



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

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DEMOCRATIC PROGRAMS AND POLICIES THAT ARE
CLEARLY IN THEIR INTERESTS?
THE MYTHOLOGY OF "FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT'S HUNDRED DAYS"
AND THE MODERN DEBATE OVER "DELIVERISM."**

BY
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The dominant view among Democrats about how to regain the support of modern workers today is essentially based on a mythologized version of how Democrats won the support of working class voters during the New Deal of the 1930's.

The long-ago story of Franklin Roosevelt's dramatic flurry of programs during his first 100 days in office is still often cited to as the classic model and example for how Democrats can win working class support by proposing and dramatically enacting bold, progressive economic programs that objectively serve working people's real economic interests.

Yet, as historians have noted, the "hundred days" story is substantially exaggerated. The great social movement of the 1930's that directly involved millions of workers and radically transformed their political outlook did not occur in response to Roosevelt's 100 days legislation but rather to the vast, epic battles across America for trade union organization. After World War II it was the mutual relationship and support between the Democratic Party and the trade union movement that cemented the "New Deal" coalition.

In the 1950's and 1960's, when workers did indeed generally vote for Democrats, their support was not won because Democratic candidates presented them with detailed policy papers or legislative bills. On the contrary, working class support for Democrats in the post-World War II era was obtained because there were a series of important community and neighborhood organizations that workers trusted and whose recommendations they followed. In the industrial states it was conversations with union shop stewards in the local union hall, endorsements by precinct captains of the local Democratic organization and Sunday sermons by progressive urban catholic priests that actually "sold" Democratic policies to white workers.

In the rural Midwest and West it was the local democratic party workers and Democratic candidates themselves who explained and promoted the rural agricultural programs that won local support.

The explanation given today for the Democrats inability to win working class support, however, is not the fact that comparable local Democratic organizations do not exist but rather that that modern Democratic politicians somehow continually fail to "convince" working class Americans

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*.

of the value of their programs. This is expressed in various ways. It is said that Democrats have “failed to adequately emphasize their most popular programs”, “failed to explain how their programs have helped working people”, “failed to focus sufficiently on “Kitchen table” issues”, “allow themselves to be dragged into debates about “unpopular issue positions” and other variations on this theme. The implication is that better speeches, ads and ribbon-cutting ceremonies are what is lacking.

But in fact, on the occasions when Democratic candidates presented detailed policies based on policy papers developed by progressive think-tanks, this appeared to many white workers as just another example of isolated “ivory tower” experts telling them “*what is good for them*” rather than being proposals that had been examined and endorsed by people they trust. In 2016 Hillary Clinton had the most detailed and comprehensive liberal economic policy platform in Democratic history—which was developed without any significant grass roots involvement or support—and which consequently had no persuasive effect at all on working class voters.

And even when Democratic programs that genuinely benefit workers do get passed, Democrats rarely get the credit they deserve because the simple reality is that ordinary people cannot directly see the results of broad economic policies. The Biden administration’s recent economic initiatives are profoundly important for many working class Americans but are not having the desired effect on workers’ perception of the Democrats. A recent *New York Times* article about the American Rescue Plan provided a clear illustration.

The headline stated: *If Biden’s Plan is Like a “New Deal, Why Don’t Voters Care?* and continued:

“Unlike the New Deal this 1.9 trillion federal investment in American communities has barely registered with voters. Rather than a trophy for Mr. Biden and his party, the program has become a case study in how easily voters can overlook even a lavishly funded government initiative delivering benefits close to home.”¹

An article in Democracy Magazine titled, “The Death of Deliverism” repeated this disturbing conclusion.

The American Rescue Plan’s temporary expansion of the child tax credit lifted more than 2 million children out of poverty, resulting in an astounding **46 percent** reduction in child poverty. Yet the policy’s lapse sparked almost no political response, either from its champions or its beneficiaries....it’s a remarkable feat to spend trillions in an attempt to usher in an economic transformation and to get such an underwhelming response.

It has long been an article of faith among liberals and leftists that if you “deliver” for people—specifically, if you deliver economic improvements in people’s lives through policy—these changes will solidify or shift people’s political allegiances.

