



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

WHAT DEMOCRATS STILL DON'T GET
ABOUT WINNING BACK THE WHITE
WORKING CLASS

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UNLESS DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES CAN
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BY

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Among Democrats who remain committed to regaining support from white working class and small town/red state voters, there are two main competing strategies—the same ones that have been continually debated for the last five decades without any resolution.¹

While the centrist, “New Democrat” approach of the 1990’s and early 2000’s is clearly in retreat, a significant group in the Democratic leadership and party apparatus continues to believe that, in general, Democratic candidates should offer carefully moderated platforms and programs. Progressives respond to this cautious view with the argument that timid, “Republican-lite” platforms offer little that can actually appeal to ordinary Americans while a robust progressive platform can provide an authentic and compelling Democratic alternative.

The very powerful continuing influence of this debate is vividly evident this year in the discussion—both in the media and within the Democratic coalition—about the primary and special election results that have occurred since the 2016 election. Despite the fact that these elections have occurred across profoundly different districts, each result has been immediately categorized as a victory for either the progressive or moderate side of the debate.

But there is a compelling argument that both the progressive and moderate-centrist views are based on an inadequate conception of how voters in many districts across the country are actually making their political choices today. In many white working class and red state districts, Democratic policies and proposals, regardless of whether they are “progressive” or “moderate,” never get seriously debated or even considered. In these districts, *neither* strategy can be relied on to elect Democrats.

In relatively urban or diverse districts with a substantial number or a majority of Democratic and independent voters, issues and platforms do indeed play an important role in a contest between a Democrat and a Republican. In these places, there’s a compelling case for progressive arguments that arouse the enthusiasm of “base” Democratic voters.

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¹For a discussion of the term “white working class” and its relationship to people who live in small town/Red State America, see appendix 1

But in the vast number of Republican, red state districts, many of them in small towns and the urban fringe of large cities where many voters have less than a college education, there is reason to believe that a profound political change has occurred—one that has rendered debates over issues and programs largely irrelevant unless Democratic candidates can first establish a basic level of trust with these voters.

How White Working Class Voters Make Political Choices

The basic problem is that both progressives and the Democratic establishment are using the same conventional model of “political choice” that is presented in civics textbooks and academic political science—that voters basically make up their minds by comparing the platforms of different candidates and choosing the one with which they most closely agree. Of course, anyone who follows politics knows that’s not the whole story; poor and working-class Republican voters in particular routinely support candidates whose policies are not in their actual economic self interest. Commentators often try to square this circle by pointing to the importance of candidate quality. In this view, candidates who voters say “understand their problems,” “shares their values,” or “is on their side” are basically making subjective judgments of the candidate’s personal style and presentation—in effect his or her performance as an actor in debates and TV commercials.

But when it comes to today’s Republican base, the focus on style misses something much more important. 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 almost entirely unacknowledged in current discussions regarding how to reach these voters, but which plays a critical role in their political thinking.

White Workers’ Perception of Social Class

There is, of course, tremendous resistance among social scientists and historians to the idea that American workers can be said to have anything like a “class consciousness” at all. While it is considered acceptable to use the term to describe, for example, the attitudes of British working class voters and their support for the Labor Party after World War II, or British coal miners during the Thatcher era, it is almost never used in discussions of American workers. 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 class is deeply meaningful. 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 are screwing them over.

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 this 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. Rather, they 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 politicians as a *completely distinct, utterly corrupt, and entirely parasitic* class that lives in total isolation from 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 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 steep tuitions.²

The third 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, and what is written in editorial page commentaries. They are perceived as affluent urban dwellers who live in expensive, gentrified urban communities or charming college towns and who exercise substantial political power, using the Democratic Party as their vehicle. This power to impose their “liberal” agenda on ordinary Americans 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.

Working people have quite 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”.

This “class consciousness” and “class resentment” is a complex perspective that cannot be easily tracked by standard opinion polls. For this reason it is often overlooked in the discussion of Democratic 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 the major sociological studies of white working class Americans that have appeared in the last several years: Katherine Cramer’s *The Politics of Resentment*, Arlie Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land* and Justin Gest’s *The New Minority*.

