



## **TDS STRATEGY REPORT:**

# **THE CULTURALLY TRADITIONAL BUT NON-EXTREMIST WORKING CLASS VOTERS: WHO THEY ARE, HOW THEY THINK AND WHAT DEMOCRATS MUST UNDERSTAND TO REGAIN THEIR SUPPORT.**

BY  
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As the 2022 and 2024 elections approach Democrats have responded to their declining working class support by proposing variations on one or another of two strategies that they have advocated ever since the 1970's – to either (1) emphatically focus on “kitchen-table issues” and offer ever more ambitious progressive economic programs and policies or (2) jettison unpopular positions on social, cultural and racial issues and reposition the party more toward the “center.”

Democratic strategists can obsessively parse opinion data to debate the relative merits of these two approaches but the (extremely) inconvenient reality is that dozens if not hundreds of Democratic candidates have tried both of these approaches in various campaigns at the Senate, Congressional and State levels since 1970 and neither has halted the slow, grinding, secular decline in white working class support for Democrats since that time. The elections of Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama each temporarily slowed this decline but when the overall 50 year record is examined the steady, gradual decrease in working class support for the Democrats is unmistakable.<sup>1</sup>

## Section 1 – How Democrats Lost the Working Class

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

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

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<sup>1</sup>The term “working class” is currently used to describe men and women with less than a college education. There are two main reasons for this. First, education, occupation and income are all substantially correlated. Among men, for example, over three quarters of those with less than a college education are also employed in occupations that most people would define as working class. Second, unlike occupation, education is a characteristic that is easily collected during opinion polls and does show a substantial difference in outlook and opinion between college educated and non-college educated individuals (for further discussion see the book, *The White Working Class Today*)

It was the existence of trusted intermediate institutions that made the arguments for the value of Democratic programs convincing. Local union presidents and precinct captains explained to white working class voters that the benefits came from Democratic Party.

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

This sociological transformation, which was officially codified in reforms enacted at the 1974 Democratic Party bi-convention became progressively ingrained during the 1970's and 1980's and allowed the GOP to increasingly position itself as the defender of a range of traditional social and cultural values that were being threatened by social change rather than limiting its appeal to the GOP's traditional business oriented conservatives.

Since the effects of progressive economic programs on individuals are very often not directly visible, this allowed the GOP to gain support among many white workers who were not economic conservatives or racial bigots but who were in many respects "cultural traditionalists" and felt increasingly alienated from the new sociological character of the Democratic coalition.

At the same time right-wing billionaires like the Koch Brothers and DeVries Family spent hundreds of millions building new conservative organizations like "Americans for Prosperity" in working class and rural areas that supplemented the long established networks of the religious right, the "old" right and traditional organizations like veterans' groups and the NRA that had not previously been overtly partisan.

These conservative organizations spent millions of dollars defining all Democratic programs as evil and discrediting all science truth. The vast campaign began with attacks on the objectivity of scientific research on the environment and by the time of the Obama administration reached previously unimaginable levels. Health care insurance provided by private insurance companies became a sinister socialist plot. Vaccines became assaults on individual freedom.

## **Section 2 – The Difference Between Cultural Traditionalism and Extremism**

The result has not simply been that white working class voters became heavily Republican (and now include an increasing number of Latinos as well as whites) but that it is now divided into two distinct groups – extremists and cultural traditionalists.

It is possible to make a series of reasonably clear distinctions between these two groups.

<b>Extremists</b>	<b>“Cultural Traditionalists”</b>
<p>These individuals assert openly negative or bigoted views of non-white groups. While not necessarily asserting explicit racism they are willing to express a clear distaste for “others” and support policies that discriminate against them.</p>	<p>These individuals sincerely insist that they judge people as individuals and know some minority individuals who they like and respect. They consider their attitude to be both correct and admirable because it is “color-blind”</p>
<p>These individuals endorse versions of Christian faith that reject any deviation from particular doctrines and assert that those doctrines should be sanctioned by society and legally imposed by law.</p>	<p>These individuals express their personal commitment and respect for “old fashioned” religion and traditional moral values but do not insist that their beliefs be imposed by law or social pressure on other groups or view others as necessarily immoral or evil for holding views different than their own.</p>
<p>These individuals assert a version of patriotism that conceptualizes conservative values and Republican candidates as being identical with the “American way of life” while, in contrast, “liberalism” is defined as a literally alien and subversive ideology.</p>	<p>These individuals assert a vision of “The American way of life” that conceptualizes patriotism as a basic love of country and support for the American form of government but which simultaneously accepts the existence of diversity and pluralism as an inherent part of the American ethos.</p>
<p>On a psychological level these individuals exhibit a high level of intolerance toward different views or behaviors across a wide range of issues and topics and display irritability and a short temper as major personality characteristics.</p>	<p>On a psychological level these individuals express a generally tolerant attitude across a range of issues and topics and display a generally more “easy-going,” “live and let live” outlook on life.</p>
<p>These individuals pay close and sustained attention to news, commentary and analysis that is produced by extremist sources including talk radio, Fox News, and social media.</p>	<p>These individuals do not closely follow either partisan or mainstream national news and commentary beyond paying relatively casual attention to newspaper headlines and local news.</p>
<p>These individuals perceive Democrats as literal subversives and traitors who are inspired by alien ideologies and are intent on undermining the traditional American way of life.</p>	<p>These individuals perceive the Democrats as a political party that primarily represents social groups like educated liberals and racial or ethnic minorities while having little interest, understanding or concern for ordinary white working people like themselves.</p>
<p>These individuals view government policies and programs as always inherently pernicious and destructive and as an essentially alien force that must be resisted.</p>	<p>These individuals view government as often deeply corrupt and government policies and government programs as frequently harmful or unresponsive to the needs of ordinary people but not as inherently bad or evil.</p>

At the same time, both extremists and cultural traditionalists share a number of basic cultural values in common.

- Pride in their Culture, Background and Community
- Respect for Tradition
- Support for Freedom
- Belief in Personal Responsibility, Character and Hard work
- Respect for Law, strict Law Enforcement and the Right of Individual Self-Defense.

Of course, dividing working people into the two distinct groups above is an oversimplification. Not all supporters of the religious right are bigoted, for example, and many white supremacists have little or no commitment to religion. Many workers will support one populist economic proposal but not another.

But the broad distinction above between extremist and cultural traditionalist groups within the white working class is far more accurate and useful than the stereotypes that are now common about what “*all white working people*” think or do.

***Most important, this distinction provides a basis for developing progressive strategies that are designed to specifically reach the more persuadable sector of the white working class.***

In fact, in two major ways recognizing the existence of this division profoundly clarifies the current intra-Democratic debate.

First, it fundamentally invalidates both the crude “*they’re all a bunch of racists*” stereotype and the slightly more subtle “*all white workers basically think the same way but some are just more extreme than others.*” Both these notions are based on the idea that white working class people can accurately be viewed as a basically homogeneous group and when it is recognized instead that two distinct sectors exist it renders both the views stated above too superficial to be of any use in the serious discussion of Democratic political strategy.

Second, it broadens the scope of strategic discussion beyond a narrow focus on “issues” as the sole force that guides white working class vote choice and adds the role and influence of values, community and culture. It is notable that none of the key distinctions indicated above between extremists and cultural traditionalists involve opinions on specific political issues. Instead, they deal with differences in basic social values like tolerance, compassion, empathy and open-mindedness and personal characteristics like psychological rigidity and obsessiveness. While these characteristics are resistant to change, they clearly divide the white working class into distinct sectors that are more and less persuadable.

And, equally important is the sense of basic cultural identity that both sectors share – shared working class norms, values and experience that create an intensely felt sense of community. In the same way that a progressive will feel “at home” on a university campus, a bookstore or hip urban neighborhood, white working class people will feel “at home” in their own communities –

whether on the urban fringe, small towns or rural areas. Extremists and cultural traditionalists may think differently about various social values but they share a deep sense of membership and identification with their cultural community.

### **Section 3 – Culturally Traditional Working People: It’s Not Just What They Think, It’s How They Think.**

Several years ago, at the beginning of the Trump administration, I had the opportunity to collaborate on the design and execution of a large, highly innovative focus group project that examined “persuadable” white workers in a more specific way and in greater depth than had previously been undertaken. The large battery of focus groups in this project were conducted for the Fair Deal Project by Guy Molyneux of Hart Research. Molyneux summarized his conclusions from this research in an article in *The American Prospect’s* Winter 2017 issue.

There were two innovative aspects to the Hart Research/Fair Deal focus groups. First, the participants were limited to a very carefully defined group of voters – individuals with less than a college education who were not firm or consistent Democrats or Republicans but rather were “independents” or very weak Democratic or Republican supporters. The participants were also limited to those who described themselves as either “middle of the road” or only “somewhat liberal” or “somewhat conservative.” This filtered out both Democrats and firm conservatives or extremists.

(Although people with a “less than college” education work in a wide variety of jobs, a substantial portion of the occupations held specifically by the men in these focus groups were very distinctly the kinds of jobs that most people do think of as traditionally “working class” – mechanic, heating and air technician, laborer, plumber, truck driver, parts manager, shift supervisor, contractor, automotive equipment salesman, carpenter.)

Very few focus groups ever focus this precisely on specifically “ambivalent” or “persuadable” less-than-college-educated white male working-class workers.

The carefully narrowed focus makes a profound difference in the results, because a more typical focus group that also includes individuals with strong progressive or conservative opinions often tends to get shaped or even “hijacked” by the ideologues. Even participants who disagree with more extreme positions end up having to define their own opinions in reaction to the strong views that are expressed by others rather than being able to let their own perspective spontaneously emerge. In such situations, “middle of the road” participants never get to talk and share ideas with others similar to themselves.

The most distinct characteristic of these middle-of-the-road white male workers was that they approached politics using a fundamentally distinct cognitive framework from that of white workers who hold a firm conservative or progressive ideology. In Molyneux’s *Prospect* article, he uses the term “white working-class moderates” as a succinct way to characterize these Americans – but it is worth noting that this is not how they generally would describe themselves. They rather tend to describe their approach to making political decisions as using “practical common sense,” or “my personal philosophy.” They see themselves as trying to “think for myself” to “make up my own mind,” “do my own thinking” or “see both sides” of an issue. When analyzing a political topic, they will often use a distinct “on the one hand, on the other hand” mode of thought.