Although we have long been sympathetic to “deliverism” we now believe that it is mostly wrong.²

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/21/us/politics/biden-pandemic-relief-democrats.html>

²https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/the-death-of-deliverism/?source=EM_NBI_DJ_20230706_FR_Deliverism_0_1YO_DemocracyJournal_na_na_Website&link_id=3&can_id=59af36e2ffe97693a6c17b40017079a3&email_referrer=email_1982734___subject_2491755&email_subject=bhargava-shams-hanbury-the-death-of-deliverism

The authors argue that Democrats must pay attention to other important factors that influence working class voters' political views.

First, progressive policymaking must take identity, emotion, and story much more seriously... Policies that deliver economic benefit without speaking to, reinforcing, and constructing a social identity are likely to have little political impact.

Second, economic changes may be at the root of what ails us, but they are refracted through people's lived experience with things like violence, addiction, mental health problems, social isolation, loneliness, and a sense of social disintegration. Progressive policymaking and political rhetoric have been extraordinarily thin on these topics, tending to treat them as secondary issues.

Third, reinvigorated organizing and recruitment of new people, especially working-class people, into worker and community organizations is essential. Policy can support the rebuilding of social institutions, like community organizations and unions, that create opportunities for connection.

The authors of the original article that defined "deliverism" responded to this critique by arguing that the fundamental problem was that the "goods" were never actually "delivered."

Let's take a quick look at how Obamacare actually affected normal people. First, the goal of Obamacare was to insure more people, and it did. Roughly 85 percent of Americans had health insurance in 2008. Today it's about 90 percent. So 5 percent of the country had something they didn't have before, and it's quite possible to say that many lives were saved...[But] what about the other 85 percent? Well, in 2009, the average medical cost for a family of four was \$15,609. Today it's \$30,260. That's almost the cost of a new car in health care costs, every single year. In other words, 85 percent of potential voters have the same or a worse experience with health care today, versus 5 percent who have insurance. It's hard to call that a net economic improvement in the lives of most voters.³

...[with the Pandemic aid] virtually all of the pop-up safety net provisions delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic—some passed under Trump, some under Biden, making it hard for ordinary individuals to differentiate—have been rolled back, with millions losing Medicaid benefits, expanded food stamp payments, enhanced unemployment, rental assistance, and more...the lived experience of beneficiaries is that they lost government help.

Three political analysts based in the trade union movement offered a third, distinct explanation for why simply providing progressive policies is inadequate:

Unless people are actively engaged in winning the goods that are delivered to them, not only are they unable to build enough power to take the next step, but their short-term gains remain tenuous. This is often the case in minimum wage and other policy fights: When few of the impacted workers are actively involved in winning, they don't credit the unions or allies or politicians who delivered the wins, and the significance of those wins quickly dims.⁴

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

The authors contrast this with the enduring effects of gains that are won by workers when they go on strike to win better contracts and then have the opportunity to vote on the final settlement. The workers not only gain material benefits but an enhanced sense of their own power and agency which reinforces their commitment to progressive political action.

The most in depth analysis of why simply proposing or even enacting progressive programs is inadequate, however, comes from an extensive array of coordinated studies conducted by American Family Voices and Lake Research which were specifically focused on one kind of working class community – small factory towns in the Midwest. The reports included careful analysis of election results down to the county level, a substantial series of opinion polls and focus groups conducted in the same communities as well as a range of personal interviews with union and community leaders.⁵

The main report, authored by Mike Lux with his associates Richard Martin and David Wilhelm pointed to four critical challenges that face Democrats in regaining working class support.

1. There is a profound cynicism about both political parties and politics in general

“The biggest barrier to Democrats and progressive groups making gains in the Factory Towns is the intense cynicism of these voters. They don’t like or trust either party, or the media, or the government.... Mouthing general populist campaign rhetoric or running a few TV ads with that tilt are not going to move people very far because they feel like they have heard it all before and they think no one—Republican nor Democrat—ever truly fights for them or delivers on their behalf. Our poll shows that even messaging that people strongly agree with doesn’t by itself move horse race numbers very much.

