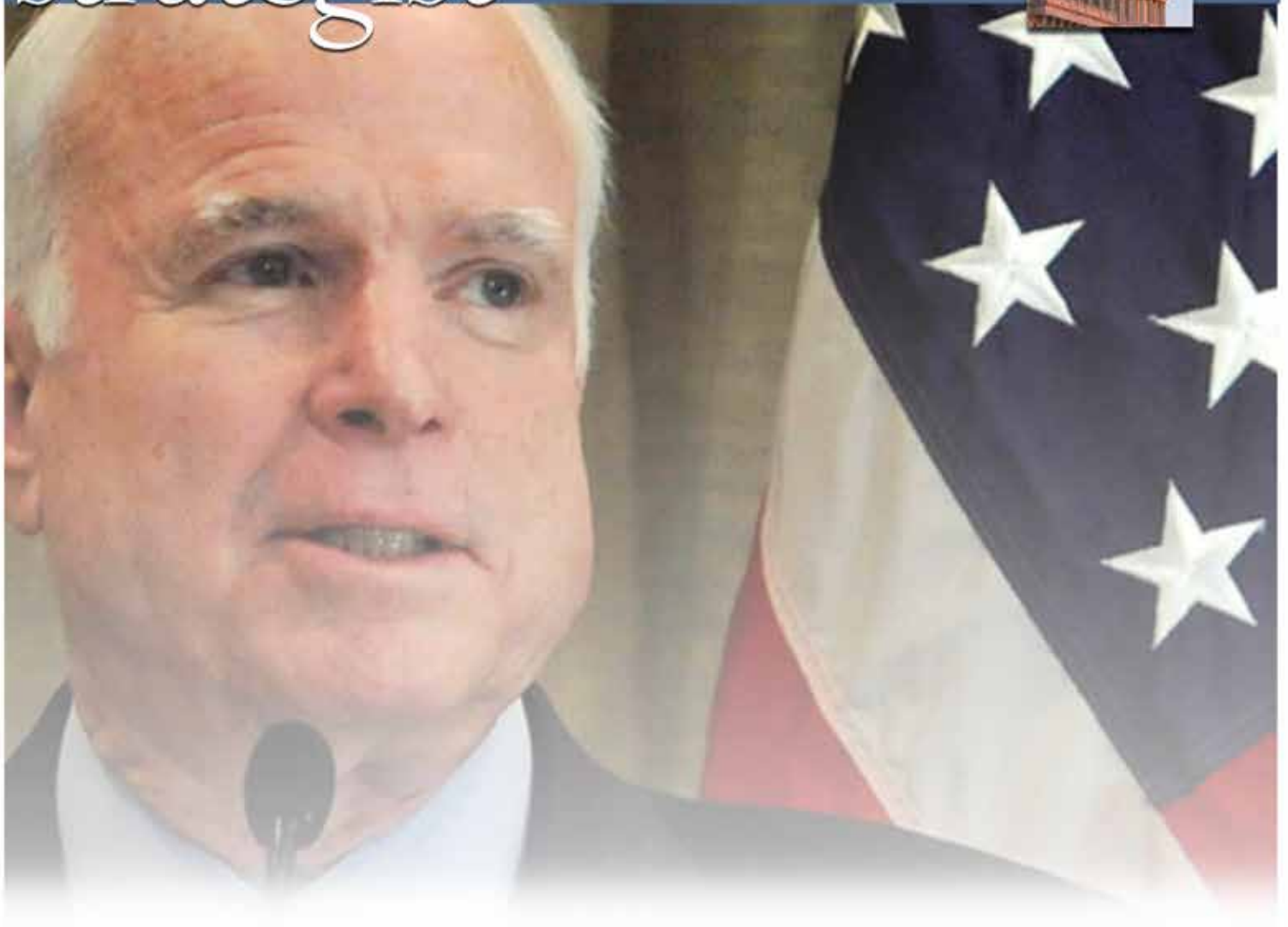


Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority

THE DEMOCRATIC
strategist



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

**HOW DEMOCRATS
CAN DRIVE A WEDGE
INTO TRUMP'S COALITION.**

BY
ANDREW LEVISON



**TDS STRATEGY MEMO:
HOW DEMOCRATS CAN DRIVE A WEDGE INTO TRUMP'S COALITION**

By ANDREW LEVISON

Joe Biden was rightly criticized by many progressives and Democrats when he said that in the past he had been able to successfully collaborate on legislation with conservatives and even with segregationists and that as a result, if elected, he wanted to reach out and try to find areas of common ground with the GOP.

