



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL STRATEGY IS DEVELOPED BY COLLEGE EDUCATED POLITICAL ANALYSTS SITTING IN FRONT OF COMPUTERS ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES OR THINK TANK OFFICES.
THAT'S WHY THE STRATEGIES DON'T WORK.

BY
ANDREW LEVISON



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Since the 2024 elections an extraordinary number of commentaries have appeared that present proposals for how Democrats should attempt to regain their lost working class support. In the New York Times and Washington Post alone over 20 such articles have appeared and dozens more have been published in other liberal and mainstream publications.

At first glance these articles appear to offer a vast range of distinct suggestions but when examined more closely can be seen to fall into three basic categories:

1. **Revise Democratic economic programs/policies:** proposals range from suggesting that Democrats should support even more ambitious progressive economic proposals than those passed by the Biden Administration versus arguing that Democrats should adopt more business friendly policies and fiscal moderation.
2. **Revise Democratic positions on social policies:** proposals range from insisting that there should be absolutely no retreat whatsoever from current progressive racial, gender, environmental and other positions versus recommendations that Democrats adopt instead various degrees of moderation
3. **Improve Democratic Messaging:** proposals range from recommending that Democrats simply learn to express greater empathy and concern for working class voters to insisting that they recruit more candidates with working class backgrounds.

Quite literally 95% of the solutions proposed in the vast array of articles that have appeared since the election are based on suggesting some combination of positions in these three areas.

In contrast, only one or two even mention the need to rebuild grass roots organizations and local Democratic parties in working class areas and not one discusses a strategy for achieving these goals in any detail.

The first and most obvious fact about the three recommendations above is that they are not in any way new – they all echo long standing debates that have divided Democrats for decades.

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But there is also a deeper underlying similarity and communality among these three things – one that has profound implications for Democratic political strategy

The major empirical arguments offered in support of one or another of these recommendations are invariably based on the analyses of statistical data that is produced by college educated political strategists and commentators who work sitting in front of computers on college campuses or think tank offices.

This is the result of the fact that the strategic recommendations are all based on three main sources of quantitative data—opinion polls, economic/demographic data about different geographic areas and variations in election results between different electoral districts—this year either above or below Kamela Harris’s totals.

In contrast, in the dozens of articles that have appeared since the 2024 elections, there are barely any political strategies that are based on extended sociological and ethnographic “in the field” research.

This is a major weakness in Democratic thinking. It leads to the notion that Democratic “strategy” is essentially limited to three areas: (1) the design of social and economic policies (2) the crafting of political messages and (3) candidate selection.

The vast majority of strategic analyses suggest that it is some mixture of these three that will produce a “secret sauce” of electoral success.

The cliché: “If all you have is a hammer soon everything starts to look like a nail” is a venerable one but also a very accurate description of this limited view.

For professional political campaign managers this limitation seems entirely logical because for the most part they only work for 1 or 2 years on any one specific campaign and as a practical matter the three areas above are the only ones that they can effectively influence. **But this limited approach also filters up through every level of strategic discussion about broad, long-term political strategy and the future of the Democratic Party.**

The problem with this can be stated simply: it is profoundly and painfully superficial.

It essentially visualizes working people as if they were isolated individuals sitting in their living rooms watching TV or reading a newspaper and thoughtfully evaluating the political messages and policy proposals that they see presented.

What is entirely ignored in this way of conceptualizing how workers make political choices is the massive effect of social and community life, of neighborhood and community institutions and a voter’s personal history and experience on their political perspective – on how daily interaction with friends, neighbors, co-workers and others in a workers’ neighborhood, workplace and community shape that person’s political attitudes.

This very limited “isolated individual” way of understanding working class opinion formation is a result of a major change that occurred in the 1980s in the way that working class opinion was studied.¹

Before that time the primary way working class attitudes were explored was by ethnographic fieldwork – in depth sociological studies conducted in working class neighborhoods and workplaces and by extended one-on one, in depth interviews. Beginning in the 1980s, however, in-depth sociological field studies of working class Americans sharply declined and an increasingly abstract, quantitative and computer assisted approach gradually emerged as an alternative. Working class opinion became increasingly studied by the elaborate statistical analysis of polling data, election results and the general socio-economic characteristics of different geographic and political areas.

The Sociological Perspective

After Trump’s election this began to change. In her book, *Strangers in Their Own Land* sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild presented the concept of a “deep story” that was widely held among her working class subjects which portrayed them as standing on a long line leading to the American dream and watching Democrats allowing other groups to cut in line in front of them. The story vividly explained to Democrats how working class people could quite sincerely feel that they were the victims of a social injustice and not just expressing “racial animus” or “status anxiety” as most political science analyses described them.

Since that time several important studies have appeared that profoundly deepen our understanding of working class opinion.

The first is Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol’s book *Rust Belt Union Blues*.