Essentially, a decades-long campaign by conservatives has succeeded in creating among the broad majority of white working class and small town/red state Americans a deeply embedded view of Democrats as the party of the educated urban elite who impose their liberal agenda through a cynical alliance with minorities.

²This 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.

Democrats are aware of this perception, of course, and routinely complain about the conservative “information bubble” that is created by Fox News and other media. But many continue to base their campaigns on the hope that if they can only somehow figure out how to craft exactly the right package of proposals and programs—either progressive or moderate—they will somehow break through and convince these voters to support Democrats once again.

But it is now necessary to seriously consider the opposite possibility: that class resentment is so powerful and deeply entrenched that Democratic plans and proposals never get seriously considered by white working class and small town/red state voters in the first place. They are, instead, dismissed at the outset because they come from a party that is perceived to represent groups and interests that are deeply alien and antagonistic. The Affordable Care Act, for example, was never seriously examined by white working class Republican voters. Its provisions were wildly caricatured (“Death Panels”) and the measure described as quite literally a sinister socialist conspiracy simply because Obama and the Democrats had proposed it.

It is therefore now necessary to accept that Democrats have to develop a completely different mental model of how these voters actually do make their political choices—a model that will suggest alternate strategies for how Democrats can break through the wall that now separates them from many white working class and small town/red state Americans.

The Three-Level Conservative Ideological Cocoon

The first step is to recognize that the metaphor of a Fox News created “information bubble” is an inadequate way to visualize the problem. It suggests that the “bubble” is essentially created by the national mass media and that a candidate with sufficient funds to run massive advertising or otherwise gain voters’ attention should therefore be able to penetrate it (This was one of several major errors of Hillary Clinton’s campaign—an almost complete reliance on major TV ads and voter micro-targeting in white working-class districts).

In reality, however, in white working-class communities and red state small towns there are actually three concentric levels of ideological insulation isolating these voters from Democratic messages.

The first level is indeed the increasingly extremist messaging of the conservative national media and the official GOP communications apparatus. The creation of Fox News and conservative talk radio in the 1990’s produced a major amplification of the extremist demonization of Democrats, as did Karl Rove’s authorization of outright dishonesty in the 2004 elections (“If the Democrats win they will take away your bibles,” “Homosexual teachers will molest your kids”). The election of Barack Obama ramped up this conservative “big lie” strategy against all Democrats to previously unimaginable heights with the clinically paranoid ramblings of Glenn Beck, Breitbart News, and other right-wing outlets funded by conservative donors and given wide national distribution.

This national effort to totally discredit the Democratic Party was reinforced by more local sources of information: Sinclair TV stations, regional talk radio, and local hometown editorial pages projected an equally biased image of Democrats as alien outsiders rather than part of the community. The more local character of these information sources made their accusations seem more authentic and believable than purely national messages. As Democrats were repeatedly defeated in elections in white working class/red state areas in recent years, their growing absence only validated reinforced the charges against them.

Finally, and most important, it is the network of personal relationships between neighbors and friends that works to validate and confirm the broader messages. Casual conversations with friends, Facebook messages and e-mails from relatives, and jokes passed among co-workers all reinforce the sense that Democrats are the “other” and lead people who once supported Democrats to mute their views, creating what sociologists call a “spiral of silence.” The result makes support for the Republican Party seem not just dominant but unanimous.

This last, most intimate level of influence is the most important because it validates and provides the “proof” that what the conservative national and local media are saying is actually right. In this environment, political life ceases to be a debate or dialog between candidates or parties. Instead people come to accept that you would have to be completely out of your mind to ever vote for a Democrat.