This is a fundamentally different way of thinking about political issues than the method used by individuals who are firmly committed to an organized political ideology. It is not just a matter of “what they think”; it is a matter of “how they think.” The many white working-class followers of Donald Trump, Sean Hannity or the latest conservative televangelist all very emphatically reject the idea of trying to “see both sides” of political issues. They believe very deeply that there are radically distinct “right” and “wrong” views on all political issues and that their particular views are firmly and entirely based on the former.

One consequence of this difference between the two ways of thinking was very apparent in the way the individuals in the focus groups in the project related to each other. There was virtually no angry, dogmatic assertion of opinions or deprecation of other people’s views – things that quite often occur in discussions in which ideologues participate. On the contrary, the individuals in these particular focus groups were entirely friendly and respectful to each other and frequently seemed pleased and stimulated by having the opportunity to share, exchange, and compare ideas with people similar to themselves.

**Observing the groups there were three significant patterns that emerged:**

- I. These white workers were overwhelmingly cultural traditionalists-but their comments illustrated the fact that there is a fundamental difference between cultural traditionalism and conservatism.**

Cultural traditionalism is often confused with conservatism and extremism because people who are ideological conservatives or extremists very often uphold and glorify traditional cultural ideas. But cultural traditionalism is a distinct concept from conservatism, one that refers to a set of basic social values that exist in working-class life and not to specific social or political views. Within this set of basic traditional social values, various perspectives can exist, perspectives that can range from firmly conservative to strongly progressive.

There are three major traditional values in white working-class culture: respect for religious faith, respect for military service, and respect for the character traits encouraged by small business, honest labor, and hard work. Each of these traditional values is supported by community social institutions like the church, the military, and the business community, and is continually reinforced by family, friends, and neighbors as a working person grows up in his or her community.

**Working-class and small-business values.** Unlike the industrial era when “working-class values” were defined by industrial labor, today working-class and small-business values significantly overlap, especially among 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 independence, individual initiative, and pride in making a small business a success.

The focus group participants expressed a variety of views endorsing these values as ones they deeply held and wanted to transmit to their children. They complained about the fact that the modern “lousy jobs” economy undermined these values, and that they could no longer find jobs where they experienced the pride that comes from being a craftsman, from doing “a hard day’s work and earning a good living” or making long-term sacrifices that provided a better life for their family. They also bemoaned the fact that the modern economy has made it very difficult

to teach their children the character-building nature of hard work – the deep satisfaction of rebuilding a car engine or framing a garage addition by hand. They expressed classic attitudes about valuing the pride that comes from being a productive member of society. “I don’t want to just be given anything,” one said. “I want to earn my living.”

Alongside these traditional blue-collar attitudes, there was similar support expressed for the virtues of owning or working in a small business. Participants endorsed the importance of “not having to take orders,” of “being your own boss,” and being “independent.”

But their appreciation of small business was very different from the glorification of “free enterprise” or “the free market” extolled by conservatives. The participants sharply distinguished between their support for small business and their attitudes toward Wall Street or corporate America. They described large companies like Walmart, for example, as essentially predatory and exploitative, undermining local businesses and not serving as a positive force in the community. They felt equally negatively toward the destructive policies of banks and the financial system.

Nor did their approval of small business automatically translate into support for conservative economic policies. As many opinion polls have shown, many white workers actually support a very substantial range of “progressive” economic views and measures. The participants in the focus groups approved of making corporate executives pay their fair share of taxes and requiring them to obey a range of rules and regulations about the environment and conditions of labor. In short, these culturally traditional workers could sound quite “progressive” rather than “conservative” on an array of economic issues.

**The military.** While progressives often equate support for the military with ill-advised foreign interventions and the neo-imperial ambitions of conservatives like Dick Cheney, this is quite distinct from the basic approval and identification that white workers feel for the military as an institution. It is rarely understood that for working-class people, a career in the military is widely seen as profoundly admirable because military service upholds and honors very deeply held and distinctly working-class values: ruggedness and bravery, teamwork and group solidarity, loyalty and self-sacrifice. In the rest of American culture, these virtues are given a much lower value than more middle-class values like intellectual ability, acquisitiveness, ambition, competitiveness, and the achievement of material success. For high school-educated young men and women who are often not “successful” in these latter terms, the armed forces provide them with the opportunity to be seen as role models and heroes to their parents, families, friends, and communities. In the eyes of working-class Americans, “our men and women in uniform” are in essence the most important “working-class heroes.”

The deep support and respect that exists for the military is most dramatically reflected in the overwhelming and deeply emotional support for the veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan that the focus groups consistently expressed, and the intense anger and dismay they felt over the many failures they observed in treating the veterans as they deserved. In the focus groups, veterans were without question seen as the most admirable group in society and the most deserving of support.

**Religious faith.** The third pillar of white working-class cultural traditionalism is the firm belief that the Bible teaches good values and that religion is a positive force in family life.

The conservative perversion of this view is theocracy – the belief that Christians should have the right to impose Bible-based morality and rules of behavior on everyone. But among the “common sense,” middle-of-the-road sector of the white working class, there is a widespread and much more tolerant version of Christian belief, based in a more open-minded and forgiving understanding of the message of Jesus Christ.

The strong majority of the men in the focus groups reflected this relatively tolerant perspective rather than endorsing theocracy. But what they also strongly expressed was a sense that the basic Christian values with which they grew up were being actively discouraged by society. As some noted:

*What about the Bible? Doesn't that have a place in America anymore?*

*Why don't Democrats talk about religion? Why don't they ever stand up for it?*

It is important to note, however, that, unlike ideological conservatives, the white working-class men in the Hart Research/Fair Deal focus groups did not place the blame for the decline in traditional values only on elitist liberals or the lack of religion in society. On the contrary, a surprisingly large portion of these participants' anger was directed at the destruction of traditional values that was being caused by the greed and social indifference of modern business.

When asked about what has made America worse and undermined traditional values, these men repeatedly cited the corrupting effect on their children of cellphones, social media, movies and television, the fashion industry, and the internet. They saw these technologies as deeply destructive, making their pre-teenage girls behave like “sluts,” and their sons sneer at their father's values. They expressed a genuine fury at the loss of control over their children's lives. “There aren't any casual ‘pick-up’ sports games in the neighborhood like there were in my day,” they complained. “Kids just come home and disappear into their rooms to play video games and stare at their computers.” It is not “liberals” who have done this, in their view; it is the result of an economy and culture where profitability and market share have become the only goal.

**II. “Common sense,” “middle-of-the-road” white workers do indeed respect and endorse core traditional cultural values, but they also endorse a more unexpected social value – a deep and genuine belief in “tolerance.”**

During the various focus groups, some of the outside observers of the sessions were genuinely surprised by the spontaneous expressions of tolerance that emerged during the discussions.

Their surprise was understandable. “Working-class whites” are so often equated with Trump supporters or hardcore ideological conservatives that hearing such views seemed quite incongruous.

But anyone who actually spends time with non-extremist white working-class people knows that this is not unusual at all – indeed, it's quite common. This should not be a surprise. If a person is willing to try to “see both sides” of an issue or view questions with an “on the one hand, on the other hand” mode of thought, the necessary psychological result has to be a willingness to accept that even if one has strong personal convictions, other points of view can and should be treated with respect as well.

In the focus groups, tolerant attitudes appeared again and again. Workers expressed “live and let live” attitudes about a wide range of issues connected to privacy, choice, and freedom. Various participants insisted that they “don’t want to try to run other people’s lives.” They were willing to accept a wide range of behavior that they personally might object to as long as it did not impinge on their own choices and way of life.

This was not some rare exception. One need only look at the wide range of issues on which the “on the one hand, on the other hand” mode of thought appears in the sentences below, sentences fundamentally built around the word “but” as the basis for reaching tolerant conclusions.

Politics: *I may agree with the GOP on 90 percent of social issues ... **but** that doesn’t mean I want to impose my views on everyone.*

Religion: *I think we need to let religion back in schools ... **but** I’m not trying to push religion on anyone.*

Health care: *I’m not for socialized medicine ... **but** we must help people in need.*

Immigration: *I’m not saying nobody can come into our country, because that’s not America ... **but** to come in and not pay any taxes, that’s crazy.*

Gay Marriage: *In 100 years, I’ll never understand what a man can see in another man ... **but** I got a friend in an interracial relationship and I think that’s a good thing, so who am I to be the judge of what someone else decides to do.*

Again and again, the basic “on the one hand, on the other hand” way of thinking that is revealed in the use of the word “but” reappears. It is not occasional; it is common. Modern life exposes many white working people to diversity: the interracial couple who move in down the street, the gay man who handles the bookkeeping for the trucking company where they work. Twenty or thirty years ago, these kinds of personal experiences were rare in white working-class life; now they are routine, and workers have gradually adapted to the change.

Perhaps most dramatically, this even extends to attitudes about the emotional subject of race.

White workers in the groups very un-self-consciously expressed an old-fashioned “I have a dream” philosophy about race – a philosophy that is now often viewed by progressives as naïve.

They sincerely stated that they judge people by their character, not by the color of their skin. Participants indicated that they know some “good” African Americans and some undesirable ones as well, and they feel no embarrassment in categorizing African Americans in this way. They express the same perspective regarding immigrants. They know one Mexican co-worker who is a “fine family man” and another who is “trouble” or “a bad dude.” They do not share the liberal view that categorizing non-whites in this way represents a perpetuation of stereotypes or reflects an unconscious racism. They believe that they judge white people according to the same standards they use for non-whites and consider themselves entirely admirable because they choose to view and treat people in this “color-blind” way.

Some progressives believe that statements of this kind are simply a smokescreen for an underlying racism, and that unless a white person explicitly recognizes the reality of systemic racism and acknowledges his or her own position as the beneficiary of “white privilege,” statements such as “I judge people as individuals” represent little more than rationalizations to justify racial bias. In fact, some will even argue that whites who express overt bigotry are preferable because they admit their bias rather than conceal it.

A vast number of commentaries have been written regarding this debate, but when it is viewed from the specific perspective of Democratic political strategy, one fact is inescapable: Virtually no overt racists are going to vote for Democratic candidates, while some white workers who hold this “I judge people as individuals” view can, in fact, be convinced to vote Democratic. Categorizing all white workers who hold this “I judge people as individuals” view as essentially indistinguishable from overt racists unavoidably represents a decision to abandon these potentially winnable voters to the GOP.

