



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

THERE IS A SECTOR OF WORKING CLASS VOTERS WHO CAN BE PERSUADED TO VOTE FOR DEMOCRATS IN 2024 – BUT ONLY IF CANDIDATES UNDERSTAND HOW TO WIN THEIR SUPPORT.

BY
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In a recent analysis Ruy Teixeira presented three daunting facts about 2024:

1. Working class (i.e., non college) voters—both white and nonwhite—will be around 60% of the voters next November.
2. Current polls have Biden losing these voters by between 14 and 17 percent, a substantial decline from his level of support in 2020. This decline includes a significant decrease in support among **nonwhite** as well as white workers.
3. Because there are fewer college educated voters than noncollege voters, Teixeira estimates that Biden would have to increase his margin of support among college educated voters by 50% more than the projected losses among less than college voters in order to compensate. Considering that the college educated voters who now vote Republican are disproportionately employed in relatively conservative professions like Finance, Business, Accounting, Engineering, Theology and Agricultural Science this is an extremely unlikely scenario.¹

Many Democrats nonetheless conclude that this is the only available strategy for Biden and the Democrats to pursue since in their view white working class voters are overwhelmingly composed of fervent Trump/MAGA supporters. Trying to regain their lost support is, as one advocate of this strategy argued “a complete waste of time, energy, money and breath.”

Even on the surface this view is wrong since in 2020 thirty six percent of **white** less than college voters supported Biden and nonwhite less than college voters supported him at substantially higher levels.

But more fundamentally, even the image of typical white workers as the jeering crowds at Trump rallies fundamentally misunderstands the actual situation.

The Culturally Traditional But Non-Extremist Working Class Voters

White working Americans who vote Republican are actually divided into two quite distinct political groups. Standard opinion polls are inadequate to detect this division but it is vividly clear in more in-depth studies of their attitudes and behavior.

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¹https://www.liberalpatriot.com/p/the-coming-working-class-election?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=reader2

On the one hand, there is indeed a large sector of white working people who vote for the GOP who can accurately be classed as “*extremists*.” In fact, depending on the particular opinion questions used to measure extremism it can be estimated that anywhere between one-third and one-half of all GOP voters college and non-college can be seen to fit this description. But at the same time there is another substantial group of white working class voters who are more accurately described as “*cultural traditionalists*.” They share a wide range of traditional, “old-fashioned” social and personal values with the extremists but their values and beliefs are not inherently Republican or ideologically conservative. The culturally traditional outlook was part of working class “*real American*” values in the 1950s and early 1960s when 60% of workers voted for Democrats and a majority of blue collar workers were members of unions.

This distinct sector is distinguished from the extremists by two key characteristics:

First, a basic outlook that tends toward tolerance and empathy. It is generally linked to a more “easy going,” “live and let live” personal psychology and is most often supported by the many varieties of compassionate Christianity that are still common in working class churches. Although this point of view is generally unfamiliar to the highly educated, Jimmy Carter is a distinct example of this “liberal” variety of small town/working class Christian faith.

Second, a “class conscious” belief in the need for greater fairness in economic affairs and anger at injustice in areas ranging from the unfairness of the tax system that lets the wealthy pay less than the average worker to the systemic corruption in the way that big business manipulates and corrupts the political system. There is a deep sense among this sector of working class voters that it is not just “woke liberals,” college graduates or Democrats who ignore working class needs but “the system” as a whole that is unfair to the “little guy.” There is a deep sense that ordinary people always get screwed by **both** political parties.

(Note: This distinct group is discussed in greater detail in the memo: “The culturally traditional but non-extremist working class voters: who they are, how they think and what Democrats must understand to regain their support.”)²

Using “Common Sense” and “Seeing both Sides”

In seeking the ways to regain support from this group a major problem is that many Democratic candidates formulate political appeals to working people based on the way that they themselves think about political issues rather than the way many culturally traditional working people do. Politically informed and involved people tend to have very clear opinions on major issues that they store in memory and recall when required. Democratic political message strategists tend to assume working people think in a similar way and they therefore study opinion data to select an optimal set of Democratic policies that a candidate should emphatically promote in his or her campaign.

