

CO-EDITORS:



William Galston



Stan Greenberg



Ruy Teixeira

The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

The **Democratic Strategist** has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As **The Democratic Strategists'** editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

A  
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST  
STRATEGY MEMO

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CANNOT POSSIBLY MATCH THE VAST  
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BY

ANDREW LEVISON

**A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:**

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By ANDREW LEVISON

In a May 7th *New York Times* article Nicholas Confessore dramatically described the profound change in progressive and Democratic strategy that is now being debated among donors, campaign managers and political strategists—a change driven by the overwhelming financial advantage that Citizen’s United has now given business and the wealthy in political advertising.

“Instead of going head to head with the conservative super-PACs and outside groups that have flooded the presidential and Congressional campaigns with negative advertising, donors are focusing on grass-roots organizing, voter registration and Democratic turnout...Strategists involved in the effort said they did not believe they could match the advertising spending by leading conservative groups and instead wanted to exploit what they see as the Democrats advantage in grass-roots organizing.”

The need for a reconsideration of progressive and Democratic strategy has become obvious. The Citizen’s United decision has opened the floodgates to virtually unlimited spending by business and the wealthy and it is rapidly becoming clear that progressives and Democrats are at a profound disadvantage. In several races totally unknown candidates with no prior political experience are now in the process of being catapulted into congressional seats by massive donations from single individuals or families, simply on the basis of saturation advertising. Democratic candidates for House and Senate seats are facing Republican opponents who have four-to-one and even five-to-one financial advantages in ad spending. Even at the presidential level, where ad spending is less decisive than it is in down-ballot races, massive negative ad bombardments allowed Mitt Romney to systematically overwhelm his primary rivals and essentially buy the Republican nomination.

But, as the *New York Times* story itself unintentionally demonstrates, there is a profound confusion within the progressive and Democratic coalition about what the term “*grass-roots organizing*” actually entails. In a wide range of recent discussions the three terms “*grass-roots organizing*”, “*GOTV/voter turnout*” efforts and “*door-to-door campaign canvassing*” are used interchangeably.

But these three terms are simply not interchangeable. GOTV and political campaign canvassing are short term efforts focused on promoting a single individual candidate that leave little or no long-term organization behind once a particular election is over.

The kind of grass-roots organizing that built the trade union movement in the 1930’s, on the other hand, was designed to create enduring organizations and to support a vibrant, ongoing social movement. A trade union did not shut down and disappear the day after the first union contract was won. It remained as a permanent presence on the factory shop floor,

providing day-to-day representation for the workers who built it and establishing deep roots as a local community service institution, headquartered in the local union hall, that provided individual workers with assistance with union pensions, health care provisions and job training and apprenticeship programs. Unions also provided their members with a union perspective on major political issues and endorsements of candidates.

It was the neighborhood and shop-floor representation provided by local unions and precinct level democratic machines that provided a firm social and political base for the Democratic Party in the northern and mid-western industrial states in the 1950's and early 1960's. Working people in those years did not vote Democratic because the Dems produced more or better TV ads; they voted for Democrats because the Dems were supported by two deeply rooted local community institutions.

As a result, the most important political initiative in America this year will not be any quickly thrown-together GOTV effort or additional political canvassing funded by liberal donors; it will be the organizing campaign that most faithfully and successfully builds on the traditional, grass-roots trade union model.

The organization that is most clearly following this approach is Working America—the community affiliate of the AFL-CIO. As a result, it is, in the long-run, the most potentially game-changing progressive project in America.

## What is Working America

Every morning Working America's organizers—about 150 at the present time but substantially more during peak periods—gather in small meetings where assignments are distributed and goals set for the days' door-to-door canvassing and organization-building. The canvassers then fan out across neighborhoods in mostly white, blue collar areas of rust belt cities like Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania as well as in similar areas in Colorado, Minnesota, Oregon, Virginia, Missouri and several other states.

