



TDS WHITE PAPER:

A SERIOUS, STEP BY STEP POLITICAL STRATEGY FOR REGAINING SUPPORT FROM A PIVOTAL GROUP OF WHITE WORKING CLASS VOTERS WHO NOW SUPPORT THE GOP.

BY
ANDREW LEVISON



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A Summary of the argument

1. Dems cannot regain support from *"The White Working Class"* in general – only from one sector of it. As a result, any serious political strategy has to begin by defining what that sector actually is.
2. The White Working Class is politically divided into three parts – (1) white working class voters who support Democrats, (2) Committed Trump/MAGA supporters and (3) non-MAGA white working class voters who vote Republican. Only one segment of the last group is potentially persuadable.
3. Both the MAGA/Extremists, on the one hand, and the non-MAGA white working class voters who support the GOP, on the other, share two characteristics: cultural traditionalism and "old-fashioned" personal values. Unlike the MAGA extremists, however, the Non MAGA GOP voters display a greater degree of social tolerance rather than intolerance and a "pro-worker" rather than a virulently "anti-limousine liberal" class consciousness.
4. Democratic candidates used to win the support of non-extremist white working class voters without sacrificing basic Democratic values by understanding that their cultural traditionalism and relatively "old-fashioned" personal views did not necessarily lead them to ideologically conservative or right-wing extremist political attitudes. On the contrary in the 1950s and 1960s white workers often voted for solidly progressive Democratic candidates like Teddy Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, George McGovern and others who were part of a "big tent" Democratic coalition.
5. Virtually all Democratic attempts to regain white working class support since that time have been based on the very limited and incomplete strategy of simply offering progressive economic plans and programs that are argued to be in workers' "real" interests.
6. White working class voters, however, generally make their political choices based on broad narratives about *"why things are the way they are"* and *"who is on my side."* Both MAGA extremists and non-MAGA white working class voters who support the GOP share a basic three-part narrative that includes (a) a past era of *"good times"* (b) a story of *"how things went wrong."* And (c) a current perception of *"things going downhill"* – of increasing chaos and disorder.

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7. Current MAGA extremists attack Democrats as literal subversives and traitors who are the cause of all the problems workers face. Non-MAGA white working class GOP voters, on the other hand, do not automatically accept this narrative and can be convinced by an alternative that offers authentic “grass roots” candidates who sincerely champion workers’ legitimate needs and interests.
8. No individual Democratic candidate can single-handedly overcome the massive national campaign of GOP demonization and slander that is inevitably leveled against all Democrats. Individual Democratic candidates seeking white working class votes must therefore seek to create a national political alliance with other Dems that establishes a distinct working class political identity as “*traditional Democratic values candidates*” embodying the outlook described above and championing the distinct political perspective of culturally traditional but non-MAGA white workers.

Note: Recent political changes in Democratic support among Latino, African-American and other non-white groups are of growing importance for the future of the Democratic coalition but are also sufficiently complex and distinct to require separate discussions that will be presented in future memos.

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Introduction

In most current elections for Senators and Governors and in national campaigns for President, Democratic candidates have no alternative except to try to build broad political coalitions that carefully balance an appeal to a wide range of different Americans that includes college-educated and suburban voters, young and female voters and people of color as well as to traditional white working class voters.

On the other hand, in vast numbers of more local contests for School Boards, City Councils, State House and Senate seats and in a substantial number of Congressional Districts white, less-than-college voters are a majority or close to a majority.

In these districts a specific, targeted strategy for regaining the support of some Non-MAGA white working class voters who now vote for the GOP is indispensable for victory.

This TDS White Paper presents a strategy for achieving that goal.

Part 1

For 50 Years Democrats Have Debated Between Two Strategies for Regaining Lost White Working Class Support.

Neither Strategy Works.

For the last 50 years there has been an essentially continual Democratic debate about how to stop the steady decline in white working class support that has proceeded with only temporary interruptions since the early 1970s. After 2016 when Donald Trump won two-thirds of white, less-than-college voters with an appeal that added a demagogic pro-working class populism to traditional right-wing ideologies this debate has flowered with even greater vigor.¹

The Progressive “Kitchen Table” Response

The progressive strategy for combatting the loss of white working class support over this entire period can be summarized in the theory that *“in appealing to white working class voters, Democratic candidates should exclusively and relentlessly focus on ‘kitchen table’ issues.”* The argument has always been that economic issues—the kinds of “pocketbook” issues that workers presumably discuss over the kitchen table—are the “real” issues while GOP appeals based on social or values issues are essentially cynical distractions and that Democratic candidates should therefore be able to successfully drive this reality home.

In virtually every year from the mid-70s to the late 1980s Democratic campaign strategists routinely announced the results of opinion polls that showed that workers held progressive views on a range of economic issues and that many rated those issues more important than social or values issues. On this basis the repeated failure of Democratic candidates to regain working class support was attributed to every other imaginable cause—bad luck, bad candidates, inadequate funding, bad advertising, bad political environments, hostile media—other than to this basic strategy itself.

Even today “exclusively focus on kitchen table issues” still clearly remains the central progressive strategy for appealing to working class voters. For example, the major economic issues that are noted on Bernie Sanders’ “Our Revolution” website include:

Medicare for all, Fight corporate monopolies, Good jobs for all

Aside from these, the other issues noted in this progressive agenda are demands from other sectors of the progressive community that include:

Green new deal, Criminal justice reform, Immigrant rights, End fossil fuel subsidies

The national working groups, caucuses and commissions of the Democratic Socialists of America shows an even wider range of other broad progressive issues (along with a focus on labor movement issues) with which the organization is engaged:

¹There have also been recent, troubling declines in Democratic support among working class Latinos and other People of Color. These will be discussed in future memos.

Abolition Working Group, Afrosocialists and Socialists of Color Caucus, Antifascist Working Group, BDS and Palestine Solidarity Working Group, Disability Working Group, Housing Justice Commission, Immigrants' Rights Working Group, International Committee, Medicare For All, Mutual Aid Working Group, Queer Socialists Working Group, Religion and Socialism Working Group, Socialist Feminist Working Group

In contrast neither organization attempts to seriously address or even mention any of the legitimate "social" or "values" concerns that Republicans use to win working class support such as reducing crime, improving the quality and safety of public schools in working class areas, reducing inflation, supporting local small business or combatting opioid addiction.

This same "to win working class support focus entirely on economic issues" approach was equally evident in Bernie Sander's January 2023 speech – a major address rather grandly entitled, "The State of the Working Class." It deals exclusively with economic issues and completely avoids making even a single mention of any of the issues that Republicans make central to their working class appeals.

"Republican-lite" – Centrism's Asparagus Bisque and Lobster Salad Alternative

In stark contrast to the progressive approach, beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s an alternative strategy generally called *centrism* gained support within the Democratic coalition. It held that Democrats had to moderate their stances on a range of social and values issues and support moderate candidates like Bill Clinton and Al Gore who embodied this approach. During the early period of the Clinton administration this strategy was focused on regaining working class support and balancing progressive goals like national health insurance with moderation on social and cultural issues. In the latter part of the 90s, however, a different approach championed by Clinton's advisors including Robert Rubin, Dick Morris and Mark Penn reshaped centrism into a strategy that included supporting aggressively pro-business, neo-liberal economic policies and focusing the centrist appeal on college-educated "soccer moms," "office park dads" and "wired workers" rather than the Democrats' traditional working class base while also sharply moderating the party's position on social and values issues. This approach reached its nadir in the 2002 bi-elections during which the strategy was widely derided as being a dismal failure because it simply offered "Republican-lite."

Nonetheless, the basic elements of this approach have remained unchanged. A recent NYT Magazine article by Jason Zengerle titled, "The Vanishing Moderate Democrat" described centrist strategy today.²

On the one hand the article says centrism is focused on regaining the support of the non-college working class by moderating the party's stance on social and values issues. As it says:

The Democrats have taken up ideological stances that many of the college-educated voters who now make up a sizable portion of the party's base cheer but the rest of the electorate does not... Much as in the early 1990s, the most vibrant and urgent discussion in Democratic circles currently revolves around why and how the party needs to steer itself back to the center.

²<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/magazine/moderate-democrat.html>

It is important to notice that there is a subtle but critical “bait and switch” being performed here. The problem is defined specifically as losing the working class but the problem is suddenly redefined as the need to return to “the center” as though this is the universally agreed method for achieving the goal.

And, moreover, the “moderate” candidates that the article profiles also hardly qualify as champions of the working class on economic issues.

As it says:

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

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

The Candidates’ Dilemma – Two Strategies to Choose From and Neither One Works

This leaves a democratic candidate seeking white working class votes with two fundamentally inadequate strategies to choose from:

1. A “left/progressive” strategy which holds that the candidate should propose ambitious progressive economic policies and then trust that workers will also accept a wide range of other woke/progressive social and cultural positions with which they disagree as a necessary price of joining the left coalition.
2. A “centrist” strategy which holds that the candidate should emphatically reject woke/progressive positions on a wide range of social and cultural issues and then trust that this will be sufficient to win working class support even though the candidate’s basic economic platform is actually designed to appeal to business.

The limitations of these two strategies become vividly evident the moment they are clearly stated. **And, even more startling, neither one of these strategies has any foundation in the way that ordinary people actually make political decisions.**

Let’s face it. No-one really believes that any working class person sitting at the proverbial kitchen table actually says, *“Well, I disagree with this guy’s social and cultural values, but I like his economic platform so I’m going to vote for him.”* Instead, the way that most people who are not deeply involved in politics choose which candidate to support is in a broad, very impressionistic way, viewing the candidate as a wholistic integrated package of opinions, social

background and personality characteristics. What political research has repeatedly found is that the most important factors which determine an ordinary voter's choice of candidate A instead of B is his or her gut-level judgment that the candidate is *"on my side," "understands how I feel," "cares about people like me," "is someone I can trust"* and *"will fight for me."* Only in the most abstract mathematical models of the "rational voter" do voters compare and rank specific elements of a candidate's social and economic platform with an internal checklist of their own policy preferences.

In reality, both of the strategies above are based on pre-existing ideological platforms and agendas which workers are then expected to support rather than on what persuadable working class voters themselves indicate that they actually desire. As a result there is no particular reason to think that either one of these strategies should be able to win substantial support.

But what is the alternative? The answer is that candidates should **propose what persuadable, non-extremist white working class voters actually say that they want.**

Part 2

“Less-Than-College” workers Are Not a Social Class. Democrats Need to Understand Who Persuadable Workers Really Are.