²https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_culturally_traditional_WWC_voters_v2.pdf

The problem is that culturally traditional working class voters do not think about politics in the same way that politically involved Democrats do. They do not have clearly formulated and memorized yes/no opinions on most issues which they retrieve from memory to decide if they agree or disagree with a candidate. Rather, they have a set of basic social and personal values that they apply to an issue *“on the spot”* in order to formulate their opinion.

If a politically involved Democrat is asked for an opinion about the circumstances under which abortion should be legal he or she will immediately recall to mind specific terms and concepts like *“Roe vs, Wade,” “Freedom of choice,” “Abortion should be a decision between a woman and her doctor”* and so on. In contrast, a non-extremist working person who is not politically involved or deeply religious will more cautiously consider various factors – the opinions of their family and friends, their personal experiences with the issue and *“common sense”* in formulating an opinion. They will then express the conclusion as *“my personal philosophy”* or *“my way of thinking.”*

The result is that across a range of issues culturally traditional working people who are not extremists will employ a very distinct *“on the one hand, on the other hand”* way of thinking that tends toward tolerance rather than intolerance. In focus groups this emerges again and again across a range of issues. For example:

- *Politics: I may agree with the GOP on 90 percent of social issues... **but** that doesn't mean I want to impose my views on everyone.*
- *Religion: I think we need to let religion back in schools... **but** I'm not trying to push religion on anyone.*
- *Health care: I'm not for socialized medicine... **but** we must help people in need.*
- *Immigration: I'm not saying nobody can come into our country, because that's not America... **but** to ignore our laws and just walk in, that's crazy.*
- *Gay Marriage: In 100 years, I'll never understand what a man can see in another man... **but** I got a friend in an interracial relationship and I think that's a good thing, so who am I to be the judge of what someone else decides to do.*

Again and again, the basic *“on the one hand, on the other hand”* way of thinking that is revealed in the use of the word *“but”* reappears. It is not occasional; it is common.

As a result, a Democratic candidate who believes he or she should forcefully support a particular position on an issue and refuse to concede that there can be sincere arguments for both sides will not seem persuasive to culturally traditional voters. He or she will seem to be rigid and dogmatic – to lack *“simple common sense.”* The same culturally traditional voters who find right wing MAGA extremists to lack common sense will feel a similar way toward progressive Democrats who seem to be equally rigid and dogmatic in their views.

The debate over immigration provides a clear example. While non-extremist working people will not accept the extremist notion that all immigrants are rapist and criminal “vermin” they will be equally unwilling to accept Democratic rhetoric that describes the 3.1 million people who have been allowed to enter the U.S since the 2020 elections as all desperate refugees whose lives would be in danger if they remained in their countries. “Simple common sense” tells working Americans that many immigrants have been attracted by the easier rules for entry to the U.S. that were established since Biden was elected and that their numbers have been greatly increased by the massive criminal networks of “people smuggling” gangs that have vastly extended their operations in recent years. Candidates who refuse to recognize both sides of this issue—whether Republican or Democratic—are seen as ideologues lacking in common sense.

Democrats don’t care about people who “play by the rules” and “things are going downhill”

There are also certain broad perspectives that are widely shared among working people, both extremist and non-extremist that Democratic candidates must understand and respect. They are organized into two broad narratives that are widely held.

These basic narratives play a major role in political thought. Voters basic understanding of “*what’s gone wrong*” and “*why things are the way they are today*” act as a conceptual framework within which specific issues and specific candidates are considered.

The first is that modern America has become deeply unfair to people who hold traditional values and “play by the rules.”

American workers perceived the post-War II “deal” between business and labor as fundamentally “fair.” Successful businessmen, professionals and wealthy people were seen as basically deserving the greater wealth and income that they received as part of a “deal” that also provided a decent life for a working class person who was willing to work hard and “play by the rules”.