It is this process that underlies the existence of today’s intense “negative partisanship,” the fierce and categorical rejection of the Democratic Party as a whole that is now the most striking result that emerges from current opinion polls and the reason for the defeat of even very conservative Democrats in red state areas.³

Ideological Diversity within the Cocoon

But what is critical to recognize is that inside this three-tiered “bubble” there is actually a wide and nuanced range of social opinions and perspectives. Among devout Christians, for example, there is a deep divide between two interpretations of the message of Jesus Christ. The first is intolerant and absolutist and leads to the belief that Christians should impose their beliefs on society as a whole. The second is rooted in the compassionate elements in Christian teachings and faith and as a result is more tolerant and accepting of diversity. Equally, racial attitudes among white working people span a wide range, from overt racist bigotry to a more relaxed “live and let live” acceptance, the difference based more on individual psychology and personality characteristics than commitments to any specific social or political doctrine.⁴

These divisions are clearly visible in daily white working-class life. Popular country music now includes a number of artists who express acceptance of gay men and women and condemn misogyny in a way that is dramatically different from two or three decades ago. In evangelical churches, even before the recent wave of family separations, there was an ongoing debate about what a true Christian’s response to immigrants ought to be. During the Obama years many evangelical churches were making active efforts to invite African-Americans to their services until the 2016 election poisoned the atmosphere. More generally, transcripts of focus groups and ethnographic interviews repeatedly reveal the degree to which the realities of modern life have changed former patterns and attitudes. Many white working Americans now have some non-white or interracial couples living in their neighborhood and personally know gay men and women. The attitudes of a significant number are consequently more open-minded than they were years ago. But these debates and divisions are largely invisible to many urban and educated Democrats because they occur inside the three-level ideological cocoon.

³See Alan Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*. https://www.amazon.com/Great-Alignment-Party-Transformation-Donald/dp/0300207131/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1531409121&sr=8-1&keywords=alan+abramowitz

⁴See Andrew Levison, *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*. https://www.amazon.com/White-Working-Class-Today-Progressives/dp/0692019790/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1533736105&sr=8-1&keywords=The+White+Working+Class+Today

It is vital to recognize that these divisions exist because they are the key to developing more successful Democratic strategies. Many Democrats have recoiled against all Trump voters because the bitter racism and crypto-fascism that is on display at Trump's rallies seem like clear proof that anyone who supported Trump in 2016 must be equally racist and anti-democratic. The reaction is understandable but based more on emotion than analysis. After all, about one in ten African-Americans and about one in four Latinos voted for Trump in 2016, and unless one is prepared to seriously argue that they are also genuine racists, it is necessary to recognize that a range of other factors—from low information to class resentment to an inchoate desire to “shake things up”—also played a role in his election.⁵ The reality is that Trump's white working-class supporters are divided between a deeply racist, intolerant sector that is beyond any realistic hope of persuasion and a distinctly more tolerant sector that is potentially open to Democratic appeals and can be reached with messages that are specifically crafted to appeal to their very distinct social outlook and political views.⁶

What Democrats in White Working-Class Districts Must Do

Given the reality that simply proposing programs and policies that are objectively in white workers' interests is insufficient to win their support, Democratic candidates must instead visualize the method of appealing to these voters as a two-stage process.

First, they must develop a specific communication and persuasion strategy designed to break through the conservative “bubble” and become accepted as a legitimate part of the political discussion that goes on between the different sectors of the white working-class community. Second, once this is accomplished, they can then begin to debate and challenge their Republican opponents regarding specific social and economic policies and programs.

Historically, Democratic candidates who succeeded in white working-class, small-town districts have followed this kind of approach and 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

⁵See Andrew Levison, *Modern-day “Class Consciousness” and “Class Resentment”: Trump's Secret Weapon*, The Democratic Strategist. http://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Andrew_Levison_Class_Consciousness.pdf

⁶See Guy Molyneux, *Mapping the White Working Class: A deep dive into the beliefs and sentiments of the moderates among them*. The American Prospect, <http://prospect.org/article/mapping-white-working-class>

Many Democrats who reject this conclusion are justifiably dismissive of the many anecdotal commentaries that present a “I grew up in a small town and I know my neighbors and relatives who voted for Trump are actually nice people” style of debate. More convincing evidence, however, comes from the very substantial body of information developed by the largest grass roots organization in white working class America. As Karen Nussbaum, for 15 years the director of Working America, noted: <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/rebuilding-working-class-labor-canvassing-elections>

Over the past 15 years] our door-to-door organizers have had more than 12 million conversations, 80 percent of which have been with white working-class moderates across the country. Our three million members are not in unions, and 90 percent of our email subscribers don't show up on the list of any other progressive organization.

guns. They would reject the notion that America should impose Christianity on all Americans, but they would equally firmly assert 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 would 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 at the same time both construction workers and small businessmen).