Critics fumed, *"haven't you noticed that the old GOP with whom previous generations of Democrats had been able to reach compromises is today entirely gone and that the current generation of Republicans who dominate Congress and control the machinery of the GOP are without exception unprincipled extremists who gleefully and cynically engage in legislative sabotage and voter suppression to undermine the Democratic Party rather than agree to collaborate with Democrats on even the most elementary tasks of Democratic governance?"*

Biden's critics were indeed correct when they launched this condemnation of his statement but, at the same time, progressives and Democrats should be extremely careful to recognize that there is a vitally important distinction.

While it is indeed true that Trump has taken essentially complete control of the Republican delegation in the House and the Senate as well as the machinery of the Party—**GOP voters**, on the other hand, have not yet all become political extremists and passionate Trump supporters.

As [E.J. Dionne noted](#)¹ last October:

Those of us who support impeachment don't deny that there is a "Trump base," but insist that mountains of polling evidence show that it amounts to 25% to 30% of voters at most. The rest of the 46% who voted for Trump in 2016 have real doubts about who he is, how he behaves and what he is doing to our country...

The latest Reuters/Ipsos poll, conducted between Sept. 30 and Oct. 1, found that only 24% of registered voters strongly approved of Trump's performance. That 24% are the folks you see at the Trump rallies. Trump's more tepid approvers were 17% of registered voters in this survey...

Andrew Levison is the author of *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*. He is also a contributing editor of *The Democratic Strategist*.

¹<https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2019/10/07/ej-dionne-trumps-base-is/>

Moreover, a stack of surveys show that while Trump has maintained a fairly steady overall approval rating in the low 40s, the proportion of Americans who actually like and trust him is much lower. An NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll conducted Sept. 13-16 found a relatively high 45% saying they approved of Trump's performance. But only 30% said they had "very positive" feelings toward him, and only 25% said that they both liked Trump personally and approved of his policies.

The bottom line is that too much political analysis (wrongly) sees this hard core as representing all of those who backed Trump in 2016...In fact, a lot of Trump's one-time 2016 supporters do not believe everything they hear from him or Fox News. A fair number of them don't like him very much.

There are different ways to define this division among Republican voters. Some opinion surveys used terms like "*strong*" versus "*weak*" Trump supporters while others distinguished between people who "*somewhat support*" Trump versus those who "*strongly support*" him. The less supportive were variously defined as "*reluctant*" or "*ambivalent*" Trump supporters.

These different ways of defining the divisions within the GOP produced different estimates of the ratio between the committed and the ambivalent Trump supporters but two general patterns were consistently clear.

First, the number who said that they approve of Trump personally was invariably much lower than the number who gave him a positive job approval or agreed with him on some or most major issues.

Second, until recently substantially more Republicans supported Trump when the choice was posed as Trump against an unnamed Democratic opponent than when they were asked if they supported Trump's behavior or policies in general.

As a result it is possible to visualize the GOP coalition as composed of three distinct parts:

(1) Passionate Trump supporters – these are people who approve of Trump's personality and behavior as well as agreeing with him on the issues. These are the kind of people who attend Trump's rallies and raucously shout their approval.

(2) Cynical Trump allies – These are people who find him personally obnoxious or disagreeable but who are willing to support him because he advances particular parts of the conservative agenda that they consider of supreme importance.

These two groups form Trump's loyal political "base" and the simple reality is that—as many Democrats correctly argue—appeals to this group are entirely useless.

But there is a third group within the GOP coalition:

(3) Ambivalent or Reluctant Trump supporters – these are people who have significant objections to not only to Trump's behavior but to some aspects of his agenda as well. At the same time, however, these voters will simply not consider voting for a Democrat

as an alternative. Years of lurid accusations promoted by Fox News, talk radio and more recently right-wing websites and social media have successfully “demonized” Democrats for these voters at the same time that the gradual decline and virtual disappearance of Democratic candidates and local offices in many Red State neighborhoods and communities have made the Democratic Party appear to them as simply not a serious option.

The key problem that needs to be solved is figuring out how to clearly identify this distinct group of Republicans and then drive a wedge between them and Trump’s base voters

The first, critical step in this process is to recognize that this group is not the same as the traditional political category of “moderate Republicans.” The term moderate Republican tends to create the image of college educated men and women who are conservative on tax and economic issues but to some degree more “middle of the road” on social issues like reproductive rights or other “libertarian” concerns.

