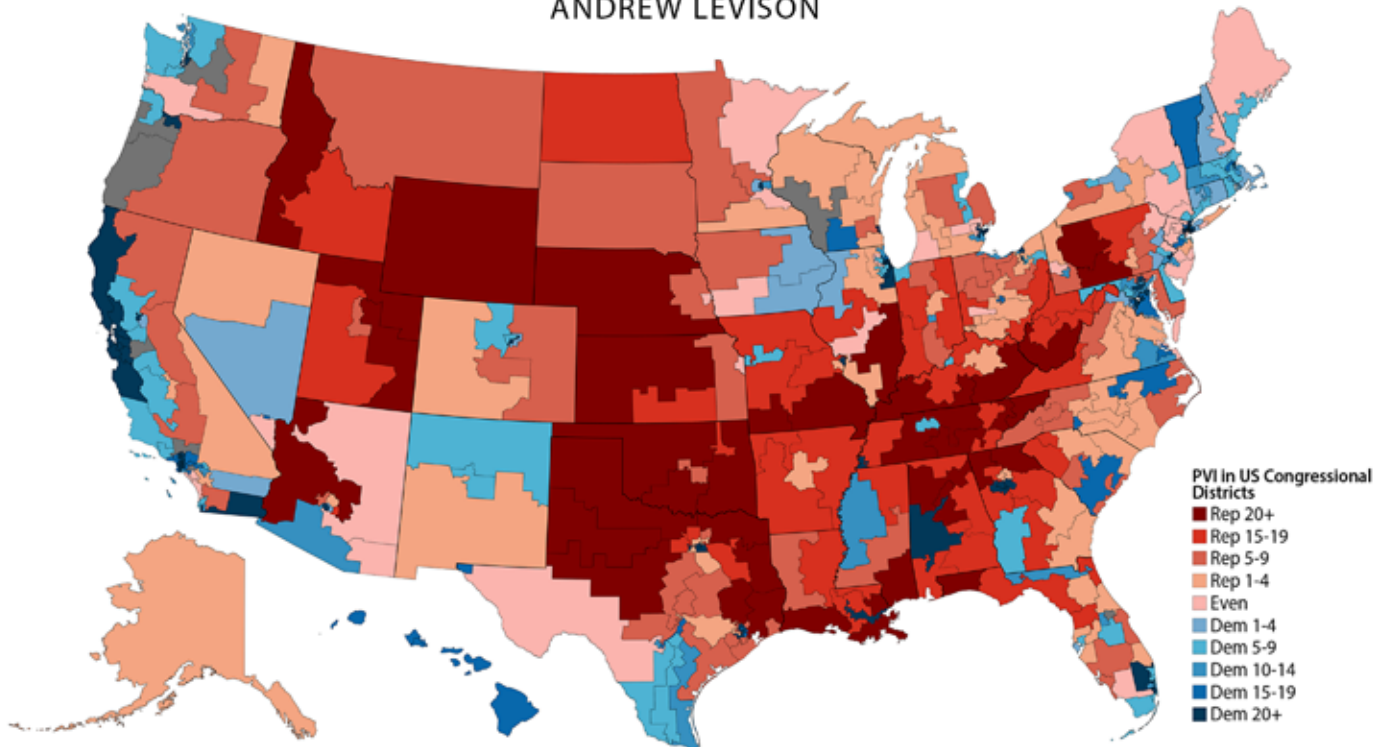




TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

TO PREVENT THE TRIUMPH OF GOP EXTREMISM
PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS MUST DEVELOP
A STRATEGY FOR SEPARATING EXTREMIST FROM NON-EXTREMIST
WHITE WORKERS IN “DEEP RED” DISTRICTS—AND NONE
OF THE TRADITIONAL DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIES
CAN DO THE JOB. IT IS THEREFORE NOW
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BY
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TO PREVENT THE TRIUMPH OF GOP EXTREMISM PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS MUST DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR SEPARATING EXTREMIST FROM NON-EXTREMIST WHITE WORKERS IN “DEEP RED” DISTRICTS—AND NONE OF THE TRADITIONAL DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIES CAN DO THE JOB. IT IS THEREFORE NOW VITAL TO SERIOUSLY CONSIDER ALTERNATIVES.

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The grotesque events since the election finally forced a limited section of the Republican coalition to take a stand against the extremists who gained essentially complete domination over the GOP after the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

But any optimism about the future is certainly premature when one considers the following facts.

1. The current backlash within the GOP against the extremists will rapidly fade away. Well before the 2022 and 2024 congressional elections, The GOP will have closed its ranks around a new anti-Democratic consensus and reconsolidated the support of the 72 million Americans—48% of the electorate—who voted for the GOP in 2020.
2. The [current opposition](#) to the extremists in the GOP is centered among the more educated, politically involved and “constitutional conservative” sectors of the party. Among rank and file Republican voters, on the other hand, support for Trump and his extremist approach and agenda remains substantial. It is particularly strong among the GOP base voters who are most often described as “white working class” and/or “Red State” voters—voters who are less than college educated and more likely to live in small towns and rural areas than in upscale suburbs and major urban centers.¹

As a result, a critical challenge facing progressives and Democrats today is to figure out how to drive a wedge into this grass-roots support for political extremism and separate the die-hard extremists who are beyond persuasion from others who are not firmly committed and can potentially be convinced to withhold support from the extremist wing of the party.

