



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

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NARRATIVE ABOUT DEMOCRATS’ STRUGGLE TO REGAIN THE
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“NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD” OF
AMERICAN POLITICAL COMMENTARY. NO MATTER
HOW MANY TIMES IT IS BURIED BY THE WEIGHT OF EVENTS
IT KEEPS ON COMING BACK.**

BY

ANDREW LEVISON

The New York Times Magazine



The Night of the Zombie Political Clichés

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Here’s the plot of this oft-repeated journalistic bed-time story:

1. In the 1980’s the Democrats had drifted too far to the left, driving away working class voters who became “Reagan Democrats” instead. In response, the “New Democrats” organized to regain the lost working class support. In his 1992 campaign Clinton used the New Democratic strategy and narrative to win victory. He signaled his break with the left and embrace of a moderate agenda with a dramatic “Sister Souljah” moment during the campaign and thereby regained “the center.”
2. Now, once again, Democrats have drifted too far to the left, losing working class voters to Trump and the GOP. And again, “Moderates” are pushing back.

Even on the surface this narrative doesn’t hold up to serious scrutiny. After the 1992 election and particularly in his second term, Clinton adopted a neoliberal economic agenda from advisors headed by Treasury secretary Robert Rubin and—under the rubric of the British “Third Way”—took trade, globalization and deregulation measures that not only continued but substantially worsened the process of deindustrialization that had destroyed vast numbers of decent factory jobs under Ronald Reagan. In the op-ed pages of the leading newspapers and magazines, Clinton’s neoliberal advisors wrote appallingly blasé and dismissive assurances that displaced workers could easily adapt to lost jobs by “improving their human capital” – i.e., by going to college and getting new and better jobs in the “information economy.”

At the same time under the influence of political strategist Mark Penn the “New Democrats” radically shifted their focus from regaining the support of white working class voters to winning college educated white professionals—a switch Penn obscured under a range of smug ad agency marketing euphemisms—“soccer moms,” “office park dads” and “wired workers.”

This enduring Democratic abandonment of the white working class emerged as absolutely central to Donald Trump’s successful appeal to the white working class many years later. In his speeches Trump quite literally *plagiarized word for word* the writings of trade union and progressive economists that criticized Clinton’s neoliberal economic policies and excoriated the disdain of the educated elite for ordinary Americans.

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As a result, any narrative that describes Clintonian “Third Way” centrism” as actually being a strategy that is designed to win the support of the American working class is, to use a technical term drawn from political demographics, just plain stupid.

Political journalism, however, rarely lets facts ruin a good story. The notion that appealing to “moderates” or “the center” can be equated with appeals to the American working class continues to periodically reemerges as a meme in the mainstream media. It is the journalistic equivalent of the endless succession of slasher film sequels that feature the 9th or 10th utterly implausible return of a machete or chainsaw wielding maniac.

The latest incarnation is a major NYT Magazine piece by Jason Zengerle. titled “The Vanishing Moderate Democrat.”

As campaign journalism about the 2022 elections the piece is unobjectionable. It features interviews with various moderate Democratic candidates detailing their travails with the left of the Democratic Party and their advocacy of less left-wing rhetoric. It quotes three leading critics of “woke” sloganeering Sean McElwee, David Shor and Ruy Teixeira, substantially oversimplifying their strategic recommendations to be simply avoiding extreme positions in favor of more popular ones -- a stance often labeled “Populism.”

More important, however, the article plays fast and loose with the question of who it is that moderate candidates are actually appealing to.

On the one hand the article says it is the non-college working class:

The Democrats have taken up ideological stances that many of the college-educated voters who now make up a sizable portion of the party’s base cheer but the rest of the electorate does not....

...In the past few years, a growing and increasingly vocal cohort of strategists, policy wonks and intellectuals has been arguing that Democrats have overreached on social and cultural issues and that, as a result, the party has become unable to appeal to **voters without college degrees** — and, increasingly, not just white voters in that group but Hispanic, Asian American and Black voters too. From 2012 to 2020, the support of **nonwhite voters without college degrees** for the Democratic presidential candidate decreased by 10 percentage points. *Much as in the early 1990s, the most vibrant and urgent discussion in Democratic circles currently revolves around why and how the party needs to steer itself back to the center.*

It is important to notice that there is a subtle but critical “bait and switch” being performed here. The problem is defined specifically as losing the working class but then in the last sentence the problem is suddenly redefined as the need to return to “the center” which is not necessarily the same thing. As the Muppets often explain to 4 year old children on Sesame Street, “*One of these things is not like the other.*”

In the process of profiling Data for Progress's Sean McElwee, the article repeats the idea that centrism equals appealing to the working class.