In the focus group sessions, the important difference between this perspective and explicit racism emerged most dramatically in regard to the videos of police mistreatment or the unjustified shooting of African Americans. Unlike the reflexive “support the police” attitudes racists and firm conservatives will usually express, these white working-class men very firmly agreed that in some cases the video clearly showed that the police officer was totally wrong and his conduct utterly inexcusable and indeed criminal. Their only objection was that such misconduct should not automatically be assumed to always be the case, and that all police officers should not be blamed for the actions of a minority.

**III. In an ironic twist, the admirable trait of “common sense,” “middle-of-the-road” white working-class support for tolerance becomes also a demand that liberals should be tolerant themselves and respect white working-class values as well.**

The flip side of such workers’ support for tolerance, however, is a demand for respect for their own choices, lifestyle, and views. The men in the focus groups felt that the traditional values they were taught as children are good values and deserve respect. They deeply value core elements of traditional working-class culture like religious faith, patriotism and individual responsibility, and they do not accept the view that such values should be treated as inherently ignorant or reactionary. In fact, it is this dismissal of their values and culture that produces the greatest antagonism toward Democrats and progressives.

This feeling is expressed most clearly in disgust with “political correctness,” which they see as an attempt to impose upon them values with which they do not agree. Unlike conservatives, a number of participants in the groups admitted that over the years, they had gradually come to recognize that the biased cultural attitudes regarding African Americans that they’d held in the past were wrong and needed to change. They expressed sincere embarrassment at their previous views and felt pride at the way their views had evolved. But they simply would not accept that people who have no respect for the positive aspects of their culture should have the right to enforce upon them a whole range of rules and standards of behavior derived from a very different culture and social world.

Consider a few of the comments in the focus groups:

*America used to be a melting pot and that's good, but previous generations had to integrate, but now we're so PC we can't demand that any more. We get in trouble if we even raise the idea.*

*Let's face it; you're automatically the bad guy if you complain about this stuff.*

*Just because I don't agree with gay marriage doesn't mean I hate gays.*

*We've all run out of white guilt.*

*You shouldn't have to worry about everything you say.*

*I really could care less what you do in your backyard, but don't tell me what I have to do and believe in my backyard ... freedom of speech ... you're supposed to be able to think and say what you want in America, but they want to force you to believe this and agree with that. No, I don't have to agree with everything you say.*

Liberals may disagree with these sentiments, but it is foolish to believe that they are no different from intolerant assertions that demand support for conservative ideology.

It is important to pause at this point and note a key fact. The three major psychological elements of middle-of-the-road white workers' perspective-cultural traditionalism, support for tolerance, and demand for respect for their own culture-are not independent psychological traits that can be mixed and matched like Lego blocks. They form a mutually reinforcing mental framework that emerges from the basic "open-minded" mode of cognition that these men employ. Their respect for their own culture and views and their willingness to be tolerant of other perspectives are interrelated. Progressives cannot assume that they can detach white workers' displays of tolerance (of which they approve) from these workers' cultural traditionalism (of which progressives do not approve and wish they would discard). Culturally Traditional white workers' basic mental frameworks cannot be taken apart and reassembled at will.

#### **Section 4 – The Streets of Gatlinburg**

The essential problem for Democrats is that what is required to win working class votes are candidates who can not only present objectively pro-worker proposals but who can convince white working people that they are genuinely "on their side", "will fight for them", "understand their problems" and "share their values." These are characteristics working people consistently say they consider fundamental in choosing a political candidate.

In fact, the central obstacle that many progressive candidates and their supporters face, unless they actually come from the communities where they are running for office, is how to genuinely become part of the culture and community where they are campaigning and to learn to see the world through the eyes of the people who live there.

In fact, it must be admitted that a substantial number of urban, college-educated people have difficulty imagining why white working class culture and community is something that working people deeply value and even consider superior to the culture of those above them. From the

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outside, the urban fringes of major cities, the small towns and the rural areas across the country where white working class people live can easily appear to outsiders like sad, declining areas with stagnant economies, rampant drugs and little to recommend them.

But the people who live in these communities deeply feel the importance and the value of their neighborhood, friends, communities and home. To working people the stock car races and rodeos of the West and the country music bars, motorcycle rallies, church socials and state fairs that go on across the country are as valuable and meaningful to them as the art galleries, receptions, sushi bars, bookstores and coffee shops of “hip” urban areas are to the educated and affluent.

And integrally connected to these physical aspects of community 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.

The problem can be stated simply: a progressive Democratic candidate who tries to run a campaign based on an elegantly detailed agenda of issues and policies but who cannot communicate a personal connection and emotional identification with the culture of the voters he or she seeks to represent will rarely succeed.

### **The Streets of Gatlinburg**

To understand why this is so it would have been instructive if a person had happened to visit Gatlinburg, Tennessee before the Covid epidemic. Gatlinburg is a regional vacation center, the gateway to the Smokey Mountains, the home of Dolly Parton’s “Dollywood” amusement park and a major recreation area for people who can only afford to take modest vacations, especially working class people from around the Southeast who drive to the area from their homes.

The people who come to here to visit are very visibly part of the America that Trump claims as his base. Some are overweight, others smoke, still others walk with a cane or the distinctive kind of limp that comes from injuries sustained at work. Harley Davison motorcycles roll down the street, not expensive mountain bikes or electric cars. There are no women wearing leggings or designer jogging suits or men wearing NorthFace or Patagonia vests walking the crowded streets. Instead, one sees leather vests with “Sturgis Motorcycle Rally” patches, belts with large western belt buckles and boots with inlaid “cowboy” designs.

To someone coming from the streets of Cambridge Square or Brooklyn Heights, at first it appears a very alien world. And it is, indeed, a profoundly different culture.

But a careful observer would also notice something else; it does not look or feel like a Trump rally.

There is not a sea of red Make America Great Again baseball caps. In fact, there are very, very few. The cars driving by are not filled with anti-abortion or anti-Democratic bumper stickers. Both elderly and young African-American vacationers mingle comfortably among the circulating crowds.

It is easy to dismiss the significance of this impression by suspecting that “deep down” many of these people completely agree with the fervent supporters who attend Trump’s rallies and, to be sure, a large percentage of the people one sees on the street did indeed vote for him. But the

absence of “Trumpist” paraphernalia—hats, bumper stickers and buttons, despite Trump’s constant attempts to encourage public displays of support—suggests that the crowds are simply not passionate political partisans seeking every opportunity to display their commitment.

In fact, if one looks in the windows of the many stores that sell tea shirts with slogans emblazoned on them, shirts with “Make America Great Again” or other slogans supporting Trump are a minor part of the total. This is notable because these stores constantly update and revise their displays to highlight the most popular items.

What one sees instead are a vast array of slogans asserting “cultural traditionalism” – the values of a coherent and traditional “middle American” cultural perspective.

A substantial proportion of the slogans honor military service. For the elderly there are hats and tee shirts that declare them to be a “*Vietnam Veteran*” – often including their particular branch of service. For the younger there are hats and tea shirts and caps that declare “*Veteran – Desert Storm*” or “*Operation Enduring Freedom*.”

Other slogans and dramatic images printed on tea shirts vividly honor military sacrifice: “*All Gave Some, Some Gave All*,” “*Never forget the ones who died to keep us free*.”

Other slogans assert an emphatic patriotism: “*I’m glad to be an American*,” “*land of the free*,” “*I stand for the flag and kneel for the cross*,” “*If you don’t love this country, you can leave*.”

There is also a strong presence of traditional religion. There are stores on the main streets of downtown Gatlinburg that are specifically devoted to religious merchandise – small statues, paintings and biblical quotes framed for mounting on the wall. There are only a few bitter anti-atheistic bumper stickers or buttons available although the sentiment is not far away. On the highway entering Gatlinburg from the South, a billboard tells visitors “*If you want to get rid of God don’t worry, he won’t be there in hell when you arrive*.”

In the main tee shirt stores there are also shirts with a variety of pro-second amendment slogans “*An armed man is a citizen; an unarmed man is a slave*.” There are a range of regional slogans as well “*Never apologize for Dixie*.” “*American by birth, Southern by the grace of God*.” “*Southern pride will never die*.”

It is easy to think that these are expressions of conservative opinions – “dog whistle” appeals to racism, militarism, theocracy and bigotry

But the reality is that they are not.

**The Military.** What the men and women who walk by the window displays think as they see shirts with military slogans and logos is not about their opinion of the wars in Asia or the Middle East but rather a series of memories. Memories of a picture of an older brother or sister in uniform that is proudly displayed on a living room wall. Memories of a father or uncle falling silent and choking back tears when thinking about a long-ago war. Memories of themselves at nineteen, feeling for the first time a unique sense of belonging and dignity in sharing the values of ruggedness and bravery, teamwork and group solidarity, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. The memory of the pride they felt when someone on the street said “Thank you for your service” as they walked by.

These are not “opinions” and they are not “right” or “wrong.” They are memories deeply woven into the fabric of a person’s life and they define the kind of person that they are today.

**Religious faith.** As the tourists walk by the store windows crowded with framed biblical quotes and simple images of Christian themes the thoughts that are evoked are not opinions about Roe vs. Wade or prayer in school but the recollection of similar framed quotes and images on the wall of a well-loved grandmother or elderly aunt’s home, now faded and greying with time. It is the memories of Sunday morning sermons and church picnics and the flavor of fried chicken and watermelon. It is the memory of the minister in the twelve-step program who helped a person to overcome addiction and gain the hope that they might be able to find forgiveness for all the pain and sadness they had caused. It is the reverie of the long-haul trucker driving a dark highway and thanking God for the beautiful baby who is waiting for him back home.

**Love of country, freedom and independence.** As the tourists file past the tee shirts with slogans like “America – land of the free” they visualize freedom as they experience it in their own lives – in their jobs and communities. Beyond the basic freedom that comes from living in a democracy, for working people today, many of whom are independent contractors or work for them the traditional concept of independence is tied to the value system of small business. Traditional working-class values like pride in craftsmanship, the character-building value of hard work and self-discipline are now intertwined with values like owning your own business, individual initiative, and pride in making that business a success. Love of country and patriotism are also tied to a sense of the place and culture that they come from – to memories of their youth and nostalgic cultural images of an idealized South or the West, of small towns and farm communities.