The book explains the fundamental role that unions played in the community life of workers in the 1950s and 1960s and how the underlying changes in social life that occurred as unions shrank after deindustrialization began in the 1970s profoundly transformed workers’ political attitudes.

The authors clearly state their basic thesis:

...the union man of the mid-20th century was not a disaggregated bunch of white of white male lone wolves but rather a dense social web of interconnected workers, family members and neighbors that included grounded union and political organizations along with other community groups.

...union members expressed loyalty and gave support because they expected these institutions to have their backs and act as partners to them and their families over the long term. **Voting Democrat was not just about particular issues for unionized workers instead it was in large part about socially embedded identities and mutuality about who they were.**

¹Until recently, in Democratic discussion “the working class” basically referred to the **white** working class because working class African Americans and Latinos were assumed to remain solidly Democratic. Recent trends, however, have seen a decline in these groups support for the Democratic Party. There are certain specific and distinct reasons for this change that are beyond the scope of this discussion.

The decline in Democratic support occurred because of the loss of the social solidarity that made a worker in the 1950s and 1960s define himself as “a good union man” What reinforced this sentiment and gave it tremendous social power was the extensive and important social role that unions and union halls played in the local community and the social solidarity created by close knit urban neighborhoods.

With the decline of unions as central institutions in working class life new organizations arose to fill the void -gun clubs, mega-churches and The Tea Party all of which created a new social foundation for the GOP in working class areas.

A second in-depth sociological field study “How the Heartland Went Red” by Stephanie Ternullo added an additional depth and subtlety to the discussion by examining the way that the distinct local political cultures of different communities influenced the national trends that Newman and Skocpol describe.

She summarized her research as follows:

[In most conventional political science accounts] a place is just the aggregate of the kind of people who will live within it. In other words [political scientists] explain the rightward shift in white communities across the heartland via the political behavior of the individual voters living within them not by any political effect of place itself. In an alternative view place does have an effect. Places shape the way their residents interact with one another and interpret the world around them.

...How does this happen in practice? One cities many active churches, nonprofits and volunteers constitute a private but collective problem solving arrangement that makes visible efforts to address emergent social problems. By way of contrast in another city continuing ties among the remaining unions and elected officials ensure that the community leaders define their challenges as rooted in systematic economic decline and focus residents’ attention on the government as a vehicle for shaping economic outcomes.

Finally, two recent books by sociologists – Arlie Russell Hothschild’s *Stolen Pride – Loss, Shame and the Rise of the Right* and Jennifer Silva’s *We’re Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America* studied the political effect that deindustrialization had on individual coal miners’ sense of self and identity in the mining regions of Kentucky.

A key concept in both of these sociological accounts is that a person’s partisan identity as a Democrat, Republican or Trump supporter basically arises out of their personal history. Workers, and indeed all voters, think about their lives in narratives of their personal history that shape their view of who they are and which political party is for them.

The profound historical narrative that shapes the perspective of the men and women in the coal mining region of Kentucky was the era of “good union jobs” which in the post-war period the United Mineworkers Union had won for the people of the region. In the 1990s the demand for coal fell, taking with it not only mining jobs but work for coal truckers, machine repair technicians and restaurant workers.

The result was not just lower wage jobs but unstable, irregular jobs that did not provide a steady income. This downward spiral had profound effects on family life, children, wives and extended families. Rates of divorce, abandonment, alcoholism, drug addiction and early death dramatically increased. The children and grandchildren of the miners reflected the disorganization of family life that resulted from the collapse of stable employment with rising rates of crime, jail and drug addiction.

In their interviews with these younger generations both Rothschild and Silva note the ironic result. Many of the men and women they talked to clearly recognized the parallels between their situation and that of inner city Blacks. But rather than seeing this as a basis for alliance, they viewed it as simply ironic. Their view of politics became either complete withdrawal from voting or a search for someone who reflected their specific perspective – the kind of politician that “their kind of people” support.

Trump understood how to perfectly fit himself to this image – he packaged himself as a non-politician who was contemptuous of both the Democrats and Republicans who had produced the disaster and aggressively promoted himself as a unique rebel who would champion former mine workers’ perspective, He would “bring back coal” and traditional factories more generally. He would Make American Great Again.

The Future

There is one fundamental strategic conclusion that flows from this analysis – a conclusion that profoundly challenges basic Democratic assumptions about the way Democratic politics should be conducted today.

It can be stated simply. A Democratic political strategy that is entirely based on promoting Democratic programs, policies and messages can only have an extremely small impact on working class attitudes.

Advertisements on TV or social media and speeches by candidates cannot deeply influence working class attitudes unless they are supported and reinforced by a working persons’ circle of friends, neighbors, co-workers and the social institutions in the local community.

The result is that in modern politics variations in the specific policies and messages in a Democratic candidate’s platform can only make a significant difference in extremely close elections.

All of the sociologists noted above emphatically insist on this reality:

Newman and Skocpol:

Our claim is that workers in the past and those today do not make choices at the ballot box simply via cost benefit analysis of candidates or policy positions nor have they ever simply responded to top down union directives. We argue that workers [conservative] re orientation happened at least as much through shifting understandings of who we are and upended perceptions of which US political party is on our side.

