Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority

THE DEMOCRATIC strategist

TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL STRATEGY FOR REACHING WORKING CLASS VOTERS THAT STARTS FROM THE ACTUAL "CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS" OF MODERN WORKING AMERICANS.

PART ONE:
MODERN WORKERS DO HAVE A "CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS" BUT IT'S VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS THAT AMERICAN WORKERS HAD IN THE 1950'S.

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THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THIS HAVE TO BE FACED: TODAY'S WORKING CLASS VOTERS WON'T JOIN A DEMOCRATIC "BIG TENT COALITION" THAT MAKES IT CLEAR THAT IT DOESN'T REALLY WANT THEM.

BY
ANDREW LEVISON

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Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the recent elections Democrats breathed a deep sigh of relief that there had been neither a GOP "red wave" nor widespread right-wing disruption of the elections. Now that this initial sense of relief has passed, however, Democrats find themselves facing a basically disheartening reality.

The depressing fact is that Republican political candidates in 2022 received several million more popular votes than did Democrats. Even more daunting, the fact that both the House and Senate ended up with an almost equal balance of Democrats and Republicans did not indicate that the country contains vast numbers of potentially persuadable "swing" voters but rather that America is now deeply and rigidly divided into two fundamentally distinct voting blocs.

On the one hand there is a solid Democratic majority among demographic groups like college educated voters, single women, African Americans and Latinos many of whom tend to be very heavily concentrated in urban areas, the East and West coasts and college towns. On the other hand there is an equally solid and deeply entrenched Republican majority among white working class and rural/small town voters across wide sections of non-urban America.[1]

The consequence of these rigid voting blocs is that national elections for president or for control of congress now tend to be decided by relatively small shifts of less than five percent of the voters while in the large majority of individual electoral districts voters overwhelmingly choose either the Democratic or Republican candidate.

This map of 2022 congressional districts illustrates the point. The vast majority of the country is shown in bright Red, indicating that Republicans win in these areas by 15 to 20 percent or more, far beyond the range where any election year efforts at turnout or persuasion can change the outcome. Democratic candidates do win some local and district level elections in these areas but the overall pattern is clear. (*Note:* the exact percentages in each congressional district can be seen by accessing the link in the footnote).[2]

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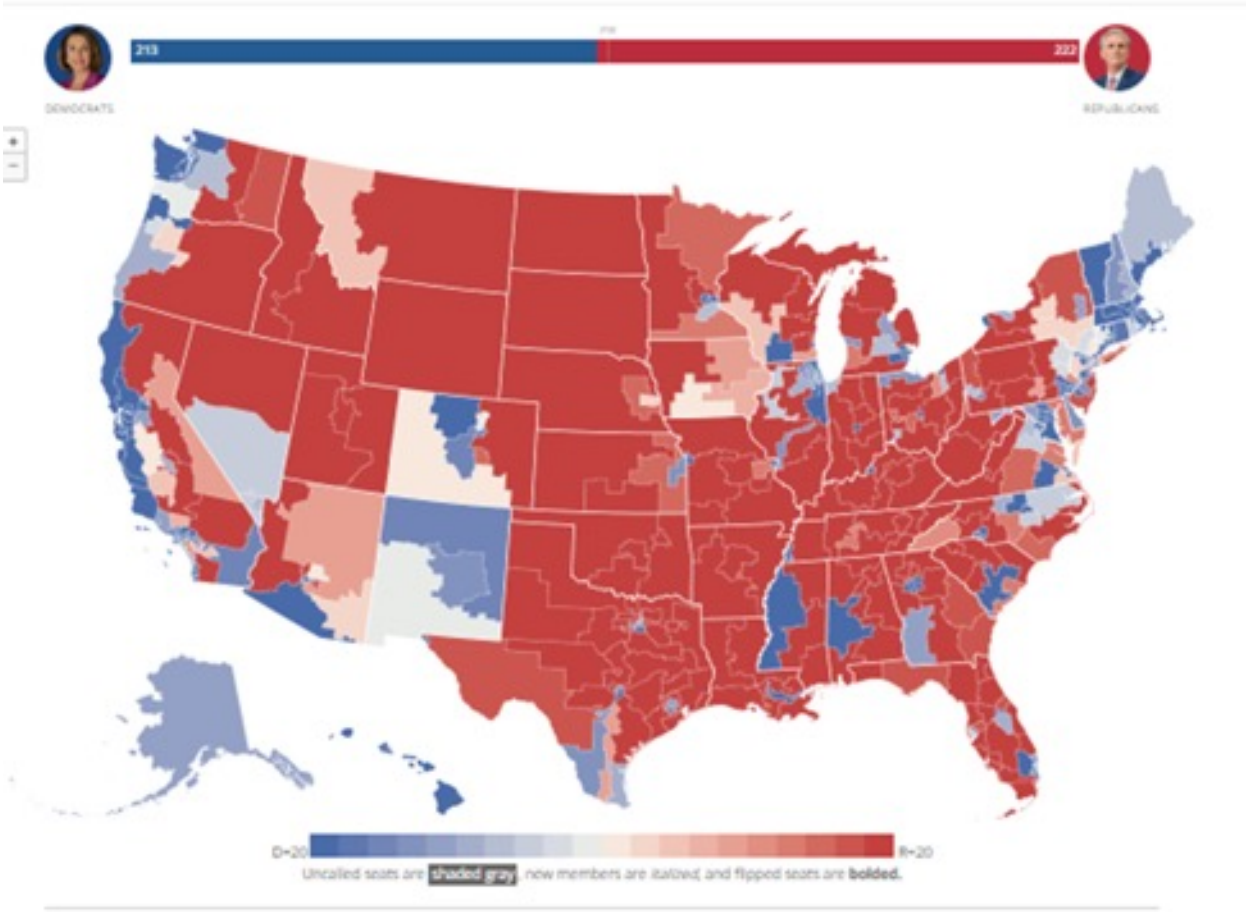
[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/09/29/us-house-districts-rural-urban/

[2] https://www.cookpolitical.com/charts/house-charts/national-house-vote-tracker/2022

Demographic change can in theory gradually alter this balance over long periods but short term trends can also very quickly reverse its impact. Growing Republican support among Latino voters, for example, now threatens to override any potential long term pro-Democratic effect of a growth in their numbers.