As a result, to the outsider the tee shirts in the stores can indeed seem to reflect the assertion of an explicit conservative philosophy. Understood more deeply, however, they actually express three major traditional values in white working-class culture: respect for religious faith, respect for military service, and respect for the character traits encouraged by small business, honest labor, and hard work. Each of these traditional values is supported by the person’s community social institutions like the church, the military, and the business community, and is continually reinforced by family, friends, and neighbors as a working person grows up in his or her community.

## **Section 5 – Politicians – Who Workers Trust and Who They Don’t**

White working-class ideological extremists view politics and politicians through a strictly ideological lens. They believe that government is inherently evil and they sharply divide politicians by those they agree with— those who want to make government small enough to “drown in a bathtub,” as conservative activist Grover Norquist once put it—and those they disagree with— progressives who think government plays a positive and vital role in modern life. Trump infused this view with a distinct, bitter fanaticism.

The white workers in the Fair Deal focus groups, on the other hand, expressed a very different perspective. In their comments, they described politicians not simply as sometimes individually corrupt but as part of an inherently and irredeemably corrupt system that requires politicians to sell themselves to special-interest contributors to get elected, and who inevitably use their position to become wealthy. They further perceive all politicians as living in an insular and elite artificial world of wealth and influence-peddling.

This view is not new. In their 1995 book, *Congress as Public Enemy*, political scientists John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theis-Morse described the views of the participants in their focus groups:

The American people have come to believe that the political system is run by a powerful professional political class (cut off from ordinary people) and that votes no longer make much difference because money rules. ...People believe that the Washington system runs on greed and special privilege.

They noted, in fact, that this perception was so strong that it represented “a new form of class consciousness.”

In fact, the continuity and connection between this view and the class consciousness of the previous 1930s trade union era can be seen in the fact that for most white working-class Americans, the popular Roosevelt-era caricature of the immoral, top-hatted millionaire, swilling champagne while orphans starve, has been completely replaced by the modern vision of the venal and corrupt politician, making backroom deals with cynical lobbyists in return for fat campaign contributions.

In the Hart Research/Fair Deal Project focus groups, this uniformly cynical view was expressed again and again:

*They [politicians] all come out millionaires.*

*The majority of politicians have sold their soul for the almighty dollar.*

It is this intense categorical distrust and contempt for conventional politicians and the political system as a whole that explains one of the most enduring frustrations progressives encounter in dealing with white working-class people. For 40 years, polls have repeatedly shown that majorities of white working people support quite a substantial range of basically progressive economic policies but, oddly, never vote for the Democratic politicians who promise to enact them.

The mystery disappears when it is understood that white working people tend to see Democrats as just as corrupted by the political system as Republicans are.

Measures that Democrats themselves consider entirely altruistic policies to help not only the poor and needy but white working-class people as well are seen by white workers as cynical electoral bribery to buy mostly minority votes. The pervasive cynicism gives Democrats absolutely no credit at all for altruism.

In consequence, white workers refuse to believe that even programs that appear to be in their direct self-interest will actually work as promised. Instead, they assume that such programs will be undermined by corruption and vote-buying. They do not believe the promised benefits will ever “trickle down” to them.

As Guy Molyneux said in his *Prospect* analysis of this same focus group data:

These voters agree that the economic system is “rigged” as populists like Senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders like to say, but with a crucial difference. It is rigged not only to the advantage of those at the top. The men in the focus groups complain that the rich and the poor get taken care of today, while those in the middle get left behind.

This view was perfectly summarized by one participant who said: “The left cares about the poor, the right cares about the rich. Nobody cares about us.”

Regarding the poor and minorities, there is a combination of genuine concern and willingness to help those who are genuinely in need, along with an intense fury and contempt for the lazy, the dishonest, and the criminal.

The participants expressed this dichotomy in many ways:

*If you're in a wheelchair, yeah, we'll help you. But if you're able-bodied there's no reason you're not working.*

*My mom is 70 years old. She has congestive heart failure. She has all kinds of health problems. She cannot work. She has not been able to work for 15 years. ...So yeah, she lives off \$900 a month in assistance. She gets \$16 in food stamps. But I have a friend who has never worked a day in her life but has five kids and also gets \$900 a month in food stamps. That is not fair.*

When conservatives express broad generalizations about “welfare queens and Cadillacs,” it is reasonable for progressives to dismiss such statements as urban legends that mask simple prejudice. But the anecdotes offered in the focus groups were entirely different; they were highly detailed and specific stories of people—white people—who the participants knew personally, and who were frequently their own white neighbors and relatives. It was, in fact, precisely the very clear, detailed, and vivid personal knowledge they demonstrated about such people taking advantage of the system that formed the basis for their intense anger.

This same distinction between fairness and unfairness also appeared in the participants’ attitudes toward the wealthy. On the one hand, there was no antagonism for people who become wealthy through business success, and virtually no support for abstract “income redistribution” or punitively taxing the rich as a matter of basic social justice. But at the same time, there was a deep anger at the way the wealthy manipulated the system to pay lower taxes than ordinary workers or otherwise game the system to their advantage.

There was also a feeling that the rich had become increasingly separated from and indifferent to those below. As one participant stated: “They all live in gated communities these days and don’t serve in military. They don’t care about us and are happy to export our jobs all over the world.”

### **What kind of candidates will “common sense,” “middle of the road” white workers support?**

The focus group participants were directly asked to list the characteristics they most wanted in a political candidate. The results revealed a very striking fact. While white workers who are Trump supporters or ideological conservatives will predictably respond to questions like this by listing a wide range of conservative policies they would want a candidate to support, the middle-of-the-road participants in the groups responded in a very different way. What they most deeply and indeed passionately wished for were candidates with sound moral and ethical character, and a genuine commitment to the people they represent. Because they perceive all modern American politicians as corrupt, self-seeking parasites, the attributes they hope for in candidates are strong personal virtues like honesty, integrity, and authenticity.

The range and intensity of the feelings that were expressed are startling. Regarding greed and money, the kind of candidates they wanted were men and women who...

*See politics as public service, not a way to make money,*

*Focus on the needs of the people and not the special interests,*

*Care about the people of the country instead of just making their wallets bigger,*

*Are motivated by the needs of everyday citizens and not the high-dollar contributors,*

*Are not bought or corrupt, and*

*Don't make getting rich their guiding principle.*

The participants in the groups also wanted men and women who would be authentic, grassroots representatives of the communities that elected them. They said they needed politicians who...

*Know real people,*

*Live in the community they represent,*

*Have walked the walk and understand Americans' struggles,*

*Remember where they came from and the people they represent,*

*Have worked their way up by themselves without family and friends who got them where they are,*

*Can be judged by their works, by what they have done in the past,*

*Live their ethics in their own lives, and*

*Should be honest and want to represent the voice of the people.*

The participants supplemented these general views with specific ideas: that candidates should live on their government salary and reject all other income, and that they should come from and live in the very same community that elected them.

The participants also reaffirmed the basic values that candidates should personally embody: to defend traditional cultural values but at the same time to display tolerance and compassion for others.

It is important to notice that this distinctive, personal-character-based set of criteria describe a candidate who is profoundly different from many of the "blue dog" Democrats that progressives quite reasonably scorn. Such candidates pander to conservative hot-button issues to win votes, while at the same time do not seriously defend workers' economic interests but rather take money from special interests and make no effort to reduce the influence of big money in politics.

The kind of candidate these workers are describing is very different—a candidate who upholds core traditional values but very emphatically does not compromise with intolerance, and who rejects the corrupt big-money system of modern political life.

## Section 6 – John Tester – Taking Out the Transmission on a John Deere Tractor

Historically, Democratic candidates who succeeded in white working-class, small-town districts have always tended to display two major characteristics:

First, they firmly asserted and embraced many key traditional values and what sociologists call “cultural markers” of the white working class even as they staked out relatively moderate or liberal stances on these subjects. They would endorse common-sense gun regulations, for example, but also consider gun ownership legitimate and categorically support the rights of citizens to own guns. They would reject the notion that America should impose Christianity on all Americans, but they would assert equally firmly that Christian faith is a positive force in many Americans’ family life, including their own. They would support a variety of populist economic measures but at the same time endorse the virtues of small business and individual initiative that are an inherent part of working-class culture. (In this regard one need only think of the vast number of worker-contractors in construction who are both construction workers and small businessmen).

Second, they frequently embodied culturally traditional values in their own personal life and history. Many attended church on Sunday; others had served honorably in the military or had a background in a working-class occupation or as the owner of a small business. Many went hunting on fall weekends, listened to country music in their car, and were able to talk with firsthand knowledge and personal experience about the day-to-day problems of the white working-class people in the neighborhoods and communities they represented. In their personal lives they refuted the accusation that they were educated elitists with no connection to or understanding of ordinary peoples’ lives.

One well known Democratic politician who embodies these characteristics is Senator Jon Tester of Montana. As an article in the *Washington Post* noted:

Tester may be tricky to brand, as he has already established one here. He still works on his family farm, sports a flat-top haircut and isn’t bashful about telling the story of how he lost three fingers in a meat grinder as a child. ...“Our guy can take out a transmission on a John Deere tractor, okay?” said Tester supporter Geoff Gallus, 51, as he sat at the bar at the Silver Dollar Saloon here in Butte. “That’s meaningful.”<sup>2</sup>

Tester was able to win election in 2006 and 2012 and then win reelection once again in 2018 using this political approach. A 2006 *New York Times* article described Tester as he began his first term.

The senator-elect from Montana truly is your grandfather’s Democrat—a pro-gun, anti-big-business prairie pragmatist whose life is defined by the treeless patch of hard Montana dirt that has been in the family since 1916. “You think of the Senate as a millionaire’s club—well, Jon is going to be the blue-collar guy who brings an old-fashioned, Jeffersonian ideal about being tied to the land,” said Steve Doherty, a friend of Mr. Tester’s for 20 years. “He’s a small farmer from the homestead. That’s absolutely who he is. That place defines him.”

