

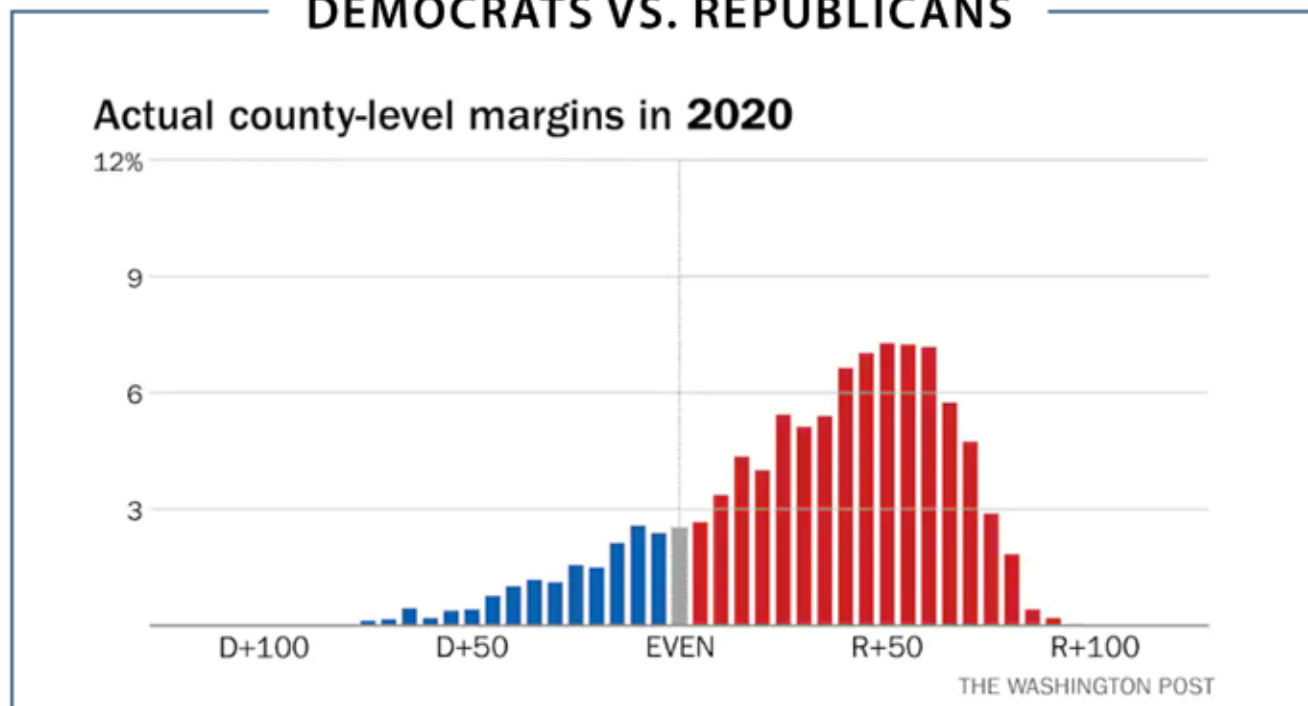


TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

**MANY NON-EXTREMIST AMERICAN WORKERS TODAY
SIMPLY WILL NOT VOTE FOR DEMOCRATS OR PAY
ATTENTION TO THEIR CAMPAIGN MESSAGES.
DEMS NEED TO THINK ABOUT NEW WAYS
TO INFLUENCE THESE WORKING CLASS VOTERS
DURING THE REPUBLICAN PRIMARIES.**

BY
ANDREW LEVISON

DEMOCRATS VS. REPUBLICANS



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Key points:

1. *There are two distinct wings to GOP – they differ on the direct threat they pose to democracy but neither tries to deal with the major economic issues facing working class voters.*
2. *Progressives need to face the fact that a large number of American workers today simply will not vote for Democrats or pay attention to their campaign messages and that tweaks to Democratic programs and messaging will not change this.*
3. *As a result, with the unprecedented threats to democracy today, progressives need to think about how to influence these working class voters during the Republican primaries.*

1. There are two distinct wings to GOP – they differ on the direct threat they pose to democracy but neither tries to deal with the major economic issues facing working class voters.

Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds reply to Biden's State of the Union speech provided a clear outline of the basic approach and message that the "Mitch McConnell wing" of the Republican Party will now be following. This now makes it possible to clearly and directly compare the basic approach that the "Trumpist" and McConnell wings of the GOP will be taking in 2022 and 2024.

The distinct perspective of Trump's supporters and candidates will include five elements that differ from the standard Republican approach.

1. Candidates who support Trump will offer vocal and passionate support for the "cult of personality" that Trump has created around himself and his campaigns. This includes accepting Trump's dogmatic claims that the 2020 election was stolen, supporting his vast range of personal grievances and vendettas and excusing his outright, blatant lying and flagrant personal greed.
2. Candidates who support Trump will base their campaigns on a fierce and profound class and racial resentment which was at the heart of Trump's original appeal. Trump's grass-roots supporters sincerely perceive themselves to be deeply despised by college educated liberals and physically threatened from below by Black criminals and illegal

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aliens. This profound “Us versus Them” perspective is absolutely central to their political identity and pro-Trump GOP candidates will compete to show how passionately and irrationally they can endorse and embrace this view.

3. Candidates who support Trump will base their campaigns on an almost complete absence of any coherent platform or set of specific policy positions. Despite Trump’s fervent attacks on Democratic trade policy and de-industrialization in 2016 and his demagogic claim to be the great champion of the working class, once he was in office Trump did not actually advance any serious initiatives about these working class issues. The only actual policies that Trump enacted were those directly demanded by key groups of his supporters – tax cuts for the wealthy and conservative judicial nominations for the religious right.
4. Many Trumpist candidates will base their campaigns on wildly extreme policy proposals specifically designed to “outrage the libs” and signal sub-rosa support for ultra-right-wing extremist views. For a sub-set of GOP candidates who choose to emulate Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert this strategy will involve behaving quite literally like circus clowns – engaging in flamboyant, infantile theatrics that display their complete contempt for any standards of political behavior.
5. Candidates who support Trump will base their campaigns on fervently supporting Trump’s assault on democratic institutions that limit his power and will endorse his search for essentially dictatorial authority.

Candidates from the McConnell wing of the GOP, in contrast, will generally follow the outlines of the strategy that Governor Reynolds presented in her reply to the State of the Union address.

1. Candidates will base their attacks on a relatively traditional set of Republican accusations – that Democrats “*encourage inflationary deficit spending,*” “*pay people not to work,*” “*allow looters and shoplifters to run free,*” “*support liberal prosecutors,*” “*refuse to control the border,*” and “*oppose energy development*”.

GOP candidates, in contrast, will promise to balance budgets, cut taxes, encourage energy exploration, restore law and order, close the border and restore traditional values like the “right to life.”

2. Candidates will base their attacks not so much on demonizing all college educated liberals but specifically “the political class” – the “elites” who “*tell everyone else what they can say and do.*” Policies regarding schools and education will be central – opposing critical race theory, banning a range of textbooks, scapegoating gay and transgender students and demanding parental control over every aspect of teaching.
3. Candidates following this strategy will define themselves in traditional Republican terms as “*pro-family,*” and “*pro-parent,*” as people who support “*Freedom*” and who will represent “*Hardworking, Patriotic Americans*” and the “*Values of America.*”

Large elements of this latter “McConnell” approach are, of course, entirely compatible with the Trumpist platform but candidates representing the McConnell wing of the party will attempt to downplay the five distinct elements of Trumpism that are noted above.