As a result, if Democrats want to develop strategies for achieving more than marginal and tentative victories in 2024 and beyond it is necessary to consider how it might be possible to win or at least neutralize some significant sector of the white working class/rural/small town electoral base of the modern Republican coalition.

The place to begin such an analysis is by seeking to understand white working class voters on a deeper level than simply as an abstract demographic category.

Part One

Modern Workers Do Have a "Class Consciousness" But It's Very Different From the Class Consciousness That American Workers Had In the 1950's.

The New Definition of the Working Class

In their 1999 book, *The Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters,* Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers proposed a new way to define working class Americans – as workers with "less than a college education."

It was an extremely valuable conceptual advance. The traditional, occupation-based definition of the working class defined the group as blue collar, manual workers – people who worked with their hands rather than their minds. And although union benefits significantly improved the economic situation of many union workers after World War II the average workers' standard of living was still very considerably below that of middle class, white collar managerial and professional workers.

But beginning in the 1970's the number of factory and manufacturing workers began a steady, precipitous decline as did manual jobs in mining, dockworking, construction and other fields under the impact of automation. In their place, the number of low level clerical, retail sales and service jobs substantially grew. The change was particularly noticeable because women were entering the labor force in increasing number at the same time.

The workers in these occupations faced many problems similar to traditional non-union blue collar workers– low wages, dead end jobs, no fringe benefits and pervasive job insecurity.

Although some college graduates were employed in these jobs the large majority were held by workers with only a high school or two-year college education. Teixeira and Rogers therefore argued that workers with "less than college" educations (which included both these new workers and most traditional blue collar workers) could now be defined as the modern working class.[3]

There was one great advantage to this new way of defining the working class – levels of education were routinely collected during opinion surveys while occupations were not. The result was that the opinions of "less than college" workers began to be directly interpreted by political analysts as representing the views of "working class" Americans.

This new definition allowed Democrats to analyze and discuss the genuine economic problems and political opinions of white working class Americans as a distinct group and to distinguish them from the views and conditions of more affluent middle class and upper class Americans.

[3]*Note:* Income is also often collected in opinion polls and would seem like a logical measure of social class but as an alternative it is actually of very little use. In sociological terms "low income" people are an incoherent mixture of radically different groups – the old, the retired, the unemployed, students, the disabled, homemakers and others. As Ruy Teixeira noted during one debate on this issue, the ironic fact was that most low income people were not actually working. Some academic studies of opinion use various combined measures of income and education (for example "low income, less than college workers") which generates some interesting data. But as each study uses its own unique definition, however, they cannot be easily compared or combined with the constantly updated flow of educational data that is collected in standard opinion polls.

Democratic Political Strategy – "Kitchen Table Issues"

Based on this data the political strategy that many Democrats endorsed was to argue that Democrats could still win working class support by appealing to their "real," "kitchen table" interests in contrast to the "values issues" that Republicans routinely stressed instead. The underlying assumption was that the group that was now defined as working class—even if many were occupationally different from the workers of the past—should still respond to the same class-based "kitchen table" appeals as had the workers of the 50's and 60's who had provided the foundation of the Democrats' "New Deal" coalition.

By the 1980's Democrats no longer routinely won majorities of the white working class vote as they had in the 1950's and 1960's but this strategy still seemed adequate to allow coalitions of white working class voters and the growing number of college educated voters and people of color to win elections. In 2012, Barack Obama received about 40% of the white less than college vote which was sufficient to permit his re-election against the plutocratic Mitt Romney.[4]

In 2016, however, Hillary Clinton's share of the white less than college vote substantially declined to 36%, falling even in the formerly industrial Rust Belt swing states that her campaign was counting on to provide the margin of victory. In fact, her candidacy deeply inflamed a deep, visceral antagonism among many white working class voters that they generalized to all Democratic candidates. The Republican demonization of the Democratic Party had, of course, long predated Hillary Clinton's campaign but Trump's uniquely bitter, demagogic appeal magnified that hostility to an unprecedented level. Given the substantial rural, small state bias of the American political system this allowed Trump to create a new majority coalition.

Biden did slightly better in 2020, but not by much. He received just 37% of the white less than college vote, only one percent more than Clinton.

The implications for Democratic strategy are stark. Two thirds—two out of every three—white working class voters are part of Trump's coalition and with a disturbing number of Latino and Latina working class voters also deserting the Dems the ability of Democratic candidates to assemble a majority coalition becomes increasingly remote.[5]

Trapped in the Past

Yet the discussion of Democratic strategy seems trapped in the past.

One group argues that white workers are either totally blinded by GOP propaganda or are intrinsically racist and dedicated to preserving their existing privileges (in political science research these latter views are more politely defined as white working class "racial resentment" and "status anxiety").

[4]Catalist: https://www.dropbox.com/s/ka9n5gzxwotfu1a/wh2020_public_release_crosstabs.xlsx?dl=0

[5]https://theliberalpatriot.substack.com/p/hispanic-and-working-class-voters?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=reader2

https://theliberalpatriot.substack.com/p/the-democrats-working-class-problem?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=reader2

The alternative view argues that the traditional strategy of offering full throated progressive economic policies should still be able to convince working class voters to elect Democrats.

These two perspectives essentially assume that the pro-democratic "class consciousness" that white working class voters displayed in the 1950's and early 1960's—the class consciousness that led them to assert that the Democratic Party was "the party of the working man" while the Republicans emphatically were not—has either (1) disappeared entirely or (2) still exists in some essentially intact but dormant form and can be resurrected.