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¹Some data suggests that the activist core of the extremists is actually businessmen and women and other more middle class individuals rather than average white working class people. But, while it is not yet possible to draw fully reliable conclusions about the voting behavior of different demographic sub-groups until more precise data becomes available later this spring, the preliminary data suggests that white working class and rural voters are central to the extremist electoral coalition. As Stan Greenberg argues: “what the general elections reveal is that 40 percent of all Americans are fully part of an anti-establishment, God-first, racially resentful, anti-democratic bloc, who live in a right-wing media cocoon and adore Donald Trump. This bloc of white rural, evangelical, and working-class male voters rushed to the polls in both 2016 and 2020. And critically, they are three of every five Republicans.”

To Save America, Look at America As It Is

<https://prospect.org/politics/to-save-america-modeling-electorate-critical-challenge/>

It is critical to recognize that this is not the same political objective as the traditional progressive goal of winning white working class GOP voters to the Democratic Party. It is rather the conceptually distinct objective of weakening the hold that extremists within the GOP now enjoy over the entire party. Of course, in the long run winning GOP voters to the Democratic Party is the most desirable solution, But, for the near-term future another profoundly valuable objective would be to foment ideological division within the white working class/Red State supporters of the GOP in order to allow a less-extreme wing to develop.

The Traditional Strategies

The value of achieving this second goal is obvious but the strategies that are now being discussed for 2022 and 2024 are the same ones that have been consistently proposed since the 1970's.

1. Appeal to white working class GOP voters by emphasizing visionary and ambitious populist economic policies to address their "kitchen table" issues.
2. Appeal to white working class GOP voters by "moving to the center" on both "values" issues and economic issues.
3. Completely abandon any attempt to appeal to white working class voters in order to focus all effort and resources on increasing the turnout of the "Rising American Electorate" / "Obama Coalition" voters (i.e. People of Color, youth, single women, educated professionals).

All of these approaches have been tried over the last 50 years – without any enduring success.

As a result, the troubling fact that must be faced today is that progressives and Democrats are now debating between three theories **not one of which has successfully stemmed the steady, decades long defection of white working class voters from the Democrats and not one of which is explicitly focused on the task of driving a wedge between the extreme and less-extreme sectors of white working Americans.**

It is time to consider alternatives.

The Hidden Assumption that Underlies the General View of the White Working Class

It is not often noted that all three of the progressive/Democratic strategies noted above are based on a common underlying perspective – that white working class Americans can be discussed and analyzed as if they were a single, essentially undifferentiated social group with largely uniform characteristics and views.

Commentators are aware that there are differences between the views of younger and older workers, male and female workers and between those who live in small towns and rural areas and those who live in larger urban areas. But the participation of many young men and women from different areas of the country in the current extremist groups and political campaigns makes it seem reasonable to assume that demographic or geographic differences within the less educated and non-professional sectors of the population do not necessarily create significantly distinct political perspectives. This is certainly the perspective one gains when

reading the vast number of “roadside diner,” “local tavern” “VFW hall” and “factory gate” interviews that journalists conducted with white working people after Trump’s election. These one-on-one chats, regardless of where they were conducted across the country or the age of the subjects who were interviewed, produced a largely similar picture of people whose support for Donald Trump had been driven by a felt deeply alienation from the nation’s political and cultural establishment and a sense of being looked down upon by people in the more educated and successful “liberal” tiers of society.

This same perspective has also informed the major academic debates about the causes of the support for Trump among the white working class. A vast array of studies has appeared that debate the degree to which either explicit racial prejudice, “status anxiety” “a loss of social standing” or legitimate economic issues are the primary driver of white working class Americans drift to the GOP and political extremism.

The unstated assumption in this discussion is that (aside from the minority of workers who continue to vote Democratic) the white working class is a basically homogeneous group who all think in largely similar ways. A [recent round-up article](#) in the *New York Times* by Thomas Edsall strikingly illustrated of how deeply engrained this perception is.² In the article a wide range of academic political scientists explained the motivations of the political extremists who attacked the capital using exactly the same set of concepts that are also used to explain white working people’s support for Trump and the GOP. As a result, from this perspective the mob that attacked the capitol simply represent the extreme expression of a general pattern of white working class support for political extremism and do not constitute a distinct social group.

The picture that emerges from the more in-depth research of sociologists, field ethnographers and long-term grass-roots organizers in white working class communities is quite different, however. It is that white working people are not a monolithic group with uniform outlooks and perspectives. On the contrary, both before and during the Trump administration, in-depth observers of white working people repeatedly found that they were divided into quite distinct groups. Some individuals were indeed “Rush Limbaugh/talk radio” conservatives and others were sincerely devout Christians. But there were also many non-ideological workers who asserted old-fashioned, “traditional”, but not explicitly conservative attitudes and others who were entirely focused on their daily life and completely uninterested in larger issues of any kind.³

In fact, people who work with white working class people or conduct focus groups, field ethnography or door to door organizing campaigns will generally agree that it is possible to distinguish two distinct perspectives among white working people – on the one hand workers who can be described as “cultural traditionalists” but who are not ideological conservatives and on the other hand individuals who clearly and energetically embrace extreme versions of conservative views (for a listing of books and articles that support this assertion, see pages 6 and 7).

