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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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AWAY BY TRUMP AND CRUZ'S
WEAK POLL NUMBERS.**

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BY
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TDS STRATEGY MEMO: DEMOCRATS: DON'T GET CARRIED AWAY BY TRUMP AND CRUZ'S WEAK POLL NUMBERS. THE OBAMA COALITION MAY BE ABLE TO BEAT TRUMP OR CRUZ IN NOVEMBER BUT IN ORDER TO FIGHT THE LARGER THREAT OF GOP EXTREMISM WE STILL NEED MORE SUPPORT FROM THE WHITE WORKING CLASS.

By ANDREW LEVISON

The last several days have produced a perfect storm of bad demographic news for Donald Trump and rising skepticism about the general election appeal of Ted Cruz. When pollsters switched from measuring Trump's popularity within the GOP to gauging his national appeal, his limited base of support immediately became obvious. At same time other polling demonstrated the overwhelming degree of hostility to his candidacy among several key demographic groups—women, minorities, youth and the educated. Suddenly, it seemed that the only group strongly supporting Trump was white, less than college voters, the group also known as the white working class.

At the same time the latest polling on Ted Cruz revealed that he remains significantly less popular than either Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders and would lose if the election were held today.

The shift in the perception of Trump's popularity has given new fuel to a long standing demographic argument among Democrats—the argument that the steady growth of the Obama coalition and the decline of the white working class as a percentage of the electorate makes winning greater support from the latter group unnecessary.

For one group of Democrats, this conclusion represents a long-desired outcome and even a source of satisfaction. This group fundamentally dislikes and distrusts the “racist,” “sexist,” “ignorant” and “hopelessly reactionary” white working class and absolutely hates any suggestion that Democrats should ever modify a pure progressive message in order to appeal for their support. For this group, giving up on the white working class presents not a distasteful compromise with reality but a complete “win-win.”

For many other Democrats, in contrast, abandoning any hope of winning a greater share of white working class votes (unless, of course, they can be won by a pure and uncompromised progressive populist appeal) is not something from which they take pleasure in in any way, but which as a practical matter can seem unavoidable. Much as they

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would like to see Democrats regain something of their former position with the white working class, they will generally agree that today a Democratic candidate's time, money and effort is undoubtedly better focused on voters who are more likely to support him or her rather than on the voters who are the most resistant to Democratic appeals.

But there are some serious reasons to think very carefully about assuming the white working class is now entirely dispensable. The current polling data do indeed suggest that Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders might be able to win the presidency in 2016 with largely the support of the “Obama coalition”—the overlapping demographic categories that include single women, youth, minorities, the more highly educated, liberals and urban dwellers. But startlingly, even when facing possibly the most unpopular GOP presidential candidates since Barry Goldwater, polling suggests that Democrats face an uphill struggle to regain the Senate and almost certainly cannot regain the House of Representatives. If the Republicans choose a candidate with more mainstream appeal than Trump or Cruz in 2020, in fact, there is a strong likelihood that **the traditional GOP coalition could be reestablished**¹, insuring continued Republican control of Congress and consequent gridlock.

And Democrats cannot count on gradual demographic change to automatically provide a solution. While demographic change is inexorable, it is also painfully slow. The most comprehensive analysis by Ruy Teixeira, William Fry and Rob Griffen in the **“States of Change” project**² shows that, assuming demographic groups maintain their current partisan balance, it will be at least a decade or more before demography begins to produce the kind of political changes that might return Congress to Democratic control.

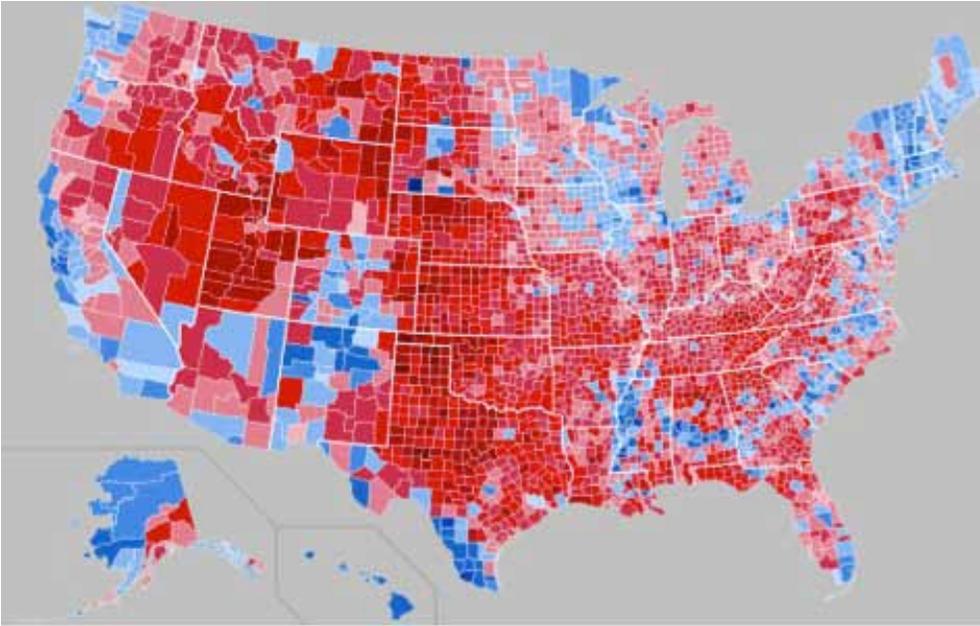
And there is an even more urgently pressing and important reason for democrats to make efforts to try to win at least some sector of the white working class in the near-term future. So long as the *“real America”* coalition of the GOP—a coalition that is overwhelmingly white and located in Red States—continues to include around two thirds of white working class voters, they will provide the GOP with supermajorities in many areas of the country. These supermajorities provide the critical social foundation for the ongoing evolution of the GOP toward more and more dangerous forms of right-wing political extremism. This is an evolution that quite literally threatens not only Democratic candidates but American democracy itself.