Ternullo:

...Individuals form party attachments based on which party is home to “their kinds of people” or others who share their social identity rather than through careful consideration of each party’s policy program. Pundits often blame the breakdown of working class politics on the Democratic Party arguing that they focus too much on “social issues”. But if partisan ties are formed as voters figure out which party best represents “their kind of people” then these fluctuations in issue salience will only move the needle at the margin.

Silva:

It is the stories people tell about who they are, what they have been through, and how their lives should have been that shape their political views. Instead of mobilizing around shared identities the white residents and Black and Latino newcomers alike harness stories of individually managing pain to bridge their personal experiences to the larger social world. They invalidate the pain of others when they fear that their own needs and sacrifices are going unrecognized. The need for self-preservation leads most of them reluctant to engage in the political sphere

Many Democratic strategists will resist the conclusion that Democratic programs and policies can play only a very limited role. They deeply believe in the power and importance of policies and messages and will insist that the “right” policies and messages can somehow successfully break through the partisan divide and win workers’ support. For political commentators and campaign managers this belief is central to their careers and professional lives. They are frustrated that the progressive policies and messages during Biden’s administration had so little resonance in working class America and insist that the only practical response is simply to push on.

The alternative is deeply daunting – so much so that many Democrats will dismiss it as impossible. It is that Democrats need to gradually and systematically rebuild locally based community institutions that can win workers’ trust and act as a counterweight to the conservative/MAGA perspective that now dominates much of working class America.

The rebuilding of local Democratic organizations and grass roots community institutions in working class areas is inescapably a long, slow process that cannot be completed in a single election cycle. The challenge is entirely different from the door to door canvassing and election day mobilization operations that are organized by political campaigns for each candidate and election. The proper comparison is instead with the gradual, painfully difficult struggle for trade union organization that occurred in the 1930s – a process that took most of the decade before the first meaningful union contracts began to be signed.

Newman and Skocpol accurately define the scope of the challenge:

Democrats have to establish an ongoing cooperative presence in states and districts where electoral wins seem impossible in the near term. **Indeed, the meaning of electoral success itself should be redefined to include running locally attuned candidates in every contest and at every level, doing community outreach everywhere and aiming to improve democratic electoral margins even in defeat.**

To do this at the local, state and regional levels Democrats cannot just send in operatives from afar every four years for presidential contests. There must be an ongoing progressive presence through credible local voices. This means building for the party even in regions of the country that have become solidly red. It means finding candidates and party leaders who represent the workers of a region and not simply members of the intellectual elite.

Many Democrats will object that this approach requires too long to wait for change in working class America but the simple reality is that there is no alternative “quick fix” available. Short term canvassing and get out the vote efforts have very temporary effects which quickly dissipate after an election.

But there is one profoundly important practical step that can be taken now. Democratic strategists are aware that a substantial amount of modern political spending is significantly ineffective. Some races receive massive financial contributions beyond the point where the funds can be productively invested while others are underfunded. TV advertising for many races is purchased far beyond the point of diminishing returns.

According to an article in Forbes Magazine, Democratic political spending in the 2020 elections—the vast majority on advertising—was 4.7 billion dollars and a similar amount was invested in 2024. Diverting just 10 percent of this sum could finance major long term organizing work along the lines Newman and Skocpol suggest in a wide range of working class districts and communities that now vote heavily Republican. This, more than anything else, would begin to lay a foundation for an enduring Democratic majority.

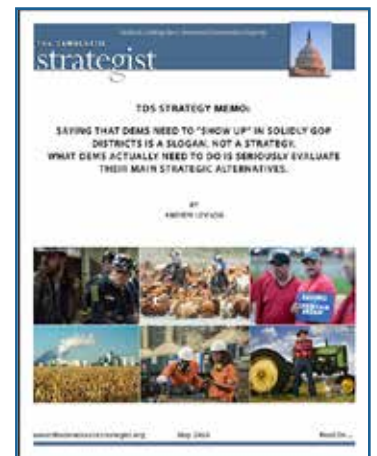
Note: There are a range of progressive and pro-Democratic organizations that now conduct organizing and community building efforts in red state and working class areas. They are without exception appallingly underfunded and largely unsupported by the national infrastructure of Democratic organizations.

The RUBI Directory of Rural Organizations, (<https://ruralurbanbridge.org/rubi-publications>) as just one example, lists over 120 grass roots organizing efforts, many of them located in largely working class districts and areas.

Two Important Resources for Democratic Strategy:



The RUBI Directory of Rural Organizations
<https://ruralurbanbridge.org/rubi-publications>



Democrats need to “show up” in red state areas is a slogan, not a strategy
<https://thedemocratic-strategist.org/2024/05/democrats-need-to-show-up-in-red-state-areas-is-a-slogan-not-a-strategy/>