² White Riot
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/opinion/capitol-riot-white-grievance.html>

³See, for example:
Cultural and Political Diversity in the White Working Class
<https://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/2020/11/09/cultural-and-political-diversity-in-the-white-working-class/>
New Poll: There is no Singular Trump Voter
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/02/05/new-poll-there-is-no-singular-trump-voter/>

These are a few of the differences that are often noted between these two groups.

Extremists	"Cultural Traditionalists"
<p>These individuals assert openly negative or bigoted views of non-white groups. While not necessarily asserting explicit racism they are willing to express a clear distaste for "others" and support policies that discriminate against them.</p>	<p>These individuals sincerely insist that they judge people as individuals and know some minority individuals who they like and respect. They consider their attitude to be both correct and admirable because it is "color-blind"</p>
<p>These individuals endorse versions of Christian faith that reject any deviation from particular doctrines and assert that those doctrines should be sanctioned by society and legally imposed by law.</p>	<p>These individuals express their personal commitment and respect for "old-fashioned" religion and traditional moral values but do not insist that their beliefs be imposed by law or social pressure on other groups or view others as necessarily immoral or wicked for holding views different than their own.</p>
<p>These individuals assert a version of patriotism that conceptualizes conservative values and Republican candidates as being identical with the "American way of life" while, in contrast, "liberalism" is defined as a literally alien and subversive ideology.</p>	<p>These individuals assert a vision of the "American way of life" that conceptualizes patriotism as a basic love of country and support for the American form of government but which simultaneously accepts the existence of diversity and pluralism as an inherent part of the American ethos.</p>
<p>On a psychological level these individuals exhibit a high level of intolerance toward different views or behaviors across a wide range of issues and topics and display irritability and a short temper as a major personality characteristic.</p>	<p>On a psychological level these individuals express a generally tolerant attitude across a range of issues and topics and display a generally more "easy-going," "live and let live" outlook on life.</p>
<p>These individuals pay close and sustained attention to news, commentary and analysis that is produced by extremist sources including talk radio, Fox News, and social media.</p>	<p>These individuals do not closely follow either partisan or mainstream national news and commentary beyond paying relatively casual attention to newspaper headlines and local news.</p>
<p>These individuals perceive Democrats as literal subversives and traitors who are inspired by alien ideologies and are intent on undermining the traditional American way of life.</p>	<p>These individuals perceive the Democrats as a political party that primarily represents social groups like educated liberals and racial or ethnic minorities while having little interest, understanding or concern for ordinary white working people like themselves.</p>
<p>These individuals view government, government policies and programs as always inherently pernicious and destructive and as an essentially alien force that must be resisted.</p>	<p>These individuals view government as often deeply corrupt and government policies and government programs as frequently harmful or unresponsive to the needs of ordinary people but not as inherently bad or evil.</p>

At the same time both extremists and cultural traditionalists also share a number of basic cultural values

- Pride in their culture and background
- Respect for Tradition
- Love of Freedom
- Belief in Personal Responsibility, Character and Hard work
- Respect for law, strict law enforcement and the right of individual self-defense.

To be sure, dividing the white working class into the two distinct groups above is itself to some degree an oversimplification. Different Individuals display idiosyncratic mixtures of the attitudes described above. Not all supporters of the religious right are bigoted, for example, and many white supremacists have little or no interest or commitment to religion. Many white workers will support one populist economic proposal but not another.

But the broad distinction above between extremist and cultural traditionalist groups within the white working class is far more accurate and useful than broad stereotypes that are based on generalizations about what “all white working people” think or do.

And most important, because this distinction between cultural traditionalists and conservatives or extremists segments the white working class into two distinct ideological groups based on their different social and political outlooks, it suggests a basis for a progressive strategy designed to divide the extremist and non-extremist sectors.

How to Drive a Wedge Between the Extremists and Non-extremists among Republican-voting White Working Class Voters.

There is nothing new in the broad observation that many white working class people can combine quite traditional attitudes about cultural and racial issues together with support for a diverse range of progressive or populist economic policies. In the 1950’s and 1960’s the Democrat’s “New Deal” coalition was based on the fact that many white workers and people in rural areas would vote for Democrats based on the Dems support for the economic policies of the Roosevelt Administration while being otherwise not particularly “liberal” or “progressive” in their attitudes.

It was in the 1980’s that Stan Greenberg first clearly defined the “Reagan Democrats” – white working class men and women who had abandoned the Democrats and switched to the GOP Opinion surveys continued to show that many still expressed support for various progressive economic policies but felt generally more at home with the cultural and racial conservatism of the Reagan era GOP.

Articles and Books That Discuss Cultural Traditionalism versus Right Wing Extremism in The White Working Class

Articles

Does the Democratic Coalition Really Need the White Working Class? https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_Do_Dems_need_WWC.pdf

Democrats’ Critical Challenge: Seeing the World Through Red State Eyes <https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/2018/06/democrats-critical-challenge-seeing-the-world-through-red-state-eyes/>

Modern-day “Class Consciousness” and “Class Resentment”: the unacknowledged—but vitally important—perspective that is necessary to understand why many non-racist white working class voters voted for Trump—and might do so again if Democrats don’t figure out how to respond. https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Andrew_Levison_Class_Consciousness.pdf

Can the Democratic Party Be White Working Class, Too?