While McElwee personally still supported many of these left-wing policy proposals, Data for Progress's polling showed that they weren't actually popular with voters – or at least not with the **working-class, non-college-educated voters Democrats need to win outside those safe blue districts.**

But the “moderate” candidates the article profiles hardly qualify as “working class heroes.” As it says:

[Rep. Susan Wild from Pennsylvania's 7th district] was eating a lunch of crab asparagus bisque and blackened tuna roll topped with lobster salad at an upscale bistro in Bethlehem's intermittently gentrifying downtown during Congress's Easter recess. She continued, “People look at me as a 64-year-old woman who was a lawyer and represented a lot of corporations and hospitals over the years, and they're like, ‘Yeah, I'm pretty sure she's not a socialist.’ ...But the main thing, again, for me, is being willing to be pro-business.”

Wild is not unusual among moderate Democrats in promoting an economic agenda that champions the interests of industry, Wall Street and the affluent. Although [New Jersey Representative] Josh Gottheimer spends a lot of time jousting with the Squad, his signature issue is raising or eliminating the cap on the state and local tax deduction – not exactly a pressing concern of working-class voters. (Relatedly, Gottheimer doesn't need to worry about appealing to small-dollar donors. A favorite of Wall Street donors, he currently has \$13 million in his campaign war chest.)

In short, the reader gets whipsawed between an analysis that seems to suggest that “moderate” candidates are what the party needs to regain working class voters and portraits of “moderate” candidates who define themselves as proudly pro-corporate and who are not described as doing anything at all in particular to win working class voters.

But the article is not so much dishonest as it is incoherent. It simply assumes without evidence that moving to the center on social issues is automatically equivalent to appealing to working class voters.

But it is, in fact, absolutely vital that democratic strategists clearly distinguish between these two concepts.

For most of the post-World War II era the advocates of political moderation portrayed American politics as basically aligned along a “liberal-moderate-conservative” continuum without any reference to social class. Again and again in op-ed commentaries and magazine articles American politics was depicted by a simplistic chart as follows:

Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
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Since opinion polls consistently showed that more voters defined themselves as conservatives than as liberals, it was always suggested that Democrats had to tack more forcefully to the center than did Republicans.

Social class only began to be discussed in the 1970's and 1980's as formerly Democratic working class voters moved toward the GOP on social issues. The answer that trade union and other progressive Democrats proposed was that Democratic candidates should focus entirely on "kitchen table" economic issues as these issues were more real and pressing than "values" issues – an approach that was tried in a wide array of political campaigns over the years without achieving any notable success in slowing the steady decline in support for Democrats. The most recent and extensive test of this approach was Bernie Sander's 2016 and 2020 campaign strategy which argued that white workers could be convinced to join a broad coalition with other progressive groups by offering them a far-reaching progressive economic platform even though the coalition was also endorsing and advocating a wide range of other "woke" proposals and demands.

In contrast, Donald Trump ran a campaign that **fiercely and explicitly** reached out to the white working class in particular while Hillary Clinton, running a campaign managed by the same Mark Penn who had coined the terms "*soccer moms*" and "*office park dads*," seemed almost intentionally trying to ignore and disparage white working class voters in order to appeal to educated middle class voters instead. The utter and appalling isolation of Hillary's campaign from working class voters was dramatically illustrated by fact that even in the final weeks of the campaign when Hillary's white working class support was literally collapsing her campaign spokesmen were still appearing on TV touting the "*blue wall*" of working class industrial rust belt states as the barrier that would prevent Trump from winning.

Despite this history, in Zengerle's article the struggle is now once again described as a battle between "centrists" who seek to regain the support of the working class by moving to the center and "leftists" who now dismiss any appeals to them on the grounds that 2016 and 2020 proved that they are all racists. Zengerle cites Elie Mystal writing in *The Nation* as example of the latter view.

[in 2020]...a majority of whites (and a not insignificant number of Latinos) remembered that keeping a violent police force with its foot on the neck of Black folks was what they really wanted.

