

*Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority*

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TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

THREE PROFOUNDLY DANGEROUS  
MYTHS ABOUT THE 2018 ELECTIONS

BY

ANDREW LEVISON

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In the days immediately after the 2018 elections the most widely circulated analysis held that along with high turnout among minority voters the significant Democratic gains in the House of Representatives and in a range of state level elections were the result of the significant defection from the GOP of college educated whites, particularly women and voters in “suburbs” across the country.

In contrast white voters with less than a college education, the group generally defined as the “white working class,” and voters in rural areas were then described as remaining completely committed to Trump and the GOP. In literally dozens of articles they were defined as the “Rock-Solid Republican “Base” and “Trump Country.”

The strategic conclusion this implied was obvious: efforts to regain support among these voters would be a waste of time. For 2020 and beyond, all Democratic efforts at voter persuasion and mobilization should be focused on educated whites, the suburbs and people of color.

This was quickly accepted by many Democrats because it simply “felt” true. Politically involved Democrats personally know and regularly talk to educated women and men who are feminists, supporters of Bernie Sanders, scientists and social justice advocates and who are passionately opposed to Trump as well as with less political middle class men and women who are simply repelled by Trump’s greed, corruption and misogyny. In contrast, most politically involved Democratic activists have little or no personal contact with working class people like sheetrock contractors, hardware store sales workers or agricultural machinery repairmen. As a result the consensus view seemed entirely plausible.

But in recent weeks new data has emerged—data that sharply contradicts the initial assessment and casts significant doubt on the strategic conclusions which have been drawn from it.

In order to properly assess this new data, let’s break down the broad narrative above into three specific empirical assertions that can be evaluated one by one. They are:

1. ***A substantial number of college educated voters who voted Republican in 2016 switched to the Democrats this year while, in contrast, white working class voters maintained (or perhaps even increased) their 2016 level of support for the GOP.***

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Andrew Levison is the author of *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*. Along with Ed Kilgore, he is coordinator of *The White Working Class Roundtable*.

2. *The “suburbs” that shifted from supporting the GOP in 2016 to the Democrats this year were composed of educated middle class voters.*
3. *In 2018 rural areas maintained or increased their 2016 level of support for the GOP*

Let’s look at them in turn.

### Myth #1:

**A substantial number of college educated voters who voted Republican in 2016 switched to the Democrats this year while white working class voters maintained (or perhaps even increased) their 2016 level of support for the GOP.**

The headlines that trumpeted this conclusion were often a bit unclear. Some declared that *“the white working class is now more than ever Trump’s true base”* or *“white working class America: still Trump country”* making it difficult to tell if it were being asserted that white working people had simply maintained their 2016 levels of support for the GOP or if their level of support had actually increased since that time. The one thing these headlines clearly asserted, however, was that white working class support for the GOP had **not** declined.

But as more detailed data has become available, it turns out that this conclusion is wrong. Political demographer Ruy Teixeira was one of the first to spot the trend. As he said:

To read a lot of the coverage of the 2018 election, you’d think the only shift of real significance in the election was the movement of suburban white college-educated voters toward the Democrats. This is just not true no matter how well it fits into pre-existing narratives about the election favored by the media.

The white college educated versus less educated part of the standard view is definitely suspect. **My analysis of Catalyst data indicates that, while white college voters made a very significant contribution to the Democrats’ gains, white noncollege voters did as well. The split was roughly 2:1 between white college and white noncollege.**

Writing in the publication *Working Class Perspectives*, the former head of the Working Class Studies Association Jack Metzgar goes into more detail:

—while the GOP won among the white working class this year by 24 points, that is a substantial shift away from the 37-point advantage they gave Trump in 2016. **And because this group of whites represents 41% of all voters, compared with college-educated whites who make up only 31%, that 13-point shift produced some 6 million additional votes for Dem candidates versus the 4 million produced by the 11-point gain Dems achieved among the white middle class.** So shifts toward the Dems among “poorly educated” whites were of greater importance than the shift in the metro suburbs.