As deindustrialization spread across the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, however, a vast number of working class cities and towns in the industrial states became virtual ghost towns as businesses closed, social services shrank and downtown areas declined. Mining towns in the Appalachian region and logging towns in the Pacific Northwest experienced a similar fate. As workers competed for the declining number of working class jobs and faced the growing decay in these areas, they became increasingly convinced that Democrats had abandoned them.

The result was a profound sense of injustice.

The sociologist who has described this most vividly is Arlie Hochschild. In her book, *Strangers In Their Own Land*, she defines this narrative as a “Deep Story.” As she says:

I think supporters of the Tea Party in Louisiana have a deep story, as do Bernie Sanders supporters in Berkeley, California. We all have a deep story. And it’s important to know what these are. Because so many arguments aren’t really between one set of facts and another; they’re between one deep story and another.

So the deep story I felt operating in Louisiana was this: Think of people waiting in a long line that stretches up a hill. And at the top of that is the American dream. And the people waiting in line felt like they'd worked extremely hard, sacrificed a lot, tried their best, and were waiting for something they deserved. They've suffered long hours, layoffs, and exposure to dangerous chemicals at work and received reduced pensions.

But this line is increasingly not moving, or moving more slowly [i.e., as the economy stalls]. Then they see people cutting ahead of them in line. Immigrants, blacks, women, refugees, public sector workers. In their view, people are cutting ahead unfairly. And then in this narrative, there is Barack Obama, to the side, the line supervisor who seems to be waving these people ahead. So the government seemed to be on the side of the people who were cutting in line and pushing the people who are in line back.³

It is necessary to read the full description of this “Deep Story” that Hochschild presents in her book to appreciate the subtleties and textures of this narrative and the profound, wrenching sense of unfairness that it describes. In interviews and focus groups with working class people this sense of being treated in a profoundly “unfair” way and the smoldering anger it produces is always one of the most powerful messages that emerge. The repeated charge is that, *“We played by the rules but the rules weren’t fair.”*

The second narrative expresses the growing sense that *“things are falling apart today,”* that chaos is growing as an increasing number of people blatantly violate the “rules” and make a mockery of the sacrifices of those who try to follow them. There are several distinct elements within this sub-narrative.

1. CRIME AND LAWLESSNESS

In many cities around the country a set of quite distinct forms of lawlessness have markedly increased. The most frightening kind of random street crime—armed robbery, home invasions and carjacking—have remained the least common but as handguns and assault rifles have proliferated other kinds of violent crimes have sharply increased and blurred former distinctions. Personal arguments between people who know each other and are rivals for a girl or who engage in drunken arguments when late-night clubs close increasingly erupt in gunfire that kills innocent bystanders as well as the participants, while school shootings and senseless “road rage” incidents multiply in ways never seen before. At the same time, petty theft by breaking car windows or stealing UPS packages from doorsteps have sharply increased as has trespassing and urban squatting by homeless people and incidents of assault or threatening behavior by people who are visibly mentally ill. When these personal experiences are then amplified and confirmed by the local news, the clear impression that is created is of a single crime “wave” and not a collection of distinct problems.

(The image of “chaos” on the Mexican border and uncontrolled immigration adds an additional element to this perception and creates the powerful sense that under the Democrats “law and order” in general is literally breaking down.)

³<https://www.vox.com/2016/9/6/12803636/arlie-hochschild-strangers-land-louisiana-trump>

The conventional Democratic response of quoting abstract annual statistics to refute this perception seem once again to reflect their distance from working class people and be denying "common sense."

2. INFLATION

Inflation produces a similar, general sense that things are "out of control" For ordinary people rising prices have a distinct psychological character. **They are psychologically experienced as a form of theft.** Stagnant wages and wage increases are felt to be legitimately "earned" while rising prices are felt to literally be a kind of "robbery" depriving people of their hard earned income. For a long period after prices first accelerated and then started to slow Democrats pointed to the month to month changes in the measured inflation rate as if that were the real political issue rather than grasping that working people's view was simply that prices in the grocery store were substantially higher than they had been several years before. Only in late 2023 did the discussion of Democratic strategy begin to grasp this practical reality and the profound discontent higher prices were causing in working class America.