Second, they frequently embodied white working-class 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."⁷

Other politicians who have been successful in conservative or rural areas do not necessarily embody all of Tester's personal characteristics, but manage to reflect enough of a similar cultural affinity with their voters to win their trust and support. An example is Montana governor Steve Bullock, an attorney with a modest, middle-class background.

Working America's organizers have encountered racism, sexism, and anti-immigrant bias that is more overt and pointed today than we have ever seen. But by focusing on economic issues, organizers have been able to establish common ground and can help bridge social divides through ongoing engagement with voters... A big part of Trump's base is not going to change. But about half of the swing voters we spoke to were willing to support politicians who took their economic problems seriously...

[Last year] we ran one of a number of tests we have run of our organizing methods in Trump country in southwest Virginia— in cities like Lynchburg, Christiansburg, and Martinsville. We were the only ones on our side talking to these small-town voters who had given Trump a twenty-point margin in 2016... According to independent, university based analysts David Broockman and Joshua Kalla, our efforts moved the vote in this conservative area for Ralph Northam by eight points and for Justin Fairfax, an African American, by ten.

It is, of course, possible to dismiss the genuinely massive body of evidence that Working America has amassed over the years about the existence of ideological diversity of white working class voters because "*I never heard of Working America or met any of these organizers*" but that is an argument that is painfully reminiscent of the lifelong resident of Manhattan's West Side Pauline Kael's famous dismissal of Richard Nixon's having actually won the election in 1968 because, she said, "*I haven't met a single person who voted for him.*"

⁷https://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?utm_term=.4b479fb5585f

In a *New York Times* [commentary](#) he suggested the nature of his strategy:

Above all, spend time in places where people disagree with you. Reach out. Show up and make your argument. People will appreciate it, even if they are not inclined to vote for you. As a Democrat in a red state, I often spend days among crowds where there are almost no Democratic voters in sight. I listen to them, work with them and try to persuade them.⁸

In an [analysis of Bullock and the Montana Democratic coalition](#), sociologist Justin Gest noted that:

What makes Governor Bullock such an interesting case study for the Democratic Party is that he isn't exactly a unicorn—that rare, transcendent candidate whose personality crosses social divides. He simply combines a reassuring cultural style with a practical progressive message on issues that people care about.⁹

Many of the new Democratic candidates this year are already following the basic two-phase strategy described above, seeking to establish their identity as authentic members of their districts before beginning to battle Republican opponents over ideas. Some have begun their campaigns with vivid biographical ads that cite their military service as the inspiration for their campaigns; others point to their modest, working-class backgrounds and occupations. Examples range from military veterans with hardscrabble backgrounds like Randy Bryce in Wisconsin and Richard Ojeda in West Virginia to other veterans with more middle-class backgrounds like Conor Lamb in Ohio and F-18 combat fighter pilot Amy McGrath in Kentucky.

One common trait that unites these new candidates is a striking idealism. Republican candidates in recent years have generally been of two kinds: (1) professional politicians who see their role as supporting the general GOP platform while cynically devoting their primary efforts to servicing the needs of their major financial donors; or (2) Tea Party ideologues who entered politics with the goal of imposing a Rush Limbaugh-Ayn Rand conservative ideology on the nation. Neither perceive holding political office as an act of public service that one undertakes out of altruism and, as a result, the contrast with the new generation of Democratic candidates who vividly embody this approach is striking.

Beyond Centrism and Progressivism

When the new Democratic candidates in white working-class/rural/red state areas turn to the debate over issues with the GOP, the most significant fact is that they are following neither a traditional progressive nor a traditional centrist political strategy.

Since the 1930's, the primary progressive strategy that Democrats have followed in appealing to the white working class has essentially been along the lines of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Until the 1980's it was assumed that many white workers still fondly remembered Roosevelt's dramatic wave bills and initiatives—a wave that included the creation of Social Security, the establishment of legal status for unions and collective bargaining, the organization of major public works and conservation programs, and the funding of major construction projects and rural electrification.

