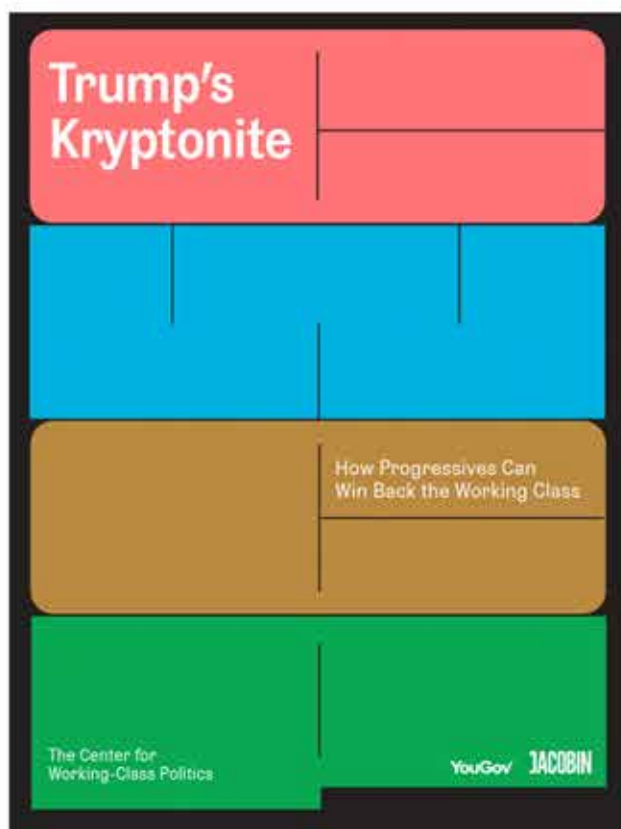# TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

## INNOVATIVE STUDY PROVIDES STARTLING NEW INSIGHT ABOUT WORKING CLASS VOTERS

BY

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**TDS Strategy Memo:**
**Innovative Study Provides Startling New Insight About Working Class Voters**

*By Andrew Levison*

It is now over 20 years since political analysts began to use the category of "less than college workers" as the practical definition of "working class." The working class had previously been defined by occupation as blue collar, manual workers.

There were several solid arguments for accepting this new definition.

1. The modern working class was no longer largely composed of factory workers and other blue collar occupations like miners, construction workers, truck drivers and longshoremen as it had been in the 1950's and 1960's. With the tremendous growth in the number of women in the labor force and the comparably large increase in the number of service and retail sales jobs in the economy the modern working class was far more occupationally and socially diverse than in the past. Using education rather than occupation to divide the modern labor force into "working class" and "professional-managerial class" seemed to more accurately capture this new reality.

2. There was a very clear economic gap between the wages and the job conditions of less than college workers compared with those of college-educated managers, technical workers and other professionals. The economic situation of people with college degrees had generally improved in recent decades while the economic conditions of less than college workers were relatively stagnant or actually declined. The college/non-college distinction thus seemed to reflect an important economic reality.

3. Opinion surveys routinely collect Information about the educational levels of the people who are interviewed whereas information about occupation had proved too complex for polling firms to easily process. Using less than college education as the definition of working class thus made it possible to interpret the data from standard opinion surveys as being the political opinions of "working class" Americans in a way that occupation did not allow.

Along with these reasonable considerations, however, there was also a less valid reason for the popularity of using less than college workers as the definition of "working class" – it reinforced the notion that America was becoming a "post-industrial" "knowledge economy" – a notion that strongly appealed to the writers and journalists of the mainstream media (eternally in search of the next new trend) and the growing ranks of Silicone Valley investors, university academics and Wall Street gurus. For the latter groups, in particular, it provided a wonderfully self-congratulatory explanation and justification for their own elevated status and importance.

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The political consequences of this conception of social class were, unfortunately, profoundly destructive for the Democratic coalition. Beginning in the 1990's it led even liberal economists to dismiss the importance of deindustrialization because the technologically unemployed could always *"improve their human capital"* – i.e., go to college and join the knowledge economy. It supported the idea that the future of the Democratic Party lay with *"soccer moms", "office park dads"* and *"wired workers"* rather than the party's traditional working class base. By the 2016 election it led the Clinton campaign and large segments of the Democratic Party to agree with Chuck Schumer's dismissive statement that *"For every blue-collar Democrat we lose in western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two moderate Republicans in the suburbs in Philadelphia."*

After Trump's election some Democratic strategists began seeking the legitimate grievances and weaknesses in the Democratic appeal that had led working people to abandon the Democratic Party while others easily jumped to the conclusion that it was precisely less than college voters' lack of education that made them easy, gullible targets for Trump's demagogic appeal.

