



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.

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*.

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

From Sociological Fieldwork to Statistical Analyses

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. Sociologists and other researchers would live in working class communities and work alongside workers in their jobs, often for years, in order to genuinely understand their social world. Sociological interviews would be long and probing.

Some of these in-depth analyses remain sociological classics today: Ely Chinoy’s *Automobile Workers and the American Dream* about the “affluent workers” of the 1950s, Jonathan Reider’s *Canarse: Jews and Italians of Brooklyn versus Liberalism* which examined the white backlash of the 1970s, David Halle’s *America’s Working Man* about the “Reagan Democrats” in the 1980s and Ruth Milkman’s *Farewell to the Factory* about deindustrialization.

Opinion polling was also occasionally employed in the period before 1980 but played a distinctly secondary role. A major reason was that the “working class” was defined by occupation, a trait that was extremely difficult to measure and track on opinion surveys.

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. The “working class” was redefined as people who had less than a college education—a variable which was more easily captured on opinion polls but which simultaneously diluted the social cohesion of the concept—and their opinions 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.

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 good union man”

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

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 book is based on dozens of in-depth interviews conducted in the twenty county area of Western Pennsylvania that stretches from Erie to Pittsburgh and which was once a major center for the steel industry and the United Steelworkers Union as well as on information the authors derived from archival materials located in university collections and union archives.

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 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.

In this social web union members were committed to supporting one another and giving loyalty, votes and time to their union and other supportive community rooted groups often including the Democratic Party.

...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.**

Over the last half a century the phenomena of automatic union man loyalty to the Democratic Party has disappeared, especially in regions with high proportions of white blue collar workers. As we will show this is not just a matter of union organizations declining or disappearing altogether nor a matter of white workers suddenly changing their personal attitudes about race, religion and guns. ...male workers have not recently or suddenly started owning or using guns nor have they recently and suddenly started harboring racist and sexist views....

The change occurred instead 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 was this "good union man"? The authors explain it as follows:

Mutual commitment was a sense of brotherhood or comradeship that was [most clearly] expressed in support for fellow workers if they were injured on the job or became sick... Workers gave support and assistance to other union members because they were "union brothers."

Historical awareness was the memory of what working class life had been like without unions. It produced an appreciation among union members for the sacrifices their predecessors had made in building the union.

Occupational pride was created by the fact that in steel making and other occupations such as mining and auto assembly the jobs were physically demanding, often dangerous and required unique, complex skills and specialized knowledge.

These three characteristics produced a shared sentiment that unionists called “solidarity.” It was an outlook that has now been largely lost – a powerful sense of brotherhood, comradeship and shared fate that today is only to be found in groups like units in the military. It is the sense that “*we’re all in this together*” which made the common expression “*my union brothers and sisters*” among union workers a genuine reflection of their sentiments and not an empty phrase.

Unions in the community

What reinforced this sentiment and gave it tremendous social power was the extensive and important role that unions played in the local community.

As Newman and Skocpol note :

Beyond collective bargaining and workplace services unions reached into recreational sports leagues, family affairs, community events, places of worship, schools and local politics across much of the Rust Belt and even other regions of the country. **Unions became cornerstone institutions in the fabric of community relations.**

Union based sports leagues abounded. There were free golf days, field days and fishing and hunting clubs. Unions partnered with several different religious organizations to plan celebrations of Labor. Unions and churches seemed to be the two big local organizations that tied the communities together.

Union halls played a major role. Many union and non-union events were held including weddings and banquets as well as conferences, negotiating sessions and governing meetings. The union halls served as rent free sites for all kinds of union recreational activities as well as clubs for teenagers or a scout troop wanting to hold a meeting. Union meetings were a place one went for camaraderie and not just to discuss the problems of the day.

In the 50s Democratic candidates regularly made the rounds of union owned halls and other community institutions. The cycles of social events that were held created space for casual peer-to-peer political talk.