⁸<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/05/opinion/steve-bullock-democrats-montana.html>

⁹<http://prospect.org/article/can-democratic-party-be-white-working-class-too>

Until the 1980's this was the model progressives consistently hoped to invoke in their political campaigns – promising broad, visionary programs that would be enacted in a dramatic flurry of legislation. It was thought that this approach ought to inspire and motivate white working-class voters to support Democrats once again.

The problem was that distrust of “big government” and liberal social programs in particular had been steadily growing since the late 1960's, and by Ronald Reagan's second term had become a dominant view among white workers. Reagan's slogan, “Government is not the solution, it's the problem,” became a national cliché.

It was at this point that centrism emerged in the late 1980's and early 1990's. At first it was a strategy designed to regain the lost support of the white working class by having Democratic candidates moderate their positions on various “social issues.” During the latter part of the 1990's, however, the strategy changed dramatically, becoming aimed instead at winning the support of affluent “soccer moms” and “office park dads” with *economic* policies that were only mildly more liberal than the proposals of the GOP. On one level these policies were very consciously designed to appeal to the wealthy contributors who had become an essential part of modern political campaigns, but they were also rationalized as being “moderate” or “middle of the road” in both economic and social terms and therefore potentially attractive to white Americans who were thought to be generally content with their economic situation.

In reality, however, this approach completely ignored the profound economic discontent that was actually widespread in white working-class America—a discontent whose deepest source was relentless de-industrialization and the decline of unions and laws that protected workers' standard of living. In 2000, 2002, and 2004 the centrist “Republican-lite” approach proved completely unable to regain lost white working-class support, and in those communities the Democratic vote continued a steady decline.

A rising progressive reaction to the Republican-lite strategy grew during the Bush years and fed into the extensive grass-roots activism and support for Barack Obama's 2008 campaign. Once elected, however, Obama's approach combined elements of both progressive and centrist strategies with his mixture of genuinely significant progressive initiatives, like Obamacare and financial reform, alongside repeated, major concessions to the GOP on the budget deficit and economic recovery. The latter aspect of his approach undercut his ability to present himself as a genuine defender and champion of the economic interests of white working Americans and is partly why the support he received from them fell by 4 to 5 percent between 2008 and 2012.

How the new candidates are handling issues

While the press has given substantial coverage to progressive challengers who have defeated or come close to defeating establishment Democrats in blue or mixed districts, with campaigns explicitly committed to Bernie Sander's agenda and platform, most of the candidates in heavily white working-class, rural, and red state areas are actually following a distinct, more eclectic strategy that features several major components that are neither classically progressive nor centrist.

First, they root their campaigns in their constituents' actual needs rather than adherence to any formal philosophy or agenda. As a result, they reject being defined as loyal followers of either Bernie Sanders or Nancy Pelosi. They insist instead that their ideas and views must be evaluated on their own terms. Relatedly, they generally argue that their goal is to try to overcome today's bitter divisions rather than to win an ideological war. As a result, they firmly avoid defining their campaigns as being primarily focused on opposition to Donald Trump.

Second, they almost all avoid asserting a modern New Deal agenda that would require a range of major new federal programs and invoke the specter of "big government." While some will advocate major progressive reforms like free college or universal health care, they generally express their support for these reforms as a matter of general principle and not yet as an endorsement of any specific plan.

Third, they focus their economic proposals on defending existing programs like Medicare and Social Security and seeking solutions to "kitchen table" issues like the high cost of health care and the need for better jobs and wages. The underlying idea is that this kind of focus on people's immediate needs is more important and meaningful to working people than are vague campaign promises of major new programs and initiatives.

Fourth, they generally understand the reasons for Trump's appeal and recognize how to fight it. They recognize that attacks on Trump must be carefully focused and calibrated to avoid appearing to be elitist criticisms of white working people and anyone who champions them. Instead, they tend to focus on the degree to which Trump is quite systematically betraying the people who supported him. It is now becoming clear to many ordinary Americans that the GOP tax reform bill offers virtually no real benefits for average voters and that Trump's proposals regarding investment in infrastructure were actually a pork barrel plan to benefit investors rather than the public. Before too long it will also become increasingly difficult for him to conceal that he is tacitly supporting and enabling Paul Ryan's stealth attacks on Social Security and Medicare.