One major problem faced by Democratic political strategists is that—unlike the white working class of the 1950s—today’s less-than-college white voters are an extremely heterogeneous group – so much so that it is difficult to analyze and discuss them as a meaningful voting bloc.

The white working class of the 1950s was relatively easy to visualize. “White workers” were basically blue collar men who worked in large factories or in other basically manual occupations like construction, mining, longshoring and trucking. As a result their generally pro-Democratic voting behavior seemed a natural response to the pro-worker economic policies of Roosevelt’s New Deal.

In contrast, the modern white working class includes large numbers of women as well as men who live in both urban and rural areas and span a very wide range of occupations – from traditional blue collar jobs to retail sales and service occupations like restaurant workers, cleaning and housekeeping employees and clerical laborers as well as skilled but less-than-college degree level occupations like physical trainers, cable and internet wiring installers, sales and marketing representatives and data entry and processing workers along with vast numbers of small businesspeople like plumbers, electricians and restaurant and fast food franchise owners who are either self-employed or who work alongside their employees on a daily basis but are also the owners of their small businesses.

It is difficult to visualize this wide range of different workers as being a clearly defined social class, much less to imagine them as a coherent political force. When “white working class” voters are discussed today, observers tend to imagine the old image of blue collar workers but now picture them as attending Trump rallies rather than standing at factory gates.³

(Note: The profound changes that have occurred in the white working class since the 1950s are discussed in depth in the following memo: “The modern working class does have a class consciousness but its radically different from the class consciousness of the 1950s”)⁴

There have been a vast number of opinion studies since the 2016 elections that have tried to understand white working class political views. Many have documented the significant differences between college-educated and non-college-educated voters in the levels of support they display for Donald Trump and their views on a range of issues. More sophisticated statistical analyses of voting and opinion data have similarly sought to determine the degree to which white working class support for Trump can be attributed to legitimate economic grievances rather than simply to racial resentment and conservative cultural values. The conclusions of these diverse studies have varied widely with conflicting implications for the degree to which white workers might be persuaded to change their partisanship.

³(Note: The use of the term “working class” for less-than-college voters is justified when discussing social and economic conditions because less-than-college voters generally have substantially lower incomes and living standards and inferior working conditions than college graduates. The two groups do also on average show distinct differences of opinion on many political issues. This does not, however, make less-than-college voters a coherent social class that actually shares a common social outlook and perspective).

⁴https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_Working_Class_Consciousness.pdf

All these studies, however, have implicitly been based on the assumption that white, less-than-college voters can be discussed as if they were a coherent social group that could be expected to display shared political values. There is no question that in many respects the views of less-than-college voters are distinct from those of the college educated but there has been little discussion of whether it would actually be more accurate to consider these voters as representing several distinct groups rather than a single coherent social formation.

There are significant differences in political outlook between urban and rural, young and old and male and female white working class voters but, for politics, the deepest and most salient division is between the approximately one third of white less-than-college voters who vote Democratic and the two thirds who vote Republican. These two groups obviously have very different political perspectives and they also differ significantly in demographic terms. The Democratic voters tend to be more urban, young, female, single and employed in the sales and service sectors of the economy while the GOP voters tend to be older, blue collar, rural and owners of small businesses – although there is substantial occupational overlap between the two sectors.

Very few of the discussions that one reads in the media, however, attempt to analyze Democratic and Republican working class voters as representing two fundamentally distinct social perspectives rather than simply as different points on a simple left-right continuum of political opinion.

And in fact, even within the group that votes for the GOP there is a profoundly important division. It is between the GOP voters who strongly support Donald Trump and the MAGA ideology and those who reject it.

Yet despite its obvious importance even the most basic facts about the very distinct non-MAGA sector of the white working class that nevertheless votes for the GOP are not understood. For example, how large is this group of voters? There have been various attempts to gauge the size of the non-Trump/MAGA wing of the GOP as a whole but these figures are very rarely broken out by years of education in order to gauge the extent of non-MAGA sentiment in the white working class.

One recent Pew Trust survey, however, did provide a breakout of this kind between college-educated and non-college educated GOP voters. It showed that on a “feeling thermometer” where GOP respondents rated Trump on a scale from 1 to 100, 20 percent of GOP less-than-college voters were “cool” to Trump with 13 percent “extremely cool.” Another recent poll by the Marist Institute found that 14% of non-college white voters who were either GOP supporters or GOP “leaners” had an unfavorable opinion of Trump. And a Times-Siena poll found 9 percent of GOP non-college primary voters had “very unfavorable” opinion of Trump and an additional 6 percent viewed him “somewhat unfavorably.” These are profoundly significant findings because they suggest that there is a sufficiently large group of non-MAGA GOP voters to swing many close elections.⁵

⁵<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/14/before-midterms-trumps-image-among-republicans-had-become-less-positive/>

<https://maristpoll.marist.edu/polls/the-trump-indictment/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/07/31/us/elections/times-siena-poll-republican-primary-crosstabs.html>

It is therefore vital to try to understand what this distinct group of workers think. As standard opinion polls and election data do not provide this information, the best place to begin is with the many sociological studies that have tried to define this group's distinct identity. These studies have generally converged on the following characteristics.⁶

1. Cultural Traditionalism

The basic social ethos and personal philosophy of many non-extremist working class and rural Americans is properly defined in sociological terms as *cultural traditionalism*. It is an outlook that is shaped by the major social institutions in working class and rural life – the church, the armed forces, the local business community and the vision of the American system of government that is taught in traditional high school civics classes.

The values these institutions uphold and teach are religious piety, patriotism, support for small business/free enterprise and the superiority of the American system of government.

These values are not seen as political opinions that can be reasonably debated but rather as “obvious” social values that “*everybody just knows are right.*” They are psychologically linked to working people's basic sense of their own personal identity and their emotional identification with their home, local community and class culture.

2. “Old-Fashioned” Personal Values

Many non MAGA working people who vote for the GOP also hold a series of “old-fashioned” personal values – a belief in individual responsibility, hard work, support for law and order, and the importance of fairness and judging people as individuals. These are understood as “*my personal philosophy*” or “*my way of thinking*” and are rooted in personal experience and family tradition more than on any abstract moral code.

It is critical to note that these values and beliefs are not inherently Republican or ideologically conservative. The outlook above was part of working class “real American” values in the 1950s and early 1960s when 60 percent of workers voted for Democrats and a majority of blue collar workers were members of unions.

What fundamentally changed was that deindustrialization left white workers feeling abandoned and betrayed by the Democratic party's embrace of centrism under Clinton combined with a sense that their needs were frequently subordinated to the demands of African-Americans and other groups within the Democratic coalition. Trump weaponized this feeling by melding it with explicit right wing ideologies of racial bigotry and theocracy, held together by class resentment toward the educated rather than the economic elite.

The non-MAGA sector of the working class, however, is culturally traditional but not right wing. This distinct sector is distinguished by two key characteristics:

⁶A list of some of these studies is presented in the appendix.

First, a basic outlook that tends toward tolerance and empathy. It is generally linked to a more “easy going,” “live and let live” personal psychology and is most often supported by the many varieties of compassionate Christianity that are still common in working class churches. Although this point of view is generally unfamiliar to the highly educated, Jimmy Carter is a distinct example of this “liberal” variety of small town/working class Christian faith.

(In this regard it is important to note that, historically, many successful Democratic candidates—especially Catholic Democrats —had personal moral objections to abortion but did not feel this gave them the right to impose their personal beliefs on others. It was precisely this distinction that made it possible for Democrats to succeed in building a majority coalition during the post-war period.)

Second, a firm “class conscious” belief in the need for greater fairness in economic affairs and anger at injustice in areas ranging from the unfairness of the tax system that lets the wealthy pay less than the average worker to the systemic corruption in the way that big business manipulates and corrupts the political system. There is a deep sense among this sector of the working class voters that it is not just “liberals” or Democrats who ignore working class needs but “the system” as a whole that is unfair to the “little guy.” There is a deep sense that ordinary people always get screwed.

(Note: this distinct group is discussed in greater detail in the memo: The culturally traditional but non-extremist working class voters: who they are, how they think and what Democrats must understand to regain their support.)⁷

The following table suggests the wide range of issues which distinguish the MAGA/Extremist from the Non-MAGA/Extremist sectors of the white working class:

MAGA/Extremist white working class voters	Culturally Traditional but Non-MAGA/Extremist white working class voters
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” (e.g., the “Great Replacement Theory”) and support policies that discriminate against them.	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”.
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.	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 evil for holding views different than their own.
These individuals understand Christ’s basic message as a call for Christian dominance and authority	These individuals understand Christ’s basic message as one of compassion and forgiveness.

⁷https://thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_levison_culturally_traditional_WWC_voters_v2.pdf

<p>These individuals assert a version of patriotism that conceptualizes conservative values and Republican candidates as being identical with the <i>"American way of life"</i> while, in contrast, <i>"liberalism"</i> is defined as a literally alien and subversive ideology.</p>	<p>These individuals assert a vision of the <i>"American way of life"</i> 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 major personality characteristics.</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 <i>"easy-going," "live and let live"</i> 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 see society as divided between <i>"average Americans"</i> and a <i>"liberal elite"</i> that imposes its own policies and values.</p>	<p>These individuals see society as divided between <i>"ordinary working people"</i> and a powerful economic/political elite that is indifferent to their needs and welfare.</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>

The challenge that Democratic candidates face is figuring out how to win the support of this second group – the Non-MAGA/Extremist white working class voters.

The place to begin is by listening to what they actually say:

Part 3

Democrats Can Win Non-MAGA Working Class GOP Voters. The First Step is Understanding What They Really Think.

The previous section argued that there are four basic elements that form the very distinct social and political outlook of working class Americans who vote Republican but are not supporters of Donald Trump or the MAGA ideology. They are *cultural traditionalism, old-fashioned personal values, tolerance and class consciousness*.⁸

Democratic candidates who wish to run in working class districts need to understand these four aspects of the non-MAGA working class perspective. Journalistic interviews with individual workers offer some insight but are not sufficient for this purpose. What Democratic candidates need is a broad overview of what successful Democratic candidates have learned about these voters during their campaigns.

An important resource for this purpose was published last Fall by the Rural Urban Bridge Initiative. Based on interviews with over 50 Democratic candidates who outperformed the partisan composition of their district the report's title indicates its thesis: "Can Democrats Win in Rural America: A Review of Strategies and Tactics That Work"⁹

Here is how the authors of the report explained their methodology:

To begin, we created a pool of all rural Democratic candidates who ran in a state legislative, U.S. House, U.S. Senate, or gubernatorial race during the 2016, 2018, or 2020 election cycles. Out of that pool, we identified 235 individuals who outperformed their district's or state's partisan lean by 5% or more, and RUBI then conducted extensive interviews with 50 people, primarily candidates and elected officials, along with a handful of staff, about their experience running in rural elections.