This profound social role was reinforced by the other major social institution in working class life – the local churches which were often socially progressive and firmly pro-union. As the authors note:

In many mid-century industrial communities priests, ministers and other religious leaders were involved with the labor movement, co-sponsoring events with local unions and at times even participating on the picket lines during strikes.

Close Knit Neighborhoods

As Newman and Skocpol note:

Most members of their local unions were congregated in relatively small residential areas and often worked under the same roof as their neighbors for much of their careers. The fact that many union members were also next door neighbors reinforced the solidarity, shared identity and related social attitudes that made the ideals espoused by and for union men socially credible and civically powerful. Combined with the grass roots, neighborhood role played by Democratic Party precinct captains in many northern working class cities the result was a mutually reinforcing network of pro-union and pro-Democratic social influences in working class life.

Around 1960 approximately 186 unions were organized into more than 78,000 union locals across the country with a total of over 18 million members. In the mid-20th century over a third of the non-agricultural workforce belonged to a labor union.

Four decades later, in 2000, the membership of the largest unions would account for less than 4% of the US labor force. Only 16 United Steel Workers locals remained in operation in Western Pennsylvania out of the original 143 USW local unions.

The Rise of New Social Organizations in Working Class Life

With the decline of unions as central institutions in working class life new organizations arose to fill the void.

Gun Clubs

As Newman and Skocpol note:

In our interviews gun clubs were mentioned more than any other category of group when we asked about associations present in today's industrial and ex industrial communities... The clubhouses of gun groups often serve as community gathering places and they typically encourage adherence to attend monthly membership meetings. Many clubs have holiday parties, ladies' nights, bingo nights or card playing events. Some gun clubs have associated golf leagues or baseball teams... Many gun clubs have also evolved into quasi-political organizations. Gun clubs often host events for candidates running for local or state office and have politically oriented Facebook pages and issue legislation alerts.

The New Mega-Churches

As the authors note:

Mega churches usually do not operate simply as one big worship service but instead include many subgroups doing special activities involving subsets of congregants. There are special groups offering various self-help programs, exercise classes, hobby groups

and social activities...While many of these churches are theologically non-denominational they overwhelmingly share a generally conservative outlook and philosophy while their social events provide many opportunities for Republican political promotions.

The Tea Party

One of the co-authors of *Rust Belt Union Blues*, Theda Skocpol, also authored the most extensive, in-depth field study of the participants in the Tea Party movement. As she and her co-author note:

Scholars studying the Tea Party at first tended to accept the word of national professional free market advocacy groups like Americans for prosperity that this was a movement of fiscally conservative people opposed to social spending and federal government deficits. But eventually attitude studies and ethnographic and interview based studies established that at the grassroots most local tea party groups were more intensely animated by cultural conservative causes such as opposition to immigration and resentment of social programs that might help black, Hispanic, low income and young Americans. Gun rights advocates and sometimes even armed militia men join tea party groups and about half of grassroots participants were also active Christian right adherents.

The Tea Party easily morphed into the MAGA footsoldiers of the Trump campaign.

Three Kinds of Working Class Communities

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. From an initial list of 476 counties that had once been Democratic that she carefully matched on their basic social and demographic characteristics, Ternullo focused on three, conducting a remarkable 400 interviews, following up on many respondents four different times. As she correctly noted: "The kind of in-depth interviews I conducted are rarely used in studies of American political behavior."

She summarized her research as follows:

I arrived at [three heartland counties that I have labeled] Motorville, Lutherton and Gravesend by searching for all the counties in the United States which had once been part of the white working class coalition that carried FDR to the White House and that remain overwhelmingly white and blue collar. ...but in these New Deal counties I found very few that still vote majority democratic.

As that political coalition has broken down since the 1960s Lutheran and Gravesend have followed two different but relatively common pathways towards the Republican Party. Motorville by contrast is a rare case where local processes have kept a white post-industrial city in the Democratic Party.

We can only make sense of the puzzle posed by Motorville, Gravesend and Lutheran and of the heartlands reddening more generally if we stop asking whether race, class or religion in general is most important in shaping white voters' political behavior and start asking in what specific social contexts are these voters more likely to understand social and political divisions.