Fifth, they treat the need for political reform and reducing the role of money in politics as absolutely central issues. They tend to be funded by small contributions rather than deep pocketed PAC's and corporations, and point to those sources of campaign funds for Republican candidates as a fundamental source of political corruption. There is no question that this is a pivotal issue for many working Americans. Stan Greenberg's polling organization Democracy Corps has conducted extensive polling and focus groups for over a decade on this issue and has overwhelming data to support the conclusion that no significant Democratic initiative can win white working-class support until this obstacle is overcome. As Greenberg concluded, "championing reform of government and the political process is the 'price of admission' with these voters."¹⁰

Sixth, they take a variety of different positions on the major social and cultural issues in a generally progressive direction but in general do not present treat these issues as core elements of a rigid platform or agenda. Some will unequivocally support Black Lives Matter or LGBT Rights, for example, but do not place them at the center of their campaigns.

¹⁰See Andrew Levison, *Five fundamental Things Democrats Must Get Right*, TDS Strategy Memo, section 2, http://whiteworkingclassroundtable.com/tds_WWCSM_levison_WWC_5_challenges.pdf

There has generally been positive reaction to this eclectic approach from both progressives and more establishment Democrats. Although progressives are forcefully pressing their agenda within the Democratic Party, for example, most of the reactions to Lamb focused on his basically progressive economic platform rather than his “moderate” persona or stances on some “hot button” conservative issues. There appears to be in general a progressive acceptance of the fact that candidates in white working-class and rural areas cannot be held to the same standards as candidates in more Democratic areas.

From Campaign Issues to Developing New Policies

Looking beyond political strategy for the current campaigns, however, there is a deeper challenge that new Democratic candidates will have to confront: developing significant new policy ideas. In the current issue of the *Washington Monthly*, Paul Glastris posed the issue clearly. On the one hand he notes that:

...As the two parties have sorted themselves into more ideologically distinct camps, voters have largely chosen sides. Political scientists find little evidence that the average voter responds to or even understands specific policy messages. Most voters, rather, cast ballots based on identity—they vote for the party they feel represents “people like us,” and, equally important, they vote against the party that doesn’t.

At the same time, however, this does not mean that developing new policy ideas is unimportant:

....The point of championing new policy ideas is not so much to persuade voters of any particular policy, but, rather, to remake the Democratic Party into one that is more in the interests of average Americans, that does truly put more power in voters’ hands. ...Policy ideas are important not because most voters will learn the details and think through the implications, but because they can give a candidate and a party an identity that voters can, well, identify with.

“The first step,” he goes on, “is to tell a clear and accurate story of what has gone wrong in the country economically, something [the Democrats] utterly failed to do in 2016.” Across a whole series of issues, from wage stagnation to rising health care costs to waste and fraud in government, Glastris presents the case that the concentration of corporate power is the underlying source of the economic problems that beset working class America.

To develop a narrative and a set of policies that will resonate with white working-class voters and people in small towns and rural areas, however, this broad argument must be carefully focused and targeted on the specific problems that these voters have directly and intensely experienced and endured.

For working class people in the formerly industrial areas of the Rust Belt the most profound social catastrophe that occurred was the massive wave of factory closings that began in the early 1980’s and has continued since that time. Trump placed virtually all the blame on trade agreements like NAFTA, which could be conveniently blamed on Democrats, but the reality is more complex. As professor Judith Stein argued in her book, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies*, there was, beginning in the 1970’s, an integrated strategy put into place

by corporate America to weaken the power of labor by exporting industrial jobs to less developed countries, aggressively busting unions, and changing American labor law in corporations' favor. Major trade agreements like NAFTA came later, but were of a piece with this coherent corporate-designed strategy. While in other countries trade policies were deliberately designed to protect important domestic jobs and industries, in the U.S., trade policy had absolutely no such objective.¹¹

In the case of small towns and rural areas, there was a similar willingness within the business community to allow corporate agriculture to undermine local economies based on small and mid-sized farms. While countries like France and Japan had active policies designed to preserve small towns and rural economies, in the U.S. nothing similar was ever contemplated by the Republican congressmen who nonetheless declared themselves the great champions of "the real America."