To see how this process works, consider **the following county level map of the 2012 presidential election**.³ It shows counties with relatively close contests between Obama and Romney as shades of light pink or light blue and one-sided landslide victories for Democrats or Republicans with deeper and deeper shades of either blue or red.

¹http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/03/opinion/campaign-stops/why-trump-cant-break-the-gop.html?_r=0

²<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/report/2015/02/24/107261/states-of-change/>

³<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2012nationwidecountymapshadedbypercentagewon.svg>



(To view more detailed versions of this map, click on the link in the previous paragraph.)

There are two key facts that emerge from this map, the second of which is actually more important than the first:

The first, quite well known fact, is that the Obama coalition is disproportionately located in coastal and urban areas. But the map dramatically illustrates that it is actually even more geographically compressed than this generalization suggests. In fact, the counties that delivered Democratic majorities in 2012 were concentrated in four extremely narrow and specific areas:

First, a narrow sliver of cities along the two coasts. Looking at the map for Oregon, Washington, California, Florida and Pennsylvania, for example, one can easily see that Democratic majorities do not extend throughout the entirety of these coastal states but rather peter out very close to the seashore.

Second, an archipelago of counties dominated by African Americans that stretches in an arc across the South and a checkerboard network of counties in Texas and the southwest that have significant Latino and Native American populations.

Third, counties in the center of the country that contain large cities within them. Aside from a loose chain of Midwestern cities that stretches from Cleveland to Chicago and then up through Milwaukee to Minneapolis/St. Paul, these heartland urban centers stand out on the map as remarkably tiny, isolated blue dots in a surrounding sea of red.

Fourth, counties that contain college towns. When one looks very carefully one can see a variety of isolated blue areas like Austin, Texas, State College, Pennsylvania and Athens, Ga. where major state universities are located.

The most important fact that emerges from this map, however, is not the concentration of Democratic voters in a limited geographical area—a fact that is widely known and understood—but rather just how deeply red the Republican areas really are—the darker red

areas indicating counties where the GOP wins supermajorities of 65, 75 and even 80 percent—and how comparatively few pink areas there are in comparison. These deep red areas do not represent districts where Democrats and Republicans compete for voters; they represent areas where the GOP and conservative ideology is for all practical purposes hegemonic. Democratic voters in these areas frequently do not assert their views with their neighbors, creating the impression of complete unanimity. Many Republicans cease to consider the Democratic party as a normal political party but rather as the advocate of a deeply objectionable, essentially alien political ideology.