...Residents of Motorville and Lutheran tell different stories about the kind of community they live in and who they are as people. Residents of Lutheran understand their community as a German Lutheran town that takes care of itself and Motorvillians understand theirs as a struggling working town that would benefit from state intervention. In Lutheran people have learned through their churchgoing community that Republicans are the party of religion and local control in a political system divided by morality. while in Motorville people have learned through experience in their union town that Democrats are the party of the “have nots” in a political system divided by economic inequality.

...How does this happen in practice? Lutherans’ many active churches, nonprofits and volunteers constitute a private but collective problem solving arrangement that makes visible efforts to address emergent social problems. Residents learn that problems related to economic precarity including hunger and homelessness are community challenges to be resolved locally over time. Local and non-governmental solutions become common sense and residents tend towards a particular kind of communitarian anti-state anti-statism. Their ties to the Republican Party are reinforced by routine social interactions that remind them they are part of a white Christian community and that the Republican Party is the party for them.

By way of contrast in Motorville continuing ties among the remaining unions and elected officials ensure the community leaders define their challenges as rooted in systematic economic decline and the drain of good jobs and focus residents’ attention on the government as a vehicle for shaping economic outcomes. Here, in a community built on the back of Labor, residents imagine themselves as part of a group of Americans disadvantaged by an unequal system and look to the state and the Democratic Party to solve their problems.

...[in] [Gravesend local organizational breakdown has residents feeling there is no viable solution nor any local leadership trying to find one. Residents feel that their city’s survival is under threat. The Republican Party’s growing rhetoric around immigration and socialism as further threats to places like Gravesend resonates, pulling residents to the right on a tide of radicalized populist resentment. Race also shapes Lutheran residents’ Republicanism but here it is less about racial resentment than ethno-religious identity.

Ternullo steps back and looks at the political implications of the distinct partisan identities that emerge from these different community political cultures:

[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.

After Deindustrialization, Unstable, Irregular Jobs

Finally, two recent books by sociologists – Arlie Russell Hochschild’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. Hochschild interviewed eighty people and Silva sixty-seven, providing a vastly more representative sample of opinion than the journalistic interviews with a handful of working class voters in roadside diners or county fairs that proliferated in the months after the 2016 elections.

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. The work was brutally hard but mining provided a solid salary that allowed a man to support his family. It also provided a deep sense of self-worth and pride. As Hochschild notes:

Miners were appreciated for their knowledge, their competence and the qualities of character their jobs called for including bravery, tenacity and patience as well as their capacity to manage boredom, discomfort and most of all fear, fear of a collapsing wall, dangerous trapped fumes and shortened lives. A miner knew how to read the seams in a mine wall, to time blasts, to repair broken equipment and to sense danger, a vast store of knowledge specific to a particular trade but of little use outside those particular circumstances.

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. As one former miner explained:

At first I scrambled to put a lot of little jobs together but then those little jobs began to dry up. I tried refrigerator repair, printer repair, 3D imaging but those jobs also got also fewer and fewer. I applied for a job as a manager at a grocery store but no one returned my calls.

Hochschild described the downward spiral that resulted:

But how does a man go from getting laid off of the job through no fault of his own to blaming himself for an absence of personal responsibility and feeling shame? Over lunch a 40 year old grandson of a coal miner offered an answer:

Shame comes gradually. Let me give you an example of guys around where I live. First thing a guy gets his layoff slip and he blames the inspector then the supervisor then he shakes his fist at the Obama administration for putting in the Clean Air Act and then adds in Biden and the Democratic Party and the deep state.

Then when his unemployment runs low and his wife asks for money for groceries for the kids he faces a hard choice. If you need money and don't have a degree you've got to go elsewhere. But his family's here and he doesn't wanna leave.