There is, however, an alternative view. It is the sociological insight that "class consciousness" is not a static, necessarily radical/Marxist perspective that either simply exists or does not exist but is rather a dynamic outlook that is rooted in the specific conditions of workers' daily lives and evolves as those conditions change. From this perspective the challenge for Democrats then becomes to understand **how and why** white working class consciousness has evolved as it has and how to use that understanding to develop new ways to champion and represent their present needs and interests.

In order to do this it is necessary to "think outside the box" of the current definition of the white working class as simply an amorphous mass of "less than college voters" and to consider white working class voters instead in sociological rather than demographic terms. While the "less than college" definition remains indispensable for the day-to-day challenge of analyzing changes in white working class political opinion it can also inhibit the discussion of long-term political strategy. As a result, it is necessary to return to the traditional sociological approach and consider how the changes in the specific conditions of white working class life since the 1950's necessarily altered their class consciousness.

What Created White Workers Class Consciousness in the 1950's?

The distinct form that class consciousness took among American white, blue collar workers in the 1950's—a class consciousness that was in some ways similar but in other ways quite distinct from that of the British or West European working classes in the same period—was rooted in three basic realities.

First, the conditions of industrial labor in large factories in the industrial regions of the country produced a distinct perception of common conditions and discontents and of a shared fate among those who worked there. Every day thousands of workers filed shoulder to shoulder through factory gates where they worked together in large groups, overseen by foremen who represented far off executives and managers. It was this perception of common circumstances and shared fate that supported the rise of unionization in the 1930's. Conditions similar to these were also present for miners, longshoremen, commercial construction workers, truck drivers, garbage collectors and others and produced similar support for unionization.

Second, workers were geographically concentrated in neighborhoods that were near the industrial facilities where they worked. Before the 1950's workers inevitably lived within walking distance of the factories and even as car ownership grew in the post-war period many still tended to live in urban ethnic communities where they shared a common neighborhood life. More affluent upper middle class and upper class people, on the other hand, were perceived as

living in remote and isolated wealthy neighborhoods. This was reflected in widespread popular clichés of the Post-War era: Wealthy people lived *"in a house up on the hill"* while workers lived *"on the wrong side of the tracks."*

Finally, a network of social institutions emerged on the foundation of the urban working class neighborhoods that created a distinct social and political culture in working class communities. The local union hall was a significant social center that at times rivaled the local tavern. The often pro-union nuns and priests in the ethnic communities' numerous Catholic churches and parochial schools did not challenge the neighborhood sentiment in favor of the Democrats and, across the northern industrial states, Democratic political "machines" existed down to the precinct level that provided neighborhood level individual outreach through precinct captains who helped workers deal with a range of routine problems with government as well as mobilizing them on election day.

How Conditions Changed (1) – The Nature of Work

Beginning in the 1970's, however, this social and cultural foundation for pro-Democratic class consciousness among American workers began to rapidly erode. Most dramatically, the "export" of factory jobs to other countries steadily eliminated many blue collar jobs and devastated working class communities across the northern industrial states. By the late 1980's deindustrialization in the northern states had become so extensive that the cliché of the "rust belt" emerged to describe the epidemic of shuttered factories and declining communities.

And even before deindustrialization took its full toll factories were also migrating to the South seeking lower wages and to more rural areas in northern states like Pennsylvania and Ohio where the tradition of unionization had never penetrated. The textile industry was an early migrant to the South but other industries increasingly joined the exodus. By the 1990's it became routine to note that new factories opening in America were invariably located in rural areas and not major cities.

For those workers who stayed in the Northern states and the large cities of the South and West there was a profound change in the nature of their jobs. A vast network of small firms acting as subcontractors to large companies replaced giant integrated factories. Mass industrial labor gave way to small businesses and the growth of "grey collar" technical service jobs, some of them requiring AA degrees. Small- and medium-sized companies increasingly hired workers such as machinists, heating and air conditioning mechanics, satellite dish installers, home remodeling and renovation workers, office computer and telephone network wiring installers and others. Along with these new "grey collar" workers and skilled construction and other craft workers many other former factory workers opened small independent businesses and struggled to make a living.

In fact, it is possible to distinguish four distinct subgroups of workers in this new deindustrialized world:

The first group is workers who sell their services as independent contractors, either working alone or as part of small workgroups. In residential construction many contractors and builders hire distinct teams for each house, selecting from a pool of workers they have used before. The wide variety of skilled tradesmen and women that they hire includes foundation excavators, cement contractors, framing carpenters, insulation contractors, roofers and sheetrock installers, plumbers, electricians and others who are themselves often incorporated as one-man businesses. In similar

fashion, long-haul trucking, once a highly unionized, high wage occupation, is now dominated by over 1,000,000 individual drivers many of whom work as independent contractors, some owning their "rigs" while others are hired for each individual job. Many barely break even on many runs.

The second group is workers who work for small firms with ten or fewer employees. Since the 1990's reality TV shows like "Dirty Jobs, "American Chopper" (about a specialty motorcycle machine shop), "Deadliest Catch," (about commercial crab fishing boats) and others have profiled the working life and conditions in a range of small working class businesses. Small companies like independent automobile repair shops, commercial lighting, alarm and cash register system installers, cleaning and janitorial services companies, security and grounds maintenance companies and other specialized contractors provide blue collar workers for other firms.

The third group is workers who work for small businesses that are individual franchises of large national firms. Fast food restaurants like McDonald's, Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken and auto shops like Brake-O, Pep Boys, and others in a vast range of industries are in one sense part of large corporations but from the point of view of the workers they employ they are a small business in which the "boss" works alongside them.