<https://prospect.org/economy/can-democratic-party-white-working-class-too/>

What Democrats Still Don’t Get About Winning Back the White Working Class <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/08/07/what-democrats-still-dont-get-about-winning-back-the-white-working-class/>

Winning Some Middle of the Road Working Class Whites <https://prospect.org/power/winning-some-middle-of-the-road-working-class-whites/>

The Obama coalition may be able to beat Trump or Cruz in November but in order to fight the larger threat of GOP extremism we still need more support from the white working class https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_still_need_WWC_vf.pdf

Some Democratic politicians successfully held onto their seats in the increasingly Republican states and districts. In almost all cases they did not do so by advocating the most ambitious populist economic policies available or by proposing a uniformly “Republican-lite” agenda. Rather, many retained white working class support because they combined a reassuringly working class personal background and culturally traditional outlook with support for a range of the more popular aspects of the Democratic platform.

Montana Senator Jon Tester is one of the most notable current examples of a Democratic politician who was able to win election in 2006 and 2012 and then win reelection once again in 2018 using this political approach.

A 2006 *New York Times* article described Tester as he began his first term.

The senator-elect from Montana truly is your grandfather’s Democrat—a pro-gun, anti- big-business prairie pragmatist whose life is defined by the treeless patch of hard Montana dirt that has been in the family since 1916. “You think of the Senate as a millionaire’s club—well, Jon is going to be the blue-collar guy who brings an old-fashioned, Jeffersonian ideal about being tied to the land,” said Steve Doherty, a friend of Mr. Tester’s for 20 years. “He’s a small farmer from the homestead. That’s absolutely who he is. That place defines him.”

On the campaign trail, Mr. Tester spoke often of how “regular folks” just “haven’t been given much of a shake.” He is distrustful of global trade agreements that have hurt farmers, and big drug companies and health maintenance organizations that he says have put medical costs out of reach for many people.

Asked why he became a Democrat in a region that has been overwhelmingly Republican for the last generation, Mr. Tester said: “It started with my parents, who always said the Democrats work for the middle class. And in agriculture, Franklin Roosevelt [did a lot of good things.](#)”⁴

In his autobiography, *Grounded – a Senator’s Lessons on Winning Back Rural America*, Tester provides richer detail and describes three key elements of his appeal.

1. He describes his genuinely authentic “working man” background. Tester grew up working on the family farm, he played bugle at VFW funerals, worked part-time as a high school music teacher and basketball coach and met his wife in church. His outlook as he grew up was equally conventional.

Books

The Politics of Resentment
Katherine J. Cramer

The New Minority
Justin Gest

Strangers in Their Own Land
Arlie Russell Hochschild

Trump’s Democrats
Muravchik and Shields

The Left Behind
Robert Wuthnow

Exit Zero
Christine Walley

Harvest the Vote
Jane Kleeb

Beyond Contempt
Erica Etelson

⁴Fresh off The Farm in Montana, A Senator to Be
<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/13/us/politics/13tester.html?pagewanted=2&r=2>

He held traditional views on abortion, sexual orientation and other “values” issues (As a member of a local school board he supported the suspension of a student for wearing an earring because it represented a violation of the school dress code, a decision he later recognized as wrong).

2. His progressivism and Democratic identification was rooted in his families support for FDR and his focus in his early political career was on support for public schools, protection and expansion of public lands and criticism of large corporations in agriculture and health care that harmed ordinary people.
3. His gradual acceptance of the more progressive perspectives on social issues that emerged in the 1960’s and 1970’s developed very slowly, not through adopting any coherent ideology but by a series of personal experiences. In many respects his social views still remain “traditional” but not ideologically conservative.

This was a not uncommon description of many moderate Democrats who continued to win election in Western and Midwestern states in the 1980’s despite the growing Republican trend in the Reagan years.

It was, in fact, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and Bill Clinton’s victory in 1992 that mobilized conservatives to launch a ferocious wave of demonization of Democrats and the Democratic Party that profoundly undermined support for the party since that time. Reagan had been a deeply conservative politician but not a political extremist. It was politicians like Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan and talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh who elevated the demonization of Democrats to a new level, promoting the view that they were literally subversive and evil.⁵