But the most notable aspect of the distinct McConnell GOP agenda is that it is entirely focused on the needs and demands of the relatively well-off sector of the Republican electorate. The McConnell GOP agenda outlined in the first point above is, in a programmatic sense, entirely

conservative. It is designed to protect the status quo and existing privileges of the already affluent or near-affluent while lacking any new programs or initiatives to help lower income, working class Republicans. There is not a single element in this approach that responds to their social and economic needs. Kim Reynold's address did not include a single mention of problems like the opioid crisis, insufficient retirement savings or the lack of adequate health insurance and medical care that are widespread among lower income and working class Republicans.

The platform of the pro-Trump wing of the GOP is equally lacking in any serious proposals to improve the conditions of Trump's lower income, working class supporters. While Trump claimed credit for overall economic growth during his presidency there are no specific promises or programs to aid the working class that are going to be offered as part of the Trump wing's Republican agenda.

2. Progressives need to face the fact that a large and increasing number of workers today will not vote for Democrats and that tweaks to Democratic programs and messaging will not change this.

On the surface the absence of any programs to improve the material conditions of working class Republicans would seem to provide a solid foundation for an effective Democratic appeal to these lower-income and working class voters who now vote Republican. But despite the wide array of programs and proposals offered in Biden's Build Back Better agenda that were directed to this group virtually all opinion polls now indicate that the Democrats continue to lose ground with working class Americans. Most startling has been the decline in support among working class Latino voters who come from Democratic families that historically considered Democrats rather than Republicans as more sympathetic to their needs and interests.

In some cases opinion data about political attitudes can be weak or ambiguous but in this case the data are consistent and dramatic in their message. Ruy Teixeira has reported the results of every major poll on working class opinion since Joe Biden's election and in his Optimistic Leftist website has documented the unmistakable trends among both white and Latino voters. His most recent report can be found [HERE](#).¹

Democrats have responded to this profound challenge by proposing variations on one or another of two strategies that they have advocated ever since the 1970's – to either (1) emphatically focus on "kitchen-table issues" and offer ever more ambitious progressive economic programs and policies or (2) jettison unpopular positions on social, cultural and racial issues and reposition the party more toward the "center."

Democratic strategists can obsessively parse opinion data to debate the relative merits of these two approaches but the (very) inconvenient reality is that dozens if not hundreds of Democratic candidates have tried both of these approaches in various campaigns at the Senate, Congressional and State levels since 1970 and neither has halted the slow, grinding, secular decline in working class support for Democrats since that time. The elections of Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama each temporarily slowed this decline but when the overall 50 year record is examined the steady, gradual decrease in working class support for the Democrats is unmistakable.²

¹https://theliberalpatriot.substack.com/p/the-democrats-working-class-voter?token=eyJ1c2VyX2lkIjoyNDA5MzAxMSwicG9zdF9pZCI6NTAwNTUzNTIsI8iOiJBmJBQilslmhdCI6MTY0NjkyOTA5MSwiZXhwIjoxNjQ2OTMyNjkxLCJpc3MiOiJwdWltMjM-5MDU4Iiwic3ViljoicG9zdC1yZWJfdGlvbiJ9.r0ZDVnW_e0tCkSlxxDW5aN6lY9rdxbNjzVvRGgE-wTg&s=r

²Note: It is unproductive to debate the degree to which this is a result of effective GOP propaganda versus defects in the Democratic platform and message. In either case it remains a fact.

The reasons for this change lie in a major sociological realignment that occurred over the last 50 years.

In the 1950's and 1960's Democrats held substantial majority support among both urban industrial workers in the North and among many manual workers in many small towns and rural areas across the country. In the northern cities there was a deep infrastructure of grass-roots pro-Democratic organizations including labor unions, progressive catholic churches and local "political machines" at the precinct level that undergirded this support as well as the memory of Roosevelt reforms during the great depression and of popular post-war programs like the GI Bill. In small towns and rural areas New Deal programs like rural electrification had won Democrat support while in many such districts grass-roots level Democratic Party organizations were equal or superior to their Republican counterparts. Democratic candidates in these districts came from the local area and were socially and culturally generally similar to their GOP opponents.