The fourth group is the "new" working class of lower level clerical, retail sales and service workers. The "service economy" that emerged in the 1970's and 1980's required a vast increase in the number of waiters and waitresses, retail sales clerks, child care workers and others, many of whom were hired on temporary contracts or as subcontractors to service firms. As with the other groups, they did not perceive their employers as far-away executives and plutocrats but as individuals they knew personally.

These fundamentally different kind of workplaces from the large industrial worksites of the past produce a correspondingly major change in the outlook of these workers. They no longer feel like industrial workers, collectively in conflict with far off owners, but rather like part of a small team in competition with other small businesses for jobs or customers.

Even in the case of franchises like McDonald's where the actual nature of the work is little different from a classic automobile assembly line the workers do not think of the executives in the distant corporate headquarters of McDonald's as their "bosses" but rather the individual manager in the shop.[6]

This alone generates a radically different kind of working class consciousness but, in addition, in this environment the values and outlook of small business also become embedded in working class identity. Today working-class and small-business values are intermingled, especially among traditional blue-collar groups like worker-contractors in construction. Pride in craftsmanship, the character-building value of hard work and self-discipline and similar traditional working-class values are now intermixed with values related to small business-- values like appreciation for independence, individual initiative, ambition and pride in making a small business a success.

[6]One major work environment where large numbers of workers are still concentrated together is in the vast network of warehouses across the nation where firms like Amazon and Walmart temporarily store and distribute massive quantities of goods. The way these quasi-industrial worksites avoid unionization is by basing virtually all hiring on short term contracts and constantly replacing the workers in any particular site in order to prevent them from creating the social bonds that support unionizations.

How Conditions Changed (2) – Where Workers Live

The major change in the kinds of communities where workers live has also profoundly changed their psychology from the 1950's.

For workers who continued to find employment in the formerly industrial states the growth of ghettos in the central cities and the gentrification and urban renewal of urban ethnic communities increasingly led them to move to the "urban fringe" of many cities—areas outside the boundaries of the city limits that have low cost, modest housing and a semi-rural atmosphere—places where Dollar General grocery stores and modest restaurants dominate rather than Whole Foods or Sprouts and trendy Tapas bars. These workers drive an hour and a half to two hours a day to their jobs in the urban centers but live in a profoundly different social environment.

Along with the urban fringe, another semi-rural white working class environment are the "Factory Towns" – midsize counties anchored around cities with a population of 35,000 or more and smaller counties that still have some manufacturing or storage or processing facilities like beef and poultry slaughter and packaging plants.[7]

These non-urban places where workers live link them to the society and culture of the smaller towns and rural areas that surround major cities – to the distinct semi-rural social networks of schools, churches, low-cost strip mall shopping centers, VFW clubs and "country" bars. This leads to workers distinct identity as working people becoming combined with an identification and feeling of being "country" people rather than "city" people.

The consequence of this transformation of working class psychology is perhaps most vividly reflected in the fact that "country music" which had previously been a relatively isolated regional music of "hillbillies" and "cowboys" had by the 1980's become the dominant music of the American working class. By that time Country and Western music could be found on the lists of crossover "top ten" hits, on major radio stations and echoing on the sound systems and local band playlists of distinctly "country" styled bars in every region of the country. Leading "Country" singers no longer sang about cattle drives and sleeping under the stars but rather of hard work during the day and drinking at night in rowdy "honky-tonk" bars. Songs of ordinary working class life like Glen Campbell's "Wichita Lineman" *("I am a lineman for the county")*. Garth Brooks' "Friends in Low Places" *("I'm not big on social graces cause I've got friends in low places")* and Merle Haggard's "If we make it through December". *("Got laid off down at the factory")* played alongside love songs in which 18 wheel tractor-trailer trucks and longing for "back home" were a part of daily life:

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[7]https://www.americanfamilyvoices.org/_files/ugd/d4d64f_5c5b228a260e4793ad6034c9dd535d36.pdf

"18 Wheels and a Dozen Roses"
Sung by Kathy Mattea

Eighteen wheels and a dozen roses
Ten more miles on his four day run
A few more songs from the all night radio
And he'll spend his time with the one he loves

Charlie's got a gold watch. Don't seem all that great
After thirty years of drivin' the interstate

Detroit City
Sung by Bobbie Bare

Home folks think I'm big in Detroit City
From the letters that I write they think I'm just fine,

But by day I make the cars and by night I make the bars. If only they could read between the lines.
I'm gonna take my foolish pride on a southbound freight. I'm going back to the ones I left behind.

The workers who live in these urban fringe and factory town communities were brought into close contact with traditional small town/rural life which was itself undergoing massive change. These areas had traditionally been based on small farmers whose distinct perspective often produced relatively liberal strands of "prairie populism" in many Midwest, Northwest and Western states. In recent decades, however things changed. As an article in *The U.K. Guardian* noted:

> A century ago, there were more than 6 million farmers; today, fewer than 750,000 remain. Yet the US's agricultural **output** has increased fourfold since then, while total acres farmed have declined only slightly.
>
> The same set of resources with more capital and fewer owners: this is an instructive way of understanding the economic stratification that has occurred in many rural communities. A class of local elites owns the valuable land that surrounds a typical small town, which is home to a post office, public schools, a grocery store, and sometimes a hospital… the owners of physical assets—fast food franchises, apartment complexes, car dealerships—make up the rest of this scaled-down hierarchy. They sit on local non-profit boards, run the chamber of commerce, and are influential members of their churches. They often hold elected office and are disproportionately responsible for the political constitution of rural areas.[8]

Beneath this rural elite there are a wide variety of working class occupations, ranging from farm and ranch workers and foremen to truck drivers, feedlot, storage facility and warehouse workers, mechanics and repairmen and regional concentrations of lumber workers, fishermen, oil pipeline and refinery workers, strip mine and open-pit mine workers, forestry employees, firefighters and others.

