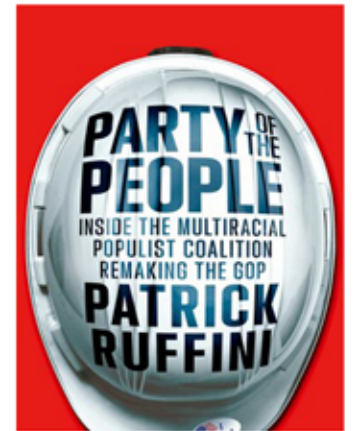




## TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

### DEMOCRATS:

GOP POLLSTER PATRICK RUFFINI'S BOOK, *PARTY OF THE PEOPLE* IS AN EXTREMELY PERCEPTIVE AND IMPORTANT ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN WORKING CLASS VOTERS BOTH WHITE AND NONWHITE THAT DEMOCRATS SHOULD CAREFULLY READ AND UNDERSTAND.



AT THE SAME TIME, HOWEVER, IT IS ALSO PROFOUNDLY MISLEADING AND DECEPTIVE. LIKE A MASTER STAGE MAGICIAN'S BEST "SLEIGHT OF HAND" TRICK, RUFFINI MAKES MAGA EXTREMISM IN THE GOP DISAPPEAR RIGHT BEFORE OUR EYES.



BY  
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Patrick Ruffini's book, *Party of the People* is part of a small but growing group of GOP analyses that respond to Donald Trump's success in drawing substantial working class support by arguing that the GOP should develop a more "populist" working class agenda instead of retaining its traditional business oriented "free market" perspective. Before Trump this approach was dubbed "Sam's Club Republicanism" or "Reform Conservatism." The American Compass is a leading current advocate of this perspective, proposing a very wide range of economic and social reforms that are specifically designed to directly appeal to working class voters.

Ruffini is an influential pollster and consultant to many GOP campaigns whose book promotes a political strategy based on this approach. As the title suggests, it argues that the GOP can become a solid majority party by basing itself on a multiracial coalition of working class voters.

Ruffini's analysis includes large areas of agreement with Democratic strategists like Ruy Teixeira and John Judas whose current book, *Where Have All the Democrats Gone* presents a largely similar analysis of the growing Democratic loss of both white and non-white workers. In a joint ABC News interview during which Ruffini and Teixeira were asked if their analyses was largely similar, they agreed. Ruffini replied that, "*We come at it from different directions but our diagnosis is largely similar.*"<sup>1</sup>

Both Ruffini and Teixeira begin from the same starting point – that in 2016 Trump won many white working class voters who previously voted Democratic and in 2020 increased his share of Latino, Black and other non-white working class voters while college educated white voters moved very significantly to the Dems.

These trends very substantially undermine the "Emerging Democratic Majority" strategy that had ballooned after the election of Barack Obama. Although the term itself had been developed by Teixeira and Judas to describe a broad "big tent" coalition of growing groups like college

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<sup>1</sup><https://abcnews.go.com/538/video/fight-working-class-voters-fivethirtyeight-politics-podcast-104965698>

educated knowledge workers, minorities, youth and single women together with the Democrats' traditional supporters among the white working class, after Obama's victory the "emerging majority" became reinterpreted as the description of a different coalition that Teixeira and Judis had very explicitly said could not possibly succeed. Ruffini approvingly quotes Teixeira and Judis' explanation of where this new theory went wrong.

Instead of focusing on the fact that the emerging democratic majority only gave Dems tremendous potential *if they played their cards right* many progressives started to interpret it as a description of an inevitable future. All they had to do was to mobilize the growing segments of the electorate and the changes that favored them would take care of the rest.

**But our argument had always been much more complicated than that.** We had always envisioned the new democratic majority as a *coalition* between growing segments of the population and the party's traditional electorate. To be sure this coalition would include a lot of the voters' progressives now chose to focus on: minorities, professionals, the young, the unmarried and highly educated women. But, to succeed, in addition to this rising American electorate it would also 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% of eligible voters belonged to the white working class; in the 2020 elections 41% will).

In their original 2004 book, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, Judis and Teixeira specifically noted that Democrats would have to retain at least 40% of the white working class vote to reliably win national elections – a percentage that Obama did obtain but Hillary Clinton dramatically failed to match.

And this is just considering the **white** working class. Ruffini documents the significant pro-Republican trend among working class Latinos, Blacks, Asians and other nonwhite groups in 2020 and 2022 and points out the central political reality for the future – that there is in America still a **working class majority**.

Ruffini offers the following key statistics about the size of the different social groups and their political evolution.