The two narratives confirm and reinforce each other. They form a coherent story of a society that once was fair to working people but has gradually become deeply unfair to those who "work hard" and "play by the rules." The result is that a large group feels that they have been abandoned and that things are becoming steadily worse. There is a profound and grinding sense of unfairness and betrayal that can be read again and again in literally dozens of studies by sociologists and anthropologists who have lived and worked with working people over the years.⁴

"I'm on your side" and "I'll fight for you"

These key narratives form the emotional foundation for the profound desire of workers for candidates who are genuinely and indeed passionately – "On your side," "Care about you," "Understand people like you" and "Will fight for you." A vast range of studies have shown that working people consider these characteristics absolutely central in deciding which candidates to support. In contrast, politicians like Hillary Clinton who vividly fail to reflect these values in their campaigns have little chance of success.

In American politics there is a standard way that presidents and presidential candidates try to communicate passion and sincerity. In a speech there will be a pregnant pause followed by a deep, dramatic and authoritative pronouncement. The most memorable of these remain part of political history – Ronald Reagan declaring in Berlin, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," or George Herbert Walker Bush denouncing Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait with the declaration, "This will not stand." In conventional political rhetoric this is viewed as communicating passion while still maintaining the proper dignity.

⁴An extensive list of ethnographic studies of working class Americans can be found in Appendix 2 of book, *The White Working Class Today*, by Andrew Levison.

This is where Donald Trump's extensive media experience as a familiar participant in "lowbrow" television entertainment like professional wrestling and reality TV for many years allowed him to understand how to use his crude and offensive behavior to communicate a raw and vivid *"Hey, I'm one of you, I'm not one of them. I'll be on your side"* message in a way that convinced many non-extremist working class voters to minimize or dismiss his extremism.

In many areas of working class life losing one's temper, fuming with outrage, and bitterly shouting when one is angry is seen as reflecting honesty rather than a shameful lack of "proper" middle class propriety. Shouting, *"You stupid son of a bitch"* when someone makes you angry is not utterly shocking to hear on a construction site but would get a person permanently ostracized from an upper class country club dining room.

As a result, many non-extremist working people rationalize Trump's bitter, snarling tirades against immigrants, China, criminals and others and his hyperbolic threats against his "enemies" as spontaneous displays of his sincerity rather than deep and calculated ideological racism and extremism. This was reflected in many journalistic interviews in which his supporters dismissed his racist or irresponsible statements as *"he was just kidding," "he didn't really mean what he said"* and so on. Trump understood that it was more important to communicate spontaneous, genuine passion to working class voters than to maintain proper "presidential" decorum.

Conclusion

It is understandable that many educated Democrats have concluded that regaining lost working class support is a hopeless task. The tremendous passion and enthusiasm that Trump still generates among his working class supporters seems proof that they and many like them are simply beyond reach.

But there is an important sector of working class voters who are not extremists and retain significant reservations about Trump's campaign. What they lack is a compelling alternative that more accurately reflects their culturally traditional but not extremist outlook.

There are three important ways that Democratic candidates and campaign strategists can improve their appeals to this group.

1. By speaking to these voters in a way that respects their distinct perspective: an outlook that is based on trusting "common sense" rather than hard partisan positions and favoring tolerance and open-mindedness rather than rigid adherence to any partisan agenda.
2. By respecting the profound sense of betrayal and pessimism working Americans' feel and building an appeal to working class voters on this basis. Simply promising new and wonderful programs and ignoring the past will seem condescending and detached.
3. By recognizing that if a campaign is to succeed it must be based on a genuine, passionate and emotional identification with working class voters. Hillary Clinton's campaign represents an almost perfect example of how a campaign that seeks working class support should not be conducted.