[8]https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/22/us-politics-rural-america

One distinct characteristic of this rural and small town white working class is a distinct "rural consciousness." As *The Guardian* articles notes:

> During the Great Recession, Katherine Cramer, a professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, spent several years conducting ethnographic studies on rural, often white, Wisconsinites. She found a persistent sense that rural areas and the people who live there are mistreated, creating a recognizable "rural consciousness". People felt not only that they had been abandoned by the government, but that cities and cultural elites hoarded power and prestige at the expense of rural areas….
>
> …To the extent that a rural consciousness exists, it's entangled with a sense of having lost something while the rest of the country moves ahead. This, Cramer found, creates a persistent "us v them" view of the world. In Wisconsin, this rivalry manifests as anger at cities—where, it should be said, most of the state's non-white population lives—but also at white-collar professionals and public employees of all kinds.

This hostility to large cities and identification with small town and rural life in working class imagination can easily appear strange to outsiders who perceive these places as sad, declining areas with stagnant economies, rampant drugs and little to recommend them.

But to working people the state fairs and rodeos of the West and the country music bars, stock car races and motorcycle rallies and evangelical church socials that go on across the country are as real and meaningful a "culture" as the art galleries, sushi bars, bookstores and coffee shops of "hip" urban areas.

And integrally connected to the physical aspects of this overlapping of rural/small town and working class sensibility are shared and distinct working class social values – a respect for hard work and common sense, a commitment to simple honesty rather than subtle wordplay and a belief that genuine friendship and personal integrity is more valuable than wealth or status.

These are no longer understood as specifically working class values but as traditional small town, *"real American"* values in which many traditional working class values are embedded. This perspective is not the same as ideological conservatism but it is also quite distinct from 1950's working class consciousness. In sociological terms it is best defined as "cultural traditionalism" – a perspective rooted in the ideologies of traditional social institutions like the church, the armed forces, the schools and the local business community and which reflect generally "old-fashioned" although not necessarily ideologically conservative or extremist ideas about religion, patriotism, small business and democracy.

For an extensive discussion of cultural traditionalism in the American working class and how it differs from ideological conservatism and extremism see:

> *The Culturally Traditional but Non-extremist Working Class Voters: Who They Are, How They Think and What Democrats Must Understand to Regain Their Support*[9]

[9] https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_culturally_traditional_WWC_voters_v2.pdf

How Conditions Changed (3) - Altered Perceptions of the Ruling Class "Power Elite."

For modern workers both urban and rural the financial centers and corporate headquarters on Wall Street that exported industrial jobs in the past and that shape the job market of the present are remote and unreal. In the 1980's substantial anger was directed at Wall Street by laid off industrial workers and was expressed in angry protests and demonstrations at factory closings across the northern industrial states. In the 1990's this anger became diffused as the Clinton Administration embraced "globalization" and deregulation and for new generations of workers the image of the Wall Street financial and corporate elite as the "Ruling Class" and main source of their economic problems became increasingly abstract.

On the other hand, a new elite that urban workers increasingly observed and personally encountered were the growing class of college educated, middle class professionals whose houses they were building, renovating or wiring for home networks and who were invading and gentrifying the old urban ethnic neighborhoods. The GOP had demonized African Americans and "limousine liberals" during the 1970's and 80's but after the Bush-Gore campaign of 2000 the GOP radically increased the condemnation of the heterogeneous group of college professors and students, Hollywood actors and producers, music and fashion producers and TV, newspaper and magazine columnists and commentators as a new elite with alien, un-American values.

This new elite was not attacked as a new financial ruling class but rather as a well-off, condescending and sanctimonious group that dominated and controlled the culture – what working people would see on TV and in the movies, what was taught in colleges and universities, what was written in editorial page commentaries and what was produced and sold in the fashion and music industries.

This new elite were portrayed as affluent urban dwellers who lived in expensive, gentrified urban communities or in charming college towns. They drove "sophisticated" costly cars, drank Lattés, casually traveled to Europe on vacations and wore Patagonia vests and Birkenstock shoes to subtly announce their sophistication. They were also depicted as exercising substantial political power, using the Democratic Party as their vehicle. This power to impose their "liberal" or "politically correct" agenda on ordinary hard-working Americans was obtained through a cynical alliance with minorities who were bribed to vote for Democrats by various kinds of "handouts," special government programs or preferential treatment. Although workers in small towns and rural areas had far less direct contact with the growing college educated middle class, they easily accepted this perspective because it reinforced the anti-urban "rural consciousness" that was already widespread.

Progressives and Democrats fiercely and correctly insisted that this new elite was neither an economic ruling class nor the most affluent sector of society – a status that belonged to the upper strata of the financial and business elite. But the hard reality was that in workers' minds the image of "woke" liberals calling working people "deplorable" was far more vivid than one of plutocratic tycoons, eccentric dot-com billionaires and Wall Street financial wizards funding the GOP to gut workers' social benefits at $25,000 per person fund raising events and with multi-million dollar contributions to secret PAC's.

In the 1950's and 60's intermediate institutions like the trade unions had provided an alternative, progressive perspective but by the 1990's the dominant institutions in small town, semi-rural working class communities had become conservative organizations like conservative religious groups, veterans organizations, local GOP offices and the NRA. In the absence of trusted inter-

mediate institutions like unions to direct working class anger toward the real economic elites in society, workers were easily persuaded to perceive the social hierarchy in the way that the GOP presented it.

Conclusion

This new class consciousness that now exists among American workers is the only "real" class consciousness in American society today. It is a product of the modern conditions of daily life in working class America and the inescapable fact is that there is no old-fashioned "proletarian" class consciousness buried deep somewhere in the subconscious minds of modern workers which can be resurrected by a particularly charismatic candidate or radical political platform. This modern class consciousness does not automatically perceive the financial elite as the ruling class that is the source of their economic difficulties, it is deeply entangled with workers' geographic identity as non-urban *"country people"* and the intermediate community institutions in working class life that shape its views are no longer rooted in trade unions and local democratic organizations.