*College whites: 28.9% of the electorate, 12% more Democratic since 2012*

*Non-college whites 43.5% of the electorate, 8 points more Republican since 2012*

*Nonwhites both college and noncollege, 28.5% of the electorate and 12% more Republican since 2012.*

For Democrats the disturbing implications are clear. If 72% of the electorate continues moving toward the GOP the Emerging Democratic Majority becomes basically a slowly receding mirage.

The core and chief value of Ruffini's book is its examination of what it dramatically calls "*The Working Class Majority*." It presents data on college versus non-college education as a measure of social class but enhances it with discussions of the distinct occupations working people perform, the places where they live, their unique social world and culture and a range of other differences from the more affluent and educated. He presents data from a wide range of analysts representing a diverse range of social and political perspectives.

In contrast to the working class, Ruffini portrays college educated whites as a new liberal elite that is profoundly distinct and alienated from working Americans.

Ruffini presents his thesis in four chapters on white workers and then three additional chapters specifically about Latino, Black, Asian and other nonwhite working class voters. In regard to Latinos, Ruffini is particularly insightful about the political trends among specific groups like Puerto Ricans and Cubans in Florida and Mexican-Americans in Texas and the Southwest where he had advised GOP political campaigns and closely observed Trump's successful efforts to reverse his anti-Latino image in 2020 and 2022. He correctly argues that the Latino experience in America is markedly similar to that of previous immigrant groups that assimilated into the cultural and political mainstream and very distinct from the unique perspective and historical experience of African-Americans

For Ruffini the key fact is that Latino working class voters are simply not ideologically left wing. He again quotes Teixeira who says that:

"It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Democrats have seriously erred by lumping Hispanics in with people of color and assuming that they embraced the activism around racial issues that dominated so much of the political scene in 2020...broadly speaking they are an overwhelmingly working class, economically progressive, social moderate constituency."

All this is both accurate and insightful. The problem emerges when Ruffini turns to offering a broad ideological classification of the electorate. Ruffini's central perspective is presented in a chart that divides voters into three basic political categories: *ideological liberals, non-ideological voters and ideological conservatives*. He then divides these groups by class as follows:

**White non college** – 12% ideological liberals, 58% non-ideological moderates and 31% ideological conservatives

**College Graduates** – 34% ideological liberals, 38% non-ideological moderates and just 28% ideological conservatives.

**Black, Hispanic Asian native American and others** – 17% ideological liberals, 70% non-ideological moderates, 12% Ideological conservatives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ruffini is not the only GOP populist advocate who uses this approach to ideological classification. A major American Compass poll creates a similar typology. The GOP electorate is ideologically divided into "old economic right" "new economic right" "areas of consensus" and areas of cultural agreement. These broad ideological categories in turn are subdivided into traditional issue clusters around areas like trade, immigration, and so on.

Ruffini concludes:

*There is a populist center of gravity in American politics, one that represents most swing voters. They are hardly new right ideologists espousing a combination of hard left economic views and hard right cultural views. The key point about these voters is that they are only slightly off-center in their views on either economic or cultural matters.*

It is important to note that in the introduction to the book Ruffini goes out of his way to reassure the reader that he personally is most emphatically not a mindless Trump supporter saying that, “My personal passions and biases [are] as the quintessential suburban college educated voter” and that I won’t recite all that I find distasteful about Donald Trump; the reasons have been endlessly recounted for eight years everywhere else.

Elsewhere in the book he reaffirms this:

*Trump’s 2020 and 2022 performances cast serious doubt on whether or not he is the best vessel to carry forward the multiracial populist realignment he first provoked...The challenge for Republicans in 2024 is to show that they can reap the structural benefits of Trump’s realignment of the American electorate without Trump’s chaotic persona.*

Now this is clearly intended to reassure the reader that Ruffini is a sensible person who is not proposing a Trump-dominated GOP -- although “Not the best vessel” and “chaotic persona” are rather weak phrases to be offered as a repudiation of Trump as an individual.

But at some point many readers will have a sudden “hey, wait a minute” recognition that something absolutely fundamental is entirely missing in Ruffini’s discussion. The traditional ideological categories above are familiar in discussions of political opinion but a reader will suddenly think, “Yeah but where in Ruffini’s or the American Compass’ analyses are the MAGA voters?” – The distinct class of extremists within the GOP who have so dramatically emerged since Trump’s 2016 campaign.