A key section of the RUBI report presents a detailed list of key attitudes and perspectives that were found among the rural/working class voters that the candidates encountered – a list which closely corresponds with the four major clusters of attitudes of persuadable working class voters noted above.

1. Cultural Traditionalism

- *Patriotic, proud of America but open to doing a better job at living up to our nation's ideals*
- *Honors military and veterans but wary of endless war*
- *Sees small businesses and family farms as backbone of economy and is wary of large corporations pushing them out*
- *Feels pride of place and strong connection to farm/land/town/community*

⁸Ibid.

⁹RUBI : Can Democrats Succeed in Rural America

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/610d482f3b9e856192886fe1/t/636eb33b324ed609f03f81fa/1668199229402/Executive+Summary_+Can+Democrats+Succeed+in+Rural+America_+Rural+Urban+Bridge+Initiative.pdf

- *(If white) Doesn't think about "white privilege" and resents being made to feel guilty*
- *Cares about and supports family and community, less so people in other communities*
- *Values freedom and liberty*
- *Believes in equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome*

2. Old-Fashioned Personal Values

- *Sees manual labor as equally if not more important and respectable than intellectual labor*
- *Takes pride in hard work and self-reliance. Hard work is a virtue, good for the individual, the family and the community*
- *Sees civility and compromise as virtues*
- *Sees honesty and integrity as virtues*
- *Helping each other is a community norm, with a strong preference for local, community-based solutions*
- *Desire to be respected and have practical, hands-on knowledge honored*
- *Preference for narratives that honor working people as engines of the economy*

3. Tolerance

- *Church-going and accepting of other faiths*
- *Rejecting but willing to be tolerant of gay marriage*
- *Moderately pro-choice but abortion not a priority issue*
- *Negative on transgender rights but open to persuasion, not passionate on the issue*
- *Feels positive or neutral about increasing racial and ethnic diversity and equates color-blindness with anti-racism*
- *Rejects racial discrimination and violence*
- *Has "live and let live" ethic but disagrees with cutting-edge social justice concepts*
- *Takes pride in being both open-minded and grounded in common sense*

- *Feels judged negatively by liberals for not being socially liberal enough but isn't constantly raging about "wokeness"*

4. Class Consciousness

- *Has mixed feelings of admiration and resentment toward the rich, particularly those who profit off average people and/or look down on rural and working folks*
- *If working or middle class, sees Republicans helping the very rich and Democrats helping the very poor while no one has their back*
- *Sees politicians disproportionately representing the interests of the rich and being out-of-touch with ordinary folks*
- *Sees a positive role for government theoretically but perceives government giving hard-earned taxpayer money to everyone but them*
- *Feels a sense of loss over community's economic decline, population loss and/or deaths of despair*
- *Sees a role for government in providing opportunities for people to help themselves but wary that direct government benefits indulge laziness*
- *Feels squeezed and/or have family or friends in trouble*
- *Upset by demise of community prosperity, trust, civility and social bonds*
- *Sees corporate greed, materialism and hyper-online-ism as bad for kids and society*
- *Feels betrayed by a party that used to champion working class*
- *Alienation from and distrust in mainstream institutions and the political system run high*
- *Distrust of scientific and academic "experts"*
- *Belief in almost universal corruption on the part of politicians and lobbyists*
- *Anger at unchecked corporate profiteering*

Part 4

John Tester – Taking Out the Transmission on a John Deere Tractor

Historically, Democratic candidates who succeeded in white working-class or small-town districts have always tended to display two major characteristics:

First, they firmly asserted and embraced many basic traditional values 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 guns. They would reject the notion that America should impose Christianity on all Americans, but they would assert equally firmly 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 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 both manual construction workers and small businessmen).

Second, they frequently embodied culturally traditional 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."¹⁰

Tester was able to win elections 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."

¹⁰https://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

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.”¹¹

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

As one historian noted:

...[in the 1980’s] by appealing to economic issues, such as federal support for agriculture, Democrats in Nebraska as well as in North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Missouri, Oklahoma, and other states were able to defeat Republicans tethered to conservative doctrine.

These states that once helped Democrats become the majority in the Senate are now an albatross for the party. Five of the six individuals South Dakota and North Dakota sent to Congress in 1989 were Democrats, but the Dakotas have zero Democrats combined as of this writing. Kansas used to have two Democrats in Congress, but now it has one. Oklahoma sent five Democrats to Congress, now it sends zero. Missouri sent five Democrats to Congress in 1989; now it sends two.

During the New Deal and Great Society, the moderates and liberals these states used to send to Congress were instrumental in getting progressive laws passed that supported unions and public-power projects. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, representatives from these states backed public education initiatives, legislation that supported the well-being of the working class, and equal rights laws.¹²

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.

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 percent of Republicans but Steve Bullock, the quite popular governor of Montana who had won his seat by 4 percent in 2016 (when Trump won the state by a margin of 21percent), could not win the other available Senate seat in 2020.

¹¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/13/us/politics/13tester.html?pagewanted=2&r=2>

¹²How Democrats Lost the Great Plains
<https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/179062>

Part 5

To Regain the Support of “Culturally Traditional but Not Extremist” Working Class Voters Democrats Need to Understand the Compelling Political Narrative That Leads Them to Vote for the GOP.

A critical question for Democratic strategists is why a significant group of working class voters choose to support MAGA Republican extremists today even though they themselves are more accurately described as “cultural traditionalists” rather than extremists.

In a range of different focus groups this group of white working class voters make clear that they do not fully accept MAGA/Q-Anon/Tucker Carlson conspiracy theories or view all Democrats as literal “enemies” but they nonetheless vote for extremist candidates who assert these views on election day.

For the most part the current intra-Democratic debate about how to reach these voters focuses on issues. Can these voters be swayed by even more ambitious Democratic economic proposals or by more moderate stances on cultural issues? Can Democratic candidates win their support by exclusively focusing on “kitchen table issues” or by aggressively challenging extremist accusations?

It is important to recognize, however, that working class voters who do not pay careful attention to politics do not make their political choices primarily based on examining specific issues and policies. They evaluate candidates based on their broader outlook and philosophy – a perspective that the candidates frequently present as a basic “story” or “narrative” about America.

These basic narratives play a major role in political thought. Voters basic understanding of “what’s gone wrong” and “why things are the way they are today” act as a conceptual framework within which specific issues and specific candidates are considered.

The Role of Political Narratives in Democratic Strategy

Among Democratic political strategists the discussion regarding political narratives is painfully superficial and there are only a few serious studies in political science and sociology journals regarding the role they play in American politics.¹³

One of the most thoughtful analyses of the role that narratives play in Democratic political strategy, however, appears in Dr. Drew Westen’s influential book *The Political Brain*. As Weston noted:

¹³See, for example,

Annual Review of Political Science 1998

<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev.polisci.1.1.315>

American Journal of Cultural Sociology

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41290-017-0037-7>

One significant attempt to relate political narratives to broader areas in the social sciences was provided by Jonathan Haidt and his coauthors who attempted to relate political narratives to both Haidt’s quite influential Moral Foundations Theory and also to what is known in psychology as the “big five” taxonomy of personality types.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233174706_Above_and_Below_Left-Right_Ideological_Narratives_and_Moral_Foundations

Our minds naturally search for stories with a particular kind of structure... a coherent story has an initial state or setting ("once upon a time") protagonists and antagonists, a problem, obstacles, often a clash between the protagonists trying to solve the problem and those who stand in their way and a denouement in which the problem is ultimately resolved.

He continues:

Any compelling political narrative must have the following elements

It should have protagonists and antagonists

It should be clear and coherent requiring few leaps of inference or imagination

It should have a clear moral

It should be moving

It should have central elements that are readily visualized

It should be rich in metaphor so that it is emotionally evocative

It should take elements of the opposition's story including its metaphors and recast them as its own.

The critical question for Democratic strategists, however, is why do working class voters who are cultural traditionalists vote for extremist candidates if they do not actually believe the extremist views that they offer? In what way does the extremist narrative appeal to them?

The Three Subsidiary Narratives

*The answer is that there is a basic narrative in working class life that is actually undergirded by three subsidiary narratives that long pre-date the modern MAGA ideology. The central fact is that **these subsidiary narratives are not inherently extremist** and many working class people deeply identify with them while not accepting extremist views.*

The three sub-narratives are:

1. The past era of "good times" when society was fair
2. The breakdown of the "Fair Deal" beginning in the 1970s
3. The growth of "chaos" and the loss of order

The First Narrative

The first subsidiary narrative describes an era of “good times” that existed in the past. In the northern industrial cities older working class citizens today can remember their parents describing the “time when things were good” in the post war period before 1970 and many younger people have absorbed the story from them at second hand.

The core of this narrative describes the “good jobs” that existed back then – factory jobs that not only provided a decent salary that allowed a man to support a family but also job security, vacation and retirement benefits and a set of standards about the conditions of work that were all provided under the union contract.

Workers perceived this post-war “deal” as fundamentally “fair.” Successful businessmen, professionals and wealthy people were seen as basically deserving the greater wealth and income that they received as part of a “deal” that also provided a decent life for a working class person who was willing to work hard and “play by the rules”.

In small town and rural areas this vision of a past era of “good times” was deeply entwined with the nostalgic memory of small town and rural life itself – of the profound sense of close, neighborly community life and shared social experience – from walking to church on Sunday to picnics on the town square and hunting and fishing on weekends only a short distance from the edge of town.

(For African-Americans in the South, of course, this idyllic picture was far from the reality. It was not only the basic reality of segregation and disenfranchisement that made small town southern life profoundly oppressive but the grotesque reality that any white man or woman could falsely accuse a Black person of virtually any offense and be entirely sure that the person would be arrested and convicted by an all-white jury.)

For many urban progressives, this reality is extended to suggest that any conception of small town life as positive or appealing is simply an illusion. But for many working class Americans who grew up in small towns the positive elements of small town life were profoundly and emphatically real and the recollection of them evokes a vivid memory of “the good old days” back when “neighbors were neighbors” and people “took care of each other.”

The Second Narrative

The second subsidiary narrative describes what came next – the way that “things went downhill.”

The sociologist who has described this most vividly is Arlie Hochschild. In her book, *Strangers in Their Own Land* she defines this sub-narrative as a “Deep Story.” As she says:

I think supporters of the Tea Party in Louisiana have a deep story, as do Bernie Sanders supporters in Berkeley, California. We all have a deep story. And it’s important to know what these are. Because so many arguments aren’t really between one set of facts and another; they’re between one deep story and another.