The problem with Democrats focusing their appeal entirely on such moderate, college-educated voters is that can very easily end up alienating white working people if it is too narrowly focused on Trump’s crudeness, ignorance and vulgarity and ignores white working class issues.²

There is, however, a different way of appealing to reluctant Trump voters—a way that is less narrowly focused on traditional, educated, “moderate” Republicans and more on aspects of Trump’s character and values that also offends the distinct category of “traditional Conservative Republicans”—both working class and middle class.

The key to this approach is suggested by the unprecedented degree to which a genuinely vast range of Republicans were offended by Trump’s sneering disrespect for John McCain, both before and after McCain’s death. While many of Trump’s insults to his other political “enemies” were dismissed as trivial by his supporters, many traditional GOP voter—and particularly veterans of the Vietnam War—viewed Trump’s attitude toward McCain as profoundly vile. It was spitting on the grave of a genuine military hero. It revealed the truth about Trump—that he was basically a petulant, spoiled brat who had never sacrificed anything in his life and who did not even have the character to understand that he owed respect to a man who had bravely suffered and sacrificed in the way that McCain had done.

Public opinion polls revealed that this particular display of Trump’s true character deeply repulsed even many of his “base” supporters. A U-Gov survey at the time of McCain’s funeral showed

²Hillary Clinton’s advertising strategy in 2016 provided a perfect example of how this occurs. Her first major ad projected an attitude that, while it was clearly aimed at mothers with small children, sounded to many working people like an expression of elitist disdain. It showed clips of Trump imitating a disabled reporter during a televised rally and telling critics to “go f**k themselves” while wide-eyed, innocent looking children watched him on TV as the narrator says, in effect, “Oh my goodness, those poor little children. Whatever will they think?” The rather sanctimonious message of the ad was that Trump was appallingly vulgar and lacked the proper dignity and decency that a president should display. Subsequent ads in the Clinton campaign continued this same basic theme.

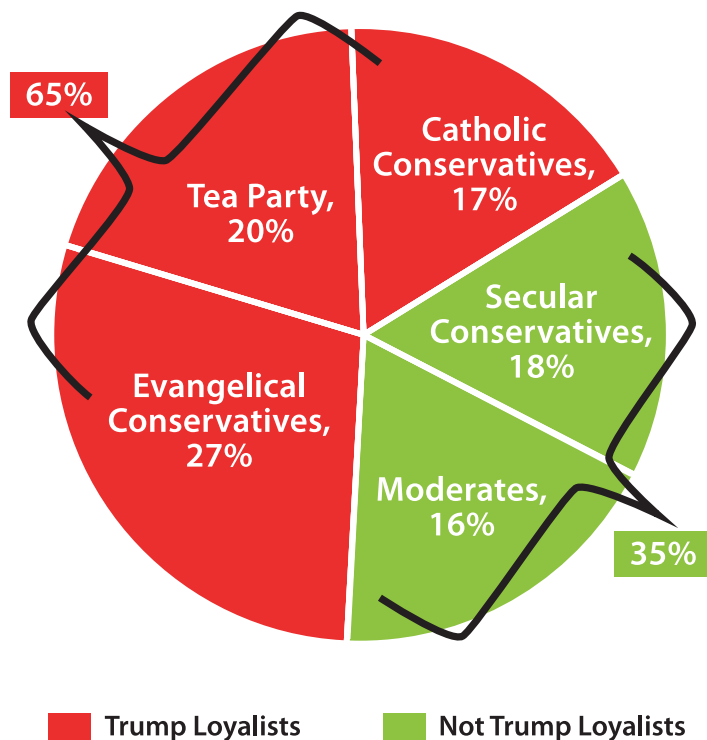
This represented a gamble that Trump could be beaten simply by winning the support of educated middle class Republican voters. In contrast, despite appeals from various advisors, including Bill Clinton himself, none of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign messaging presented any serious attempt to show sincere identification with white working class voters or expose how Trump was betraying them. Trump did indeed deeply disgust millions of college educated Americans who had previously voted Republican but at the same time the condescending tone of Hillary’s campaign reinforced Trump’s ability to project himself as an authentic, “no bullshit” champion of the white working class against the smug liberal elite.

that almost half—45% of **Trump’s own supporters**—who were aware of the issue clearly objected to his attitude and considered his behavior deeply offensive.

This suggests a different way of approaching the “non-base” part of the GOP electorate—not as all being educated middle class moderates with their distinct perspective but rather as a mixture of both middle class and working class moderates and conservatives all of whom are deeply offended by broader aspects of Trump’s character and the extremism of many of his policies.

One of the most detailed studies of the internal composition of the GOP has been the “Republican Party Project” produced by Democracy Corps. It divides the GOP into five subgroups, three of which are firmly part of trump’s base and two of which display a significant degree of disapproval of Trump’s personality and policies.