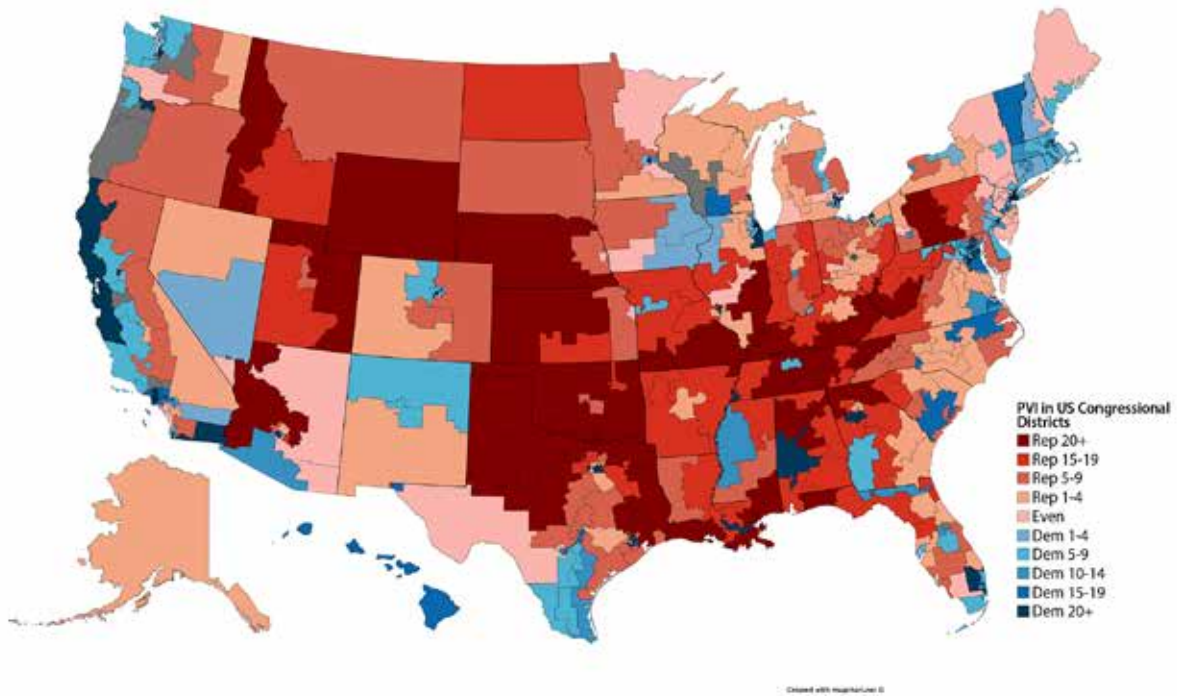
By the time of the Obama administration this demonization had proceeded to the point where few “Red State” Democrats could hold on. Jon Tester held on to his senate seat in 2018, winning a remarkable 7% of Republicans but Steve Bullock, the quite popular governor of Montana who had won his seat by 4% in 2016 (when Trump won the state by a margin of 21%), could not win the other available Senate seat in 2020.

The basic problem is simple. To be successful, in general Democratic candidates have to run in districts or states where it is possible to form coalitions between People of Color, liberals and educated professionals that make it possible for the candidate to win election while obtaining only a minority of the white working class vote. In districts where white working class or rural/small town voters are the dominant majority this strategy is most often simply not possible.

The following map from 2016 suggests the scale of the problem. All of the red, light brown or dark brown areas are **more than 10 percent** more Republican than the average congressional district, the darker of these areas are 15 to over 20 percent more Republican. And these same areas are in general also home to relatively fewer people of color, liberals or educated professionals.⁶

⁵After the fall of the Soviet Union various groups and individuals that had passionately supported the anti-communist counter-insurgency strategy developed in Vietnam and Central America turned their attention to American liberals who they now defined as their new “enemies” -- crypto-communist subversives who were as just as evil as the Viet Cong and Central American guerillas that the counter-insurgents had fought in the past. In the 1990’s Oliver North and Grover Norquist were the best known figures in this group but it had—and still has—deep roots in the armed forces, the national security apparatus and the huge independent contractor/hired mercenary sectors of the military.

⁶PVI in U.S. Congressional Districts
<https://cookpolitical.com/pvi-map-and-district-list>



In 2020 the situation actually worsened. As Phillip Bump noted in the *Washington Post*:

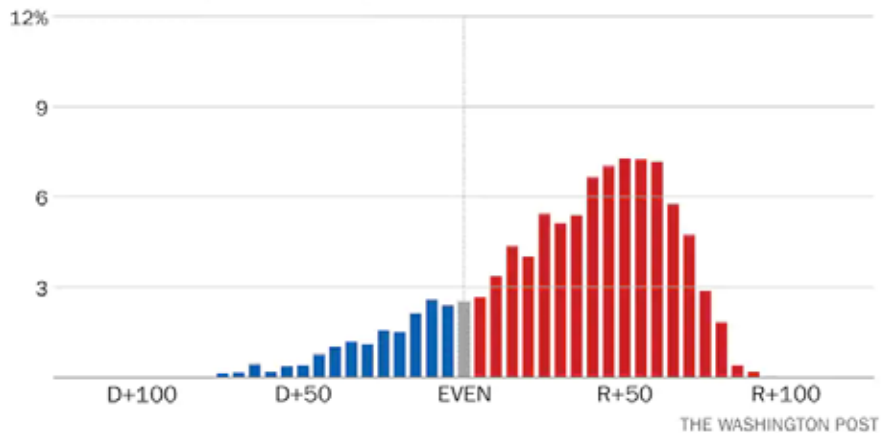
Trump’s map actually was a lot redder than maps in the past. In both 2016 and 2020, the number of counties that preferred Trump by a wide margin was substantially larger than the number of counties that had done so for candidates in any other election over the past 60 years.

In 2016, about 16 percent of counties preferred Trump by a margin of at least 50 points, up from about 10 percent of counties that preferred Mitt Romney by that margin four years prior. In 2020, the percentage increased to 33 percent – just shy of a third of counties.

We can visualize the 2020 results by plotting the percentage of counties that fell into any given five-point range of margins. It looks like [this](#).⁷

⁷Those big, misleading maps of presidential results by land area are getting worse
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/03/recent-polarization-republican-counties-visualized/>

Actual county-level margins in 2020



In the long run it is possible to imagine trying to rebuild local Democratic organizations and combat the demonization of Democratic candidates in these “Deep Red” areas but for 2022 and 2024 this is simply not a realistic strategy.

In fact, in these “Deep Red” districts all GOP candidates must now follow a two-step strategy to win an election. It doesn’t matter if they are sincere believers in one or another variety of extremist ideology or if they are more traditional conservatives who now find themselves forced to regurgitate extremist views they do not genuinely believe. The imperatives they face are exactly the same.