In one sense this may seem of purely academic importance but it is not. It has profound political implications. **It implies that the core assumption that underlies democratic political strategy is basically wrong.**

Part Two:

The Political Implications Have to be Faced: Today's Working Class Voters Won't Join a Democratic "Big Tent Coalition" That Makes it Clear That It Doesn't Really Want Them.

The most common and frequently repeated cliché about basic democratic strategy is the assertion that the Democratic Party is a "big tent coalition." This has become such a familiar platitude that Democrats no longer think about it very deeply. It is how both progressive and centrist Democrats visualize the method that the Democratic Party must use to assemble political majorities.

It is rarely noted that the conception of the "Big Tent" coalition has dramatically evolved over the years. In the 1950's and 1960's the white working class was seen as the core of the "New Deal" or "Roosevelt" coalition. African Americans (outside the South where they were disenfranchised) were understood to be part of the big tent because they benefited from the generally populist economic policies of the Democratic Party. College educated "liberals" were also viewed as a relatively small but respected subsidiary element of the coalition.

By the time of Obama's election in 2008 this conception of the Democratic coalition had given way to the profoundly different notion that it was basically composed of the "Rising American Electorate" whose main components were youth, people of color, single women and the college educated. The sharply diminished union movement was also included in this conception of the "big tent" but the white working class as a whole was no longer thought to be a solid part of the Democratic coalition. On the contrary the majority of white workers were widely viewed as permanently lost to the GOP.

The GOP, in contrast, did not consider itself to be a coalition. Instead, it saw itself as representing a basically homogeneous group of white, Christian, economically conservative and culturally traditional voters. The typical Republican candidate in a deep red district was a relatively affluent businessman who consultants would artistically pose in front of a farm or ranch with a shotgun and pickup truck where he would rhapsodize about his "Real American" values (which included subtle dog whistles to the racially intolerant and the religious right). As the 1990's wore on the increasing demonization of the liberal elite also became an increasingly important component of this appeal.

Donald Trump modified this approach not only with a more overt and visceral appeal to racial prejudice but with an explicit and indeed passionate "class conscious" appeal to the white working class. It is widely recognized that Trump quite literally plagiarized speeches by union leaders and articles in the trade union press that had editorialized against job export and the hollowing out of American industry in the 1980's. Far less clearly appreciated however, was the extent to which he defined his campaign as specifically created to champion and represent working people. During his rallies during the 2016 campaign he constantly repeated the following refrain:

> [My election] is going to be a victory for the people, a victory for the wage-earner, the factory worker. Remember this, a big, big victory for the factory worker. They haven't had those victories for a long time. A victory for every citizen and for all of the people whose voices have not been heard for many, many years. They're going to be heard again.
>
> While my opponent slanders you as deplorable and irredeemable, I call you hard-working American patriots who love your country and want a better future for all of our people. You are mothers and fathers, soldiers and sailors, carpenters and welders.

He explicitly identified himself with the working class rather than the wealthy.

> 'I've spent my professional life among construction workers, bricklayers, electricians, and plumbers. I feel more comfortable around blue collar workers than Wall Street executives
>
> ….And that's why the steelworkers are with me, that's why the miners are with me, that's why the working people, electricians, the plumbers, the sheet-rockers, the concrete guys and gals, they're all – they're with us. And I like them better than the rich people that I know. I know a lot of rich people. It's true. [but the working people] are better. I like them better.

Hillary Clinton, in contrast, explicitly rejected advice from advisors like Stan Greenberg that she should also take a class conscious approach and emotionally identify with working people. Her campaign argued instead that the extensive range of detailed economic proposals in her dense platform (which included 38 policy proposals and 65 factsheets, totaling 112,735 words) ought to sufficiently convince working people of her concern even as it simultaneously reflected the demands of other elements of the Democratic coalition like women, People of Color, environmentalists and so on.

And this "broad coalition" approach remains deeply embedded in Democratic campaign strategy. Even figures like Ohio congressman Tim Ryan who has a long history of sincere and deeply genuine commitment to working class Ohioans nonetheless presented his 2022 Senate campaign platform as one that was pitched to multiple audiences and not just to working class voters. While it shied away from stances that were clearly unpopular with working class audiences it also tried to walk a fine line with balanced positions on other social issues that reflected the demands of the other elements of the Democratic coalition. Ryan's Republican opponent J.D. Vance in contrast took a series of extreme culture war positions that were designed to consistently appeal to the MAGA wing of the white working class.[10]

In state-wide elections in states that have significant minority populations, universities and large urban areas a "big tent coalition" approach is, of course, unavoidable for Democratic candidates. There is a long tradition of Democratic interest groups and particularly progressive groups that represent the "emerging democratic majority" setting firm "litmus tests" for giving their support to Democratic candidates in the primaries, obliging candidates to accommodate the demands of the different constituencies and sharply limiting their ability to define themselves with a distinct political identity.

But it is vital to understand the way that this approach actually sends a message to culturally traditional working class people that they are not equal partners in the big tent coalition:

To illustrate how this occurs, decide if you personally agree with the following three statements:

1. *It is entirely reasonable for progressive Democrats to insist on candidates who do not just agree to support certain progressive policies because they are required as part of participation in a political alliance but who fully and sincerely embrace basic progressive values.*

[10]https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Andrew_Levison_Class_Consciousness.pdf

2. *It is entirely reasonable for progressive Democrats to be suspicious of candidates who come from backgrounds and reflect the cultural outlook of communities that are culturally distant from the progressive world and culture.*

3. *It is entirely reasonable for progressive Democrats to feel that non-progressive voters ought to be willing to support a progressive candidate if they agree with his or her economic platform even if they disagree with other aspects of his or her agenda.*

For most progressive Democrats these three statements seem entirely reasonable and indeed obvious. After all, why shouldn't progressive Democrats have the right to demand candidates who sincerely support progressive views and reflect a progressive cultural outlook while expecting non-progressives to be sensible enough to support a progressive candidate based on his or her economic agenda even if they may disagree with other aspects of his or her platform.