In particular, just broadly attacking Republicans doesn’t sell to Factory Town voters – they shut down when they perceive partisan attacks because they see both parties engaging in an increasingly polarizing war where they feel like the pawns.”

2. Many Workers Live in “News Deserts”

“These voters’ lives are too busy and too stressful to follow national political news much, and a lot of them live in news deserts where local newspapers are closing or being dramatically cut back. Local TV news stations cover mostly crime and traffic accidents – and/or have a rightwing agenda themselves as 50% of local TV stations are owned by three media corporations headed by far-right owners. [note: a tremendous amount of material that workers do see—a large majority right wing—is delivered to them through social media and is given undeserved credence because it is often forwarded by friends, relatives and neighbors.]”

3. Workers are Deeply Favorable to Small Business

“For these cynical voters, the institution of small business is the closest thing to the gold standard there is today. They are cynical about politicians, both political parties, government at every level, the “corporate media” (a phrase that kept coming up in focus groups

⁵<https://www.americanfamilyvoices.org/post/a-strategy-for-factory-towns>

with high disdain), wealthy corporations and corporate CEOs, the internet, and many other things in modern life. But they have a high regard for most small business people. Most working-class folks very much think of small business owners as part of the working class, as people who work hard, have the same challenges they do, and who are essential to rebuilding their communities. [To understand why this is so, it is only necessary to visualize the vast number of worker-contractors in construction like plumbers and electricians who are both small business owners and manual workers and the many other small business owners who work alongside their employees]

Democrats and progressive issue advocates should always talk about how much they care about small businesses doing well and should be specific about the ways they want to help the small business community, whether it is taking on corporate monopolies, giving procurement and infrastructure contracts to small business first, cutting red tape, or other things that lower the challenges facing small business owners.

4. The most important step: Community building

As Lux notes:

“When you are a cynical, alienated person living in a forgotten, ignored community, you need more than rhetoric to move you. Organizations that provide direct services and benefits to people are an important component for reaching out to Factory Towns voters.

The people in our focus groups love their hometowns, and are motivated to improve them, but they are also deeply troubled by the declines they have seen. The opioid tragedy has been a big part of these folks’ lives; worries about addiction and the consequences of it came up a lot in the conversations. While people talked about how much they trusted local media, they would talk about how newspaper downsizing had contributed to the sense that they knew less about their long-time communities. Many people in the groups mentioned how important it was to volunteer, to pitch in to make it better, and talked about how much they enjoyed their own volunteerism.

In the conversations I had with local activists, they talked to me of people not wanting to go to potluck church dinners and other events they had always gone to because they didn’t want to be where people argued about politics. The deepest longing people had was missing the sense that neighbors, co-workers, and church communities could talk about issues and what was going on without the conversations breaking down into angry screaming matches. Focus group participants expressed a lot of gratitude that the focus groups themselves had been a place where they could have a civil conversation without people getting mad at each other.

After two years of mostly being stuck at home because of Covid, people are eager to be going to community events again, and in general are eager to see their neighbors coming together.

Lux concludes:

One of my top recommendations coming out of this work is that the national Democratic Party and progressive non-profits should invest in hiring regional organizers based in targeted Factory Town counties. They should be assigned to build local committees and volunteer structures in these counties.

Democratic and progressive organizations and campaigns should work with these organizers to host community events that are not just about issues and politics, but that bring people together for fun and community building. Progressive groups and politicians should be organizing or sponsoring job fairs, health events where people can talk to health care professionals, and Chautauqua-style events with music and comedy as well as issue or political speeches. And all political events should build in elements of fun and community, including Election Day itself, where the Democratic Party or progressive groups could sponsor big events in parks or local small businesses for people who have voted or volunteered, not just victory parties at downtown hotels for political insiders.”

This local organizing extends to Facebook and other social media. The people in Factory Towns spend a lot of time on Facebook, and like the community building and information sharing aspects of it...progressive groups and the Democratic Party should make a major investment in building local and regional networks of Facebook pages.