So the deep story I felt operating in Louisiana was this: Think of people waiting in a long line that stretches up a hill. And at the top of that is the American dream. And the people waiting in line felt like they'd worked extremely hard, sacrificed a lot, tried their best, and were waiting for something they deserved. They've suffered long hours, layoffs, and exposure to dangerous chemicals at work and received reduced pensions.

But this line is increasingly not moving, or moving more slowly [i.e., as the economy stalls]. Then they see people cutting ahead of them in line. Immigrants, blacks, women, refugees, public sector workers. In their view, people are cutting ahead unfairly. And then in this narrative, there is Barack Obama, to the side, the line supervisor who seems to be waving these people ahead. So the government seemed to be on the side of the people who were cutting in line and pushing the people who are in line back.¹⁴

It is necessary to read the full description of this "Deep Story" that Hochschild presents in her book to appreciate the subtleties and textures of this narrative and the profound, wrenching sense of unfairness that it describes. In interviews and focus groups with working class people this sense of being treated in a profoundly "unfair" way and the smoldering anger it produces is always one of the most powerful messages that emerge. The repeated charge is that "we played by the rules but the rules weren't fair."

The Third Narrative

The third sub-narrative expresses the growing sense that "things are falling apart today," that chaos is growing as an increasing number of people blatantly violate the "rules" and make a mockery of the sacrifices of those who try to follow them. There are several distinct elements within this sub-narrative.

1. Crime and Lawlessness

In many cities around the country a set of quite distinct forms of lawlessness have markedly increased. The most frightening kind of random street crime—armed robbery, home invasions and carjacking—have remained the least common but as handguns and assault rifles have proliferated other kinds of violent crimes have sharply increased and blurred former distinctions. Personal arguments between people who know each other and are rivals for a girl or who engage in drunken arguments at 3 AM when late-night clubs close increasingly erupt in gunfire that kills innocent bystanders as well as the participants while school shootings multiply. At the same time, petty theft by breaking car windows or stealing UPS packages from doorsteps have sharply increased as has trespassing and urban squatting by homeless people and incidents of assault or threatening behavior by people who are visibly mentally ill. When reported on the local news, the clear impression that is created is of a single crime "wave" and not a collection of distinct problems. The image of "chaos" on the Mexican border and uncontrolled immigration adds an additional element to this perception and creates the powerful sense that "law and order" in general is literally breaking down.¹⁵

¹⁴<https://www.vox.com/2016/9/6/12803636/arl-hochschild-strangers-land-louisiana-trump>

¹⁵The rioting which occurred in several cities after incidents of police brutality added a distinctly partisan element to this perception as Republicans accused Democrats of sympathizing with the rioters. In reality, significant rioting only occurred in a very few cities but news reports made it appear to be a widespread national phenomenon.

2. Inflation

Inflation produces a similar, general sense that things are *“out of control”* although the specific causes of rising prices for gasoline, food at the supermarket and for rent and new home prices actually have distinct supply-side causes. But for ordinary people rising prices have a distinct psychological character. **They are psychologically experienced as a form of theft.** Stagnant wages and wage increases are felt to be legitimately “earned” while rising prices are felt to literally be a kind of “robbery” depriving people of their hard earned income.

These problems, combined with deteriorating physical infrastructure and municipal services in many working class neighborhoods and a declining number of “good” working class jobs for working people’s children combine to create a sense of increasing social chaos and declining social order.

The three sub-narratives above confirm and reinforce each other. They form a coherent historical story of a society that once was fair to working people but has gradually become deeply unfair to those who “work hard” and “play by the rules.” There is a profound and grinding sense of unfairness and betrayal that can be read again and again in literally dozens of studies by sociologists and anthropologists who have lived and worked with working people over the years.¹⁶

¹⁶An extensive list of ethnographic studies of working class Americans can be found in appendix 2 of [The White Working Class Today](#) by Andrew Levison.

Part 6

The Current MAGA and Democratic Narratives

MAGA extremist Republicans have very clearly and explicitly incorporated this three-part core narrative into their attack on Democrats and extended it by emphatically and categorically depicting America as engaged in a literal “war” between liberals and decent Americans. The enduring thread in the extremist narrative is the idea that liberals and Democrats are not merely stupid, deluded or misguided—as Ronald Reagan, for example, perceived them—but are consciously and intentionally evil. They are very literally “enemies” who must be crushed, if necessary, by violent vigilante action.

J.D. Vance used an almost precise extension of the basic three part narrative in his 2022 campaign against Pat Ryan in Ohio.

American Decline Was a Choice

My hometown of Middletown, Ohio is full of great people, and it has one of the highest citizenship rates in the country—nearly every person who lives there is a US citizen. Yet it has a poverty rate 15 percent higher than the national average. In many of our biggest cities, even right here in Ohio, drive around and you’ll see homeless encampments and trash strewn everywhere. Crime has skyrocketed, and even many successful families find it harder to get ahead. Every day, we read about a new assault on our country: from the Chinese who are stealing from American industry, or from our own “leaders” who teach our kids to hate their own country. Why is this happening? For a simple reason: our leaders have failed.

They chose to flood our country with criminals and drugs. They chose to take a knee as radicals ransacked our cities and made our communities less safe. They chose to make a quick buck by selling our industrial base to China. They chose censorship over the First Amendment.

Our parents and grandparents gave us the most prosperous nation in the world, and our leaders have chosen decline and plunder. But under our Constitution, We the People have the power, and it’s time we used it to fight back.

The MAGA extremist story is simple. America was once a great nation for working Americans, Democrats destroyed this prosperity and now because of them, we face chaos and decline.¹⁷

¹⁷The way that the extremist narrative switches back and forth between the three parts of the narrative described in the last section in order to deflect criticism when extremist ideas are presented is well illustrated in the recent controversy over the country music song “Don’t Try That in a Small Town.” The song’s lyrics denounce urban carjacking, armed robbery, spitting in cops faces, flag burning and rioting and is accompanied by background video of Antifa riots and urban criminals. The following lyrics threaten that if anyone tries those things in a small town, the town is “full of good old boys,” “who are ready for a fight” and “will take care of their own” with “their daddy’s guns.” When faced with criticism, however, the singer responded by reframing the song in the context of the first basic sub-narrative saying “For me, the song refers to the feeling of a community that I had growing up, where we took care of our neighbors, regardless of differences of background or belief. Because they were our neighbors, and that was above any differences.” In this way, moving back and forth between the “good old days” and “modern chaos” sub-narratives the singer reframes the explicit vigilante threat in the song as being the defense of an idealized and entirely fictional racially harmonious small town life and to therefore dismiss any criticism as unfair.

Ironically, while union leaders and progressive think tanks were actually the first to sound the warning about de-industrialization in the 1980s many other Democrats failed to understand the growing anger and desperation in working class America and continued instead to rely on two pre-existing narratives that are still the major response to the loss of working class support.

The Progressive Narrative

The progressive narrative is essentially based on a mythologized version of how Democrats won the support of working class voters during the New Deal of the 1930s and how they can use the same strategy to regain their support today.

The long-ago story of Franklin Roosevelt's dramatic flurry of programs during his first 100 days in office is still often cited to as the classic model and example for how Democrats can win working class support by proposing and dramatically enacting bold, progressive economic programs that objectively serve working people's real economic interests.

Yet, as historians have noted, the "hundred days" story is substantially exaggerated. The great social movement of the 1930s that directly involved millions of workers and radically transformed their political outlook did not occur in response to Roosevelt's 100 days legislation but rather to the vast, epic battles across America for trade union organization. After World War II it was the mutual relationship and support between the Democratic Party and the trade union movement that cemented the "New Deal" coalition.

In the 1950s and 1960's, when workers did indeed generally vote for Democrats, their support was not won because Democratic candidates presented them with detailed policy papers or legislative bills. On the contrary, working class support for Democrats in the post-World War II era was obtained because there were a series of important community and neighborhood organizations that workers trusted and whose recommendations they followed. In the industrial states it was conversations with union shop stewards in the local union hall, endorsements by precinct captains of the local Democratic organization and Sunday sermons by progressive urban catholic priests that actually "sold" Democratic policies to white workers.

In the rural Midwest and West it was the local Democratic party workers and Democratic candidates themselves who explained and promoted the rural agricultural programs that won local support.

The explanation given today for the Democrats' inability to win working class support, however, is not the fact that comparable local Democratic organizations do not exist but rather that modern Democratic politicians somehow continually fail to "convince" working class Americans of the value of their programs. This is expressed in various ways. It is said that Democrats have *"failed to adequately emphasize their most popular programs"*, *"failed to explain how their programs have helped working people"*, *"failed to focus sufficiently on "Kitchen table" issues"*, *"allow themselves to be dragged into debates about "unpopular issue positions"* and other variations on this theme. The implication is that better speeches, ads and ribbon-cutting ceremonies are what is lacking.

But in fact, on the occasions when Democratic candidates presented detailed policies based on policy papers developed by progressive think-tanks, this appeared to many white workers as just another example of isolated “ivory tower” experts telling them “*what is good for them*” rather than being proposals that had been examined and endorsed by people they trust. In 2016 Hillary Clinton had most detailed and comprehensive liberal economic policy platform in Democratic history—which was developed without any significant grass roots involvement or support—and which consequently had no persuasive effect at all on working class voters.

And even when Democratic programs that genuinely benefit workers do get passed, Democrats rarely get the credit they deserve because the simple reality is that ordinary people cannot directly see the results of broad economic policies. The Biden administration’s recent economic initiatives are profoundly important for many working class Americans but are not having the desired effect on workers’ perception of the Democrats. A recent New York Times article about the American Rescue Plan provided a clear illustration.

The headline stated: “If Biden’s Plan is Like a ‘New Deal, Why Don’t Voters Care?’” and continued:

“Unlike the New Deal this 1.9 trillion federal investment in American communities has barely registered with voters. Rather than a trophy for Mr. Biden and his party, the program has become a case study in how easily voters can overlook even a lavishly funded government initiative delivering benefits close to home.”¹⁸

An article in Democracy Magazine titled, “The Death of Deliverism” repeated this disturbing conclusion.

The American Rescue Plan’s temporary expansion of the child tax credit lifted more than 2 million children out of poverty, resulting in an astounding 46 percent reduction in child poverty. Yet the policy’s lapse sparked almost no political response, either from its champions or its beneficiaries...it’s a remarkable feat to spend trillions in an attempt to usher in an economic transformation and to get such an underwhelming response.

It has long been an article of faith among liberals and leftists that if you “deliver” for people—specifically, if you deliver economic improvements in people’s lives through policy—these changes will solidify or shift people’s political allegiances.