In the exit polls, “non-whites,” including Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Others, were about 29% of voters and gave Dems an overwhelming 54-point advantage—both numbers just 1-point higher than in 2016. As the core of the Democratic base, people

of color provide the foundation for any Democratic victory, **but the shifts among both kinds of whites [college educated and non-college educated] in 2018 account for the flip of the House.**

Leading political polling analyst Stan Greenberg also looked at the 2018 data, not only from his firms' own public opinion polls but also the Catalyst analysis and exit polls and drew similar conclusions. As he says:

Mr. Trump and his party maintained their principal base with white working class voters, and Democrats still need to do better. **Nonetheless, Democrats got their wave in part because a significant portion of male and female white working class voters abandoned Mr. Trump and his Republican allies.**

When he looked at white working class men in particular, Greenberg found that:

In 2016, the white working class men that Mr. Trump spoke most forcefully to as the "forgotten Americans" gave him 71 percent of their votes and gave only 23 percent to Hillary Clinton. This year, the Republicans won their votes with a still-impressive margin of 66 to 32 percent. But **what was essentially a three-to-one margin was deflated to two-to-one, which affected a lot of races.**

Finally, Ron Brownstein noted that **Democrats did particularly well among one sector of the white working class—white working class women who were not evangelical Christians:**

Cracks have emerged in **Donald Trump's** hold on his core constituency of white working class voters, new data from the **2018 election** reveal.

Though Republican candidates almost everywhere registered large margins among white voters without a college degree, Democrats ran much more competitively [in 2018] among the roughly half of that group who are not evangelical Christians... Nationwide, nearly three-fifths of blue-collar white women who are not evangelicals voted Democratic in last month's House races... Those women could be a key constituency for Democrats in 2020 in pivotal Rust Belt states such as Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, where relatively fewer blue-collar whites are also evangelical Christians.

The data necessary to even more precisely pin down the exact size of the pro-Democratic shift of white working class men and women between 2016 and 2018 will not be available for several more months but there are currently no reported studies that suggest that this shift did not occur.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For many readers this may seem at odds with other articles they have read that seemed to argue the opposite. But in this area one has to be very careful to compare "apples with apples"—that is, just 2018 with 2016—because there are many distinct kinds of analyses that can seem contradictory but really aren't.

Here's an example. In Nate Cohn's 538 blog a piece recently appeared with the following title: *"White Voters Without A Degree Remained Staunchly Republican In 2018"*

Wow, that certainly sounds clear enough and the first page of the text seemed to solidly confirm it.

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## Myth #2:

The “suburbs” that shifted from supporting the GOP in 2016 to the Democrats this year were composed of educated middle class voters.

Writing in the *New York Times* “Upshot” section, [Emily Badger, Quoc Trung Bui and Josh Katz](#) noted the important point that:

“The popular image of the suburbs is stuck in a model that emerged in Orange County in the 1960s: Goldwater-Reagan voters, white-collar, conservative activists,” said Matthew Lassiter, a University of Michigan historian who has studied suburban voters.

[but] Many of the districts that flipped Democratic this year, particularly in Sun Belt suburbs of Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and Orange County, have grown much more racially and economically diverse, defying conventional portraits of suburbia.

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“In 2016... White voters without a bachelor’s degree made up the Republican base, while a coalition of nonwhite voters and white college graduates formed the Democratic base. The 2018 midterms seemed to continue what we saw in 2016: Districts with bigger black populations, Hispanic populations or college-educated non-Hispanic white populations tended to vote more Democratic, while non-college-educated white voters remained **strongly loyal to the GOP**. We found a clear negative relationship ( $R = -0.72$ ) between the Democratic margin of victory in a district and the share of the district’s population age 25 or older who are non-Hispanic white and lack a bachelor’s degree—a group that pundits often call the “white working class.”<sup>1</sup>

But reading further in the article it turns out that this correlation of  $R = -0.72$  was actually 7% lower in 2018 than it was in 2016 which indicated that white workers were actually **more** Democratic in 2018 than in 2016. In fact, later in the text the authors confirm this:

“But In terms of white voters’ educational attainment predicting election outcomes, 2018 represented a middle ground between 2016 and 2012. Voters neither snapped back to their pre-2016 preferences [when Obama ran against the plutocratic Mitt Romney] nor remained quite as divided by education as they were when Trump himself was on the ballot.”

