypes and prejudices Donald Trump is now not simply destroying the GOP's hope of regaining the level of support George Bush attained among Latino voters. His overall message is actually blowing the GOP's 40 year old political coalition and master narrative completely out of the water. In fact, while it has not been clearly grasped, what Trump has actually put forward is a very distinct and coherent political perspective -- one that directly contradicts the traditional GOP approach and which particularly appeals to many white working class voters.

On the one hand, Trump has been openly contemptuous of the fundamentalist morality and sanctimonious piety of the religious right. His attitude toward religion, in fact, is best described as indifferent and even dismissive. And Trump is equally indifferent to free market fundamentalism and traditional Republican economics. He embraces positions usually identified with the Democrats such as preserving social security and support for single payer health care.

In consequence, Trump's basic political stance does not simply minimize but directly challenges the role and legitimacy of both the religious right and the free market fundamentalists in the GOP coalition. In contrast, the three main pillars of Trump's political appeal are:

1. Overt racism and xenophobia directed toward Latinos, Muslims and African-Americans (the first are "drug dealers" and "rapists", the second "American-hating terrorists" and the third "rioters" and "cop killers")
2. An aggressive, belligerent nationalism that views almost all other countries, including Mexico, China, Saudi Arabia and Europe as actively malevolent and antagonistic toward the U.S. and as a result dismisses the value of international agreements and multinational cooperation.
3. A distinctly right-wing version of populism which is overwhelmingly designed to protect the existing social safety net for the middle strata of the white working class while denying assistance to both the working and non-working white poor as well as to minorities.

These three major planks of Trump's political platform are not held together by the traditional GOP framework of dedication to "traditional American values" but rather by Trump's invocation of his own unique and extraordinary individual will, energy and personal magnetism. Knowledge and expertise are ultimately secondary in his analysis; what Americans need in a leader is a person with vast and exceptional determination, character and spirit, one who is capable of bending circumstances to his will.

Students of European social history will quickly recognize that this political ideology has clear historical antecedents in a wide variety of national governments and social movements that existed across Western Europe in the mid 20th century and which exerted a powerful attraction on the European working class in a time of extreme economic turmoil. The fact that Trump does not personally express a bitter hatred and anger toward his political opponents or dismiss democracy itself as decadent and passé as did the 20th century expositors of this perspective does not change the fact that the political perspective he has formulated is recognizably similar to its historical predecessors.

The critically important point, however, is that Trump's resurrection of this distinct political perspective now catastrophically divides the traditional GOP coalition.

The crisis for the GOP resides in the fact that with its current coalition the party simply cannot assemble a national majority without the support of the racist, xenophobic elements of their political base. As a result, they must either try to move to the center and genuinely compete with Democrats for sectors of the Obama coalition or they must try to win supermajorities of whites, a strategy which requires winning massive support from the white working class.

As it presently stands, Trump has gained sufficient popularity among the white working class to deny the GOP a majority in a national election should he refuse to support the party's eventual nominee. In a parliamentary system, the "Trumpists" who support him would in all probability quickly split into separate right-wing party like French National Front and then negotiate terms for entering into an electoral coalition with a diminished GOP. But in the American two-party system, on the other hand, there is no clear historical precedent for how this conflict will be resolved.

For progressives and Democrats, the rise of "Trumpism" within the GOP poses two challenges. First, Democrats must urgently consider how to appeal to the relatively tolerant sector of the white working class that is not deeply hostile to minorities and that is therefore uncomfortable with Trump's overt appeals to prejudice. **If Democrats can win even a relatively small share of white workers**<sup>2</sup> who currently vote for the GOP, it could provide a vital margin of victory in 2016 and beyond.

This is not an impossible task. **In his writings for the White Working Class Roundtable**<sup>3</sup> and his soon-to-be published book *America Ascendant*, Stan Greenberg presents extensive polling data to show that with a populist program of government reform Democrats can successfully appeal to the explosive anger at government corruption and subservience to special interests which lies at the heart of white working class cynicism and distrust of both political parties.

Second, Democrats must prepare to fiercely challenge the GOP "moderates," "establishment elites" and "reformers" in the quite likely event that they decide to rationalize an accommodation with Trump on the grounds that he "*is really not so bad*" or "*will ultimately be reasonable*" or "*is a lesser evil*" than permitting a third consecutive Democratic president to be elected.

The fact that Trump does not behave like a snarling, hate-filled reactionary like Pat Buchanan or George Wallace and that his tax plan ultimately benefits the wealthy much more than the working class will certainly make this process of rationalization much easier. But Democrats must forcefully point out that compromises with pernicious racial and nativist ideologies are inevitably profoundly and irrevocably corrosive and corrupting to a political party and that history has not been kind to the European elites of the 1930's who convinced themselves that alliances with the political impulse that Trump embodies represented "a lesser evil" than any of the available alternatives.

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

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/junejulyaugust\\_2015/features/the\\_average\\_joes\\_proviso055824.php?page=all](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/junejulyaugust_2015/features/the_average_joes_proviso055824.php?page=all)

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