Although we have long been sympathetic to “deliverism” we now believe that it is mostly wrong.¹⁹

The authors argue that Democrats must pay attention to other important factors that influence working class voters’ political views.

First, progressive policymaking must take identity, emotion, and story much more seriously... Policies that deliver economic benefit without speaking to, reinforcing, and constructing a social identity are likely to have little political impact.

¹⁸<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/21/us/politics/biden-pandemic-relief-democrats.html>

¹⁹https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/the-death-of-deliverism/?source=EM_NBI_DJ_20230706_FR_Deliverism_0_1YO_DemocracyJournal_na_na_Website&link_id=3&can_id=59af36e2ffe97693a6c17b40017079a3&email_referrer=email_1982734___subject_2491755&email_subject=bhargava-shams-hanbury-the-death-of-deliverism

Second, economic changes may be at the root of what ails us, but they are refracted through people's lived experience with things like violence, addiction, mental health problems, social isolation, loneliness, and a sense of social disintegration. Progressive policymaking and political rhetoric have been extraordinarily thin on these topics, tending to treat them as secondary issues.

Third, reinvigorated organizing and recruitment of new people, especially working-class people, into worker and community organizations is essential. Policy can support the rebuilding of social institutions, like community organizations and unions, that create opportunities for connection.

The authors of the original article that defined "Deliverism" responded to this critique by arguing that the fundamental problem was that the "goods" were never actually "delivered."

Let's take a quick look at how Obamacare actually affected normal people. First, the goal of Obamacare was to insure more people, and it did. Roughly 85 percent of Americans had health insurance in 2008. Today it's about 90 percent. So 5 percent of the country had something they didn't have before, and it's quite possible to say that many lives were saved....[But] what about the other 85 percent? Well, in 2009, the average medical cost for a family of four was \$15,609. Today it's \$30,260. That's almost the cost of a new car in health care costs, every single year. In other words, 85 percent of potential voters have the same or a worse experience with health care today, versus 5 percent who have insurance. It's hard to call that a net economic improvement in the lives of most voters.²⁰

...[with the Pandemic aid] virtually all of the pop-up safety net provisions delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic—some passed under Trump, some under Biden, making it hard for ordinary individuals to differentiate—**have been rolled back**, with millions losing Medicaid benefits, expanded food stamp payments, enhanced unemployment, rental assistance, and more...the lived experience of beneficiaries is that they lost government help.

Three political analysts based in the trade union movement offered a third, distinct explanation for why simply providing progressive policies is inadequate:

Unless people are actively engaged in winning the goods that are delivered to them, not only are they unable to build enough power to take the next step, but their short-term gains remain tenuous. This is often the case in minimum wage and other policy fights: When few of the impacted workers are actively involved in winning, they don't credit the unions or allies or politicians who delivered the wins, and the significance of those wins quickly dims.²¹

The authors contrast this with the enduring effects of gains that are won by workers when they go on strike to win better contracts and then have the opportunity to vote on the final settlement. The workers not only gain material benefits but an enhanced sense of their own power and agency which reinforces their commitment to progressive political action.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

The most in depth analysis of why simply proposing or even enacting progressive programs is inadequate, however, comes from an extensive array of coordinated studies conducted by American Family Voices and Lake Research which were specifically focused on one kind of working class community – small factory towns in the Midwest. The reports included careful analysis of election results down to the county level, a substantial series of opinion polls and focus groups conducted in the same communities as well as a range of personal interviews with union and community leaders.²²

The main report, authored by Mike Lux with his associates Richard Martin and David Wilhelm pointed to four critical challenges that face Democrats in regaining working class support.

1. There is a profound cynicism about both political parties and politics in general

“The biggest barrier to Democrats and progressive groups making gains in the Factory Towns is the intense cynicism of these voters. They don’t like or trust either party, or the media, or the government.... Mouthing general populist campaign rhetoric or running a few TV ads with that tilt are not going to move people very far because they feel like they have heard it all before and they think no one—Republican nor Democrat—ever truly fights for them or delivers on their behalf. Our poll shows that even messaging that people strongly agree with doesn’t by itself move horse race numbers very much.

In particular, just broadly attacking Republicans doesn’t sell to Factory Town voters – they shut down when they perceive partisan attacks because they see both parties engaging in an increasingly polarizing war where they feel like the “pawns.”

2. Many Workers Live in “News Deserts”

“These voters’ lives are too busy and too stressful to follow national political news much, and a lot of them live in news deserts where local newspapers are closing or being dramatically cut back. Local TV news stations cover mostly crime and traffic accidents – and/or have a rightwing agenda themselves as 50 percent of local TV stations are owned by three media corporations headed by far-right owners. [Note: a tremendous amount of material that workers do see—a large majority right wing—is delivered to them through social media and is given undeserved credence because it is often forwarded by friends, relatives and neighbors.]”

3. Workers are Deeply Favorable to Small Business

“For these cynical voters, the institution of small business is the closest thing to the gold standard there is today. They are cynical about politicians, both political parties, government at every level, the “corporate media” (a phrase that kept coming up in focus groups with high disdain), wealthy corporations and corporate CEOs, the internet, and many other things in modern life. But they have a high regard for most small business people. Most working-class folks very much think of small business owners as part of the working class, as people who work hard, have the same challenges they do, and who are essential to rebuilding their

²²<https://www.americanfamilyvoices.org/post/a-strategy-for-factory-towns>

communities. [To understand why this is so, it is only necessary to visualize the vast number of worker-contractors in construction like plumbers and electricians who are both small business owners and manual workers and the many other small business owners who work alongside their employees]

Democrats and progressive issue advocates should always talk about how much they care about small businesses doing well and should be specific about the ways they want to help the small business community, whether it is taking on corporate monopolies, giving procurement and infrastructure contracts to small business first, cutting red tape, or other things that lower the challenges facing small business owners.

4. The Most Important Step: Community Building

As Lux notes:

“When you are a cynical, alienated person living in a forgotten, ignored community, you need more than rhetoric to move you. Organizations that provide direct services and benefits to people are an important component for reaching out to Factory Towns voters.

The people in our focus groups love their hometowns, and are motivated to improve them, but they are also deeply troubled by the declines they have seen. The opioid tragedy has been a big part of these folks’ lives; worries about addiction and the consequences of it came up a lot in the conversations. While people talked about how much they trusted local media, they would talk about how newspaper downsizing had contributed to the sense that they knew less about their long-time communities. Many people in the groups mentioned how important it was to volunteer, to pitch in to make it better, and talked about how much they enjoyed their own volunteerism.

In the conversations I had with local activists, they talked to me of people not wanting to go to potluck church dinners and other events they had always gone to because they didn’t want to be where people argued about politics. The deepest longing people had was missing the sense that neighbors, co-workers, and church communities could talk about issues and what was going on without the conversations breaking down into angry screaming matches. Focus group participants expressed a lot of gratitude that the focus groups themselves had been a place where they could have a civil conversation without people getting mad at each other.

After two years of mostly being stuck at home because of Covid, people are eager to be going to community events again, and in general are eager to see their neighbors coming together.

Lux concludes:

One of my top recommendations coming out of this work is that the national Democratic Party and progressive non-profits should invest in hiring regional organizers based in targeted Factory Town counties. They should be assigned to build local committees and volunteer structures in these counties.

Democratic and progressive organizations and campaigns should work with these organizers to host community events that are not just about issues and politics, but that bring people together for fun and community building. Progressive groups and politicians should be organizing or sponsoring job fairs, health events where people can talk to health care professionals, and Chautauqua-style events with music and comedy as well as issue or political speeches. And all political events should build in elements of fun and community, including Election Day itself, where the Democratic Party or progressive groups could sponsor big events in parks or local small businesses for people who have voted or volunteered, not just victory parties at downtown hotels for political insiders.”

This local organizing extends to Facebook and other social media. The people in Factory Towns spend a lot of time on Facebook, and like the community building and information sharing aspects of it....progressive groups and the Democratic Party should make a major investment in building local and regional networks of Facebook pages.

Lux’s argument that this is the most important single step that needs to be taken is repeated by other leading observers. As Professor Lara Putnam, a leading researcher on grass roots movements notes:

Local party groups provide not just the boots on the ground but the community-specific knowledge and personal connections that guide voter outreach, and the group’s continuity means that knowledge and those connections grow with each campaign and build toward the next.

...failing to build participation is cast in stark relief by the enduring impact of those eras when hands-on politics *did* happen. Some grassroots activists invoke a father who was a union steward, or a mother who as Democratic committeewoman knew every voter in her precinct by name. ...These lives bear the mark of groups within which regular people convinced each other they could make the difference. Unionization campaigns today do the same. One young woman answered my knock at her door in hospital scrubs, eager to share news from Hospital Workers Rising (a Service Employees International Union initiative). She told me she’s going to be mayor of Pittsburgh one day.²³

Union organizers who work in political campaigns add further detail to this perspective. They note that a real-world “clubhouse” is the anchor that can unite the democratic supporters in a community together. All sorts of places can play this role—restaurants, bars, bookstores, libraries, churches, community centers and often people’s living rooms. The fundamental fact is that keeping grass roots political networks alive and growing requires regular personal contact and socializing. It is the friendships that are made during activities and the connections and camaraderie that results that create the bonds that cement and holds together a grass roots campaign organization after an election is over.

Successful organizations include a steady flow of purely social events. In small, old-fashioned towns these could be picnics, bowling tournaments, street fairs, barbeques, square dances or family fishing tournaments.

²³<https://prospect.org/power/digital-fixes-solve-democrats-problems/>

This social element of grass roots organizations is the key to success. The NRA has always understood this and their useful firearm safety courses were the traditional foundation of the organization. Churches, of course, have always had social events, and the Christian Right used those gatherings as central organizing targets in their campaigns.

In the past the Democratic Party understood the importance of regular social events. Consider this description of the early 20th century Democratic “machine”:

Politics under the machine was an urban festival, with picnics and chowders, boat rides, excursions to the country or the new amusement parks, balls and cotillions, block dances, and “beefsteaks,” atavistic rituals in which men donned aprons and devoured endless amounts of buttered steak with their teeth and hands.

One important approach is participating in local community volunteer activities. There are many neighborhood problems that are not usually associated with Democrats but where a campaign can participate such as assisting in the organization of neighborhood watch programs in areas where car break-ins and mailbox theft are common.

The vital importance of local community organization is underscored by a disturbing reality: Democrats in small factory towns and other rural areas feel profoundly isolated. They vastly underestimate the number of people in their communities who actually agree with them because of the heavy presence of GOP/conservative billboards, yard signs and other evidence of conservative views.