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<sup>2</sup>[https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/republicans-cheer-trump-as-attacker-in-chief--but-will-it-work-in-montana/2018/05/05/cb6c65a2-4e7d-11e8-b725-92c89fe3ca4c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/republicans-cheer-trump-as-attacker-in-chief--but-will-it-work-in-montana/2018/05/05/cb6c65a2-4e7d-11e8-b725-92c89fe3ca4c_story.html)

On the campaign trail, Mr. Tester spoke often of how “regular folks” just “haven’t been given much of a shake.” He is distrustful of global trade agreements that have hurt farmers, and big drug companies and health maintenance organizations that he says have put medical costs out of reach for many people. Asked why he became a Democrat in a region that has been overwhelmingly Republican for the last generation, Mr. Tester said: “It started with my parents, who always said the Democrats work for the middle class. And in agriculture, Franklin Roosevelt did a lot of good things.”<sup>3</sup>

In his autobiography, *Grounded – a Senator’s Lessons on Winning Back Rural America*, Tester provides richer detail and describes three key elements of his appeal.

1. He describes his genuinely authentic “working man” background. Tester grew up working on the family farm, he played bugle at VFW funerals, worked part-time as a high school music teacher and basketball coach and met his wife in church. His outlook as he grew up was equally conventional.

He initially held traditional views on abortion, sexual orientation and other “values” issues (As a member of a local school board he supported the suspension of a student for wearing an earring because it represented a violation of the school dress code, a decision he later recognized as wrong).

2. His progressivism and Democratic identification was rooted in his families support for FDR and his focus in his early political career was on support for public schools, protection and expansion of public lands and criticism of large corporations in agriculture and health care that harmed ordinary people.
3. His gradual acceptance of the more progressive perspectives on social issues that emerged in the 1960’s and 1970’s developed very slowly, not through adopting any coherent ideology but by a series of personal experiences. In many respects his social views still remain “traditional” but not ideologically conservative.

This was a not uncommon description of many moderate Democrats who continued to win election in Western and Midwestern states in the 1980’s despite the growing Republican trend in the Reagan years. It was, in fact, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and Bill Clinton’s victory in 1992 that mobilized conservatives to launch a ferocious wave of demonization of Democrats and the Democratic Party that profoundly undermined support for the party since that time. Reagan had been a deeply conservative politician but not a political extremist. It was politicians like Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan and talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh who elevated the demonization of Democrats to a new level, promoting the view that they were literally subversive and evil.

By the time of the Obama administration this demonization had proceeded to the point where few “Red State” Democrats could hold on. Jon Tester held on to his senate seat in 2018, winning a remarkable 7% of Republicans but Steve Bullock, the quite popular governor of Montana who had won his seat by 4% in 2016 (when Trump won the state by a margin of 21%), could not win the other available Senate seat in 2020.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/13/us/politics/13tester.html?pagewanted=2&r=2>

## Section 7 – How Workers See Social Class

The political views of white workers were dramatically transformed by Donald Trump's election in 2016. It is vital to understand the change that has occurred.

### Lunchtime on the Construction Site

To do this, the place to begin is during lunchtime at a building site where eight to twelve construction workers are eating the sandwiches that they purchased from McDonald's or Hardee's or that they brought with them from home. During the four to six month period when a large single family home or small commercial building is being constructed a variety of different tradesmen flow through – foundation excavators, cement workers, carpenters, masons, laborers, roofers, electricians, furnace and air conditioning equipment installers, insulation and sheetrock workers, painters, trim carpenters, cabinetmakers and landscapers.

This particular group of workers is entirely composed of white men. Latino workers have become a significant part of the construction business and hold a range of attitudes toward Trump. White working class women also, particularly younger, unmarried women and those who live in urban areas, have attitudes About Trump that vary widely. But it is among white working class men like these that one finds Trump's firmest supporters.

Ten years ago, or even just five, one could reliably distinguish four distinct political attitudes among construction workers like these.

Several would be firm Rush Limbaugh/talk radio conservatives who would resolutely and occasionally belligerently repeat the latest notions they had absorbed from their car radios or Fox news commentators on TV. Some – but not most -- would make comments that suggested a conscious, explicit racism while others would firmly deny they personally felt any overt bigotry.

Another distinct group were firm and in some cases ostentatiously pious Christians. Some would make repeated references to "my savior" in conversation or indicate their disapproval of vulgar language. In conversation men like these quickly made it plain that their religious faith was the dominant force and perspective in their life.

A third group were men who liberals might reflexively classify as "conservatives" but who actually did not hold or express explicitly ideological conservative views. Rather, they were "cultural traditionalists." They simply considered themselves deeply patriotic and pro-military, "Sunday school" religious, firmly in favor of "small business" and "old-fashioned" moral values.

A fourth group was composed of men who were strongly and resolutely apolitical. They were indifferent to the daily news, entirely focused on their immediate personal circumstances and consistently unwilling to assert any broad opinions or views. If the lunchtime conversation turned to politics or current affairs they would very quickly withdraw with a mumbled, "*Don't matter to me.*" or "*I don't pay attention to that stuff.*"

Obviously, none of these groups are what most Democrats would consider "liberal" or "progressive", but they did reflect a significant range of attitudes.

One attitude, however, they held in common. They viewed **all** politicians – **all**, regardless of party – as utterly dishonest and corrupt. If a lunchtime conversation about a topic became uncomfortably heated, the most common way the situation was defused was for everyone to cynically agree that, ultimately, politicians were all liars and that no-body “*up there in government*” really cared about the ordinary person.

Equally, while the men in the last two groups perceived college educated liberals, Silicon Valley millionaires and wall street financial wizards as all elites who lived more affluent lives and had little concern for them, on a day to day basis they did not feel any fierce and active hostility to them.

And there was one other, vitally important distinction between these men – a difference in basic personality and temperament. Some were basically bad-tempered, easily angered and generally irritable. These same individuals were most often also the most intolerant of people who were different from themselves or of ideas contrary to their own.

On the other hand, others were basically relaxed, even-tempered, friendly and easy-going and, as a result, generally tolerant of different people and ideas – usually ready to “live and let live.”

While precise generalizations are impossible, one general pattern was that men in the first two groups above tended to be the more intolerant while those in the third and fourth groups were more likely to be more tolerant in their basic attitudes.

And, critically, a sufficient sector of these more tolerant men had been willing to vote for Obama in 2008 and 2012.

Since Trump’s campaign and election in 2016, however, circumstances have profoundly changed – and changed in a way that has shifted the political terrain dramatically against the Democrats. The difference can be stated simply: when white construction workers now sit around for lunch and the conversation turns to politics, Trump now completely defines and shapes the conversation. Every discussion quickly becomes framed in terms of what they agree with or disagree with about what Trump has done and said. They may have a range of opinions about specific policies and issues, but it is always Trump and his actions that defines the terms of the debate.

This was a result of Trump’s extremely successful strategy in 2016. Even as some working people feel disillusioned by Trump today, he succeeded in imposing his framing of all political issues as “*It’s Us*” versus “*Them*.” Trump – vile and dishonest as he may be – very successfully tapped into a deep mental and emotional perspective in white working class life – a distinct kind of modern class consciousness, class resentment and class antagonism that is generally unacknowledged in current discussions regarding how to reach these voters but plays a critical role in their political thinking.

### **How White Workers See Social Class**

There is, of course, tremendous resistance among social scientists and historians to the idea that American white workers can be said to have anything like a “class consciousness” at all. In most social commentators’ minds, the term “class consciousness” can only refer to a radical mode of thought that sees society in Marxist terms as sharply and fundamentally divided between labor and capital.

But from the point of view of white working class Americans themselves, there is a quite different sense in which the terms class consciousness, class resentment and class antagonism are very deeply and powerfully meaningful. It is that from their perspective, society is indeed sharply divided between, on the one hand, “people like them” and on the other hand three distinct and separate elites who in different ways “screw” them. While this distinction does not have a clear terminology in American politics, in Mexican slang however there has always been a distinct set of terms for this very specific form of class consciousness – it is between “los chingones” – “the people with power who screw others” and “los chingados” – “the ones who get screwed”.

This is a different form of class consciousness than the traditional radical conception but it meets the key characteristic of the term – a perception of society as sharply divided between ordinary people and elites and a sense of resentment those below feel at the treatment they receive from those above.

A key difference between the modern white working class conception and the traditional radical view is that white working people do not visualize a single dominant “ruling class” or “power elite” above them but rather see three different and distinct groups, none of which totally dominates society but each of which in one way or another mistreats them and holds them in contempt.

The first group is the political class and as anyone who has ever listened to focus groups or has actually spent time with white working class Americans can attest many working people do indeed see ordinary politicians as a *completely distinct, utterly corrupt and entirely parasitic* class that lives in complete isolation from most ordinary people in a rarified environment of fancy ballrooms and expensive restaurants, big money contributions and backroom deals that invariably end up screwing ordinary Americans.

The second group is the “Wall Street” financial elite that makes decisions in faraway office towers that destroy local community jobs and mom and pop businesses. They reside in fancy gated communities filled with mega-mansions and send their children to private schools with country club entrance procedures that would never allow the children of ordinary workers admission even if those workers could afford the tuition.<sup>4</sup>

The final group is the “liberal” elite – the heterogeneous group of college professors and students, Hollywood actors and producers, music and fashion producers and TV, newspaper and magazine columnists and commentators. They are not seen as a financial ruling class but rather as a social group that dominates and controls the culture – what one sees on TV and in the movies, what is taught in colleges and universities, what is written in editorial page commentaries and what is produced and sold in the fashion and music industries. They are perceived as affluent urban dwellers who live in expensive, gentrified urban communities or in charming college towns. They drive “sophisticated” costly cars, drink Latte’s, casually travel to Europe on vacations and wear Patagonia vests and Birkenstock shoes to subtly announce their discernment and sophistication. They are also seen to exercise substantial political power, using the Democratic Party as their vehicle. This power to impose their “liberal” agenda is obtained through a cynical alliance with minorities who are bribed to vote for Democrats by various kinds of “handouts,” special government programs or preferential treatment.

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<sup>4</sup>This view of the economic elite does not extend to small businessmen and women. With the decline of mass industry, many workers – from construction to retail – today work in smaller businesses where they know and relate directly to the owner. Working people do not see the owners or managers of these small businesses as part of the elite but rather as people who are generally like them and who share their outlook and values.

Working people have distinct feelings about these three different groups but see the members of all three as living in worlds that are economically and sociologically high “above” them and who resemble each other in their indifference to the needs of ordinary people and their contempt for them as human beings. All three groups are emphatically perceived as “them” and not “us”.