2019 COMPOSITION OF GOP BASE ³



A key fact that this chart shows quite clearly is that the “non-loyal” part of the GOP is not solely composed of traditional moderates but also includes a slightly larger group which Democracy Corps defines as “Secular” or “McCain” Conservatives.

The most powerful objections that this “McCain Conservative” sector of the GOP has to Trump and his administration can be classed into three basic categories.

³https://democracycorps.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Dcorps_December-National-GOP-Poll_Slide-Deck_121819.pdf

1. **Trump's deeply corrupt character** – From the beginning of the 2016 Republican primaries Trump unapologetically refused to treat the presidency as requiring any sacrifice or limitation of personal gain. Quite the contrary, Trump explicitly insisted on his right to profit from office, conceal his financial affairs, promote unqualified family members and business associates and use the power of the presidency to promote his personal financial interests. He thus proudly asserted his right to be as greedy and selfish as he pleased. His attitude contrasted dramatically with John McCain's traditional view of public service as a civic duty and not a method for making oneself rich—a view that many traditional conservative Republicans supported and admired.
2. **Trump's stunning lack of traditional Patriotism and support for the American system of government** – There are many Republicans—ranging from the many young, working class Americans, many fresh out of high school, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan to more educated men and women who have worked since 9/11 in military, intelligence and national security—who understand “patriotism” as being the support of the “the West” and the “free world” against anti-Western dictatorships, both secular and theocratic.

These traditional patriotic Republicans were genuinely shocked by Trump's startling approval and even apparent hero-worship of Vladimir Putin and Russia, even in direct preference to the United States. Not only had Trump surrounded himself with a network of shady characters who had direct financial ties to Russian plutocrats and Russian organized crime but he seemed repeatedly committed to advancing Putin's foreign policy goals—from weakening and dividing NATO to providing openings for Russian influence in the Middle East and Eastern Europe—even to the extent of betraying U.S. allies like the Kurds in the Middle East and the Ukrainians in Eastern Europe in the process. Among many “establishment” Republicans, since the Second World War the central U.S. foreign policy objective has been the defense of the Western democracies and the NATO countries. Trump seemed literally committed to undermining these fundamental pillars of the post-war international order.

At the same time Trump also seemed stunningly consistent in embracing authoritarian leaders around the world -- from Duarte in the Philippines to Bolsonaro in Brazil, Modi in India and Kim Il Sung in North Korea. In Western Europe Trump praised and indicated his support for the leaders of neo-fascist parties ranging from Orban in Hungary to Marine Le Pen and the National Front in France. These initiatives on his part made it clear that Trump had a chilling regard and approval for dictators and authoritarian regimes and a hostility verging on open contempt for traditional U.S. allies.

In this regard, the difference between Trump and John McCain was breathtaking. While Democrats often disagreed with McCain's hard line views on foreign policy, his basic commitment to NATO and the Western Democracies was never doubted.

3. **Trump's fundamental lack of decency** – While John McCain supported a very wide range of conservative and Republican positions that Democrats firmly opposed, he was never considered by them to be either a racial bigot or political extremist. McCain was respected by Barack Obama and John Lewis, adopted an orphaned child from India and, along with Edward Kennedy and others attempted to pass bipartisan compromise legislation on immigration. The contrast with the repellently ghoulish glee with which Donald Trump viciously stereotypes, insults and scapegoats Latinos and African-Americans during his rallies is impossible to ignore.

McCain was also never part of the extremist wave of candidates that began to infiltrate Congress during the George W. Bush era and which grew dramatically in size during the elections of 2010, 2012 and 2014. The distinguishing feature of these modern political extremists is their view of politics as warfare and political opponents as literal enemies. This “politics as warfare” perspective justifies vote suppression, “Big Lie” propaganda, sabotage of the government and the refusal to negotiate or compromise over any Democratic legislation. McCain had been the victim of attacks by the new extremists in his previous campaigns and as the full dimensions of Trump’s extremism became clear he took the most clear and forthright stand against this kind of “politics as warfare” extremism of anyone in the GOP.

It is important to note, however, that McCain was not in any sense a “liberal” or “progressive.” Quite the contrary, he was in virtually all respects a very solid conservative Republican. As [Branko Marcetic argued in an article in Jacobin](#):⁴

Keen observers noted, as the Toronto Globe and Mail did in 2008, that McCain was really “a hard-line Republican with a few points of divergence from the party’s mainstream.” As of 2017, **McCain has an 81 percent lifetime rating from the American Conservative Union....**

McCain undeniably had a constructive side, including his push for campaign finance reform. But any victories he won in that vein have tended to be undone by the conservative movement whose goals McCain faithfully backed throughout his decades in power.

