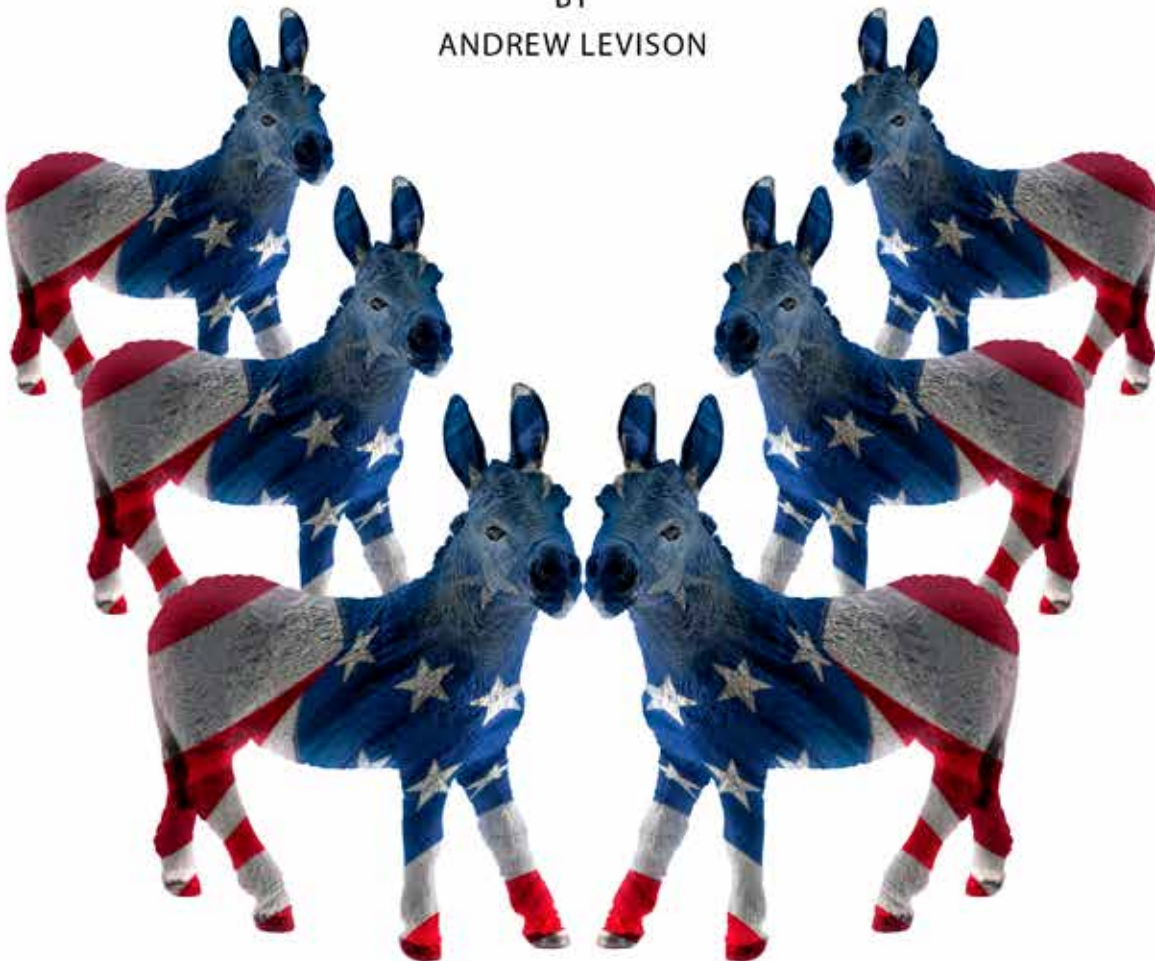




**TDS STRATEGY MEMO:**

**LET'S FACE IT: THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY IS NOT A "BIG TENT" POLITICAL COALITION – BUT IT DESPERATELY NEEDS TO BECOME ONE.**

BY  
ANDREW LEVISON



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**LET'S FACE IT: THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY IS NOT A "BIG TENT" POLITICAL COALITION – BUT IT DESPERATELY NEEDS TO BECOME ONE.**

By *ANDREW LEVISON*

Democrats routinely describe the Democratic Party as a “coalition” or even a “big tent coalition.” But in reality Dems know that this is not the case.

To observe the evidence for this statement firsthand, decide if you agree with the following three statements:

1. It is entirely reasonable for progressives to insist on candidates who do not just agree to support certain progressive policies because they are required as part of participation in a political alliance but who fully and sincerely embrace basic progressive values.
2. It is entirely reasonable for progressives to be suspicious of candidates who come from backgrounds and reflect the cultural outlook of communities that are culturally distant from the progressive world and culture.
3. It is entirely reasonable for progressives to feel that non-progressive voters ought to be willing to support a progressive candidate if they agree with his or her economic platform even if they disagree with other aspects of his or her agenda.