(It is important to note that there is an important geographical element in this perception. There is a clear “class structure” in small towns and rural areas which includes a significant group of relatively wealthy farmers, ranchers and businessmen but also a higher percentage of people with only a high school or community college education than in urban areas. The result is an overlapping class and regional component to the sentiment of antagonism against liberals in these areas).

This “class consciousness” and “class resentment” is a complex perspective that cannot be easily tracked by standard opinion polls and for this reason until Trump it was often overlooked in the discussion of progressive political strategy. But it is vividly evident in focus groups with white working class Americans, in the discussions that occur during progressive campaigns of door to door canvassing in white working class neighborhoods and in the interviews conducted during ethnographic field studies. Its centrality is revealed in the very titles of major sociological studies of white working class Americans that have appeared in the last several years: Catherine Cramer’s *The Politics of Resentment*, Jennifer Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land* and Justin Gest’s *The New Minority*.

## Section 8 – Trump’s Seductive Appeal

In 2016 Donald Trump’s appeal to white working class Americans emphatically and specifically reaffirmed their basic class outlook and promised to represent **them and them alone**. He said, in effect, “Your point of view is absolutely right. You have been horribly mistreated by all three of the elites above you. They have never given a damn about you and have been screwing you for years.”

On the one hand, when describing the economy in his rallies, Trump used language that was literally directly plagiarized from progressive speeches and publications:<sup>5</sup>

Right now our economy isn’t growing practically at all. . . Many workers are earning less today than they were 18 years ago. They’re working harder, they’re working longer, but they’re making less and in some cases, they’re working two and three jobs, but still taking home less money. It’s ridiculous. [The economy is] the worst since the Great Depression.

‘This is not a rising tide that lifts all boats. This is a wave of globalization that wipes out our middle class and our jobs. We need to reform our economic system so that, once again, we can all succeed together, and America can become rich again.’

In Trump’s narrative, however, the villains included not only business but all three social elites. In fact, in his telling, the loss of jobs was not directly caused by the Wall Street Billionaire class but was rather more specifically the fault of the political class. He said:

‘The political class in Washington has betrayed you. They have uprooted your jobs, your communities, and [t]hey put up new skyscrapers in Beijing while your factories in

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<sup>5</sup>The quotes that follow are taken from two valuable sources:

1. “Trump’s Electoral Speeches and His Appeal to the American White Working Class,” *The British Journal of Sociology* <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1468-4446.12315>

2. “The Emotional Politics of Making America Great Again: Trump’s Working Class Appeals,” *The Journal of Working Class Studies*, <https://journals.uwyo.edu/index.php/workingclassstudies/article/view/6039>

Michigan were crumbling. These are our politicians...’The political establishment has brought about the destruction of our factories, and our jobs, as they flee to Mexico, China and other countries all around the world. Our just-announced job numbers are anemic ...Take a look at what’s going on. [politicians] stripped away these towns bare and raided the wealth for themselves.’

In this revisionist narrative liberals were major villains as well:

We are living through the greatest jobs theft in the history of the world...What our politicians have allowed to happen to this area [and] all areas of our country, NAFTA, TPP, they want to approve. A disaster. Ohio has lost one in four manufacturing jobs since NAFTA--a deal signed by Bill Clinton and supported strongly by Hillary. Remember, every time you see a closed factory or wiped out community in Ohio, it was essentially caused by the Clintons. We’ve lost 70,000 factories since China entered the World Trade Organization. Another Bill- and Hillary- backed disaster.

Trump thus presented himself as an independent gadfly and the only real champion of the ignored working class in their struggle against all three of the interlocking social elites.

[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. [the working people] are better. I like them better.<sup>6</sup>

The result was that white workers heard Trump reaffirming their own basic social perspective. *“None of the three elites give a damn about you”* Trump was saying *“and all of them hold you in contempt.”*

For a huge number of white working Americans this was tremendously exciting and indeed profoundly cathartic. For the first time they were hearing someone in the political system saying what they had felt and thought very deeply for a long time but had never heard any major figure

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<sup>6</sup>It is notable that in his speeches Trump almost completely ignored the “new,” heavily female and service sector working class and focused almost exclusively on traditional blue-collar male factory, construction and mining workers. His supporters however considered that his invocation of the traditional trades was meant to embrace “ordinary people” in general and did not interpret it as exclusionary.

clearly express. It produced an enormous sense of vindication and relief – a feeling similar to that which gay men and women felt when they first heard it asserted that their sexuality was actually something normal and not a thing to be ashamed of.

This explains a key characteristic of white working class Trump supporters that progressives have always found utterly incomprehensible – why they would vehemently insist that Trump was *“telling the truth,” “telling it like it is”* or being more *“honest”* than other politicians when it was obvious that he was constantly and brazenly lying. The *“truth”* that white working Americans were referring to was not any set of specific facts, but a social outlook and perspective that they were deeply thrilled to finally hear expressed.

Of course, white workers who are bigoted toward Latinos, immigrants and Muslims also perceived Trumps overt and bitter racist rhetoric as *“telling the truth”* and being *“honest.”* But there were also many white workers who were more attracted to Trump because of his *“pro-worker”* rhetoric than to his bigotry.

In fact, what Trump had actually created was an ideological synthesis that was new to America but not to Europe – one that included scapegoating racial minorities, belligerent nationalism, attempts to undermine democratic institutions and demagogic promises of prosperity for the working class.<sup>7</sup>

But the key to developing a strategy to increase the level of support among white working class Americans is to recognize that there actually is a profound difference between passionate Trump loyalists and cultural traditionalists and between people who are intolerant and those who are tolerant. The former groups are beyond Democratic persuasion, the latter groups are not. And despite the ugly image of all Trump supporters that emerges from his rallies, the loyalists do not represent his entire coalition.

## Section 9 – Why Good Programs Aren’t Enough

As Democrats prepare for the 2022 and 2024 elections the discussion of Democratic political strategy for reaching working class voters has very largely focused on two basic ideas.

The first is that the Democrats major problem has been a failure to convince working class Americans 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,” “allowed themselves to be dragged into debates about “unpopular issue positions”* and other variations on this theme.

The common thread in these analyses is the traditional Democratic view that the best way to appeal to working class voters is by proposing and enacting bold, progressive economic programs that

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<sup>7</sup>The American press generally calls this particular package of policies *“populist”* and *“authoritarian”* but, in any introductory textbook in political science or 20 century European history it is immediately recognizable as the ideology that is defined as *“fascism”* or *“neo-fascism”*. The reluctance to use these entirely accurate terms in American political discussion is not because there is any serious doubt among non-Trump supporting commentators that the terms are indeed applicable but rather because in the US media there is an unwritten prohibition that one may not call a U.S. politician a fascist until they have grown a mustache and murdered several million people in a campaign of mass genocide. An entirely accurate definition of this absurd and ultimately cowardly stance is the *“if he’s not every single bit as bad as Hitler, you can’t call him a fascist”* rule in U.S. political journalism.

objectively serve their real interests. 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 a classic example of how Democrats can win working class support.

Yet, as historians have noted, this story is substantially exaggerated. The great social movement of the 1930's that directly involved millions of workers did not occur in response to the 100 days legislation but rather to the epic battles across America for trade union organization and after World War II it was the mutual 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 Two era was obtained because there were a series of important community and neighborhood organizations that workers trusted and whose recommendations they followed. 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 contrast, when Democratic candidates today present detailed policy papers prepared by progressive think-tanks, this appears to many white workers as just another example of isolated "ivory tower" experts telling them "what is good for them" rather than proposals that have been examined and endorsed by people they trust. In 2016 Hillary Clinton had most detailed and comprehensive liberal economic policy platform in Democratic history – and which had no persuasive effect on working class voters at all.

And even when Democratic programs that benefit workers do get passed, Democrats rarely get the credit because the reality is that ordinary people cannot see the results of economic policies directly. 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."

A key reason for this is that the "conservative media information bubble" has basically replaced not only the trusted intermediaries of the past like local unions but also the relatively non-partisan news coverage that existed when the three major TV networks – NBC, ABC and CBS – were the dominant source of daily information. Beginning in the 1990's with the oil industry funded attacks on the objectivity of scientific studies of global warming, virtually all previously accepted sources of information became discredited and blatant partisan misinformation replaced them instead. The results were stunning, In the 1950's the Salk polio vaccine was universally hailed as a miracle of modern science. Today, millions of Americans have been manipulated to believe that the anti-Covid vaccines were fundamentally unnecessary and actually part of a vile socialist plot to erode personal freedom.

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The conclusion is unavoidable. Democrats can no longer rely on proposing and passing ambitious progressive legislation as the central strategy for winning the support of working class Americans.

The second basic idea that animates current Democratic strategy is the idea that in working class districts candidates can – and often should – ask voters to evaluate them as individuals and not as typical members of a political party. Often the attempt is made to present these candidates as being authentic members of their working class or rural districts and to judge them in that way.

Jon Tester is often cited as an example of a successful politician of this kind and at present a range of other “authentic” candidates like Tim Ryan in Ohio, John Fetterman in Pennsylvania, Tom Nelson in Wisconsin and others are being described as potentially able to win working class votes because of their distinct, non-elite background and character.

This approach is based on the belief that working class voters are still willing to evaluate individual candidates separately from their evaluation of national party platforms. This implies that by taking specific stances an individual Democratic candidate can successfully distinguish himself or herself from the national Democratic Party.

In 1992 these assumptions were already under stress but were still plausible. The Fox News demonization of the Democratic party had not really begun in earnest, ads by political candidates still generally focused on specific issues and “ticket-splitting” by working class voters between local Democratic candidates and the Party’s national candidates remained a significant political reality in many districts. But by the time of the Obama administration the two assumptions above had become substantially less credible. Glen Beck emerged as the most influential Fox News commentator in 2009, overshadowing other already extreme talking heads of Fox News while many of the successful “Tea Party” political candidates based their campaigns on demonizing all Dems as an alien, anti-American force rather than by debating any specific political issues.

The transformation then became complete with the emergence of Donald Trump who elevated loathing of Democrats to a chilling, visceral degree. On one level he framed the conflict in racial terms as a clash between whites and people of color but on a deeper level his attack was based on social class. Trump’s core message to working class voters was that all Democrats— literally all—were affluent elitists who profoundly despised them and held them in contempt while Trump was their one and only great champion.