But now consider this second set of statements:

1. *It is entirely reasonable for culturally traditional rural and white working class people to insist on candidates who do not just agree to support certain culturally traditional policies because they are required as part of participation in a political alliance but who fully and sincerely embrace certain traditional cultural values.*

2. *It is entirely reasonable for culturally traditional rural and white working class people to be suspicious of candidates who come from backgrounds and reflect the cultural outlook of communities that are culturally distant from the rural and white working class world and culture.*

3. *It is entirely reasonable for rural and white working class people to feel that voters who are not rural or white working class ought to be willing to support a culturally traditional rural or white working class candidate if they agree with his or her economic agenda even if they may disagree with some of his or her other views and proposals.*

As can be seen, the underlying logic is identical in the two cases. Yet many progressives will agree with the first set of propositions but then reject the second. Many Democrats want and expect rural and white working class people to be willing to support progressive Democrats and make certain concessions and accept certain compromises as part of participation in a big tent coalition that they themselves are unwilling to make in return.

This is not the philosophy of a political party that genuinely seeks to create a "big-tent" political coalition that includes working class voters and, in fact, while there are a number of notable grass-roots groups and organizations that do serious progressive and democratic organizing in rural areas, many of the leading progressive "get out the vote" organizations are entirely explicit in stating that this is not their goal.[11]

As Tom Edsall noted in a recent column:[12]

> I asked Joseph Geevarghese, the executive director of Our Revolution, if the organization had flipped any House seats from red to blue. He replied by email:

[11]Three rural organizing groups that do excellent work at different levels of rural political mobilization are "Rural Organizing" (which works in communities across the country), "Rust Belt Rising" (which works in communities in the great lakes region) and Rural Ground Game (which works in the state of Virginia)

[12]https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/21/opinion/democrats-progressives-moderates-midterms.html

> "This was not the goal of Our Revolution. Our Revolution's goal in the 2022 elections was to push the Democratic Caucus in a progressive direction, and we succeeded with nine new members joining the ranks of the Congressional Progressive Caucus"
>
> …Waleed Shahid, communications director for Justice Democrats, emailed in response to a similar inquiry of mine that his group does not focus on shifting seats from red to blue: "We haven't run really races in those areas. We've been focused on blue seats where the incumbent is corporate-backed and out of touch with their district."

And both rural and urban working class voters are very aware of this reality. In the last three elections, in fact, few formerly Republican rural or urban white working class voters have been persuaded to vote for Democrats by this deeply unbalanced approach. At the presidential level, when Republicans nominated candidates who were out of touch plutocrats like Mitt Romney or George Herbert Walker Bush a certain, relatively small percentage of workers defected from the GOP to support the Democratic candidate. But when candidates who seem more "down to earth" like George W. Bush or Donald Trump were selected these workers reduced their support for "limousine liberal" Democratic candidates like Hillary Clinton.

This is particularly the case in Deep Red districts where the strong majority of voters support the GOP. The extremist wing of the GOP naturally gives full support to the GOP nominee in general elections regardless of the specific candidate but even non-extremist working class voters who have reservations about the GOP will still feel very strongly attracted to candidates who they feel are more sincerely "on their side" than Democrats.

So if the big tent strategy cannot win the support of these voters, is there an alternative strategy that Democrats can employ to weaken the GOP's hold on them?

Obviously, in districts where Republican candidates win by margins of only ten or even fifteen percent it makes sense to direct all efforts toward increasing a Democratic candidates support. But in districts where GOP candidates win sixty-five, seventy or even eighty percent of the vote and Democrats are limited to running what are traditionally called "educational campaigns" there is an important case for considering alternative strategies.

The starting point for considering alternative strategies is to recognize that although two thirds of white workers now regularly vote for the GOP and are extremely unlikely to vote for a Democrat not all these voters genuinely agree with the MAGA extremists.

The MAGA wing of the culturally traditional working class has evolved through several stages. In the 1990's the local community base organizations of right wing extremism were theocratic and anti-abortion religious groups, patriot groups and the NRA. In more recent years it evolved into local tea party groups, the militia movement and a range of conservative local school board campaigns. After Trump's election the movement then united around him.

Note: Three serious rural organizing groups are "Rural Organizing" (national), "Rust Belt Rising" (regional Great Lakes) and Rural Ground Game (Virginia)

But there is also another, non-MAGA wing of the culturally traditional working class. It is rooted in the sector of the working class that believes in a tolerant and compassionate interpretation of the teachings of Jesus Christ, a "color-blind" "I judge people as individuals" philosophy regarding race and an instinctive economic populism that sees working people as often being cheated and victimized by the wealthy and powerful – an attitude that is reflected in a deep cynicism and distrust of business executives and politicians of both parties.

This group is more fully described in the following 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."*

The crucial question, of course, is if the size of this group is actually large enough to have any political significance. The question is complex because cultural traditionalism and extremism are multidimensional constructs that not only involve attitudes on specific issues but also basic personality characteristics like empathy, tolerance, psychological rigidity and authoritarianism. But one very rough recent indication of the size of this non-MAGA sector of the Republican working class was recently provided when the Pew Research Center asked Republican working class voters to rate Trump on a scale from 1 to 100 from "warm" (i.e. positive) to "Cold"(i.e. negative),

20% gave trump a "Cold" rating (13% "Very Cold")

65% gave Trump a "Warm" rating (45% "Very Warm")

In short, 20 %—one out of five—working class Republicans indicated that they were not firm MAGA supporters and 13% indicated that they very strongly rejected the MAGA view.[13]

To put this in context, the quite surprising demographic reality is that white working class people still represent almost half of the voters in 2020.[14] Even if only the 13% "very cold" anti-Trump working class voters are persuadable, this would still represent a very significant 6-7 % of the electorate.