In the late 1960's these sociological advantages began to fade. Civil Rights legislation turned the white segregationists in the South bitterly against the Democratic Party while riots in the urban ghettos of major northern cities and massive university-based student protests against the Vietnam War produced a nationwide "white backlash" that elected Richard Nixon in 1968 and generated an overwhelming majority for his re-election in 1972. The Democratic Party, in contrast, became increasingly oriented toward what Ruy Teixeira and John Judis would later call "The McGovern Coalition" of minorities, college educated voters, youth and single women.

This sociological transformation, which was officially codified in reforms enacted at the 1974 Democratic Party bi-convention became progressively engrained during the 1970's and 1980's and allowed the GOP to increasingly position itself as the defender of traditional social and cultural values threatened by social change rather than limiting its appeal to the GOP's traditional business oriented economic conservatism. This allowed it to gain support among many white workers who were not economic conservatives or racial bigots but who were in many respects "cultural traditionalists" and felt increasingly alienated from the new sociological character of the Democratic coalition. At the same time right-wing billionaires like the Koch Brothers and DeVries Family spent hundreds of millions building new conservative organizations like "Americans for Prosperity" in working class and rural areas that supplemented the long established networks of the religious right, the "old" right and traditional organizations like veterans' groups and the NRA that had not previously been overtly partisan.

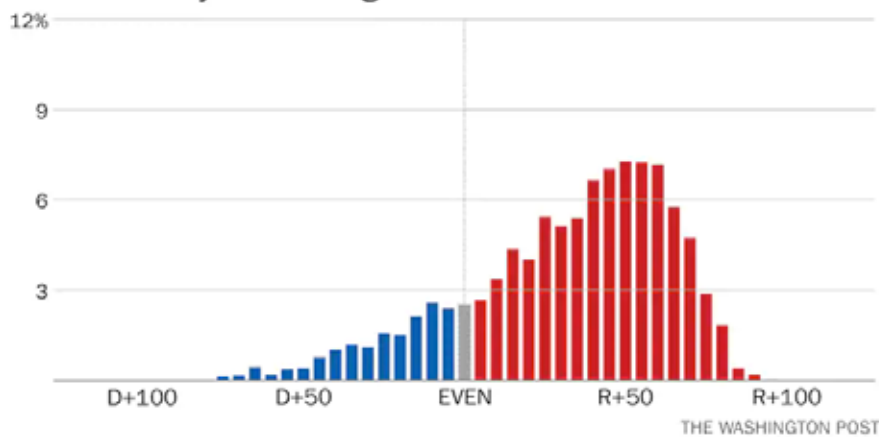
3. As a result the current Democratic dilemma can be stated clearly: there are millions of working class Americans, both white and Latino who are neither right wing extremists nor racial bigots but who are rather "cultural traditionalists." They are people who accept a wide range of traditional social and cultural values that they learned from their parents and from the social institutions in their community (i.e. the church, the military, the world of small business) and who as a result simply do not feel that the current Democratic coalition genuinely represents their outlook and perspective.

(A list of articles and books describing these "cultural traditionalists" in greater detail appears at the end of this memo)

The result has been the growth of “deep Red” counties across America. As Phillip Bump noted in the Washington Post:

“In both 2016 and 2020, the number of counties that preferred Trump by a wide margin was substantially larger than the number of counties that had done so for candidates in any other election over the past 60 years. In 2016, about 16 percent of counties preferred Trump by a margin of at least 50 points, up from about 10 percent of counties that preferred Mitt Romney by that margin four years prior. In 2020, the percentage increased to 33 percent – just shy of a third of counties. We can visualize the 2020 results by plotting the percentage of counties that fell into any given five-point range of margins. It looks like this.³

Actual county-level margins in 2020



Some Democrats will insist that working class people in these counties can nonetheless be convinced to vote Democratic simply by making additional adjustments to the Democratic message and platform but an increasing number of progressives will now admit that without facing up to the years-long challenge of rebuilding the almost totally abandoned infrastructure of grass-roots organizations and local Democratic Party offices in working class America this is simply not a realistic possibility.