For most progressives, these three statements seem entirely reasonable and indeed obvious. After all, why shouldn't progressives have the right to demand candidates who sincerely support progressive views and reflect a progressive cultural outlook while expecting non-progressives to be sensible enough to support a progressive candidate based on his or her economic agenda even if they may disagree with other aspects of his or her platform.

But now consider this second set of statements:

1. It is entirely reasonable for culturally traditional rural and white working class people to insist on candidates who do not just agree to support certain culturally traditional policies because they are required as part of participation in a political alliance but who fully and sincerely embrace certain traditional cultural values.
2. It is entirely reasonable for culturally traditional rural and white working class people to be suspicious of candidates who come from backgrounds and reflect the cultural outlook of communities that are culturally distant from the rural and white working class world and culture.

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3. It is entirely reasonable for rural and white working class people to feel that voters who are not rural or white working class ought to be willing to support a culturally traditional rural or white working class candidate if they agree with his or her economic agenda even if they may disagree with some of his or her other views and proposals.

As can be seen, the underlying logic is identical in the two cases. Yet many progressives will agree with the first set of propositions but then reject the second.

Many Democrats will resolve this dilemma by simply asserting that left/progressives are “right” and rural and white working class people who hold culturally traditional values are “wrong.” – even if they do support a range of populist economic policies. But this does not really resolve the underlying problem. What this shows is that many Democrats want and expect rural and white working class people to be willing to support progressive Democrats and make certain concessions and accept certain compromises as part of participation in a coalition that they themselves are unwilling to make in return.

Let’s face it. This is not the philosophy of a political party that genuinely seeks to create a “big-tent” political coalition – it is the philosophy of a parliamentary-style ideological political party that has a platform and agenda that is not open to negotiation. In parliamentary systems political coalitions are formally negotiated between two or more ideological parties of this kind rather than within one large “big tent” party.

There are many Democrats who nonetheless believe that an ideologically unified Democratic Party is entirely appropriate. They base this view either on the belief that all culturally traditional white working class and rural people are hopeless Trump-supporting racists and reactionaries whose support cannot be won or else they believe that those who do not fully support Trump can nonetheless be convinced to vote for Democrats simply based on popular Democratic economic policies even though they don’t agree with other elements of the Democratic platform, outlook and perspective.

Other Democrats reject this view. They believe that there are culturally traditional white working class and rural voters who are neither genuine racists nor fervid Trump supporters and who will vote for candidates who offer progressive economic policies as long as those candidates also sincerely support and champion a range of traditional cultural attitudes about respect for religious faith, hard work, small business, respect for law and “the American way of life.”

There are two distinct political strategies that can be proposed to appeal to voters who are fit this second description.

One strategy is to propose that, in general, all Democratic candidates across the party should moderate their support for a variety of extreme positions and generally reposition the party toward the “middle.”

This strategy has been debated at great length, most recently during the 2018 and then the 2020 elections. The 2018 bi-elections saw the election of a variety of “moderate” candidates, a number with military and national security backgrounds, and the disappointing results of many contests in Red State areas in 2020 were frequently attributed to the GOP’s successful attempt to link all Democrats with the “extreme” programs and outlook of the left wing of the party.

Further debate is unlikely to significantly influence the left-progressive wing of the party to modify its rhetoric and agenda, however, because anyone who does not already recognize the clear, crypto-fascist attack on democracy that is now the central political strategy of the GOP—a threat which makes the creation of a Democratic “big tent” absolutely vital—will probably not be convinced by any additional arguments in between now and 2022 or 2024.

And in any case, a repositioning of the Democratic Party as a whole in a somewhat more “moderate” direction is also unlikely to convince many culturally traditional rural and white working class voters who may be open to alternatives to the GOP. These voters have already been heavily indoctrinated with the propaganda that the Democratic Party is completely controlled and dominated by the left and a limited shift to an only somewhat more moderate stance by the party as a whole is unlikely to cause any dramatic change in their views.