The canvassers' job is to listen to the people they meet, explain Working America's progressive outlook and agenda and convince them to join the organization. Here's how David Moberg described the process in a [2008 article in \*The Nation Magazine\*](#):<sup>1</sup>

[Working America] trains and continually briefs canvassers about both political issues and canvassing techniques (such as maintaining eye contact, keeping it short and simple, and using emotionally strong but friendly and optimistic language). At the door they quickly talk to people about a broadly defined issue. Now it's primarily affordable healthcare, but it can be good jobs, retirement security, overtime pay or local issues. Then canvassers ask potential recruits to take action, such as sending a letter supporting expanded funding of children's health insurance or signing a petition in favor of the Employee Free Choice Act to ease union organizing. And, of course, joining Working America.

Alec McGillis described the canvasser's "pitch" in more detail in [a recent article in the \*New Republic\*](#):

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thenation.com/print/article/labors-new-push>

...The overall pitch, drilled into the canvassers by rigorous trainings that I witnessed separately, was standardized: an introduction, a presentation of five issues listed on the canvassers' iPads—health care, education, and so on—to see which the resident cared most about, a bit of improvised chatter about that issue, and then the hook, which [the canvasser] gave like this:

“Our solution is just to put pressure on those politicians to make sure they're looking out for us and that they're doing their jobs. ...So we're asking people to join our citizens' lobby as members of the organization so that, when our lobbyists go to the capital, they can say we have strength in numbers.”

Signing up as a member was free, but canvassers added a forthright request for cash: “It takes money to fight money.”

It is hard, grueling work. Canvassers encounter many people who turn them away. Even among those who are sympathetic to the issues and actions they present and to the idea of building a grass-roots “citizen's lobby” dedicated to giving ordinary people a voice in the political system, Working America's organizers confront massive misinformation and a deep and pervasive cynicism and a profound sense of powerlessness. At the end of the day the canvassers meet as a group once again to share their experiences, refine their message and renew their morale and commitment.

In the long run, the strategy works. Since its formation in 2003, Working America has grown to include over three million members, making it one of the largest (and simultaneously least-known) progressive organizations in America.

Every month Working America's canvassers have individual face-to-face conversations with anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 and, at peak moments, even 30,000 Americans (a typical canvasser will knock on dozens of doors during a single day-long canvass and conduct from six to eight or sometimes even twelve or more face-to-face conversations). During 2011 close to 500,000 members of Working America took part in some direct activity like letter writing, phone calling, attending a meeting or participating in some action.

At first glance, these numbers seem so large that they appear implausible. But—as we will see—Working America is actually one of the most careful and meticulous progressive organizations in collecting and analyzing data about their members—the issues that concern them, the ways they participate in the organization and their opinions about a wide range of issues.

This focus on careful data analysis to understand what their members are thinking is actually vital for Working America because its major organizing efforts are aimed at winning the support of people who are not a typical part of the Democratic coalition—white working class people many of whom go to church every Sunday, own guns and—while they tend to be relatively moderate rather than deeply conservative—think of themselves as “ordinary folks” who are part of the “Real America” and not as “liberals” or “progressives.”

Here is how Working America defines the kind of people it seeks to recruit and represent:

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Working America engages not the fixed 30-35% or so at each end of the political spectrum (including the firm conservatives who are not and will never be with us on the issues) but rather the 30-40% in the middle—working class moderates whose personal ambivalences make them swing voices in the public policy debates. Some of these individuals are present or former Democrats who have become disillusioned and some are persuadable blue collar or lower middle class Republicans.

The 2008 election gave some sense of the scale at which Working America can operate and the degree to which it can actually generate results. As an internal research summary concluded:

In 2008, Working America knocked on more than 3 million doors and spoke to 1.8 million people. Our work produced results. Obama carried independents by 8 points and moderates by 21 points, but among Working America members who are independents, he won by 26 points, and among members who are moderates, he won by 49 points.

### **More Than Politics**

But it is a mistake to think of Working America as essentially a political campaign organization. It is more correctly understood as an attempt to create a community-based organization that represents its members in the political system—a “citizens’ lobby” that gives working class people who feel entirely helpless and disenfranchised a way to express their views and have an impact on the political system. It does not view them simply as voters that the organization wants to turn out on Election Day, it views them as members who it wants to represent on a permanent and ongoing basis.

More than anything else it is this that distinguishes an authentic grass-roots organization and social movement from the outreach efforts of a political campaign. The role of an authentic grass-roots organization is not merely to collect signatures on a particular petition or to increase voter turnout. To succeed it must give its members the tools to actively represent themselves on an ongoing basis and to provide inspiration and a sense of hope and confidence in the members own power of collective action.