In fact, in many districts GOP candidates now follow a two-step strategy to win an election. It doesn’t matter if they are sincere believers in one or another variety of extremist ideology or if they are more traditional conservatives who now find themselves forced to regurgitate extremist views they do not genuinely believe. The imperatives they face are exactly the same.

First, in order to win the Republican primary they must gain the support of the pro-Trump extremists who constitute the activist core within the GOP. A Republican candidate today cannot allow any other candidate to win the support of the Trump base and Q-anon voters or his campaign will never get off the ground. This forces all GOP candidates to take a series of extremist positions and pass a series of extremist litmus tests. In 2022 and 2024 these will include insisting that the 2020 election was stolen and that Trump is still a hero and major leader of the party.

Second, when turning to the general election, the candidate will then have to engage in the most absurdly extreme demonization of the Democratic challenger since the candidate can no longer “move to the center” to seek the support of more moderate voters as Republicans would routinely do in the past. In the Georgia senate races in 2020, for example, TV and other media were filled with wildly hysterical messages that “socialist” and “radical” Democrats would quite literally allow criminals to wander the streets unmolested, open the borders to all illegal immigrants, raise taxes on ordinary people to confiscatory levels and allow radical mobs to ravage and destroy downtown city centers. Neither of the two Republican candidates made the slightest attempt to appeal to GOP moderates during the general election.

What this change implies is that Democratic political strategy needs to be reformulated based on two new assumptions.

1. That many working class voter’s loyalty to Trump and the Republican Party is now far more powerful than their views about individual candidates. The reality is that many, possibly most white working class voters have become like the working class voters who supported the Labor Party in post-World War II England. The vote for Labor in that era was above all an assertion of class pride and class identity. The choice between Labor and the Conservatives was a choice between “us” and them.”
2. That the working class vote which is now decided by class identity does not allow the voter to support specific individual candidates based on their platforms and positions. Even if an individual Democratic candidate rejects the Democratic party’s national position today the GOP will still blatantly lie and assert that the Democrat actually supports the most extreme positions within the Democratic coalition – and this accusation will be widely accepted.

## **Section 10 – “Traditional, Common Sense Democrats”: The Missing Wing of The Democratic Coalition**

The implications are stark.

1. Democratic candidates who want to reach working class voters now need to have a clear and distinct political identity that is separate from the National Democratic Party or the woke, social justice left. This cannot be achieved simply by offering a set of specific disagreements over policy, even if these disagreements are expressed in the most fierce and polemical way. What is rather required is a clear and distinct political identity that genuinely aligns the candidate with the culture and perspective of the working class convincing them that the candidate is genuinely “On your side,” “Will fight for you,” or “Cares about people like you”?
2. This new identity cannot be created just for the candidate as an individual but must rather locate him as a member of distinct and coherent political force. In a parliamentary system there is a direct solution. A heterogeneous party whose voters combined a wide range of opinions from moderate reformism to militant leftism and included a broad range of divergent social groups in its base would quickly split into two distinct parties, each with a separate platform and image. If the two parties gained a legislative majority between them in a general election they would then conduct formal negotiations to agree on a common coalition platform for governing.

This cannot be done in the American political context but it is still possible to make a substantial move in this direction by creating a distinct political coalition that might define itself as “Traditional, Common Sense Democrats.” In same way that Bernie Sanders 2016 campaign consolidated and

then became the basis for a vigorous left coalition of democratic socialists and “woke” or “social justice” Democrats, a “Traditional, Common Sense” coalition of working class, small town and rural Democrats needs to emerge as a comparable force within the Democratic Party.

This “Common Sense, Heartland Democratic” coalition would be defined by two things.

1. A deep, genuine and passionate Identification with the culture and community of the working class. This identification must be based in reality, authentic and sincere and not the phony PR campaigns that dresses a Republican used car dealer or corporate executive in a plaid shirt and hands him a shotgun to hold while he stands in front of a flatbed truck or a cattle ranch.
2. A coherent set of “Traditional, Common Sense” positions on divisive issues. These would not be defined by launching attacks on the Democratic left but rather by defining the new coalition as a “common sense” middle ground between the “crazy” right and the “radical” left that would combine a respect for working class culture and community with tolerance rather than intolerance and a willingness to accept sensible and necessary change.

For this approach to gain any significant political influence a new coalition of this kind will have to create for itself a distinct national image. In the same way that traditional political parties historically defined themselves in national conventions, a Heartland Common Sense coalition would have to find the means to capture the attention of the national media. Candidates in red state districts across the country would have to identify with the coalition and insist on its importance. Individual candidates would have to identify themselves with the national “brand” in their speeches and advertising.

It is too late to attempt to begin an initiative like this in time for the 2022 elections, but as the results of that contest become clear, it will become possible to begin developing such an approach for the presidential election in 2024.

## **Appendix – Why Working Class Mexicans Are Deserting the Dems.**

The historical experience of Mexicans in America who constitute 65%—two-thirds—of all U.S. Latinos has been defined by successive waves of immigration and assimilation.

Many of the American citizens who are originally of Mexican origin are the descendants of people who have lived in the United States for generations. In Texas, California and the Southwest these Mexican-Americans often lived in majority Latino communities and were an accepted part of the towns and cities where they resided. As one person quoted in a New Yorker article noted:

“We didn’t cross the border. The border crossed us.” The roots of their family in New Mexico went back five centuries. When Valencia was three years old, her father, Jack, was elected to the Las Cruces City Council. She recalls walking precincts with him as a child and learning about Latino politics and public service through him. “I grew up in a community where everybody looked like me and sounded like me,” Valencia said. “I didn’t ever feel like an outsider.”<sup>8</sup>

Another person interviewed presented a similar view:

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/deconstructing-the-2020-latino-vote>

As a child in New Mexico, Valentin Cortez, 46, was raised by two parents who voted as Democrats, but were personally conservative. Mr. Cortez was around “a lot of cowboys and a lot of farmers” who were also Hispanic, but he never felt as though he was part of a minority and said he never personally experienced any racism.<sup>9</sup>

Beginning In 1980’s, however, a demographic explosion of young people in Mexico coincided with the limits of continually more subdivided plots of agricultural land. Vast numbers of young Mexicans in rural Mexico simply could not make a living farming the small plots that were available to them. In conversation and in song the widespread crisis was simply called “*La Miseria*” – “the Misery.”

They had been raised in a harsh world, accustomed to work “*De Sol a Sol*,” from sunup to sundown, and to live in poverty. In the U.S., although they were generally paid either at or even less than the minimum wage, it was still enough to live day to day and to also send some money back to their families in Mexico. Single men supported their mothers. Fathers and relatives, married men supported their wives and children. By 1990’s remittances from the US had become a major source of income for families in Mexico.

The border was easy to cross at that time and many went back and forth. Whole industries – meat packing, carpet making, food processing and others became heavily dependent on Mexican workers. As communities grew some immigrants began to bring their wives and children to the U.S. while others started small businesses – restaurants, grocery stores, “*panaderias*” (bakeries), money transfer and document services.

They generally stayed in their communities – in the small towns where the plants and factories that they worked in were located and in lower income neighborhoods in the larger cities. Although the fear of deportation was omnipresent, in reality the odds against being arrested were low. Employers did not seriously examine documents and police generally left Latinos alone as long as they stayed in the lower income housing projects and trailer parks “*where they belonged*”. By the end of the 1990’s they began to branch out beyond jobs like meat packing and lawn work. Men became notably visible on construction sites, women as waitresses and maids.

By 2000, the peak year for Mexican immigration, a backlash was growing but Mexican immigrants were already deeply imbedded in America. Their children, born in the US, began filling the seats in public school classrooms. These second generation Mexican-Americans were U.S. citizens who spoke English, watched American TV, played video games and listened to the latest music.

### **The Immigrant Parallel**

They did encounter racism but, realistically, for most the experience more closely resembled the experience of previous waves of immigrants. In the early 20th century vast numbers of Italians, poles, Jews and others immigrated to the U.S. They also experienced anti-ethnic bigotry, lived in insular ethnic communities and only gradually became accepted and acculturated as their children and grandchildren came of age.

This parallel is evident in the statistics. As Noah Smith points out in his Substack commentary.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

On many indices of upward mobility Latinos are making clear progress. Rates of college enrollment have gone up 15% to near parity with whites, high school dropout rates fell from 34% in 1996 to 10% in 2016 and as early as 2011, 67% of Latinos were saying that they were better off than their parents. ...In other words, despite starting from a very humble base, Hispanics are treading the same upward path that American immigrant groups always tread. The history of the Irish, Italians, Poles, and so on is repeating itself... as a result, it is not surprising that many Mexicans do not define or think of themselves as "people of color." On the contrary the majority define themselves as either like previous immigrants or simply as "hard-working decent people."<sup>10</sup>

### The "Natural Democrats" Fallacy

In presidential elections since 1980 the GOP generally only won between 25 to 35% of the Latino vote but even long before 2016 a threat could be seen on the horizon. Aloof, rather patrician GOP establishment candidates like George Herbert Walker Bush and Mitt Romney only received 25-30% of the presidential vote but more "down to earth" candidates like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush received support ranging from the high 30s to as much as 40 percent support for Bush in 2004. George W. Bush had also been quite popular with Latino voters in Texas during his campaigns for governor. It was therefore clear that style and personality could make a significant difference.

And Democrats had also always had problems with the large Cuban exile population in Florida because of the deep anti-Castro sentiments in that community to which Republican candidates very successfully appealed.

Mexican Americans, on the other hand, have been consistently assumed to be "natural" Democrats. As an article in 538.com reported:

Mexican Americans basically single-handedly drive the narrative that Latinos are core Democratic voters thanks to their overwhelming numbers: **63 percent of the national Latino population is of Mexican descent**, and that figure is even higher in swing states like Arizona, Nevada and Texas.<sup>11</sup>

And they had generally voted more than 2 to 1 in favor of Dems.

But today the fact that Latino support for Trump actually increased from 2016 to 2020 has profoundly shaken the "natural Democrats" assumption.

### The Expanded Latino Vote for The GOP in the 2020 Campaign

According to the Pew validated voter study, one of the most reliable measures of actual voting behavior, the Latino vote for the democratic candidate declined from 66% to 59% between 2016 and 2020 – a 7 point decline. The other most highly regarded source of demographic voting estimates, produced by the Catalyst Institute, used a slightly different calculation – the "two party vote share won by the Democrat" (i.e. excluding third party candidates) – and found that it declined from 71% to 63% – a nearly identical 8 point decline.