There is, however, a strategy that can be initiated now, looking ahead to 2022 and even more to 2024. It is based on recognizing a key fact:

Although these working class voters will not vote Democratic they can play a positive and potentially quite important role inside the GOP – especially in the primaries. They are not political extremists who support undermining Democratic institutions and they have genuine and urgent social and economic problems which neither the Trump nor McConnell wings of the GOP intend to address.

Progressives can seek to raise the awareness of these voters regarding the cynical indifference of the GOP to their legitimate social and economic problems and undermine the appeals of the official candidates during the primaries.

³<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/03/recent-polarization-republican-counties-visualized/>

There are two major ways this can be done:

1. Organize grass-roots citizens groups that represent specific working class issues and constituencies and use these groups to challenge GOP primary candidates in public meetings and debates.

Since the 1970's there have been a wide range of citizen organizations that have forced political parties to deal with important social problems. Some like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, The Brady Campaign to Control Gun Violence, Black Lung and Asbestosis protest groups and others have been organized around a single issue. Others have been organized as local multi-issue groups focused on a range of key problems that faced low income and working class people in particular geographic areas.

Groups like these have organized a range of protests and intervened in debates and meetings during political party primaries. These actions raised awareness of ignored issues and put candidates on the defensive.

2. Launch and support "grass-roots insurgent candidates" to run in GOP primaries.

Donald Trump created a new model for how an outsider candidate can bulldoze his way into a political party primary without actually being a member of that party or endorsing its platform and agenda.

Trump simply steamrolled his way into the Republican party by ignoring the "rules" and claiming to be the only "real" and "true" representative of the white working class voters that the other Republican candidates were ignoring. After all, Trump had absolutely no record of activity as a Republican, had expressed a variety of opinions that deviated from Republican orthodoxy and had refused to follow a wide range of party rules and procedures that other candidates had accepted like releasing their tax returns

The establishment was unable to simply eject Trump because he effectively claimed to represent a pivotal group of voters that the other candidates had ignored.

Culturally traditional but economically progressive white working class "outsider" candidates can use some of these same tactics. They can avoid the cost and complexity of establishing formal independent campaigns by running unsanctioned "grass-roots independent" crusades. Their goal would not necessarily be to win or even be recognized as official candidates in GOP primaries but rather to seize the opportunity to dramatically challenge the official GOP candidates and undermine their campaigns.

In many cases the leading GOP candidates in Deep Red States and Deep Red State districts will be relatively well-to-do businessmen and women with a range of problematic issues in their biographies such as having financial interests in businesses and corporations with anti-working class agendas, receiving contributions from lobbyists working for corporations or organizations tainted by corruption or that harmed white working class Americans or having been exposed as exploiting their political office for personal gain.

These same GOP candidates will often be liars and hypocrites as well. Very frequently Republican candidates who own large farms or ranches will dishonestly depict themselves as “farmers” or “ranchers” in their advertisements when they have never actually done a day of hard outdoor physical work in their entire lives. This provides the basis for challenging these candidates by showing white working class voters that “you cannot trust them,” “they are not your friends,” “they don’t care about you,” and “they are not on your side.”

Aggressive, deeply “class conscious” campaign strategies like this, backed up with specific examples of financial malfeasance and support for anti-worker economic policies would put many GOP candidates “on the horns of a dilemma” – if they attempt to co-opt or assert support for populist measures it will create problems for them with their large contributors who, in return for their financial support, expect the candidate to not only support their traditional plutocratic agenda but also to defend them from populist attacks on their image and reputation. If the candidate ignores the challenge, it will validate the attacks.

The GOP candidates will, of course, claim that the insurgent candidate is not really an independent outsider but actually a “false flag” Democrat but attacking the insurgent will paradoxically provide important publicity for his or her campaign.

There is obviously not enough time to fully develop campaigns of this kind in time for the bi-elections next Fall but it is entirely feasible to carefully observe and analyse the bi-elections as the basis for planning for the Republican primaries in the decisive presidential year of 2024.