First, in order to win the Republican primary in “Deep Red” districts, they must first gain the support of the extremists who control the local party machinery and constitute the activist core within the GOP. A Republican candidate today cannot allow any other candidate to win the support of these voters or his campaign will never get off the ground. This forces all GOP candidates to take a series of extremist positions and pass a series of extremist litmus tests. In 2022 and 2024 these will include insisting that the 2020 election was stolen and that Trump is still a hero and major leader of the party.

Second, when turning to the general election, the candidate will then have to engage in the most absurdly extreme demonization of the Democratic challenger in order to consolidate the support of non-extremist Republicans despite their reservations about his or her extremism since the candidate can no longer “move to the center” to win their support once the primaries are over as Republicans would routinely do in the past. In the Georgia senate races in 2020, for example, TV and other media were filled with wildly hysterical messages that “socialist” and “radical” Democrats would quite literally allow criminals to wander the streets unmolested, open the borders to millions of immigrants, raise taxes on ordinary people to confiscatory levels and allow radical mobs to ravage and destroy downtown city centers. Neither of the two Republican candidates made the slightest attempt to appeal to GOP moderates during the general election.

As a result, progressives and Democrats must now face two difficult facts

- 1. The major battles between the extremists and the non-extremist cultural traditionalists in the white working class have to be fought within the GOP and mainly during the primaries. By the time of the general election campaign any**

internal debate about the GOP's extremism will be submerged in the overall partisan dispute between Democrats and Republicans.

2. Because of the successful demonization of the Democratic Party in Deep Red America, white working class cultural traditionalists who want to run as anti-extremist candidates will have much more influence on the debate between the two views if they run as "outsiders" rather than as Democrats.

How Could a Strategy Based on these Political Realities Actually be Executed?

The key would be to challenge the major deception that GOP candidates invariably try to play on white working class voters – claiming to be pro-worker populists while in practice defending an anti-worker, plutocratic agenda.

It is this vulnerability that can and should be attacked. Candidates who can present a genuine working class cultural traditionalism at the same time as a sincere commitment to defending white workers basic economic and social needs could seriously undermine extremist GOP candidates and complicate their campaigns by exposing and directly challenging their utter dishonesty and hypocrisy.

The way this can be done can be based recognizing one fundamental fact – that Donald Trump profoundly transformed the ways that an "outsider" can run a political campaign.

Traditionally, independent candidates at the local and state level were ignored by the media and had to overcome a wide range of obstacles, legal and financial, simply in order to be recognized as even remotely serious. It is a very expensive and difficult effort to run as a traditional independent and could only be attempted by extremely wealthy candidates like Ross Perot or as the local candidate of an already existing third party group such as the Libertarians or Greens.

Trump, in contrast, did not run as a classic "independent" like Ross Perot. Instead, Trump simply steamrolled his way into the Republican party by ignoring the "rules" and claiming to be the only "real" and "true" representative of voters that the other Republican candidates were ignoring.

After all, Trump had absolutely no record of activity as a Republican, had expressed a variety of opinions that deviated from Republican orthodoxy and had refused to follow the party rules and procedures that other candidates had accepted like releasing their tax returns. Instead, he put all the other candidates on the defensive and claimed his place in the Republican primary by two methods:

1. He replaced the somewhat subtle racial "dog whistles" that the other Republican candidates employed with more overt and aggressive bigotry.
2. He appropriated and aggressively asserted entirely legitimate trade union arguments about the disastrous effects of trade agreements and deindustrialization on white working class Americans.

It is easily forgotten just how much the entirely legitimate and very real issues of deindustrialization, loss of stable union jobs and reduced wages added to Trump's support during the 2016 election because he so quickly abandoned these issues soon after he was elected in favor of a conventional, plutocratic Republican agenda. But Trump's utter hypocrisy and

insincerity does not change fact that a very substantial part of his appeal during the 2016 elections and his enduring image as a champion of ordinary Americans was based on his demagogic exploitation of entirely real and authentic working class issues.

As Trump made his assault on the hide-bound Republican hierarchy, they grumbled but were understandably afraid to simply ban him from the party because they sensed that his arguments were resonating with an important sector of their coalition that they desperately needed to retain.

Trump also effectively exploited two new features of political campaigning – bypassing the mainstream media by using social media like Twitter and Facebook and funding his campaign with small donor contributions. And Trump very effectively used his flamboyant TV image and “media savvy” in figuring out how to generate publicity and gain huge amounts of absolutely free media attention.

What Progressives Can Learn from Trump’s 2016 Campaign

Culturally traditional white working class “outsider” candidates can use some of these same tactics. They can avoid the cost and complexity of establishing formal independent campaigns by running unsanctioned “grass-roots independent” write-in crusades. Their goal would not be to win or even be recognized as official candidates in GOP primaries but rather to seize the opportunity to dramatically challenge the GOP candidates and undermine their campaigns.

They will face two kinds of opponents.

In many cases the leading GOP candidates in Deep Red States and Deep Red State districts will be relatively wealthy businessmen and women with a range of problematic issues in their biographies such as having financial interests in businesses and corporations with anti-working class agendas, receiving contributions from lobbyists working for corporations or organizations tainted by corruption or that harmed white working class Americans or having been exposed as exploiting their political office for personal gain.