This, of course, is precisely why McCain is a very useful and appropriate figure for Democrats to point to when calling on “reluctant” Republican voters to reject the unparalleled extremism of Donald Trump. Such voters would be entirely uninfluenced by a Republican who held liberal or progressive views. It is exactly because McCain was instead an undeniably conservative politician, and is recognized as such by traditional Republicans, that Democrats can point to him as a meaningful conservative alternative to Donald Trump.

In fact, the key value for Joe Biden or other Democrats in citing John McCain as the kind of Republican they had worked with in the past and whom they would reach out if they were elected to is that it forces the “reluctant” Trump supporters to face the fact that there are indeed two distinct philosophies among GOP voters and that they are faced with a stark choice between supporting John McCain’s traditional form of American conservatism and the profoundly vile extremism of Donald Trump.

There are three overlapping objectives that can be pursued with this strategy.

1. It can aim at convincing ambivalent Republicans to withhold their vote as way of demonstrating their disapproval. In places where Republicans heavily dominate, this can be a way for these Republicans to express their desire for less extremist behavior without necessarily allowing the victory of a Democratic candidate. In more competitive districts it can be a way to reduce the GOP vote without asking ambivalent Trump voters to actually vote Democratic.

⁴<https://jacobinmag.com/2018/08/john-mccain-was-not-hero-obituary-war-racism-sexism>

2. It can aim at generating debate and conflict between GOP candidates during primaries—this can serve to challenge the ideological domination of the Trumpist/extremist wing over the Republican Party.
3. It can aim at giving a Democratic candidate a way to reach out to ambivalent Republican voters during general elections.

And it is important to note that there is a very special and distinct strategic advantage to challenging Republican candidates with the alternative of *“John McCain Republicanism.”* It puts them in a viciously difficult “no-win” dilemma. If a Republican candidate asserts that he does genuinely want to represent the McCain Republicans as well as the base, he or she risks facing the wrath and fury of the Trump base voters who bitterly revile McCain as a RINO and quite literally a “traitor” for having publicly opposed Trump. In fact, a candidate will risk provoking the wrath of Trump himself whose hatred of McCain is quite literally pathological. If Democratic candidates say they are willing to reach out and work with “McCain Republicans,” Trump will be almost certainly unable to resist bitterly attacking McCain’s memory once again, further increasing the split between his base and the “reluctant” Trump voters.

On the other hand, if a Republican candidate categorically repudiates McCain to satisfy Trump’s base supporters, he or she will clearly communicate to the reluctant Trump supporters that they are simply not welcome in the modern GOP if they refuse to join the extremist wing of the party.

In short, there are many advantages for Joe Biden or other Democratic candidates to assert their willingness to reach out to “McCain Republicans.” It is a uniquely effective way to drive a wedge between the two wings of Trump’s current support.

A Final Note

Some Democrats will argue that any outreach at all to Republicans is unnecessary because Democrats can win coming elections without winning any Republican support whatsoever. Some argue that simply mobilizing the existing democratic coalition will be sufficient while others argue that adopting the “right,” uncompromisingly progressive platform and agenda can convince Republicans to vote for Democrats instead.

There are very substantial and convincing data-based arguments for why neither of these strategies can safely be relied on to defeat Trump and also regain a Senate majority. The analyses of Roy Teixeira, Ron Brownstein, Nate Cohn and others can be cited in this regard. In fact, even if Trump is defeated in November, if Democrats do not also solidly control the Senate, Mitch McConnell will simply sabotage every piece of legislation and sideline every judicial candidate Democrats propose. Even if Democrats achieve narrow control of the Senate as well, The Senate minority and state legislatures in Republican dominated states can still foil and cripple the implementation of any measures Democrats enact.

The simple but painful reality is that so long as over 40% of the American electorate is willing to vote for the extremist agenda of Donald Trump, social progress will be limited, sporadic, insecure and reversible. What is necessary is to drive a wedge into the current Republican coalition, dividing the extremist base from the reluctant GOP voters.

Right now, the reluctant Trump voters support Trump and the GOP because they perceive their choices as limited to voting for either Democrats or Republicans. The strategy of appealing to “John McCain Conservatives” is designed to drive a wedge between the extremists and traditional conservative Republicans. This will begin to establish the sociological foundation for future Democratic victories and a return to the less extremist politics of the past.