In fact, using the authors’ methodology, the data reveal that in 2018 white workers actually moved half way back to where they had been in 2012 when they elected Obama instead of Romney.

The authors were not being intentionally misleading. They were analyzing the broad long-term trend of general white working class support for the GOP and not focusing on the profoundly important change that occurred between 2016 and 2018. But the fact is that, when read carefully, their analysis actually confirms the pro-Democratic trend noted in this memo rather than contradicts it. Careful reading of other articles will often reveal similar differences between what the headline and lead paragraph seem to suggest and what the data actually reveal.

To see just how different today's "suburbs" are, just take a look at the chart below:

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## The share of adults who are college educated has increased in each community type

*% of population 25 and older by education*

	Year	<HS grad	HS grad	Some college	Bachelor's+
<b>Urban</b>					
	2012-16	15	23	27	35
	2000	22	24	27	28
<b>Suburban</b>					
	2012-16	11	28	30	31
	2000	17	29	28	25
<b>Rural</b>					
	2012-16	15	36	30	19
	2000	24	36	25	15

Note: "Some college" includes those with an associate degree and those who attended college but did not obtain a degree. County categories based on the National Center for Health Statistics Urban-Rural Classification Scheme for Counties.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2000 decennial census SF3 data and 2012-2016 American Community Survey data. "What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities"

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39% of suburban dwellers have no more than a high school diploma and an additional 30% have less than a college degree, indicating that less than a third of "suburbanites" are college graduates.

Now it is critical to recognize that this chart includes both whites and non-whites. But the total percent of non-college graduates is so high that even if the chart were limited to whites alone, it would still show that a majority of "suburbanites" have not graduated college.

As the quote above notes, this is certainly not our normal image of the "Suburbs." But when we make the mental distinction between the gated communities and relatively affluent suburbs, on the one hand and the "urban fringe" that surrounds large cities on the other it becomes more familiar. These latter areas have smaller, older and cheaper houses and streets with Family Dollar and

Dollar General Supermarkets instead of Whole Foods and Trader Joes and with Cracker Barrel “home style” restaurants, Waffle Houses, used car lots and army-navy surplus stores rather than sushi joints, latte-coffee shops and yoga studios. We do not think about these kinds of areas as “the suburbs” when we drive through them but that is how they are classed in geographic data.

Next time you pass a house under construction with a line of contractors’ trucks and construction workers’ cars in front of it, look carefully at the license plates. They will reveal that these workers do not live in the central urban counties but in the outlying fringe counties outside the perimeter.

It was these “suburbs” as well as the more educated and affluent ones that played a key role in the Democratic gains in 2018. [As Metzgar noted:](#)

Along with the dozen or so suburban districts Democrats flipped in 2018, Dems also flipped at least 14 House districts that cannot be characterized as “suburban,” let alone “wealthy.” Nate Silver highlighted many of these as “Obama-Trump” districts because they went for Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2016. There were 21 such districts, mostly in Rust Belt states where there are large proportions of white working-class voters—including 6 in New York, 3 each in Iowa and Minnesota, 2 each in Illinois and New Jersey, and one each in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Democrats won 14 of them, and that is at least as important as the “wealthy suburban districts” D.C. pundits continue to focus on.