Glastris argues that if Democrats can regain a majority in the House of Representatives this November it will provide them with the opportunity to show white working-class Americans the real sources of their economic problems and who is their genuine advocate. As he says:

Armed with subpoena power, committees will be able to unearth hidden industry and government documents and data about these problems, commission studies into them, and hold public hearings in which victims are invited and bad actors compelled to tell what they know. Fresh information and captivating witness testimony will draw the attention of the press, and if that attention is sustained, the public will slowly begin to connect the dots.

Revealing the hidden history of deindustrialization and the impoverishment of large sectors of small town and rural America can indeed contribute significantly to showing these voters that Democrats are actually "on their side" and "understand their problems".

Conclusion

It is critical to recognize that the new approach many Democratic candidates are taking cuts across the conventional centrist-progressive divide that now so obsesses the media and dominates the elite debate within the Democratic coalition. Some successful Democratic candidates will frame their policies in relatively moderate (though still clearly Democratic) terms, as Conor Lamb did in Pennsylvania, while others will campaign on more robust progressive terms. But the success of all the new Democratic candidates will ultimately depend whether they can win recognition and acceptance as sincere and authentic representatives of their predominantly working-class districts, rather than on any differences in the exact details of their platforms and policies.

This is not to deny that there are indeed important issues that divide the Democratic left from the Democratic establishment—issues that cannot be avoided. The role of money in politics and the proper design of social and economic policies are significant areas of disagreement that the two sides can and must debate. But at the same time it must be recognized that the differences that exist regarding these issues will not be the critical factors that decide the 2018 elections.

¹¹Two articles in Washington Monthly by former Reagan and Clinton trade official Clyde Prestowitz dramatically outline the way these agreements were developed despite the clear knowledge that their impact on working class Americans would be disastrous. <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january-february-march-2018/trade-secrets/> and <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/junejulyaug-2016/free-trade-is-dead/>

This will be a disappointment to those progressives and moderates who would like to see the elections validate their particular political perspective and strengthen their relative position within the Democratic Party. But both progressives and moderates must recognize that Democrats and the nation as a whole are today in a situation of unprecedented peril. In early 2008, if any American political scientist had been shown a list of the policies and pronouncements that Trump and the Republican Party have issued since 2016 they would have confidently asserted that they were not reading a description of The United States of America, but rather of the programs and views of the neo-fascist French National Front under the leadership of first Jean-Marie and then Marine Le Pen. They would then have sanctimoniously added that, of course, nothing like this could ever possibly occur in the U.S. because the Republican Party would never allow such a thing to happen.

But the impossible has happened, and Democrats must try to reverse the trend. But the way that it must be done is to accept that traditional progressive versus centrist debate over platforms and programs will not be the decisive factor that will decide victory or defeat. Rather, in Trump-friendly districts, the central challenge Democrats face is to penetrate the conservative ideological cocoon and convincingly demonstrate to voters that Democrats can once again be their most effective and genuine advocates and representatives.

Appendix 1.

In the period after World War II the definition of the term “working class” was based on occupation and generally referred to factory and other primarily male manual workers. With the decline in manufacturing and the massive entrance of women into the work force since that time, the term has gained a broader meaning and also now includes many male and female service workers and lower level clerical and sales workers. As it happens, there is a very substantial overlap between people who work in these kinds of occupations and those who have only a high school or less than a college education (close to 80% in the case of white males with only a high school education). Since it is vastly easier to ask poll respondents about their level of education than it is about their specific occupation, virtually all opinion poll analysts now use the level of education as the practical operational definition of “working class” (for a more detailed discussion of this issue, see *The White Working Class Today*, Chapter 3).

Also, although the white working class was traditionally visualized as being factory workers in the industrial cities of the Midwest, with the decline of traditional manufacturing, men and women with a high school or less than college education are today disproportionately represented in small towns and rural areas. This makes the urban/rural and Blue State/Red State distinctions overlap the distinction between working class and higher level occupations.