To see why a modest shift to the “center” **would have only a limited influence on culturally traditional white working class and rural voters** consider the following two questions:

**1. Who are the most charismatic and respected national figures in the Democratic left?**

*Most Dems can easily and immediately answer: Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and several others.*

But then:

**2. Who are the most charismatic and respected national figures on the cultural traditionalist/ economic populist wing of the Democratic Party?**

*The honest answer is that there is not a single one. There is literally not a single Democratic politician with a major **national** reputation today who genuinely personifies and champions the ethos and values of culturally traditional rural and white working class voters. The Democrats who are typically contrasted with the Democratic Left are either “establishment” figures like Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer or highly educated “center-left” figures like Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and so on. There are no nationally prominent political figures in the Democratic coalition who culturally traditional rural or white working class voters can seriously view as passionate and authentic champions and representatives of their political perspective. The few state-level politicians such as Montana Senator Jon Tester who fit this description are popular within their state but largely unknown outside it and Joe Biden, who had previously established an “inside the beltway” image as “middle-class Joe” is now obliged to act as referee between the progressive and center-left wings of the party and cannot play the role of a champion of one wing rather than the other.<sup>1</sup>*

The simple fact is that there are no major national figures who white working class and rural voters can look to as Democratic champions when the Trump-supporting extremists on the right claim that the Democratic Party is completely controlled by the extreme left.

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<sup>1</sup>This absence of Democratic champions of rural and white working class voters was not always the case. In the past there were a large number of Democrats who were passionate “FDR New Deal progressives” on economic issues and at the same time relatively liberal on social issues. The industrial trade unions included many white ethnic Irish and Italian union leaders of this kind in the industrial states, for example. The religious community similarly included churchmen who supported both New Deal economics and racial integration and Democratic “Prairie Populists” from the Midwest and West were among those who voted for both Medicare and the Voting Rights Act.

This suggests the need for an alternative Democratic strategy to replace moving the entire Democratic Party somewhat toward the center.

Instead, Democrats need to encourage the formation and growth of a second, very clearly distinct wing of the party – a “Heartland, Common Sense” wing that proudly asserts its distinctive view in Red State districts and elections across the country. This “Heartland, Common Sense” wing would propose a platform that combines:

1. Strong support for populist economic policies
2. A clear rejection of racism, theocracy and intolerance
3. A clear and firm embrace of basic traditional values – respect for religious faith, support for small business, hard work, respect for law and the constitution.
4. A firm and principled rejection of a range of extreme and unpopular Democratic policies – “Defund the Police,” “Open the Borders,” etc.

Over the years a number of attempts have been made to create “moderate” alternatives to the progressive wing of the Democratic Party but these have generally not been focused on white working class and rural voters. During the 2018 elections a number of quite successful grass-roots voter mobilization efforts were conducted but were focused primarily on educated white voters and women in particular. Other initiatives over the years have been explicitly focused on reviving 1990’s “Third Way” centrism – including the neoliberal support for free trade, financial deregulation, and de-industrialization that were profoundly unpopular with white working class voters. And in general, these efforts reflected the characteristically “policy-wonk” Democratic fixation on developing elaborate plans and policy proposals as presumably the best way to win white working class and rural support.

Yet, as Donald Trump’s victory in 2016 dramatically demonstrated, what was lacking in all these efforts was a passionate identification with these voters – a genuine sense that Democratic candidates cared about these voters in particular and were emotionally committed to authentically represent them. In 2016 Hillary Clinton had perhaps the most extensive and elaborate set of liberal-progressive plans and proposals that any Democratic candidate had ever developed for a presidential campaign. But Trump, without any policies beyond bluster and clichés, won unprecedented white working class support because he successfully communicated the feeling that he would be their angry and passionate champion and was genuinely “on their side.”

It is predictable that many on the Democratic Left will oppose the development of a “heartland”, culturally traditional wing of the party because it would dilute a proper and consistent radical Democratic message. In the traditional Marxist jargon of the old left this kind of reformism was invariably sneered at as “misleading the masses,” “fostering petty-bourgeois illusions,” “distracting the working class from its historic task of overthrowing capitalism” along with many similarly flamboyant denunciations.

In the more modern, “woke” version of this perspective a wide range of traditional cultural views are considered inherently reactionary and unacceptable, even if they reflect attitudes that were firmly “liberal” in the civil rights era (e.g. judging people by the “content of their character, not the



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color of their skin” or being “tolerant” of people and ideas that challenge traditional cultural views rather than actively endorsing them). In the modern view, a true progressive “ally” must fully agree with the radical position across the entire range of issues or be defined as either hopelessly ignorant or actively evil and a person with whom no political alliance of any kind can be seriously contemplated.

But large segments of the progressive left who have read 20th century European history should now recognize the clear threat that the 2022 and 2024 elections will be stolen by GOP sabotage of America’s democratic institutions and in consequence accept the need for a modern day “popular front” to prevent it from coming to pass. The growth and development of a “Heartland, Common Sense” wing of the Democratic Party is the most practical way to make this a plausible possibility within the unique structure of the American political system. Democrats cannot create a “Big Tent” political coalition in the way that such coalitions are created in parliamentary systems. The development of a “Heartland, Common Sense” wing of the Democratic Party is an alternative way to expand the party and create a commanding Democratic majority that can not only provide a foundation for progressive change but also protect American democracy itself.