Shor suggests doing what Democrats have traditionally done: figure out what the racists want and give it to them, ...the move of crapping all over the Black people you need to win elections so that **white racists feel more comfortable with you was tried and perfected by Bill Clinton. He called it "triangulation."**

...What does a Shor-style strategy look like? I'd argue we've already seen it. When we saw images of Border Patrol agents whipping Black Haitian refugees at the border, we were seeing what it looks like Beating Haitians while beaming about mass deportation is probably the exact kind of policy that makes Biden tolerable to **non-college-educated voters** in swing states.

...That's why, even operating with the **same basic facts about white America that Shor is—a majority of white voters are racist and will punish Democrats for being insufficiently so**—it's possible to draw a completely different electoral conclusion..... Overpowering Republicans with enthusiasm and turnout is the only way to beat them, because trying to appease them is both morally intolerable and strategically foolish.

If this characterization of white workers as not merely biased but clinically sociopathic in their unbridled loathing of African-Americans is remotely valid there is obviously little hope of winning their support. As a result, in Zengerle’s article the implicit choice of strategies regarding working class support are limited to either “moving to the center” or abandoning any attempt to win the support of white workers at all.

There is, however, a different perspective that can be found when one steps outside the myopic world of campaign political journalism and looks at a wider range of sociological and other in-depth research that goes beyond stereotypes and lazy generalizations about what white and Latino working class Americans are actually like.

It suggests that rather than being virtually all rabid racists, working class Americans are divided into three distinct groups.

Currently Democratic-voting workers	Cultural Traditionalists	Extremists/Racists
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This division is not familiar to either political journalists or political scientists but the basic sociological insight which underlies it is that there are working class voters who broadly support traditional cultural values but who are also not deeply intolerant and are willing to “see both sides” of issues. As a result, they can potentially be won by Democratic candidates who understand their distinct perspective.¹

The best short introduction to working class cultural traditionalism can be found in the following:

The culturally traditional but non-extremist working class voters: who they are, how they think and what Democrats must understand to regain their support.²

This perspective puts the standard strategic advice of “move to the center” into a deeper sociological context.

The Democrats’ current problem is not simply that they are perceived to support a range of unpopular left-wing positions but that **they are not trusted to genuinely represent working class voters**. Opinion surveys since the 1980’s have repeatedly and emphatically shown that working class voters do not think that Democrats are “on their side,” “care about them” or “will fight for them” and also indicate that working class voters consider these characteristics **vital and fundamental** to their choices on election day.

¹When one sets aside his flamboyant totalizing rhetoric, what Mystal implicitly argues is that the division between the three categories of working class voters looks something like this:

Currently Democratic-voting workers	Cultural Traditionalists	Extremists/Racists
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The actual division between these three categories is hard to quantify but as many elections today are won by close margins, even if the culturally traditional group represents only 10% of the working class electorate, it can provide the margin of victory in a range of districts.

²https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_culturally_traditional_WWC_voters_v2.pdf

This was not always the case. In the post-World War II era working class voters emphatically felt that Democrats did represent them while Republicans did not.

Zengerle ignores this crucial point in his analysis, noting it only in an anecdote about a former policeman at the end of his piece.

Hendricks was a Democrat himself. He'd been one since he was 18, he said, when he was told that the Democratic Party was "the working-class party" and the Republican Party was "the party of the rich." "So there was no question what I was going to be," he said. But he felt that, in recent years, the Democratic Party had lost its way.

The difficult fact is that there is no simple way for Democrats to regain the trust of the culturally traditional working class voters who now feel that they have "lost their way." Moderating unpopular positions on various "values" issues is only one specific tactic in such an effort and not a complete strategy in itself.

As Ruy Teixeira notes in the article:

"The thing about moderates today is I don't think they have a worldview. They're just reacting to what A.O.C. and the Democratic left are doing. But what's their alternative? I don't think they have an alternative. *'Don't do dumb stuff'* is not a worldview."

One thing, however, is certain. Any serious strategy must begin by burying once again the zombie narrative that simply "moving to the center" represents an adequate plan for regaining the support of working class Americans. Political journalists will insist on reviving this zombie notion again and again in the coming period but serious democratic strategists are not obligated to pay them any attention.

After all, it is also inevitable that Hollywood will continue to produce still more and more formulaic zombie/killer-maniac movies in the future. Intelligent moviegoers, however, are not obligated to watch them.