As one journalist noted in 2018:

In Virginia’s Sixth Congressional District, there’s another element that I hadn’t considered until I visited: intense social pressure. In places where Trumpism is so widespread, identifying as a liberal carries risks—social, financial, and perhaps even physical. For Democrats, this means that half the battle is simply normalizing their party.

“I wear these shirts to the gym that say ‘Pro-America, Anti-Trump,’” said Morrison. “Women, particularly, would come up to me and whisper, ‘I’m a Democrat.’ But they really were embarrassed to say it. That’s how strong it is.”

Morrison is the chair of her county’s Democratic committee. She told me that in her experience, most liberal residents keep quiet about their political affiliations. The pressure to stay silent and vote Republican is especially strong for people who work for conservative employers, are part of Shenandoah’s prominent, multigeneration (and generally conservative) families, or run small businesses that depend on a local clientele.

Morrison mentioned her hairdresser as an example. When Morrison gets her hair cut, the two will often quietly discuss politics and their shared outrage at Trump. “But she won’t do anything public, because her business depends on Republicans,”²⁴

²⁴<https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/10/28/the-democrats-of-trump-country/>

The depth of this isolation that many Democrats in small towns and rural areas feel today underlines the importance of a central fact: ***The rebuilding of local Democratic organizations and community institutions is inescapably a long, painfully slow process that cannot be completed in a single election cycle.*** It will require years of patient effort before even very modest results can be seen.

The challenge is entirely different from the door to door persuasion and voter mobilization operations that are organized by political campaigns for each candidate and election. The proper comparison is instead with the gradual, painfully difficult struggle for trade union organization that occurred in the 1930s – a process that took most of the decade before the first meaningful union contracts began to be signed.

Many Democrats will object that this is too long to wait for change in small town and rural America but the simple reality is that there is no alternative “quick fix” available. Short term canvassing and get out the vote efforts have very limited effects which quickly dissipate after an election. Democrats can either commit themselves to the long and hard struggle to rebuild an enduring Democratic presence in these areas or accept that there will be no progressive change at all.

Part 7

How to Reach non MAGA White Working Class Voters

While rebuilding a progressive and Democratic grass-roots presence in working class America, in the short run Democratic candidates need a new Democratic narrative for appealing to the distinct culturally traditional but non-extremist sector of the white working class.

Listening to Workers at the Construction Site

To do this, the place to begin is back in the years before the 2016 elections during lunchtime at a building site where eight to twelve construction workers are eating the sandwiches that they purchased from McDonalds or Hardees or that they brought with them from home. During the four to six month period when a large single family home or small commercial building is being constructed a variety of different tradesmen flow through – foundation excavators, cement workers, carpenters, masons, laborers, roofers, electricians, furnace and air conditioning equipment installers, insulation and sheetrock workers, painters, trim carpenters, cabinetmakers and landscapers.

Before 2016 one could generally distinguish four distinct political attitudes among construction workers like these.

Several would be firm Rush Limbaugh/talk radio conservatives who would resolutely and occasionally belligerently repeat the latest notions they had absorbed from their car radios or Fox news commentators on TV. Some—but not most—would make comments that suggested a conscious, explicit racism while others would firmly deny they personally felt any overt bigotry.

Another distinct group were firm and in some cases ostentatiously pious Christians. Some would make repeated references to “my savior” in conversation or indicate their disapproval of vulgar language. In conversation men like these quickly made it plain that their religious faith was the dominant force and perspective in their life.

A third group were men who liberals might reflexively classify as “conservatives” but who actually did not hold or express explicitly ideological conservative views. Rather, they were “cultural traditionalists.” They simply considered themselves deeply patriotic and pro-military, “Sunday school” religious, firmly in favor of “small business” and “old-fashioned” moral values.

A fourth group was composed of men who were strongly and resolutely apolitical. They were indifferent to the daily news, entirely focused on their immediate personal circumstances and consistently unwilling to assert any broad opinions or views. If the lunchtime conversation turned to politics or current affairs they would very quickly withdraw with a mumbled “*don’t matter to me*” or “*I don’t pay attention to that stuff.*”

Obviously, none of these groups are what most Democrats would consider “liberal” or “progressive”, and no longer included at least one “*good union man*” who would speak up in defense of unions and the Democrats. But these workers did reflect a significant range of attitudes.

One attitude, however, they all held in common. They viewed **all** politicians—**all**, regardless of party—as utterly dishonest and corrupt. If a lunchtime conversation about a topic became uncomfortably heated, the most common way the situation was defused was for everyone to cynically agree that, ultimately, politicians were all cynical liars and that nobody “*up there in government*” really cared about the ordinary person.

Equally, while the men in the last two groups perceived college-educated liberals, Silicon Valley millionaires and Wall Street financial wizards as all elites who lived more affluent lives and had little concern for them, on a day to day basis they did not express any fierce and active hostility to them.

And there was one other, vitally important distinction between these men – a difference in basic personality and temperament. Some were basically bad-tempered, easily angered and generally irritable. These same individuals were most often also the most intolerant of people who were different from themselves or of ideas contrary to their own.

On the other hand, others were basically relaxed, even-tempered, friendly and easy-going and, as a result, generally tolerant of different people and ideas – usually ready to “live and let live.”

While precise generalizations are impossible, one general pattern was that men in the first two groups above tended to be the more intolerant while those in the third and fourth groups were more likely to be more tolerant in their basic attitudes.

And, critically, a sufficient sector of these more tolerant men had been willing to vote for Obama in 2008 and 2012 to make his election possible.

After Trump’s campaign and election in 2016, however, circumstances profoundly changed – and changed in a way that has shifted the political terrain dramatically against the Democrats. The difference can be stated simply: After Trump’s 2016 campaign when white construction workers sat around for lunch and the conversation turned to politics, Trump completely defined and shaped the conversation. Every discussion quickly became framed in terms of what they agreed with or disagreed with about what Trump had done and said. Trump exploited the vacuum left by both Democrats and Republicans to vividly establish an image as the unique, passionate defender and spokesman for working class Americans – both extremist and non-extremist.

How to Reach Non MAGA White Working Class Voters

Despite Trump, however, polls and more dramatically focus groups consistently report that what white working class voters most deeply and indeed passionately wish for are candidates with sound moral and ethical character, and a sincere commitment to the people they represent. Because they perceive modern American politicians as corrupt, self-seeking parasites, the attributes they most deeply desire are candidates with strong personal virtues like honesty, integrity, and authenticity.

The range and intensity of the feelings that are expressed in many focus groups are startling. Regarding greed and money, the kind of candidates they wanted were men and women who:

- *See politics as public service, not a way to make money,*
- *Focus on the needs of the people and not the special interests,*
- *Care about the people of the country instead of just making their wallets bigger,*
- *Are motivated by the needs of everyday citizens and not the high-dollar contributors,*
- *Are not bought or corrupt, and*
- *Don't make getting rich their guiding principle.*

They also wanted men and women who would be authentic, grassroots representatives of the communities that elected them. They said they needed politicians who:

- *Know real people,*
- *Live in the community they represent,*
- *Have walked the walk and understand Americans' struggles,*
- *Remember where they came from and the people they represent,*
- *Have worked their way up by themselves without family and friends who got them where they are,*
- *Can be judged by their works, by what they have done in the past,*
- *Live their ethics in their own lives, and*
- *Should be honest and want to represent the voice of the people.*²⁵

As a result, a new narrative for Democratic candidates seeking working class votes should go something like this:

"You know, things have completely changed since the time when my father was a young man. He used to work in a Ford plant in Ohio and back then politics were different. An ambitious young guy who wanted to get into politics started out by doing work for the local Democratic precinct captain in the neighborhood or for the political action committee in the union. He'd begin by getting the local precinct or the union to support him to run for a local office. It didn't take that much money back then because their endorsement went a long way in the community. Sometimes they just had to say, 'You know, Joe's a good guy, I'll vouch for him' and people would trust their recommendation."

²⁵<https://prospect.org/power/winning-some-middle-of-the-road-working-class-whites/>

And politics back then was a lot more local. Money helped, of course, but a lot of the electioneering was done face to face at Fourth of July parades and street fairs and passing out flyers and going door to door.

After a while, if he was ambitious, the young guy might run for a higher office. People in other parts of the state would obviously not know him personally but the local precinct or political action committee in his hometown would promote him with the state level Democratic Party or the AFL-CIO. They would take him around and help him make contacts with the state level Democratic organizations because they knew him and knew he was *“one of us”*.

In the little town in Ohio where my uncle lived there were no big factories or strong unions but in a lot of ways things were pretty much the same. A guy who was known in the community as a trustworthy businessman who ran the big local feedlot or supply store for many years might decide to go into Democratic politics and would begin by running for a local office like a school board or house district. He had a good reputation with his friends and neighbors and that was his base if he wanted to run for a higher office.

It was the decline of local Democratic organizations and—most of all—the rise of TV and radio advertising that changed all this. All of a sudden a guy you never heard of was on TV 24 hours a day because he had deep pocket supporters who were financing his campaign. He didn’t need to have any roots in the community that he was running to represent because the commercials he ran were professionally produced and packaged him and sold him just like a shiny new Chevrolet.

The truth is that these commercials all pretty much looked the same. A guy who ran a chain of car dealerships across the state or the biggest real estate company in a city would suddenly show up on TV wearing a flannel shirt, holding a shotgun and standing in front of a pickup truck that was parked in front of a ranch where cows were mooing in the distance and would talk about his “down home – real American” values while an American flag flew the background.

No, we weren’t conned by this. We knew that it was B.S. and that the guy on TV had no roots in the community and probably didn’t know which end of a cow the milk came out of but seeing that commercial week after week people couldn’t help but get the candidates name pounded into their head. And since you didn’t go to meetings to hear candidates talk in person or see them in the flesh anymore, the only information you had to go on was the TV ads.

Now everyone knows that even honest guys who come out of the local community will still get sucked into the back room dealing and influence peddling once they get into political office but these TV politicians were totally and completely bought and paid for before they even got elected. They might just as well have had the names of the big money men who financed them sewed onto the back of their jackets and stamped on the sides of their cars like race car drivers.

The Democratic ads were different but they didn’t pass the smell test either. Their commercials went on and on about all the great plans they had and programs they supported but then the next day you would see a different commercial where they were talking about a whole bunch of other plans and programs to a group of completely different people and you never got the feeling that there was any one group of people that these candidates really thought of as “their”

voters – the people they were being elected to represent. And they never honestly admitted that they knew that most of the programs they were proposing would never get passed anyway. They would have been a whole lot more convincing if they had promised to do half as much but gave realistic explanations of how they were going to try to actually “deliver the goods.”

