



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

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HE'D PROBABLY PORTRAY THREE DEMOCRATS
DEBATING ABOUT THE AMERICAN WORKING CLASS**

BY
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If Jean Paul Sartre were writing his influential play *No Exit* today he'd probably depict his three characters who are trapped in a small room somewhere deep in Hell as Democrats endlessly and fruitlessly debating what to do about the American working class.

One character would insist that American workers are all irredeemably bigoted and hypnotized by GOP propaganda and that Democrats should therefore entirely concentrate on mobilizing college educated voters and people of color.

The second would insist that a truly radical economic program would entice American workers to vote for Democrats and that it is the timid and corrupt Democratic leadership that is creating the problem.

The third would argue that the vast majority of American workers are decent people and that if Democrats showed sincere empathy and understanding these voters could be convinced to abandon the GOP.

In this modern version of Sartre's play these arguments would be repeated again and again until the characters realize that they are trapped in hell and that their diabolical punishment is to recite these arguments endlessly for eternity.

Sartre's original play is often edited to run about an hour and a half or two hours although some versions run far longer in an attempt to make the audience feel the full claustrophobic horror of the situation. The most recent Democratic version, on the other hand, has now run for the 6 years since Trump's 2016 election and, like Sartre's original, appears to have no end.

The reason is straightforward: none of the three views above can be definitively falsified while at the same time each also seems deeply and intuitively obvious to its advocates.

There are always alternative explanations for why a particular candidate fails to achieve victory aside from his or her platform or political strategy. The economy, external events, inadequate funding, bad media strategy, gaffes, dishonest smears...the list is endless. It is always possible to attribute a defeat to some other factor than to one or another of the three basic strategies defined above.

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At the same time, there is an almost invincible tendency for advocates of all three of the positions above to also feel that *“if I could just sit down at their kitchen table and talk with these voters I know that I could demonstrate that my view was right.”* The radical firmly believes that he or she could convince them to vote for radicalism, the moderate believes he or she could convince them to vote for Democratic moderates and the cynic believes he or she could demonstrate that no possible arguments could detach working class voters from right wing extremism.

The result can be seen over and over again in the op-ed pages of the Times, the Washington Post and other publications since Donald Trump’s election. Those grindingly repetitive debates could easily be cut and pasted directly into the dialog of a modern version of Sartre’s play.

There is, however, a possible way to move beyond this interminable debate. There are three empirically-based propositions that suggest a way forward that many proponents of all three of the perspectives can agree make sense.

1. *Working class Americans are not entirely ideologically homogeneous. There are distinct subgroups with varying political perspectives. Some do not accept the MAGA ideology.*
2. *The size of the non-MAGA group is obviously critical to its potential political significance but even if it is quite modest, it can still have a very significant impact.*
3. *Conservative, MAGA candidates in many GOP districts have a well-established, robust grass-roots infrastructure that they can rely on as a base of support while Democratic candidates do not. Regardless of a person’s preference between the three political strategies noted above developing a grass-roots base of support for non-MAGA Democratic candidates is a clearly desirable goal.*

Let’s look at these three propositions in more detail.

1. *Working class Americans are not entirely ideologically homogeneous. There are distinct subgroups with a range of political perspectives. Some do not accept MAGA ideology.*

The idea that working class voters are a basically homogeneous group is reflected in the extremely common generalizations about what “most” or “all” of them think. Even at the most superficial level, however, this is obviously false. Even in Hillary Clinton’s utterly ghastly, breathtakingly clueless campaign, for example, around 30% – almost a third of white, less than college voters supported her. This was a 10% decline from Obama’s 40% support in 2008 which proved fatal to her campaign.

It can very reasonably be objected that these percentages are artifacts of the very sloppy “less than college” definition of working class being used. The tattooed twenty something barista in a trendy Brooklyn neighborhood and the drummer in a Portland rock band fit the definition but are hardly what the term “working class” is usually thought to include. A more stringent definition focused on more traditional working class jobs and neighborhoods would certainly reduce—but not eliminate—the levels of support above.

More difficult to dismiss are the increasing numbers of Latino and Latina voters who are voting for GOP candidates, including MAGA extremists. These voters can hardly be supporting the “great replacement” theory that bitterly demonizes them as sinister foreign invaders or the

widespread GOP accusations that they vote illegally to “steal” elections. The reasons they support Republican candidates are complex but cannot be plausibly attributed to genuine agreement with many of the major tenets of rabid MAGA ideology.

And even if one specifically focuses on traditional white working class voters, there is still a clear distinction between MAGA extremists and the group that in sociological terms is properly called “cultural traditionalists.” This latter group is a core component of the white working class but differs significantly in both ideology and personality from explicit right-wing MAGA extremists.