Working America has gradually but systematically built this kind of momentum. As one organizer said:

“The unanticipated outcome that’s gotten us so excited is what organizing does not just for the people we sign up but for the people who sign them up. The people in [Working America] get so juiced up by their experiences that it gives us legitimate hope that there are many more people out there who are basically like us, and that the potential for solidarity is far greater than we thought.”

To create and maintain this electric sense of possibility, the organization must constantly help the members generate new actions. As David Moberg noted:

In some areas, Working America members join canvasses and phone banks to reach fellow members or, as a group of women did in Kentucky, gather to write personal

letters encouraging Working America women to vote. Working America members also sign petitions or letters supporting unions (such as nurses organizing in St. Paul, Minnesota) or join labor rallies (such as backing Pittsburgh hotel workers in a contract dispute or Ohio union members advocating labor law reform).

The full list of activities is long and varied. Members are encouraged to write letters (During the health care debate Working America delivered 75,000 handwritten letters to congressional leaders). They attend public events, rallies and demonstrations. They form local community action teams. They meet with lawmakers and write for blogs. During the Occupy protests Working America held a series of tele-town halls. After the 2010 elections they organized a “*buyer’s remorse*” campaign in which voters returned imitation ballots to express their discontent with the newly elected politicians.

The sudden explosion of outrage against the “stealth” attack on unions by Gov. Scott Walker in Wisconsin and the anti-union SB-5 legislation in Ohio provided a rallying point for Working America’s growing membership. As an internal memo reported shortly after the Wisconsin protests began:

We’re finding new energy at the doors, with working class moderates actively looking for ways to become involved and fight back. There’s a heightened intensity of response from our members—people across the country asking us what they can do to help the Wisconsin workers, people increasingly mentioning specific policies or politicians they are upset about, and higher levels of anger and emotion being expressed.

- We recruited 25,000 new members in Wisconsin in just two months.
- We’re collecting 3,500 handwritten letters, postcards and phone calls from members each week.
- Hundreds of members are going to rallies and lobby days and hosting meetings in their homes.

In Ohio, Working America played a clear and measurable role in defeating the anti-union SB-5 legislation. Voters who were reached by Working America were 14.7% more likely to oppose the measure, according to an independent study carried out by the Analyst Institute. This increase held for different age and gender groups and for both union and non-union workers.

### **Combining Research and Organizing on Social Issues**

Working America’s unusually strong emphasis on using serious empirical research as the basis for its campaigns is even more evident in regard to specific social and political issues. Working America does extensive research in order to understand not only which issues are important to its members but the best language and approaches for its canvassers to use when they talk with them.

On the issue of jobs:

An internal Working America memo notes: “In the three weeks from July 3rd through July 24th 2010, Working America’s organizing canvass knocked on 141,924 doors and

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had 69,078 conversations focused in some way on jobs. Over the period we conducted several messaging tests about jobs and the economy with subsets of new and recently joined members.”

Some conclusions that emerged from this research included (1) that reducing outsourcing was the most frequently favored measure (2) that despite widespread hostility to “big government,” in this area government was seen as a solution not a problem (a result which the researchers described as “an unexpectedly positive indicator”) (3) that the issue of “fair taxation”—and specifically eliminating tax loopholes for companies that move jobs overseas—was a second highly popular remedy.

One specific application of this research was the creation of a “job tracker” application on Working America’s website which showed the firms that were outsourcing jobs. This single feature of the website received 700,000 hits within a short time after it was introduced.

### **On Health Care**

From April 25 to May 18, 2010—shortly after the health care bill was passed—Working America began a “Listening tour” in Ohio, Minnesota, New Mexico and Oregon. They conducted 1,200 informal conversations about health care with their members. At that point in time they found that 29% were supportive, 55% unsure/undecided and 16% opposed. Based on the initial data they collected, they then tested a series of different messages, examining, for example, if members responded differently depending on whether the change was described as a “Reform” or a “Law.”

Partially on this basis, Working America launched a campaign that resulted in 75,000 individualized letters supporting the health care reform legislation being delivered to congressional leaders.