Lux’s argument that this is the most important single step that needs to be taken is repeated by other leading observers. As Professor Lara Putnam, a leading researcher on grass roots movements notes:

Local party groups provide not just the boots on the ground but the community-specific knowledge and personal connections that guide voter outreach, and the group’s continuity means that knowledge and those connections grow with each campaign and build toward the next.

...failing to build participation is cast in stark relief by the enduring impact of those eras when hands-on politics did happen. Some grassroots activists invoke a father who was a union steward, or a mother who as Democratic committeewoman knew every voter in her precinct by name. ...These lives bear the mark of groups within which regular people convinced each other they could make the difference. Unionization campaigns today do the same. One young woman answered my knock at her door in hospital scrubs, eager to share news from Hospital Workers Rising (a Service Employees International Union initiative). She told me she’s going to be mayor of Pittsburgh one day.⁶

Union organizers who work in political campaigns add further detail to this perspective. They note that a real-world “clubhouse” is the anchor that can unite the democratic supporters in a community together. All sorts of places can play this role—restaurants, bars, bookstores, libraries,

⁶<https://prospect.org/power/digital-fixes-solve-democrats-problems/>

churches, community centers and often people's living rooms. The fundamental fact is that keeping grass roots political networks alive and growing requires regular personal contact and socializing. It is the friendships that are made during activities and the connections and camaraderie that results that create the bonds that cement and holds together a grass roots campaign organization after an election is over.

Successful organizations include a steady flow of purely social events. In small, old-fashioned towns these could be picnics, bowling tournaments, street fairs, barbeques, square dances or family fishing tournaments.

This social element of grass roots organizations is the key to success. The NRA has always understood this and their useful firearm safety courses were the traditional foundation of the organization. Churches, of course, have always had social events, and the Christian Right used those gatherings as central organizing targets in their campaigns.

In the past the Democratic Party understood the importance of regular social events. Consider this description of the early 20th century Democratic "machine":

Politics under the machine was an urban festival, with picnics and chowders, boat rides, excursions to the country or the new amusement parks, balls and cotillions, block dances, and **"beefsteaks,"** atavistic rituals in which men donned aprons and devoured endless amounts of buttered steak with their teeth and hands.

One important approach is participating in local community volunteer activities. There are many neighborhood problems that are not usually associated with Democrats but where a campaign can participate such as assisting in the organization of neighborhood watch programs in areas where car break-ins and mailbox theft are common.

The vital importance of local community organization is underscored by a disturbing reality: Democrats in small factory towns and other rural areas feel profoundly isolated. They profoundly underestimate the number of people in their communities who actually agree with them because of the heavy presence of GOP/conservative billboards, yard signs and other evidence of conservative views.

As one journalist noted in 2018:

In Virginia's Sixth Congressional District, there's another element that I hadn't considered until I visited: intense social pressure. In places where Trumpism is so widespread, identifying as a liberal carries risks—social, financial, and perhaps even physical. For Democrats, this means that half the battle is simply normalizing their party.

"I wear these shirts to the gym that say 'Pro-America, Anti-Trump,'" said Morrison. "Women, particularly, would come up to me and whisper, 'I'm a Democrat.' But they really were embarrassed to say it. That's how strong it is."

Morrison is the chair of her county's Democratic committee. She told me that in her experience, most liberal residents keep quiet about their political affiliations. The pressure to stay silent and vote Republican is especially strong for people who work for conservative employers, are part of Shenandoah's prominent, multigeneration (and generally conservative) families, or run small businesses that depend on a local clientele.

Morrison mentioned her hairdresser as an example. When Morrison gets her hair cut, the two will often quietly discuss politics and their shared outrage at Trump. "But she won't do anything public, because her business depends on Republicans,"⁷

The depth of this isolation that many Democrats in small towns and rural areas feel today underlines the importance of a central fact: ***The rebuilding of local Democratic organizations and community institutions is inescapably a long, painfully 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 persuasion and voter 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.

Many Democrats will object that this is too long to wait for change in small town and rural 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 limited effects which quickly dissipate after an election. Democrats can either commit themselves to the long and hard struggle to rebuild an enduring Democratic presence in these areas or accept that there will be no progressive change at all.

⁷<https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/10/28/the-democrats-of-trump-country/>