For an extensive discussion of cultural traditionalism in the American working class see: *The Culturally Traditional but Non-extremist Working Class Voters: Who They Are, How They Think and What Democrats Must Understand to Regain Their Support*¹

To a significant degree the widespread tendency among Democrats to visualize all white working class Americans as right wing extremists results from assuming that the mental image that one gets from observing fervent Trump supporters at Trump campaign rallies and the snarling candidates and conservative commentators who appear on the nightly news is a valid image of all workers who vote for Republican candidates. But both in-depth ethnographic field studies and the experience of individuals who work with working class people confirm that there are also many others who actually more closely conform to the image of the “working class heroes” who are regularly depicted in movies and TV. It is not a coincidence that the cinematic franchises that feature working class heroes and are the most popular with working class audiences – Sylvester Stallone in the six-movie *Rocky* cinematic franchise, Bruce Willis in the five-movie *Die Hard* franchise, Vin Diesel in the nine-movie *Fast and Furious* franchise and the ranch hands in the four season *Yellowstone* TV series all feature characters who are physically brave, tough and proudly working class but not bitter, bigoted and narrow-minded but rather basically decent “nice guys.” These characters fully identify with their traditional working class culture—urban or rural—but not with right-wing ideology.

2. *The size of this non-MAGA group is obviously critical to its political significance but the critical fact is that even if it is quite modest, it can still have a very significant impact.*

This was most dramatically illustrated by the small but vital shift that occurred between 2016 and 2020.

As Ruy Teixeira notes:

White working class voters did indeed shift against Trump in 2020 relative to 2016, albeit not as much as pre-election polls suggested would happen. That 3 point shift against Trump was exactly what Trump didn’t need; what he needed was a 3 point shift toward him to replicate his 2016 success. It’s a popular, if unenlightening, exercise to claim that such-and-such a demographic group “won” the election for Biden, given the small vote margins in a handful of states. I won’t do that here but it’s fair to say that the white working class vote was “the dog that didn’t bark” in 2020. Trump needed more of their support, not less, in 2020 and he just didn’t get it.

And Teixeira notes an equally important aspect of this shift:

¹https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_culturally_traditional_WWC_voters_v2.pdf

Trump still carried white noncollege voters nationally by a wide margin in 2020 but strikingly they also made up a larger share of Biden's coalition (32 percent) than white college voters (29 percent),²

In short, a small decline in white working class support for Trump not only made a vital contribution to his defeat but working class voters actually constitute a central part of Biden's political coalition.

This same pattern is repeated in many state and local elections. Democrats rarely win a majority of the white working class vote today but the level of support they do receive often represents the difference between defeat and victory.

3. *Conservative, MAGA candidates in many GOP districts have a well-established, robust grass-roots infrastructure that they can rely on as a base of support while Democratic candidates do not. Regardless of a person's preference between the three political strategies noted above developing a Democratic grass-roots base for Democratic candidates is a clearly desirable goal.*

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. 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.

Since the 1970's this grass-roots infrastructure decayed while 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.

The result is that now there is a totally lopsided situation.

In many districts and communities across America Democrats are essentially invisible while Republicans seem pervasive. There is a local GOP storefront headquarters in many downtown areas but no comparable Democratic presence. As elections approach friends and neighbors at little league games or church socials seem to either support Republicans or be entirely apolitical. The campaign posters that can be seen in diners and gas stations seem unanimous in their support for the GOP. In this social milieu even Democratic candidates with genuine roots in the community and a sincere identification with their neighbors' problems cannot overcome the cultural pressure that makes voting for Democrats seem abnormal.

This pervasive cultural atmosphere has its strongest effect on working people who do not pay attention to politics or have strong ideological views and who are therefore much more likely to follow the lead of their friends and neighbors. As a result, it is particularly the cultural

²https://theliberalpatriot.substack.com/p/ten-things-we-now-know-about-the-1a6?utm_source=%2Fprofile%2F12224429-ruy-teixeira&utm_medium=reader2

traditionalists in the working class who are most likely to be influenced by the absence of a grass-roots Democratic infrastructure even though they are also the least committed to right-wing extremist views.

This makes investment in developing Democratic grass-roots infrastructure an obvious objective – and one that many will recognize is likely to be more productive than unending arguments about strategy that are conducted in a locked room in hell.

At one point in the play *No Exit* a mysterious door in the claustrophobic room opens, offering the possibility that at least one of the characters might be able to escape. Yet none of the characters are able to leave because their entire sense of their own identity has become completely entangled in their debate with the other occupants of the room.

The op ed pages of the leading newspapers are certainly a less obviously claustrophobic venue than a small room in the depths of hell but the comparison is not entirely misleading. The debate over the three strategies above will never be definitively resolved but it need not be a trap from which *No Exit* can possibly be found.