As a result, the crucial question for Democratic strategy is how to effectively drive a wedge between these voters and the MAGA extremists.

The key lies recognizing that even though most of these working class voters in deep red districts cannot imagine voting for Democrats they can still play a profoundly important role inside the GOP – and specifically in the Republican primaries.

To grasp the possibilities it is necessary to visualize how the 2024 Republican primaries will develop.

At the beginning of the primaries various MAGA candidates will compete for the support of the extremist element in the GOP. They will appeal to the working class with a perverse version of class consciousness that involves (1) a deeply conspiratorial vision of the liberal elite as a dominant

[13]https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/11/14/before-midterms-trumps-image-among-republicans-had-become-less-positive/

[14]https://www.dropbox.com/s/ka9n5gzxwotfu1a/wh2020_public_release_crosstabs.xlsx?dl=0

ruling class that oppresses ordinary Americans, (2) a vision of non-whites as alien invaders who are engaging in a "great replacement" of white Americans and (3) an intolerant interpretation of traditional values that requires imposing them on everyone else.

In their competition the MAGA candidates will use outrageous, theatrical behavior as a key strategy for gaining attention. Outrageous claims and behavior like threats of violence against Democrats, posturing with guns and fraternizing with extremists will be key strategies for standing out from the crowd.

At the same time, however, the dramatic failure of Trump's chosen nominees in the recent elections will embolden the more establishment wing of the GOP to push back and return to the more traditional *"Good Old Country Boy, shotgun and pickup truck"* campaign style. In this regard Brian Kemp's successful campaign for Governor against Stacy Evans in Georgia will be offered as model.

The reality, however, is that both the MAGA and the "Good Old Boy" strategies have two severe weaknesses.

First, both groups lack any genuine personal and emotional connection with actual working class Americans. Both the MAGA candidates and the Good Old Boys are invariably relatively wealthy businessmen and women who do not genuinely identify with or have any sincere understanding and sympathy for economic hardship and distress. The key spokesmen and political representatives for the current MAGA movement are overwhelmingly small and medium size business owners like Lauren Bobert, Marjory Taylor Green and "pillow man" Mark Lindell or are Ivy league graduates like Tucker Carlson and Ron DeSantis. The absence of candidates who are actually from working class backgrounds among the MAGA politicians or the Good Old Boys is in fact extremely striking.

In many cases these candidates not only have no empathy with ordinary working people but have 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 who have been exposed as corruptly exploiting their political office for personal gain.

These same 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."

Second, neither the MAGA nor the "Good Old Boy" candidates have any connection with the tolerant versions of Christianity which still have deep roots in many working class families and local churches. The bitter culture war perspective of both MAGA and "Good Old Boy" candidates cuts against any compassionate and tolerant interpretations of the message of Jesus.

This provides an opening for progressive working class "outsider" insurgents to present challenges within the 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.

Culturally traditional but economically progressive white working class "outsider" candidates can use some of these same tactics. 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.

An authentically working class culturally traditional/economic populist candidate could drive up to a Republican Party primary debate in a tractor or a bulldozer and demand the right to speak *"on behalf of the people who aren't here – the people who actually work with their hands all day long and all their lives. They deserve someone who will speak for them because you damn, spoiled, crooked, rich bastards certainly won't do it."*

Montana Senator Jon Tester is often offered as an example of this "salt of the earth," culturally traditional but tolerant and economically populist approach.

In most deep red districts this strategy will not be sufficient to allow grass roots challengers to win the GOP nomination but it can create divisions and disrupt the narrative that the MAGA and Good Old Boys want to run on. It can open the Republican primaries to serious challenge on issues rather than standing back and allowing them to simply be a competition between candidates offering meaningless extremist theatrics.

It can be thought that this is a diversion of resources from Democratic organizing and therefore of little value. But what this fails to consider, however, is that uncontested GOP domination in Deep Red districts is what has created the sociological foundation for today's profoundly dangerous political extremism. When people with different political views live in the same areas and communities and share schools, sporting events, parks and streets they tend to see each other as neighbors, despite any differences in their political views. When a profound social and geographical distance divides them, on other hand, they very easily come to see each other as aliens and strangers.

So long as the Democratic and Republican parties shared a fairly wide degree of consensus, as they did in the post-World War II era, most Americans, even in firmly Republican districts, saw members of the opposite party as basically "normal" people who were their friends and neighbors and with whom they socialized in daily life – at PTA meetings, Little League games and a host of other shared activities.

As the social and demographic character of Democrats and Republicans began to diverge in the 1970's and 1980's, on the other hand, it became vastly easier for right wing demagogues in the GOP to portray Democrats as "alien" – essentially subversive, sinister and even evil rather than as fellow Americans with whom one just happens to somewhat disagree.

In this context, challenging the dominance of the extremists in Deep Red white working class and rural districts across America is crucial. Right now in many Deep Red districts Democrats are essentially invisible and the Republican Party organization is entirely committed to defending MAGA extremism.

Challenging what is now essentially the unchallenged ideological hegemony of the extremists in these districts may seem irrelevant in purely electoral terms but in sociological terms the effect of weakening their hold would be profound. Even if a community generally continues to vote Republican, if a person's next door neighbor or the captain of his children's baseball team rejects candidates who spout extremist conspiracy theories or even dismisses the candidate who circulates the myths as a corrupt hypocrite it becomes much more difficult for a person to passively accept the lies he or she reads on Facebook posts that Democrats are all secret degenerates running child sex slave rings or crypto-Stalinist subversives plotting the creation of massive nationwide concentration camps.

The challenge can be stated simply. A strategy that consolidates a democratic majority in blue areas but abandons all red areas to the GOP is a recipe for a permanently divided country. A strategy that tries to weaken extremism's hold on the heartland is a strategy aimed at reuniting America in the future.