These same GOP candidates will often be liars and hypocrites as well. Very frequently Republican candidates who own large farms or ranches will dishonestly depict themselves as “farmers” or “ranchers” in their advertisements when they have never actually done a day of hard outdoor physical work in their entire lives.

This provides the basis for challenging these candidates by showing white working class voters that *“you cannot trust them,” “They are not your friends,” “they don’t care about you,”* and *“they are not ‘on your side.’”* Right-wing political extremists don’t consider these issues significant; culturally traditional workers do and will say on surveys that they consider them central factors in their vote.

The other type of GOP candidate will come from the extremist fringe and have a history of extremist activity but no track record of ever having done any actual work on behalf of white working people. Their entire “pitch” to white workers will be based on their bitter hatred of “liberal elitists” and the Democratic Party.

In either case a culturally traditional white working class populist can convincingly point out the failure of these candidates to genuinely represent their white working class supporters.

It is, however, important to point out that, with white working class voters, an effective “populist” campaign is different from the kind of campaign that many radicals and progressives tend to assume a populist campaign should be. A frequent assumption is that a populist program that will genuinely appeal to white workers must be one that promises expansive, dramatic and visionary programs – free college, free universal medical care, a guaranteed income and so on.

To many working people, however, these kinds of promises invariably sound impractical and unrealistic. Long experience has taught them to distrust big promises and big ideas that never seem to work the way they are promised. Instead, it is clear and specific, down to earth issues and solutions that they perceive as plausible and sincere expressions of populism.

Jon Tester’s various campaigns provided a range of examples of this practical variety of populism.

Preserving family farms.

Tester has argued that “large scale industrial agriculture...results in a food system that efficiently grows calories with chemical inputs in frankensoil that has no smell. But the scary part is that the food system we are creating and dumping money into is a vertically integrated system. One or two companies own and control every part of the process: the genetically modified seed, the herbicide that works only for the modified genes in that seed, the grain, the shipping method used to get that grain to a factory, the factory and the food product that comes out the other side of it. **A small farm producer like me wants nothing to do with that kind of system.**”

Advocating for Veterans:

Tester served on the Veterans subcommittee and introduced and passed a wide range of bills aimed at improving veteran’s health services, especially in rural areas. He fought increase the milage compensation that vets received for the long distances they had to travel in order to receive the specialized medical services they often needed and wrote legislation to help seniors pay their Medicare Part D premiums for pharmaceuticals.

Opposing the Privatization of Schools, the Veterans Administration, Public Lands and Electric Power

Tester argued that in privatized systems the search for profit would produce worse service for rural students and veterans and deprive ordinary citizens of access to outdoor recreation. He also opposed the deregulation of electric power in Montana because it would lead to higher prices for consumers.

Tester’s brand of populism also recognized the importance of focusing on issues of personal integrity and character, repeatedly attacking his opponents’ dishonesty and corruption.

In 2005, Tester ran against a senator who had steered a 3 million dollar grant meant for impoverished Indian tribal schools to one of the richest tribes in the nation as a result of campaign contributions from lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

In two elections Tester challenged the honesty and character of his opponents for claiming to be “ranchers.”

In 2012 Tester ran against candidate who claimed to be a rancher but had not bought sold or registered livestock for over a decade. His only business, it turned out was converting his former family ranch into a housing development. In one of their debates Tester said: “Building houses and mansion ranchin’ is not ranching.”

In his 2018 campaign Tester faced another opponent who called himself a rancher. As Tester’s autobiography noted, “Tester’s opponent posed in front of cattle. He spoke about building fences and injecting growth hormones into livestock and working the land...but hadn’t registered any ownership of any livestock since 2011 and before then it was limited to a few horses. It appears he never owned any cattle.” Tester, predictably, did not let this go unchallenged.

It is this sharply focused and concrete form of populism that can most effectively undermine the image and support for right-wing extremist candidates in the GOP.

Executing the Strategy:

1. “Storm the Gates.”

A culturally traditional economic populist could drive up to a Republican Party primary debate in a tractor or a bulldozer and demand the right to speak *“on behalf of the people who aren’t here – the people who actually work with their hands all day long and all their lives. They deserve someone who will speak for them because you damn, spoiled, crooked, rich bastards certainly won’t do it.”*

Such a candidate could demand that candidates make specific promises and commitments to their white working class supporters – for example to reject donations from companies that harm or cheat workers.

A candidate could hold a press conference displaying two large suitcases filled with fake 100 dollar bills representing the amount the GOP candidate had been given by some donor and then carry them around as a prop while campaigning. The theme would be the *“this is how much the GOP candidate got from the lobbyists to vote for what they wanted, and not for what you need.”*

In the past stunts of this kind were dismissed as superficial but are now vastly more powerful and effective because of social media. The same event that would once have been ignored on TV will now circulate widely on Twitter and Facebook.

Aggressive, deeply “class conscious” campaign strategies like this, backed up with specific examples of financial malfeasance and support for anti-worker economic policies would put many GOP candidates “on the horns of a dilemma” – if they attempt to co-opt or assert support for populist measures it will create problems for them with their large contributors who, in return for their financial support, expect the candidate to not only support their traditional plutocratic agenda but also to defend them from populist attacks on their image and reputation. If the candidate ignores the challenge, it will validate the attacks.