There are two objections that can be raised about this approach.

Some Democrats will argue that this strategy would divert resources from organizing for Democratic candidates and distract attention from Democratic messages. However, this approach is specifically intended for “Deep Red” districts where (1) Democratic campaigns are extremely limited in any case and basically represent what used to be called “educational campaigns” rather than serious efforts to win elections and (2) where Democratic messages now entirely fail to have any influence within the Republican Fox News/Right-Wing Social Media information bubble. The purpose of this strategy is precisely to penetrate the “bubble” in order to challenge the GOP within it.

In districts where Democrats can pose a significant challenge to GOP candidates, on the other hand, it is entirely correct to argue that all resources should be directed toward achieving a Democratic victory.

The second objection to this approach is the “left” view that Democrats should not compromise a proper radical perspective by expanding the Democratic “big tent” to accept non-racist and non-extremist workers whose perspective contains many aspects of American “cultural traditionalism.” On the contrary, Democrats should present a firm and uncompromised radical perspective in the expectation that working people can eventually be convinced to accept that perspective as a whole.

This philosophy has its roots in the classical Marxist view that workers are ultimately trapped in a mirage of “false consciousness” and that only a dramatic, radical awakening can alter their perspective. From this perspective a political party’s proper task is to present the fully “correct”

position and then work to convince the voters to support it.

It is beyond the scope of this memo to debate the practicality of this strategy as a means for achieving opinion change but it is difficult to contemplate it without remembering Bertholt Brecht's sardonic suggestion that if the people fail to support a party, "would it not be simpler for the party to dissolve the people and elect another?"

Articles and Books That Discuss Cultural Traditionalism versus Right Wing Extremism in The White Working Class

Articles:

[Democratic Strategists Are Asking the Wrong Question About the White Working Class](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_Memo_Levison_asking_wrong_questions_WWClass.pdf)

https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_Memo_Levison_asking_wrong_questions_WWClass.pdf

[Does the Democratic Coalition Really Need the White Working Class?](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_Do_Dems_need_WWC.pdf)

https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_Do_Dems_need_WWC.pdf

[Democrats' Critical Challenge: Seeing the World Through Red State Eyes](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/2018/06/democrats-critical-challenge-seeing-the-world-through-red-state-eyes/)

<https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/2018/06/democrats-critical-challenge-seeing-the-world-through-red-state-eyes/>

[Modern-day "Class Consciousness" and "Class Resentment": the unacknowledged—but vitally important—perspective that is necessary to understand why many non-racist white working class voters voted for Trump—and might do so again if Democrats don't figure out how to respond.](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Andrew_Levison_Class_Consciousness.pdf)

https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Andrew_Levison_Class_Consciousness.pdf

[Can the Democratic Party Be White Working Class, Too?](https://prospect.org/economy/can-democratic-party-white-working-class-too/)

<https://prospect.org/economy/can-democratic-party-white-working-class-too/>

[What Democrats Still Don't Get About Winning Back the White Working Class](https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/08/07/what-democrats-still-dont-get-about-winning-back-the-white-working-class/)

<https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/08/07/what-democrats-still-dont-get-about-winning-back-the-white-working-class/>

[Winning Some Middle of the Road Working Class Whites](https://prospect.org/power/winning-some-middle-of-the-road-working-class-whites/)

<https://prospect.org/power/winning-some-middle-of-the-road-working-class-whites/>

[The Obama coalition may be able to beat Trump or Cruz in November but in order to fight the larger threat of GOP extremism we still need more support from the white working class](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_still_need_WWC_vf.pdf)

https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_still_need_WWC_vf.pdf

Books:

The Politics of Resentment – Katherine J Cramer

The New Minority – Justin Gest

Strangers in Their Own Land - Arlie Russell Hochschild

Trump's Democrats – Muravchik and Shields

The Left Behind – Robert Wuthnow

Exit Zero – Christine Walley

Harvest the Vote – Jane Kleeb

Beyond Contempt – Erica Etelson