



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

**“LESS THAN COLLEGE” WORKERS ARE NOT A SOCIAL CLASS.
DEMOCRATS NEED TO UNDERSTAND
WHO PERSUADABLE WORKERS REALLY ARE.**

BY
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“LESS THAN COLLEGE” WORKERS ARE NOT A SOCIAL CLASS. DEMOCRATS NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHO PERSUADABLE WORKERS REALLY ARE.

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Although some Democrats argue that it is possible to create a stable Democratic majority coalition without gaining greater support from white working class voters, most serious political strategists recognize that this is simply not the case.

There is, however, a profound lack of agreement about how gaining working class support might actually be achieved. Since the 1970's Democrats have seen a slow but steady erosion in support from white working class voters followed by a sharp decline when Donald Trump emerged on the political scene. In the 2020 elections Biden received only 37% of the votes from white, “less than college” voters (which is how working class voters are defined on opinion polls) and there have been disturbing declines in the level of support for Democratic candidates among working class Latino voters as well.

One major problem faced by political strategists is that—unlike the white working class of the 1950's—today's less than college white voters are an extremely heterogeneous group – so much so that it is difficult to analyze and discuss them as a meaningful voting bloc.

The white working class of the 1950's was relatively easy to visualize. White workers were blue collar men who worked in large factories or in other basically manual occupations like construction, mining, longshoring and trucking. As a result their generally pro-Democratic voting behavior seemed a natural response to the pro-worker economic policies of Roosevelt's New Deal.

In contrast, the modern white working class includes large numbers of women as well as men who live in both urban and rural areas and span a very wide range of occupations – from traditional blue collar jobs to retail sales and service occupations like restaurant workers, cleaning and housekeeping employees and clerical laborers as well as skilled but less than college degree level occupations like personal trainers, cable and internet wiring installers, sales and marketing representatives and data entry and processing workers along with vast numbers of small businesspeople like plumbers, electricians and restaurant and fast food franchise owners who are either self-employed or who work alongside their employees on a daily basis but are the owners of their small businesses.

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It is difficult to visualize this wide range of different workers as a clearly defined social class, much less to imagine them as a coherent political force. When “white working class” voters are discussed today, observers tend to imagine the old image of blue collar workers but now picture them as attending Trump rallies rather than standing at factory gates.

(Note: The use of the term “*working class*” for less than college voters is justified when discussing social and economic conditions because less than college voters generally have substantially lower incomes and living standards and inferior working conditions than college graduates. The two groups also, on average, show distinct differences of opinion on many political issues. This does not, however, make less than college voters a coherent social class that actually shares a common social outlook and perspective).

There have been a vast number of opinion studies since the 2016 elections that have tried to understand white working class political views. Many have documented the significant differences between college educated and non-college educated voters in the levels of support they display for Donald Trump and their views on a range of issues. A wide range of more sophisticated statistical analyses of voting and opinion data have similarly sought to determine the degree to which white working class support for Trump can be attributed to legitimate economic grievances or simply to racial resentment and conservative cultural values. The conclusions of these diverse studies have varied widely with conflicting implications for the degree to which white workers might be persuaded to change their partisanship.

All these studies, however, have implicitly been based on the assumption that white less than college voters can be discussed as if they were a coherent social group that could be expected to display shared political values. There is no question that in many respects the views of less than college voters are distinct from those of the college educated but there has been little discussion of whether it would actually be more useful to consider these voters as representing several distinct groups rather than a single coherent social formation.

There are, certainly, significant differences in political outlook between urban and rural, young and old and male and female white working class voters but, for politics, the most deepest and salient division is clearly between the approximately one third of white less than college voters who vote Democratic and the two thirds who vote Republican. These two groups obviously have very different political perspectives and they also differ significantly in demographic terms. The Democratic voters tend to be more urban, young, female, single and employed in the sales and service sectors of the economy while the GOP voters tend to be older, blue collar, rural and owners of small businesses – although there is substantial occupational overlap between the two sectors.

Very few of the discussions that one reads in the media, however, attempt to analyze Democratic and Republican working class voters as representing two fundamentally distinct social perspectives rather than simply as different points on a simple left-right continuum of political opinion.

And in fact, even within the group that votes for the GOP, there is a **profoundly important division. It is between the GOP voters who strongly support Donald Trump and the MAGA ideology and those who reject it.**

Yet despite its obvious importance even the most basic facts about the distinct non-MAGA sector of the GOP voting working class are not understood. For example, how large is this group of voters? There have been various attempts to gauge the size of the non-Trump/MAGA wing of the GOP as a whole but these figures are very rarely broken out by years of education in order to gauge the extent of non-MAGA sentiment in the white working class.

One recent Pew Trust survey, however, did provide a breakout of this kind between college educated and non-college educated GOP voters. It showed that on a “feeling thermometer” where GOP respondents rated Trump on a scale from 1 to 100, 20% of GOP less than college voters were “cool” to Trump with 13% “extremely cool.” This is a profoundly significant finding because it suggests that there is a sufficiently large group of non-MAGA GOP voters to swing many close elections.¹

It is therefore vital to try to understand what this distinct group of workers think. As standard opinion polls and election data do not provide this information, the best place to begin is with the many sociological studies that have tried to define this group’s distinct identity. These studies have generally converged on the following characteristics.

1. Cultural Traditionalism

The basic social ethos and personal philosophy of many non-extremist working class and rural Americans is properly defined in sociological terms as *cultural traditionalism*. It is an outlook that is shaped by the major social institutions in working class and rural life – the church, the armed forces, the local business community and the vision of the American system of government that is taught in traditional high school civics classes.

The values these institutions uphold and teach are religious piety, patriotism, support for small business/free enterprise and the superiority of the American system of government.

These values are not seen as political opinions that can be reasonably debated but rather as “obvious” social values that “everybody just knows are right.” They are psychologically linked to working people’s basic sense of their own personal identity and their emotional identification with their home, local community and class culture.

2. “Old-Fashioned” personal values

Many non MAGA working people who vote for the GOP also hold a series of “old-fashioned” personal values – a belief in individual responsibility, hard work, support for law and order, and the importance of fairness and judging people as individuals. These are understood as “my personal philosophy” or “my way of thinking” and are rooted in personal experience and family tradition more than on any abstract moral code.

It is critical to note that these values and beliefs are not inherently Republican or ideologically conservative. The outlook above was part of working class “real American” values in the 1950’s and early 1960’s when 60% of workers voted for Democrats and a majority of blue collar workers were members of unions.

¹<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/14/before-midterms-trumps-image-among-republicans-had-become-less-positive/>

What fundamentally changed was that deindustrialization left white workers feeling abandoned and betrayed by the Democratic party's embrace of centrism under Clinton combined with a sense that their needs were frequently subordinated to the demands of Black Americans. Trump weaponized this feeling by melding it with explicit right wing ideologies of racial bigotry and theocracy, held together by class resentment toward the educated rather than the economic elite.

The non-MAGA sector of the working class, however, is culturally traditional but not right wing. This distinct sector is distinguished by the following:

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 firm "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 the working class voters that it is not just "liberals" 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.

(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.](https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/2022/07/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

The challenge that Democratic candidates now face is how to win the support of this specific group of voters. The next memos in this series will discuss the following:

1. The need for new research methods specifically focused on understanding the opinions of non-MAGA white workers.
2. The need for more systematic procedures for studying the characteristics of successful Democratic candidates in "red" (i.e., strongly Republican) districts.

²<https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/2022/07/the-culturally-traditional-but-non-extremist-working-class-voters-who-they-are-how-they-think-and-what-democrats-must-understand-to-regain-their-support/>