### Myth #3:

**In 2018 rural areas maintained or increased their 2016 level of support for the GOP**

Writing in the *Washington Monthly*, [Daniel Block reviewed the data on rural voting:](#)

For most pundits and journalists, Democrats’ successful Election Night was marred by a rural disaster. The *New York Times* wrote that “the Democratic collapse in rural areas that began to plague their candidates under President Obama worsened.” Vox correspondent Zack Beauchamp argued that “Democratic inroads in the suburbs were offset by huge Republican gains in rural areas.” The *Hill* summarized such thinking by claiming that “rural voters stormed to the polls in virtually unprecedented numbers, delivering once again for the president they voted for in 2016.” That article quoted Oklahoma GOP representative Tom Cole, who said, “Rural America’s much more Republican than ever before.”

They’re wrong. On the whole, Democrats performed better in rural areas during these mid-terms than in 2016, which helped the party win some of its most consequential victories.

According to the most recent data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES)—a political science survey of more than 50,000 people conducted around election time—**roughly five percent of rural Trump voters cast their ballots for a Democrat running for a House seat.** That’s not a huge gain, and as Tuft’s political science professor and CCES co-director Brian Schaffner told me, it was smaller than Democratic improvements in urban and suburban regions. **But a five percent improvement is far from meaningless, and a preliminary breakdown of the returns in three critical contests suggests that, in some parts of America, the rural shift to Democratic candidates was even larger. In some races, it ultimately made the difference.**

The London Economist [confirmed the trend](#):

Democrats did far better in rural America, particularly in the Midwest, than is commonly understood. **If the baseline is how Hillary Clinton preformed in 2016, Democrats actually saw their largest increase in vote share in rural constituencies...** working class white voters in rural areas across the country shifted their votes toward Democrats by seven points.

And Ruy Teixeira [provides additional evidence](#) for this conclusion:

G. Elliott Morris on The Crosstab takes particular aim at the almost-universal under-estimation of Democratic gains in rural areas (something I've posted about previously). As he says:

We may have overlooked that, compared to 2016, House Democrats actually did better in rural areas in the 2018 midterms. We saw evidence this year that they're beating expectations in "Middle America," not lagging behind them.

"Indeed... Democratic House candidates beat Hillary Clinton's 2016 performance all over the map, but especially in rural areas. What is notable is that Democrats seem to have slightly bounced back—or "boomeranged"—in these areas that swung toward Trump between 2012 and 2016, but they did not lose significant ground in areas that swung toward Clinton in the same period."

In other words, Democrats may have expanded their coalition in rural areas in 2018—reversing some (not nearly all!) of the polarization to the right that occurred in the region between Obama's and Trump's presidencies—without sacrificing gains they have made in recent cycles.

By and large, the strongest shifts in the Democrats' direction were within rural areas! Comparing overall urban vs. suburban vs. rural areas, the respective pro-Democratic shifts were 1, 5 and 7 points. You see roughly the same pattern when comparing urban whites vs. suburban whites vs. rural whites. You even see a 7 point shift toward the Democrats among white noncollege rural voters!

Stan Greenberg [agreed](#):

—Analysts I trusted concluded that [the Democratic 2018 victories occurred] because suburban and college-educated women issued "a sharp rebuke to President Trump" that set off a "blue wave through the urban and suburban House districts." At first, I also believed that was the main story line.

[But in fact] Democrats cut the Republicans' margin in rural areas by 13 points, according to the Edison exit poll and by seven points in one by Catalyst. Democrats still lost rural America by somewhere between 14 and 18 points so that left Democrats in a pickle there. That had implications for the Senate, but it shouldn't conceal the fact that Democrats actually made progress in rural areas.

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## Conclusion

So let's sum it up simply: **white working class and rural areas did indeed participate in the rejection of Trump in 2018 and the image of the suburbs as entirely composed of educated professionals is wrong.**

The strategic implications are clear. There are votes to be found and races to be won in white working class and rural areas as well as among the educated and urban. Giving up on white workers and rural areas is simply playing into the GOP's hands. The Republicans would like nothing better than for Democrats to cede them vast areas of the country so that they can concentrate all their resources on attacking swing districts and Democratic strongholds. Behind closed doors they are anxiously looking at the map of the elections in 2018 and hoping that Democrats will allow their deeply embedded negative attitudes about white working class and rural voters to blind them to the opportunities that exist.