Let's face it. Nothing is going to change for working people until we get a completely different kind of politics and elect a completely different kind of politician.

We need to go back to electing working class politicians who come from our neighborhoods and communities.

We need to elect politicians who get into politics because they care about us, who grew up with us and who know who we are.

We need politicians who care about the issues that affect us. The lack of affordable health care clinics in our communities, the medicines we can't afford, the drug addicts who can't get treatment, the veterans who still have problems, the old people who need aid.

We need politicians with real moral values that they have demonstrated in their personal lives. We need politicians who volunteered to deliver meals to old people or at a church food bank when they were in high school, not politicians who never did a single damn thing for anyone else in their entire lives but who want to get elected so they can go around raking in cash and telling everyone else what to do.

We need politicians who look for ways to support local small businesses instead of figuring out how to give rich people tax credits for private jets they don't need and fancy vacation homes they don't use.

We need politicians who are willing to let us know the names of the people and companies that are supporting their campaigns and publish the details of all the deals that they make on their campaign web sites.

The current generation of MAGA extremist Republicans are profoundly vulnerable to an attack from this direction.

As Trump has increasingly centered his 2024 message on his imagined personal victimization and the vast “deep state” conspiracies arrayed against him it is important to remember that in 2016 Trump's appeal was not simply based on his overt, blustering racial extremism. A substantial part of his appeal to working class voters was based on his passionate identification with workers and claim to be their champion. At the time mainstream commentators generally dismissed Trump's appeals as vacuous demagoguery but many working people were genuinely thrilled because it was the first time any major candidate had placed them at the center of a presidential campaign.

Consider the following quotes from Trump's rallies in 2016:

Right now our economy isn't growing practically at all... Many workers are earning less today than they were 18 years ago. They're working harder, they're working longer, but they're making less and in some cases, they're working two and three jobs, but still taking home less money. It's ridiculous. [The economy is] the worst since the Great Depression. We need to reform our economic system so that, once again, we can all succeed together, and "America can become rich again."

[My election] is going to be a victory for the people, a victory for the wage-earner, the factory worker. Remember this, a big, big victory for the factory worker. They haven't had those victories for a long time. A victory for every citizen and for all of the people whose voices have not been heard for many, many years. They're going to be heard again.

While my opponent slanders you as deplorable and irredeemable, I call you hard-working American patriots who love your country and want a better future for all of our people. You are mothers and fathers, soldiers and sailors, carpenters and welders.

...And that's why the steelworkers are with me, that's why the miners are with me, that's why the working people, electricians, the plumbers, the sheet-rockers, the concrete guys and gals, they're all – they're with us.²⁶

Video clips of comments like these were widely circulated on social media distributed during Trump's 2016 campaign and were part of his outreach to white working class voters whose appeal many Democrats failed to adequately recognize.

Today's MAGA/extremist Republican candidates have almost completely abandoned this kind of "class conscious" appeal to white working class voters because the current generation of MAGA politicians are almost entirely self-satisfied businessmen and women who display the most obnoxious personality characteristics of that group – arrogance, egotism, self-righteousness, and other aspects of what sociology calls a "social dominance" orientation – a sense of superiority and a desire to exercise authority over others. The most flamboyant MAGA politicians like Marjorie Taylor Greene, Lauren Boebert and Kari Lake do not display compassion, understanding or empathy with working class people or attempt to identify with the adversities and hardships faced by ordinary Americans as part of their political identity. Other leading MAGA politicians in congress and media spokesmen like Tucker Carlson are graduates of Ivy League schools and equally isolated from any personal familiarity with working class life.²⁷

²⁶The "quotes that follow" are taken from two valuable sources:

1. "Trump's Electoral Speeches and His Appeal to the American White Working Class," *The British Journal of Sociology* <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1468-4446.12315>

2. "The Emotional Politics of Making America Great Again: Trump's Working Class Appeals," *The Journal of Working Class Studies* <https://workingclassstudiesjournal.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/jwcs-vol-2-issue-1-june-2017-schrock1.pdf>

²⁷The two leading MAGA politicians who do come from modest circumstances J.D. Vance and Ron DeSantis are also graduates of Ivy League Universities and had subsequent careers in technology or the military during which they displayed no particular interest or concern with the problems and needs of the white working class.

As a result the competition among MAGA Republicans today is largely a race to generate the most dramatic and newsworthy attacks on Democrats by taking the most extreme positions on “hot button” social issues. The current MAGA candidates do not passionately identify with the white working class and do not show that they care about its problems. Trump’s strategy of making himself a champion of the white working class element has been, for all practical purposes, entirely abandoned.

The consequence is that a Democratic narrative that focuses on the political corruption of the MAGA extremists and their betrayal of working class needs and interests will find an audience among the culturally traditional but non MAGA extremist sector of white working class Americans.

Note:

Opinion Research Specifically Focused on Non-Extremist White Working Class Voters is Extremely Rare but One Recent Study Provides Significant Support for This Approach.

A recent study conducted by the Center for Working Class Politics surveyed 1700 working class voters who were neither Democratic nor Republican base voters. The studies’ recommendations for Democratic candidates provided remarkable support for key elements of the approach suggested above.

1. **Run working-class candidates.** All else equal, working-class voters prefer candidates from non-elite, working-class occupations (middle school teachers, construction workers, nurses, and warehouse workers) over those from elite, upper-class occupations (corporate executives, lawyers, and doctors).
2. **Focus on messages that champion the working class and critique economic elites.** We found that working-class voters prefer candidates who say they will serve the interests of the working class and who place blame for the problems facing working Americans on the shoulders of economic elites. We find that this economic populist message is particularly effective among working-class respondents who work in manual jobs, a group that Democrats increasingly struggle to reach.
3. **Run on a jobs-first program.** Working-class voters viewed more favorably candidates who highlighted a progressive federal jobs guarantee.
4. **Take a critical stance towards both parties.** Candidates who explicitly criticized the Democratic and Republican Parties for being out of touch with working- and middle-class Americans were viewed more favorably across the board compared to candidates who either said nothing or stressed that Democrats have delivered for working- and middle-class Americans.²⁸

²⁸<https://www.slowboring.com/p/can-democrats-win-back-the-working#:~:text=Our%20results%20suggest%20that%20Democrats,from%20the%20Democratic%20Party%20establishment>

Part 8

One Candidate Can't Do It Alone

Democratic political strategists clearly recognize that the most damaging single line of attack used by Republican candidates in both swing districts and deep red districts is to tie every individual Democratic candidate, regardless of their actual political views, to a lurid image of the supposedly “*extreme,*” “*crazy,*” “*left-wing*” national Democratic Party.

This attack is relentlessly repeated in melodramatic TV ads and Fox News reports that portray cities in flames, schoolchildren being brainwashed and decent citizens cringing in terror – a story that is repeated in candidate speeches, billboards, leaflets and posters and inflammatory rhetoric from the leading figures in the GOP.

This demonization has two components. First, it accuses every single Democratic candidate of supporting the views of the most extreme figures in the Democratic coalition on a range of specific issues and also makes the accusation that all Democrats represent a distant, condescending educated elite whose values are diametrically opposed to those of ordinary Americans. This two-pronged attack unfortunately can seem plausible to many working class voters.

Democrats who seek to represent places with substantial rural and working class voters do not have any clear and distinct alternative national political identity and strategy with which they can identify themselves and which would reinforce and lend plausibility to their individual campaigns. Each Democratic candidate has to start all over from scratch explaining why he or she doesn't believe X or support Y or why he or she isn't a blasé “limousine liberal.”

Democratic candidates who want to reach working class voters now need to have a clear and distinct political identity that is separate from the National Democratic Party or the most polarizing elements of the Democratic left. This cannot be achieved simply by offering a set of specific disagreements over policy, even if these disagreements are expressed in the most fierce and polemical way. What is rather required is a clear and distinct political identity that genuinely aligns the candidate with the specific culture and perspective of culturally traditional but non-MAGA white working class voters. Political strategists continually study this aspect of working class opinion by testing survey questions that ask: How important is it to your vote that a candidate is “*On your side,*” “*Will fight for you,*” or “*Cares about people like you*”? The answer that consistently emerges is that working class voters consider these factors **deeply important.**

The critical point, however, is that this new identity cannot be created just for the candidate as an individual but must rather locate his or her identity as part of a distinct and coherent political force. In a parliamentary system this is a problem that has a direct solution. A heterogeneous party like the Democratic Party whose voters combine a wide range of opinions from moderate reformism to militant leftism and a broad range of divergent social groups in their base would quickly split into two distinct parties each with a separate platform and image. If the two parties gained a legislative majority between them in a general election they would then conduct formal negotiations to agree on a common coalition platform for governing.

This cannot be done in the American political context but it is still possible to make a substantial move in this direction by creating a distinct political coalition that might define itself as *“Traditional Democratic Values Candidates.”* In same way that Bernie Sanders’ 2016 campaign consolidated and then became the basis for a vigorous left coalition of democratic socialists and “social justice” Democrats, a *“Traditional Democratic Values Candidates”* alliance based on working class, small town and rural Democrats needs to emerge as a comparable force within the Democratic Party.

The sociological basis for creating this new political formation resides in the fact that, as has been shown, the white working class is divided into two distinct sectors: non-MAGA Cultural Traditionalists, on the one hand and MAGA/extremists on the other. A *“Traditional Democratic Values Coalition”* could very clearly and self-consciously define itself as the distinct voice for the non-MAGA traditionalist group within the working class.

This “Traditional Democratic Values Coalition” would be defined by three things.

1. A deep and sincere Identification with the culture and community of the working class. This identification must be **genuine, authentic and sincere** and not the phony PR campaigns that dress a Republican used car dealer or corporate executive in a plaid shirt and hands him a shotgun to hold while he stands in front of a flatbed truck or a cattle ranch.
2. An outlook that would feature an intense opposition to the “raw deal” workers have gotten in the political system from the financial and political elite combined with a philosophy of “live and let live” respect for different views – of social tolerance rather than intolerance.
3. A coherent set of “Fair Deal for Working Americans” positions on divisive issues. These would not be defined by launching attacks on the Democratic left but rather by defining the new coalition as upholding a distinct array of positions that non-MAGA working Americans can support.²⁹

The spirit of this coalition could be expressed with the following kinds of messages:

“Reviving the Ideals of The Democratic Presidents Who Actually Made America Great – Franklin Roosevelt – Harry Truman – John Kennedy”

“American politicians used to respect hard working people. It’s time they did once again”

“A Fair Deal for All Hard-Working Americans”

“It’s Time Hard Working Americans Finally Get a Fair Deal”

²⁹It is important to note that although there are other groups and organizations that define themselves as representing moderates or centrists the three specific characteristics above sharply distinguish this approach from other pro-Democratic groups such as Third Way, The Welcome Party, and The Blue Dogs which do not specifically target non-MAGA white working class GOP voters or systematically shape their appeal around the distinct combination of cultural traditionalism, “old-fashioned” personal values, tolerance and class consciousness that would be the foundation for a “Traditional Democratic Values” white working class coalition.