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<sup>10</sup><https://noahpinion.substack.com/p/hispanic-voters-and-the-american?s=r>

<sup>11</sup><https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/theres-no-such-thing-as-the-latino-vote/>

This was quite stunning because by 2020 Latinos had had four years to observe Trump's demonization of Latino immigrants and barely concealed bigotry. Yet instead of voting more solidly Democratic, Latinos actually increased their support for Trump.

In the Democratic postmortems of the 2020 elections it was belatedly recognized that the Trump campaign's Latino strategists, lavishly funded by the major right wing foundations run by the Koch Brothers, the Mercers and others had conducted extensive polling and focus groups which correctly determined that Latino voters could be successfully targeted with pro-Trump appeals. The information was then put into practice by providing ample funds for pro-Trump social influencers in the Latino community and conducting extensive door to door canvassing and persuasion campaigns in Latino neighborhoods.

As the head of one Latino organization noted:

...the Trump campaign maintained a consistent line of communication with, and outreach to, the Latino community that went beyond TV advertising starting two years before the 2020 election. Its Spanish-language strategy included in-person canvassing, mail, digital advertising, newspaper ads and a network of influencers who spread disinformation and echoed Donald Trump's talking points on digital media. The misinformation they peddled was not rebutted by the Democrats until it was too late in the election cycle to make a difference....

Since the 2000s, organizations like the Libre Initiative, a Latino conservative advocacy group within the Koch political network, have been working tirelessly to promote conservatism in Hispanic communities. Through them, the G.O.P. has built support while providing resources to the Latino community. For example, the Libre Initiative offers English courses, economic empowerment sessions and pathways to citizenship to immigrants throughout the South and Southwest. It also helps them study for driver's license exams, citizenship tests and the G.E.D. Come election year, Republicans coordinated an aggressive social media campaign, accompanied by canvassing programs, and hosted car parades with well over 500 cars in Texas. They didn't need to empty their wallets in the final weeks before the elections because they had maintained a constant drumbeat of communication in the area for months.<sup>12</sup>

This extensive Republican outreach included utterly cynical and dishonest pro-Latino slogans and messages. Incredibly, on Spanish language TV Trump actually promised to pass *Citizenship for Dreamers* by executive order. At the same time the campaigns dramatically muted Trump's attacks on immigrants and focused his vitriolic attacks instead on African Americans, riots and crime.

The result was clear. As a commentary by The Brookings Institution noted:

Latino voters' perception of President Trump shifted significantly from 2016 to 2020. Most notably, perceptions among Latinos that President Trump was "hostile" to Latinos dropped from 55% in 2016 to 29% in 2020... this shift is undoubtedly due to the movement away from hostile language about Latino, and predominately Mexican immigrants in 2020.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup><https://noahpinion.substack.com/p/hispanic-voters-and-the-american?s=r>

<sup>11</sup><https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/theres-no-such-thing-as-the-latino-vote/>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/01/opinion/latino-vote-midterms-2022.html>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/06/17/immigration-and-the-latino-vote-a-golden-opportunity-for-democrats-in-2022/>

In fact, while many left-progressives continued to believe that Latino support could be won by appealing to their solidarity as “People of Color,” the Republican strategists had figured out that many Latino voters would not be repelled by attacks on African-Americans as criminals and rioters. On the contrary, such attacks would resonate with many because the reality is that a substantial current of hostility has long existed between the two groups.

This has been true for many years. As a 2007 commentary in the *Los Angeles Times* noted:

Animosity between Latinos and blacks is the worst-kept secret in race relations in America. For years, Latino leaders have pointed the finger of blame at blacks when Latinos are robbed, beaten and even murdered. Blacks, in turn, have blamed Latinos for taking jobs, for colonizing neighborhoods, for gang violence. These days, the tension between the races is noticeable not only in prison life and in gang warfare (where it’s been a staple of life for decades) but in politics, in schools, in housing, in the immigration debate.<sup>14</sup>

Leaders in both communities have always very carefully muted their discussion of this issue in the mass media for fear of inflaming the situation but ministers, social service providers and other local leaders who work in the African-American and Latino communities are very well aware of the hostile underlying attitudes that do exist in the two communities.

(Note: An important first step to reduce African-American-Latino tensions and encourage unity began during the Black Lives Matters protests in the Spring of 2020. Initiated by the youthful activists in the movement, serious discussions about unity began between members of both communities for the first time. While this is a very encouraging development, it just begins to scratch the surface of the substantial tensions that exist between the two groups.)

### **Latinos are a Working Class People**

Equally if not more important, Trump’s campaign recognized that working class Latinos could be successfully appealed to as working people using the same messages that had built Trump’s support among white workers.

As an *NBC News* postmortem noted:

Although President Joe Biden won a majority of votes from Hispanics, 59 percent in the 2020 race to Trump’s 38 percent, there was a significant difference in preference based on education, Pew reported.

Biden won 69 percent of college-degreed Latino voters, compared to 30 percent for Trump, a 39 percentage-point advantage. But Biden’s advantage over Trump narrowed with Hispanics with some college or less, 55 percent to 41 percent, a 14-point advantage.<sup>15</sup>

This presented a huge threat because, according to Pew estimates, Hispanics are the most heavily working class group among nonwhites , with 80 percent falling into that category. If future GOP candidates could exceed that 41% level with working class Latino voters, the entire group could essentially become a 50/50 swing voter category rather than part of the Democratic base.

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<sup>14</sup><https://www.latimes.com/la-op-hutchinson25nov25-story.html>

<sup>15</sup><https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/latinos-supported-trump-likely-lack-college-education-rcna1306>

There were a range of factors involved. One postmortem noted as follows:

Interviews with dozens of Hispanic men from across the country who voted Republican last year rejected the idea that Latino men would instinctively support liberal candidates. These men challenged the notion that they were part of a minority ethnic group or demographic reliant on Democrats; many of them grew up in areas where Hispanics are the majority and are represented in government. And they said many Democrats did not understand how much Latino men identified with being a provider – earning enough money to support their families is central to the way they view both themselves and the political world.<sup>16</sup>

This was echoed by other journalist’s interviews,

Jose Aguilar grew up in McAllen, Texas, in the 1960s, raised by parents who had limited means for buying food and clothing. They were hard workers and instilled in him that “if you apply yourself, you will get what you deserve.” His family welcomed relatives from Mexico who stayed for a short time and then returned across the border; some managed to immigrate legally and become citizens, and he believes that’s how anyone else should do so.

“We were brought up the old-school way, that men are men, they have to provide, that there’s no excuses and there’s no crying. If you don’t make it, it’s because you’re a pendejo,” he said, using a Spanish term for idiot. “Maybe that’s not nice, but it breeds strong men, mentally strong men.”<sup>17</sup>

Trump’s tough, blustering style also suggested that he could be trusted to be a sincere advocate for the “common man.” As one Latino noted in an interview:

Trump’s image as a straight-talking businessman was definitely part of what appealed to my dad. He liked that the former president grew up with men similar to those who worked with my grandfather. “We’d run into the electrical contractor’s union or somebody else working in houses, building houses. Every one of them talked like Trump,” my dad said. “No big words. Everything was very, very simple. And Trump learned to do that. He learned to master that, where he can communicate.”<sup>18</sup>

This was echoed by two opinion analysts who conducted extensive interviews with white working class trump supporters:

After spending the past few years living in white working-class Democratic communities that voted for Trump, we are not surprised by the President’s cultural appeal across racial lines. ...Exit polls show that his supporters especially admire the President’s strength. When asked to identify the quality that mattered most in voting for President, a 32%

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<sup>14</sup><https://www.latimes.com/la-op-hutchinson25nov25-story.html>

<sup>15</sup><https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/latinos-supported-trump-likely-lack-college-education-rcna1306>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/us/politics/latino-voters-democrats.html>

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup><https://fortune.com/2020/11/06/trump-support-black-latino-men-rappers/>

plurality of voters said “a strong leader.” Among those citizens, 71% voted for Trump. That figure was even higher in heavily Latino Florida, where 81% of such voters did likewise... the citizens we encountered praised Trump in general terms, for his “strength,” “energy,” and “balls.”<sup>19</sup>

Progressives are endlessly frustrated by the fact that Democratic candidates invariably offer programs that are objectively far more favorable to working class people than those of the GOP. But these arguments invariably run up against the fact that many working class people do not read policy papers or carefully listen to policy debates. They “*vote for the candidate, not the platform*” and tell pollsters that they base their choices on which candidate they think seems to “*care about people like you,*” “*is on your side,*” “*will fight for you,*” or, in the commentator’s most recent cliché – “*is someone you would like to have a beer with.*”

And Trump, despite his privileged childhood and vast inherited wealth, displayed a blustering, Archie Bunker/Tony Soprano style that seemed more authentic to many working class people than that exhibited by many of the more “*typical Washington politician*” candidates and media commentators who criticized him.

The GOP also appealed to working class Latinos by focusing attention on the aspects of the Democratic platform that seemed unfavorable to working people or indifferent to their interests. Many working class Latinos in Texas, for example, have good, very high paying blue-collar jobs in the many oil and gas refineries and in pipeline construction and maintenance. Democratic rhetoric about eliminating fossil fuels seemed to directly threaten their livelihood. A substantial number of Texas Latinos also work in law enforcement, including the Border Patrol, and view rhetoric about “defunding the police” or “open borders” with scorn. GOP commercials made these ideas appear to be the defining elements of the Democratic platform.

More broadly, GOP rhetoric that cast Republicans as “job creators” and defenders of small business seemed plausible to many working class Latinos when contrasted with what Republicans described as the “job destroying” Democratic agenda. Had Democratic messaging been sharply focused on refuting these attacks they might have been blunted. But, in many cases across the country the primary Democratic appeal to working class Latinos was to emphasize instead Trump’s inhumane policies and disparaging remarks about immigrants.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup><https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2021/03/22/latino-men-trump-2020/>

<sup>20</sup>Many working class Latinos also hold conservative views about abortion, GLBTQ issues and other aspects of personal morality that are reinforced by their Catholic or Evangelical Churches which openly support the GOP. Many working class African-Americans hold similarly conservative views but keep their moral attitudes separate from their political choices on election day.