At the present time this strategic debate about "less than college" voters remains active but there is also a deeper sociological and political question about whether it is valid to view less than college voters as a coherent social class in any sense at all.

After all, the traditional rationale for treating blue collar workers as a social class lay in the fact that they shared a wide range of common conditions and discontents of mass labor in factories, mines, construction sites and warehouses which made it reasonable to expect that they would have a common social and political outlook based on their shared experience and shared fate.

These common elements are clearly not present in the vast range of occupations that are held by less than college workers. Barista's in Starbucks, sales clerks in Macy's and mailroom clerks in large office buildings have little shared experience with framing carpenters in residential construction or long-haul truckers. As less than college workers also include many people with AA degrees the group also includes "grey-collar" workers like heating and air conditioning mechanics, bookkeepers, certified massage therapists and physical trainers. Given the vast differences in these social environments there is little reason to expect that the people employed in them would show a shared, common political outlook.

One very direct way to examine the difference between the two definitions of class would be to simultaneously classify the same group of voters by both their occupation and their level of education and then compare the differences when the groups were measured one way and then the other.

Until recently this had not been done but in March of 2023 the Center for Working Class Politics released an important opinion study **"Trump's Kryptonite: How Progressives Can Win Back The Working Class"** that included precisely this comparison.[1]

Using a method of occupational classification developed by European sociologists it classified a sample of 1,700 voters first by education and then by occupation.

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[1]https://images.jacobinmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/08125102/TrumpsKryptonite_Final_June2023.pdf

Here were the results for education:

| | Vote For Biden in 2020 |
|---|---|
| **Four Year College Degree or More** | 59.2 |
| **Less Than Four-Year College Degree** | 43.9 |

This is generally in line with other polling. When it is remembered that this sample included both white and non-white American voters the 43.9% support for Biden looks entirely reasonable. If the sample were restricted to **white** less than college voters the percentage would probably be quite close to the 37% that Biden actually did receive in 2020 from less than college workers according to the most reliable data.[2]

But now here are the results for the exact same group of voters divided into working class and non-working class occupations:

| | Vote For Biden in 2020 |
|---|---|
| **Non-Working Class** <br> **(Managers, Technical Professionals,** <br> **Frontline Professionals, Small Business** <br> **Owners)** | 52.5 |
| **Working Class** <br> **Service Workers, Manual Workers** | 48.6 |

This is extremely striking. When these voters' social class is defined by occupation the "working class" appears substantially more pro-Democratic than when their social class is defined by a "less than a college" education. The working class support for Biden in fact appears remarkably close to that of the professional/managerial/business middle class.

This is, in fact, so seriously disruptive to the common wisdom which visualizes blue collar workers as the most hard core Trump supporters that there is a strong temptation to suspect that there must be some flaw in the data.

But a more careful look at the occupational categories reveals the most plausible interpretation. There are vast numbers of small business owners, men and women and lower level managers and supervisors, independent contractors and others who do not have college degrees and are therefore lumped into the "working class" when class is defined by education. Voters of this kind were highly visible participants in the Tea Party demonstrations during the Obama year and the pro-Trump "boat parades" of speedboat owners in 2020.

Removing these disproportionately Republican, middle class pro-Trump voters from the category of "working class," as the occupational approach does, quite understandably makes the working class look less Republican and the professional, managerial class look more so than the "less than college" approach does.

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[1]https://catalist.us/whathappened2022/

It is important to emphasize that this data comes from a single poll of 1,700 people and must be substantially replicated and extended before any firm conclusions can be drawn.

But it clearly suggests the possibility that the widespread common wisdom among Democrats that dismisses the "working class" as hopelessly lost to the GOP is based on a fundamental misunderstanding about social class that is based on the notion that "less than college" workers can be properly considered equivalent to the traditional "working class" in political analysis.