That's when he starts to feel bad about himself. He looks around at the jobs on offer at \$9 or \$10.50 an hour and he turns his nose up on what he thinks of as "girly" service jobs because he can't support his family on that kind of money. But then his partner says we need to feed the kids so he takes the crap job and she says there's still not enough money for food, gas and fixing the roof.

It's then that his shame begins to get stronger because now he feels the problem is on him and if he leaves on route 23 looking for work and comes back empty handed that's shame waiting for him at home.

Then if he gets into drugs take it from me he's ashamed. This can lead to divorce and separation from his kids and now he's on the dole. He always felt superior to others on the dole and now he's on it too so he's ashamed about that and mad that he's made to feel ashamed. Then he may read some op-ed in the Appalachian News Express calling people like him a deadbeat for not supporting his family and paying taxes to the town that it needs for sewer repair.

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.

Pharmaceutical drug addiction played a massive and unique role in this process. Mining was inherently dangerous and fraught with injury. Miners were very often injured on the job and suffered long term illnesses from occupational diseases like "black lung" and emphysema. One pharmaceutical company alone—Perdue Pharmaceutical—falsely promoted oxycontin as a "non-addictive pain medicine," which it offered free with limited time prescriptions. Doctors were given free 7-30 day supplies and salesmen were paid large bonuses. In Kentucky alone salesmen were paid \$40 million in bonuses for increasing sales of the drug. The sales of Oxycontin from 1996 to 2000 nationwide went from \$48 million dollars to one billion. By 2004 it had become the leading drug of abuse in nation and was widely known as "hillbilly heroin."

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 Hochschild 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. They expressed an utter and complete cynicism about all politicians as corrupt and indifferent and retreated into a defensive posture of self-involvement. 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.²

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 person’s circle of friends, neighbors, co-workers and other members of the local community. If on the other hand such proposals or messages are widely rejected by a person’s social circle, whatever initial plausibility they might initially seem to contain quickly dissipates under the weight of social disapproval. Without the social support of local institutions such as unions or progressive churches that in the past reassured a voter that a Democratic candidate or the Democratic party could be trusted because it was “on their side” few individuals will embrace a view just because it initially seems plausible when presented to them in a speech or TV ad. This is the case regardless of whether the policies and messages being promoted present more progressive economic policies or more “moderate” cultural positions.

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. In the vast number of red state districts across America today, on the other hand, the massive weight of community opinion makes most voters “follow the crowd.”

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]

²Center for working class studies on Trump’s rhetoric

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:

[This analysis] points us away from other mechanisms by which we might expect to cultivate class voting among white Americans. **It suggests that social policy is probably not part of the equation.** This is not to dissuade politicians from fighting for legislation that will improve the lives of America's working poor but it is to say that this is probably not what will marshal people from Gravesend and those like them into a coalition with Motorvillians advocating for government spending to benefit a cross-racial working class coalition...

...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. This means that bringing Gravesend back into a working class coalition with places like Motorville requires more than just a new campaign strategy by political elites. Pundits often blame the breakdown of working class politics on the Democratic Party arguing that they focus too much on "social issues" that appeal to liberal college educated voters rather than to the bread and butter issues that motivate workers. But if Americans overwhelmingly vote according to their partisanship and 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. We urgently need to create a space for the working class to explain what has gone wrong and listen to how the stories they tell justify their political demobilization... What unites these different groups is their inward turn, a focus on self-protection, endurance and personal redemption in place of external collective strategies geared toward social change. They feel empowered by their knowledge that they have not been foolish enough to believe in something larger than themselves...The people I met were deeply mistrustful of government to such an extent that participating in conventional politics felt like a joke.

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. It will require years of patient effort before even very modest results can be seen. 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 1930's – 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. Democrats can either commit themselves to the long and hard struggle to rebuild an enduring progressive and Democratic presence in working class communities or accept that there will be no progressive change at all.

Democratic Political Spending is Significantly Ineffective

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 to grass roots organizations and local Democratic groups 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://thedemocraticstrategist.org/2024/05/democrats-need-to-show-up-in-red-state-areas-is-a-slogan-not-a-strategy/>