### **On Immigration:**

One particularly sophisticated project Working America conducted was a month-long outreach to working class voters in three Detroit counties: Wayne, Oakland and Macomb in December of 2009. Six experienced canvassers were given special briefings on the immigration issue and how to present a variety of messages favoring comprehensive immigration reform. The canvassers made extensive notes about what worked and what did not and developed a range of guidelines for future canvassers to use in discussing the issue.

The results were impressive. Of the 4,277 people contacted, 2,572 were willing to engage in an extended conversation with the canvassers about the issue (this represented 60% of those contacted). Of this latter group, an extraordinary 2,216 actually ended up by joining Working America (representing 86% of the completed conversations and 52% of all the people contacted). 2,004 of these voters completed postcards to be sent to Senator Debby Stabenow supporting comprehensive immigration reform.

As these examples suggest, Working America treats research as an absolutely critical part

of their strategy for outreach and organizing. They view the knowledge it provides as vital for maintaining a close relationship with their lower middle class and working class members and they also have found that it provides a depth of understanding that simply cannot be obtained from conventional opinion polling. As one internal memo notes:

“What we hear at the doors often echoes the latest polling data but the responses we get from the field can also differ or add further insight because of the effect of the conversation itself. We often hear trends before they make it into polling questions—for example, we started hearing the heat around outsourcing months [before it showed up in the national polling].”

### **Digital Organizing versus Face-to-Face Conversation**

For many liberals and progressives Working America’s methods can seem highly admirable but at the same time rather antiquated and labor-intensive in the modern age of social media and the “Netroots.” After all, organizations like Move On have also developed memberships that number in the millions but have done so almost entirely by using digital communication.

For modern, “wired” and web-savvy liberals and progressives, this kind of purely electronic organizing can indeed be effective, but for working class Americans it is simply not a viable strategy. Intimate, face to face communication is absolutely indispensable for effectively presenting a progressive alternative to the Fox News/Talk Radio perspective that is so widespread in the daily life and conversations of working class America.

**Jane McAleve**y, an innovative union organizer who worked for many years as an organizer for SIEU, carefully distinguishes between modern, electronic approaches and traditional “organizing”:

By “organizing,” I mean an approach that has at its core a day-to-day, direct relationship with the base.... There are simply no shortcuts to this. We know this because we have spent the past twenty years looking for one and have not found it. Right now, the fashionable shortcut is using the Internet. Ten years ago it was direct mail, robo phones, phone banks, opinion research, and “sophisticated media.”

None of this is bad; of course it is a good thing to poll and message and phone and communicate in better ways. All of this is important, and all of it adds up to more wins and a stronger movement. But none of this can replace organizing. It must be in addition to it.

Indispensable as it may be, there is also no question that the traditional face-to-face, door-to-door organizing methods of Working America require tremendous commitment and dedication. Alec McGillis captured the hard, grinding character of this kind of organizing when he recently accompanied canvassers from Working America as they went door-to-door in working class neighborhoods in Ohio:

...I set out with Elisheva Aneke, an earnest Atlanta native with a very forceful knock, and Isaac Heard, an affable Ohioan whose front-step routine often included a request for a cigarette. I was struck by how resolute the pair remained despite setbacks:

- ...Heard coaxed Michele Zahel, who works in nuclear medicine, into scrounging up some money, and she reemerged with \$6 in change. But, after Heard stepped away, Zahel told me that, despite being raised in a union family, she was now firmly opposed to organized labor and voted Republican....
- ...The next night out was in a much different area—Clintonville, a working-class neighborhood of tiny Cape Cod houses.... I was out with Theresa Bruskin, a brassy 24-year-old from New Jersey ...“Our strategy is strength in numbers. It’s how we won on Senate Bill Five in the fall, people like you and me fighting for working people,” she told a home health aide still in her floral medical smock, who agreed to sign up but declined to give money.
- ...Bruskin’s resolve was frequently tested, however. At one home, she spoke with Clarice Grinstead [who] signed up and said she might even be willing to chip in after her next payday. (Bruskin tried in vain to get a postdated check.) But, when I asked Grinstead about the election, she scowled. She had voted for Obama in 2008 but was leaning toward “Mitt Romney” this time.
- ...next door, we were greeted by David Schnepf, 49, sitting at the front door in his wheelchair as a dog and several cats lolled about. He, too, signed up, but he couldn’t give any money—he had no ready cash and said he had gotten “in trouble with checks.” Moreover, despite his good humor, he was not inclined to Bruskin’s message. As much as he depended on the federal safety net, he said, he agreed with Republicans that entitlements needed to be reined in ....
- ...At the next house, a slightly chaotic scene swirled around James Tichenor, a 50-year-old who works at a local McDonald’s. A minivan missing a wheel sat jacked up on the driveway; an armchair lay on its side in front of the house; a 16-month-old boy, the son of Tichenor’s deceased niece, cried inside the house. Bruskin forged ahead, taking it in stride when Tichenor said he had no e-mail address (“I don’t know nothing about computers”) and that he could not give any money (“Right now, I’m pretty well busted”).