(It should be noted that this approach intentionally incorporates elements of the three narratives described in Part 5 – recognizing the deep sense of unfairness that exists in working class America, remembering “better times” in the past, and honoring the powerful desire for a “fair deal”)

For this approach to gain any significant political influence a new coalition of this kind will have to create for itself a distinct national image in the same way that Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump created clear national political movements based on their campaigns. A coalition of “*Traditional Democratic Values Candidates*” would have to find the means to capture the attention of the national media. Candidates in red state districts across the country would have to identify with the coalition and insist on its importance. Individual candidates would have to identify themselves with the national “brand” in their speeches and advertising.

The GOP will inevitably fiercely attack any initiative of this kind as a “false flag” operation of the perfidious radical Democratic elite. But this will also have the paradoxical effect of affirming the existence of Traditional Democratic Values Candidates as a “brand.” The more fiercely Republicans deny the authenticity of this coalition, the more they will simultaneously be affirming that it does indeed exist.

The goal of creating a “traditional Democratic values” coalition will also be rejected by some left-progressives who will argue that progressives must categorically reject any compromise with “traditional values” – whether they are labeled “Democratic” or not. In their view traditional values inescapably include racism, sexism, religious intolerance and a wide range of other right-wing ideological views. Instead, the Democratic Party must be ideologically united around a consistent progressive perspective. Working class voters who will not accept a consistent progressive perspective of this kind are neither needed nor desirable in the Democratic coalition.

The entire argument in this Strategy White Paper is in opposition to this view. It has argued that in reality, working class GOP voters are divided into two sections – cultural traditionalists and extremists and has presented a strategy for winning the support of a politically significant sector of the non-extremist voters.

The main objection to this strategy is that even the slightest diversion of time, effort and resources from efforts to maximize the vote of college-educated or other “new coalition” voters is a misuse of scarce resources. As one critic argued *“seeking the votes of white working class voters is a waste of time, effort money and breath.”*

And indeed, If the only goal of Democratic strategy is to win the most painfully narrow, limited, indeed knife edged, 51 percent victories in presidential and state-wide elections, than devoting all efforts to maximizing the turnout of current pro-Democratic voters can be at least somewhat plausibly defended.

But if Democrats want to aim for the goal of winning the kinds of solid majorities that would allow for the passage of significant social legislation and a sufficient level of control over Congress to prevent Republican sabotage of all Democratic initiatives then there is no plausible strategy that does not involve regaining the support of some of the working class voters who once composed part of the Democratic Party’s “big tent.”

To be sure, it is possible for even the most utterly uninformed armchair political observer to produce a wide variety of scenarios where historically and sociologically completely unprecedented levels of Democratic turnout or sudden mass ideological conversions among non-Democratic “new coalition” voters produces a commanding Democratic majority, but it must be stated clearly that these scenarios are exercises in wishful thinking that are not supported by any reputable body of serious political or social research. Both persuasion and turnout require slow, grinding grass roots organizing and cannot produce results on the level that these scenarios require.

The reality is simple: if Democrats genuinely wish to win a commanding majority there is no alternative to regaining greater support from working class Americans.

Appendix – 1

Innovative Research Provides Startling New Insight About Working Class Voters

It is now over 20 years since political analysts began to use the category of “less-than-college workers” as the practical definition of “working class.” The working class had previously been defined by occupation as blue collar, manual workers.

There were several solid arguments for accepting this new definition.

1. The modern working class was no longer largely composed of factory workers and other blue collar occupations like miners, construction workers, truck drivers and longshoremens as it had been in the 1950s and 1960s. With the tremendous growth in the number of women in the labor force and the comparably large increase in the number of service and retail sales jobs in the economy the modern working class was far more occupationally and socially diverse than in the past. Using education rather than occupation to divide the modern labor force into “working class” and “professional-managerial class” seemed to more accurately capture this new reality.
2. There was a very clear economic gap between the wages and the job conditions of less-than-college workers compared with those of college-educated managers, technical workers and other professionals. The economic situation of people with college degrees had generally improved in recent decades while the economic conditions of less-than-college workers were relatively stagnant or actually declined. The college/non-college distinction thus seemed to reflect an important economic reality.
3. Opinion surveys routinely collect information about the educational levels of the people who are interviewed whereas information about occupation had proved too complex for polling firms to easily process. Using less-than-college education as the definition of working class thus made it possible to interpret the data from standard opinion surveys as being the political opinions of “working class” Americans in a way that occupation did not allow.

Along with these reasonable considerations, however, there was also a less valid reason for the popularity of using less-than-college workers as the definition of “working class” – it reinforced the notion that America was becoming a “post-industrial” “knowledge economy” – a notion that strongly appealed to the writers and journalists of the mainstream media (eternally in search of the next new trend) and the growing ranks of Silicon Valley investors, university academics and Wall Street gurus. For the latter groups, in particular, it provided a wonderfully self-congratulatory explanation and justification for their own elevated status and importance.

The political consequences of this conception of social class were, unfortunately, profoundly destructive for the Democratic coalition. Beginning in the 1990s it led even liberal economists to dismiss the importance of deindustrialization because the technologically unemployed could always “*improve their human capital*” i.e., go to college and join the knowledge economy. It supported the idea that the future of the Democratic Party lay with “*soccer moms*”, “*office park dads*” and “*wired workers*” rather than the party’s traditional working class base. By the 2016 election it led the Clinton campaign and large segments of the Democratic Party to agree with Chuck Schumer’s dismissive statement that “*For every blue-collar Democrat we lose in western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two moderate Republicans in the suburbs in Philadelphia,*”

After Trump's election some Democratic strategists began seeking the legitimate grievances and weaknesses in the Democratic appeal that had led working people to abandon the Democratic Party while others easily jumped to the conclusion that it was precisely less-than-college voters' lack of education that made them easy, gullible targets for Trump's demagogic appeal.

At the present time this strategic debate about "less-than-college" voters remains active but there is also a deeper sociological and political question about whether it is valid to view less-than-college voters as a coherent social class in any sense at all.

After all, the traditional rationale for treating blue collar workers as a social class lay in the fact that they shared a wide range of common conditions and discontents of mass labor in factories, mines, construction sites and warehouses which made it reasonable to expect that they would have a common social and political outlook based on their shared experience and shared fate.

These common elements are clearly not present in the vast range of occupations that are held by less-than-college workers. Barista's in Starbucks, sales clerks in Macy's and mailroom clerks in large office buildings have little shared experience with framing carpenters in residential construction or long-haul truckers. As less-than-college workers also include many people with AA degrees the group also includes "grey-collar" workers like heating and air conditioning mechanics, bookkeepers, certified massage therapists and physical trainers. Given the vast differences in these social environments there is little reason to expect that the people employed in them would show a shared, common political outlook.

One very direct way to examine the difference between the two definitions of class would be to simultaneously classify the same group of voters by both their occupation and their level of education and then compare the differences when the groups were measured one way and then the other.

Until recently this had not been done but in March of 2023 the Center for Working Class Politics released an important opinion study "Trump's Kryptonite: How Progressives Can Win Back The Working Class" that included precisely this comparison.³⁰

Using a method of occupational classification developed by European sociologists it classified a sample of 1700 voters first by education and then by occupation.

Here were the results for education:

	Vote For Biden in 2020
Four Year College Degree or More	59.2
Less Than Four-Year College Degree	43.9

³⁰https://images.jacobinmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/08125102/TrumpsKryptonite_Final_June2023.pdf

This is generally in line with other polling. When it is remembered that this sample included both white and non-white American voters the 43.9 percent support for Biden looks entirely reasonable. If the sample were restricted to **white** less-than-college voters the percentage would probably be quite close to the 37 percent that Biden actually did receive in 2020 from less-than-college workers according to the most reliable data.³¹

But now here are the results for the exact same group of voters divided into working class and non-working class occupations:

	Vote For Biden in 2020
Non-Working Class (Managers, Technical Professionals, Frontline Professionals, Small Business Owners)	52.5
Working Class Service Workers, Manual Workers	48.6

This is extremely striking. When these voters' social class is defined by occupation the "working class" appears substantially more pro-Democratic than when their social class is defined by a "less than a college" education. The working class support for Biden in fact appears remarkably close to that of the professional/managerial/business middle class.

This is, in fact, so seriously disruptive to the common wisdom which visualizes blue collar workers as the most hard core Trump supporters that there is a strong temptation to suspect that there must be some flaw in the data.

But a more careful look at the occupational categories reveals the most plausible interpretation. There are vast numbers of small business owners, men and women and lower level managers and supervisors, independent contractors and others who do not have college degrees and are therefore lumped into the "working class" when class is defined by education. Voters of this kind were highly visible participants in the Tea Party demonstrations during the Obama years and the pro-Trump "boat parades" of speedboat owners in 2020.

Removing these disproportionately Republican, middle class pro-Trump voters from the category of *working class*, as the occupational approach does, quite understandably makes the working class look less Republican and the professional, managerial class look more so than the "less-than-college" approach does.

It is important to emphasize that this data comes from a single poll of 1,700 people and must be substantially replicated and extended before any firm conclusions can be drawn.

But it clearly suggests the possibility that the widespread common wisdom among Democrats that dismisses the "working class" as hopelessly lost to the GOP is based on a fundamental misunderstanding about social class that is based on the notion that "less-than-college" workers can be properly considered equivalent to the traditional "working class" in political analysis.

³¹<https://catalist.us/whathappened2022/>

Appendix 2

Some Recent Books and Articles Offering Sociological Discussions of the White Working Class

The Politics of Resentment, Katherine J Cramer, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2016

The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality, Justin Gest, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016

Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right, Arlie Russell Hochschild, The New Press, New York, 2018

Trump's Democrats – Stephanie Muravchik and Jon Shields, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D. C., 2022

The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small-Town America, Robert Wuthnow, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2019

Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago, Christine Walley, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013

Harvest the Vote, Jane Kleeb, EccoPress, New York, 2020

Beyond Contempt: How Liberals Can Communicate Across the Great Divide, Erica Etelson, New Society Publishers, Gabriola, BC, 2019

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

“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/>