In fact, in Ruffini’s analysis and the similar analyses by groups like the American Compass they have quite literally disappeared. These invisible GOP voters include:

*Election deniers, Q Anon conspiracy theorists, Tea Party militants, militia supporters, Citizens for Constitutional Freedom advocates, Sovereign Citizen supporters, Great Replacement Theorists, Democratic child sex ring accusers, 3 Percenters, “lock er up” Clinton haters, “Jews Will Not Replace Us” Charlottesville demonstrators, 4 Chan and 8 Chan racial hate discussion group members and beyond them the much wider group of GOP voters who sympathize with their views.*

In fact, depending on the particular survey questions used to create a scale, MAGA extremists can be estimated to be anywhere from one-third to over half of all GOP voters. Just for example:

63% of GOP supporters say the 2020 election was stolen.

52% of GOP supporters say God intended America to be a new promised land where European Christians could create a society that would be an example to the rest of the world.

33% of GOP supporters believe that true American patriots may have to resort to violence to save the country.

29% of GOP supporters now say they subscribe to the Q-Anon theory that the centers of power are controlled by Satan-worshipping pedophiles atop a child sex-trafficking operation and that violence may be required to remedy it.<sup>3</sup>

And an increasing number of Republican candidates now directly appeal to these extremist voters. As an article in the political newspaper, The Hill noted:

Political violence is now openly promoted by MAGA Republicans and acquiesced to by Republican leaders. As a recent Center for American Progress (CAP) Action analysis showed, **nearly 100 Republican candidates have run political ads this cycle brandishing, shooting or displaying firearms, and more than a quarter of those explicitly threatened a group of Americans or the government itself.**

In Missouri, the front-runner in the Republican primary for U.S. Senate released an ad explicitly inviting his supporters to “Join MAGA” in killing RINOs (Republicans in Name Only). Rather than denounce the ad or make it clear that the National Republican Senatorial Committee would never support a candidate promoting political violence against anyone, Sen. Rick Scott (Fla.), the chair of the committee, stated “I think it’s up to the voters in Missouri,”<sup>4</sup>

The inescapable fact is that extremists are a huge sector of the Republican base that is now impossible to ignore.

*And yet the startling fact is that there is **not one single sentence** anywhere in Ruffini’s entire book that is specifically devoted to discussing the role and extent of MAGA/extremist voters in the GOP coalition and explaining how the “moderate working class majority” leaders that Ruffini hopes will appear will manage a coalition where extremists dominate so many districts and political offices in the GOP.*

The hard fact is that a majority of Republican representatives in the House of Representatives today refuse to categorically say that the 2020 election was not stolen. If the majority of these national elected GOP officials are so cowed by the MAGA forces how can Ruffini seriously believe a sensible political party can emerge?

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<sup>3</sup>American Values survey

<sup>4</sup><https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/3574481-from-fringe-to-the-forefront-an-extremist-takeover-of-the-gop/>

Instead, like a skilled stage magician with a magic wand, a top hat and rabbit, Ruffini's solution to this question is to divide the GOP coalition into a set of bland ideological categories that make the extremists disappear right before our eyes.

There are two ways to explain Ruffini's and other "populist GOP" advocates complete silence on this fundamental issue.

1. Ruffini and other populist GOP advocates sincerely believe that the current extremism in the GOP is a unique product of the theatrical personal style and flamboyant antics of Donald Trump and that when he finally passes from the scene the GOP base will calm down and return to their previous place on the fringes of American politics, providing passive support for a new generation of moderate/conservative GOP leaders. It is difficult for most Democrats to take this view seriously but it does have a solid historical precedent. In the late 1920s and early 1930s the major political and business leaders in Germany and Italy sincerely dismissed the possibility that the disreputable right wing "hooligans and thugs" in the streets and the clownish demagogues who were leading them could actually be powerful enough gain control of the country and impose their rule.
2. A more sinister and unfortunately more plausible explanation is that Ruffini and other populist GOP advocates are perfectly well aware of the size and power of the huge extremist base in their party and have decided that they are willing to reach an accommodation with it with it as long as the MAGA leaders recognize the need to keep their extremism "on the down low" – off the front pages of the newspapers and the TV evening news. There is a long tradition in the GOP of politicians giving wink and a nod "dog whistles" to racial and religious extremists while the latter accepted this compromise, understanding the need to "play the game." This is far more insidious but much more likely way that GOP "moderates" can attempt to build their majority coalition.

Ruffini's book therefore represents a profoundly double-edged sword. On the one hand it is full of extremely useful insights about working class voters, both white and nonwhite, that Democrats can profit by understanding. But it is at the same time also profoundly deceptive in the way it obscures rather than confronts the large extremist element in the GOP that in reality blocks any hope that a "moderate, populist working class GOP" can actually ever emerge.