[Tichenor] told me he wasn’t sure who he was voting for. I asked: Wouldn’t Obama’s health care law help him? He shook his head, saying he couldn’t afford the \$51 per week bare-bones health plan offered by McDonald’s. I told him I was pretty sure that, if his employer didn’t offer decent, affordable coverage, he would qualify for Medicaid, which Obamacare will greatly expand. He said he’d never heard anything about that: He worked nights and didn’t watch the news.

### McGillis concludes:

...Indeed, over my two evenings of canvassing—during which I met about a dozen different voters—what struck me most was the depths of the misinformation or resignation that needed to be bridged in order to turn opposition to [Ohio law] SB-5, as well as more general economic concerns, into solid Democratic votes.”

This kind of traditional organizing is indeed hard, brutally hard and grinding work that requires vast reserves of dedication and commitment. But, for those in the trade union movement with

long memories, it also recalls the history of how the last great wave of organizing in the 1930's finally achieved its success.

## **Echoes of the Past**

If American history textbooks mention the trade union movement at all today, they note only a few climactic moments—the 1937 sit-down strikes at auto plants, the pitched battles in trucking and other industries. But the actual day to day reality of union organizing in the 1930's was in reality an endless succession of gradual one-to-one, face to face conversations—a process of slow persuasion and argument that was offered during lunch breaks on the factory floor or sitting in bars, churches, living rooms and union halls in the evening after work. Day after day, evening after evening, union organizers preached the progressive gospel of unionization, of the power of collective action to provide representation and dignity to working men and women and of the deep satisfaction produced by building and belonging to an institution that defended the interests of the “average Joe.”

It is not surprising that precisely this same kind of organizing is needed once again today. In an extraordinary number of respects conservatives and big business have succeed in reversing the gains the trade union movement won in the 1930's and returning ordinary working people to the conditions of the pre-union era.

Today, few workers are any longer represented by unions on the job. Union pensions, union health insurance and union fringe benefits are for vast numbers of working class Americans only a memory. Job security, once common, is now almost impossible to find. Income is now in many respects as unequally distributed as it was in the turn of the century “gilded age.”

And along with the reality of this return to the economic conditions of the pre-union era, the ideologies that dominated the era of the gilded age are also once again ascendant. Conservative economists today proudly promote pre-Keynesian turn of the century “neo-classical” economic theories that assert the ideal results of completely unregulated free markets. Ayn Rand's “objectivist” philosophy that extols the “virtue of selfishness” and the inherent inferiority of the ordinary working man is a direct 20th century echo of the “social Darwinism” of the gilded age and is proudly advocated today by members of the financial elite in downtown Manhattan and the Republican establishment in Washington and across the country.

In this grotesquely retrograde environment, the tools and strategies that progressives successfully employed in the past are once again the only viable strategy for reversing the conservative tide today.

The matter can be stated simply: there is absolutely no certainty that the traditional door-to-door trade-union style organizing Working America employs can succeed in organizing and mobilizing working people again on the scale that it did in the past. Social history offers no such money-back guarantees.

But one thing is certain. In the age of unlimited political contributions by corporations and the wealthy there is simply no alternative. If the appalling social recidivism of the policies and philosophies of this new gilded age are ever to be defeated, they will be defeated by the methods that Working America is pioneering today.