The candidates will, of course, claim that the insurgent candidate is not really an independent outsider but actually a “false flag” Democrat but a genuine culturally traditional candidate will simply not fit the false stereotype that the GOP candidate would be trying to impose.

One dramatic example of how to combat false stereotypes was provided by 2016 democratic senate candidate Jason Kander, who responded to criticism of his support for sensible gun control measures with a TV ad that showed him assembling an AR-15 assault rifle blindfolded, in this way calling attention to his service in Afghanistan. Kander closed the ad by saying “In the Army, I learned how to use and respect my rifle. I’d like to see [my opponent] do this.”

Jon Tester provided a similar example of authenticity with advertisements that showed him repairing the engine of a John Deere Tractor and displaying the missing fingers on his left hand which he had severed while running a meat grinder in the families’ butcher shop when he was only 9 years old. He repeatedly challenged his opponents to show similar familiarity with rural farming life.

2. Open a “Second Front”

In some cases an “outsider” candidate might not only be running against an GOP extremist but also against a more traditional and less extreme “constitutional conservative” in the primary and then a Democrat in the general election. In both cases, if there seemed to be a realistic possibility that either of these candidates could win, there could be a strong case for the candidate to throw his or her support to them.

In most “Deep Red” districts, however, the much more likely scenario is that the extremist candidate would clearly dominate both the primary and the general election. In this case, it could actually be more effective for a culturally traditional white working class “outsider” to continue to run a separate campaign against the extremist because this would, in effect, open a “second front” against him or her, bringing distinct attacks from an entirely different direction. From a strategic point of view, it is obviously easier for an extremist Republican to concentrate all of his or her attacks on a single opponent than to have to fight a “two-front” war against multiple opponents with distinct backgrounds and agendas.

The Vital Challenge: How to Weaken the Ideological Hegemony of Republican Extremism in Deep Red America.

There are two reasonable questions that can be raised about this suggested strategy.

The first is that resources devoted to a campaign of this kind might better be used for grass roots organizing around specific issues in these districts and it is indeed true that a traditional “independent” political campaign with expensive offices, staff, salaries and advertising might indeed compete for resources with grass roots organizing efforts.

A genuinely grass roots “outsider” write in campaign, on the other hand, would be very different – it would be a relatively low cost, no frills effort that would not compete with local grass roots efforts for resources but, much more likely, “piggyback” on them or, if none exist, stimulate their creation. Since white working class communities are so often ignored and underserved, both grass roots organizing efforts around specific economic issues and a “gadfly” candidate raising those same issues in a political campaign would be more likely to be mutually reinforcing rather than competitive.

The second possible objection is that even the slightest diversion of time, effort and resources from winning potentially “winnable” swing districts is a misuse of scarce resources since Deep Red districts are unlikely to actually add a single extra Democratic representative to Congress or to local or state government.

What this fails to consider, however, is that uncontested GOP domination in Deep Red districts is what has created the sociological foundation for today’s profoundly dangerous political extremism. When people with different political views live in the same areas and communities and share schools, sporting events, parks and streets they tend to see each other as neighbors, despite any differences in their political views. When a profound social and geographical distance divides them, on other hand, they very easily come to see each other as aliens and strangers.

So long as the Democratic and Republican parties shared a fairly wide degree of consensus, as they did in the post-world war II era, most Americans, even in firmly Republican districts, saw members of the opposite party as basically “normal” people who were their friends and neighbors and with whom they socialized in daily life – at PTA meetings, Little League games and a host of other shared activities.

As the social and demographic character of Democrats and Republicans began to diverge in the 1970’s and 1980’s, on the other hand, it became vastly easier for right wing demagogues in the GOP to portray Democrats as “alien” – essentially subversive, sinister and even evil rather than as fellow Americans with whom one just happens to somewhat disagree.

Each successive stage of this campaign has been more grotesque than the last. In the 1990’s Fox News, Bill O’Reilly and Rush Limbaugh began the process of demonizing the Democrats, but the resulting extremist militia movement remained a fringe phenomenon, especially after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1998. After Obama’s election new and more extreme demagogues like Glen Beck and Breitbart provided the ideology for the much larger Tea Party movement.

Now Trump has legitimized the worst extremism ever seen in America, ranging from the conspiracy theories of Q-Anon to the proud and open neo-fascists marching in Charlottesville and invading the Capitol.

In this context, challenging the dominance of the extremists in Deep Red white working class and rural districts across America is crucial. Right now in many Deep Red districts Democrats are essentially invisible and the Republican Party organization is entirely committed to defending Donald Trump's extremism. Challenging what is now essentially the unchallenged ideological hegemony of the extremists in these districts may seem irrelevant in purely electoral terms but in sociological terms the effect of weakening their hold would be profound. Even if a community generally continues to vote Republican, if a person's next door neighbor or the captain of his children's baseball team rejects candidates who spout extremist conspiracy theories or even dismisses the candidate who circulates the myths as a corrupt hypocrite it becomes much more difficult for a person to passively accept the lies he or she reads on Facebook posts that Democrats are all secret degenerates running child sex slave rings or crypto-Stalinist subversives plotting the creation of massive nationwide concentration camps.

The challenge can be stated simply. A strategy that consolidates a democratic majority in blue areas but abandons all red areas to the GOP is a recipe for a permanently divided country. A strategy that tries to weaken extremism's hold on the heartland is a strategy aimed at reuniting America in the future.