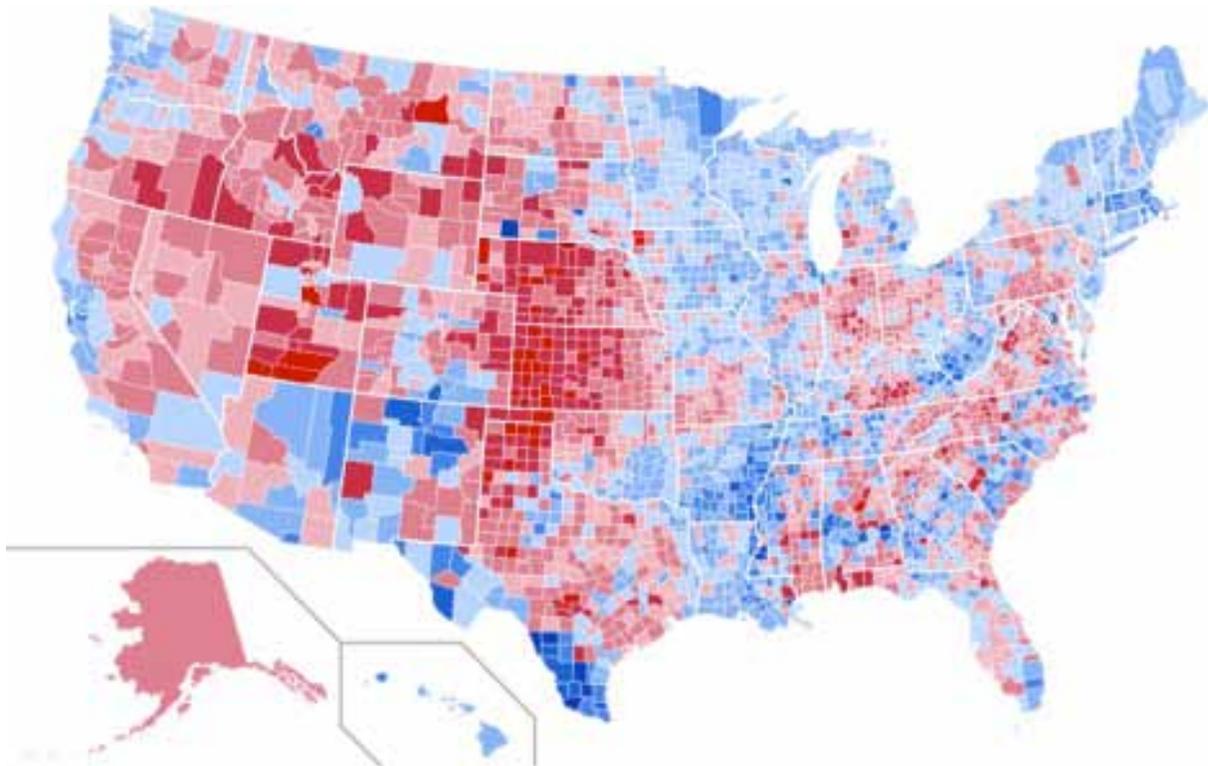
This ideological hegemony in the Republican dominated areas provides the critical sociological foundation for the GOP's constantly increasing political extremism. When political debate becomes constrained within the ideological limits set by Fox News, political discussion ceases to be a debate between progressive and conservative perspectives and becomes instead a battle among Republicans for the mantle of "true conservative" to win the support of the activist and extremist Republican base. As a result, with each new election the hyper-conservative wing of the GOP is therefore both free and strongly incentivized to create new and more extreme demands that serve to shift the balance of power within the party even further to the right.

It is as a result of this process that proposals that would have been considered quite literally signs of possible mental derangement two or three decades ago—proposals like a supposed constitutional "right" to carry loaded assault rifles in restaurants, stores, day care centers, hospitals, PTA meetings, churches and college classrooms or to encourage Republican election officials to deliberately sabotage the operation of polling places in areas where they dislike the partisan preferences of the voters—have now become "the new normal" in many Republican states and counties.

In contrast, in regions of the county with two genuinely competitive political parties, Republican candidates have to be vastly more sensitive to non-GOP opinion, a constraint which establishes significant limits on this descent into extremism. The Republican base is not necessarily any less extreme in the northeast or west coast than it is elsewhere in the country but GOP candidates are constrained from proposing the kinds of wildly extremist measures popular in GOP supermajority districts because of the more contested nature of the elections in those areas.

A [map of the 1996 U.S. presidential election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1996#/media/File:1996nationwidecountymapshadedbyoteshare.svg)⁴ suggests the difference that a more contested political environment can make. In 1996 Clinton won 49.2 percent of the vote against an almost identical 49.1 percent for the combined total of Bob Dole and Ross Perot. The presence of Perot, who reduced Dole's total in various states by 5 to 9 percent, however, not only shifted the outcome in Clinton's favor in 11 states but more important made virtually every section of the country appear dramatically more pink and light blue on the political map rather than dark blue and deep red. Perot's average of a 5 to 9 percent reduction in the Republican margin made the national political contest clearly shift more toward the center and the entire country more sociologically stable.

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1996#/media/File:1996nationwidecountymapshadedbyoteshare.svg



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This reduced level of political polarization was reflected in the generally more civil and restrained tone of the 2006 campaign compared to the ferociously extremist rhetoric of 2008 and 2012 (In fact, it was precisely the relative partisan civility of the 2006 campaign that drove the right wing into a literal frenzy and convinced them that a drive to impeach Clinton over his private sexual behavior had to be immediately undertaken in order to prevent gradual acceptance and accommodation to his brand of carefully modulated political centrism).

What this suggests is that it is not necessary for Democrats to actually win elections in red areas of the country in order to profoundly reduce the very dangerous trend toward GOP extremism. A shift of less than 10 percent in the GOP margin of victory in many states will materially improve the political climate of the country even if the Democratic candidate is ultimately defeated.

The potential for achieving some reduction in GOP margins by winning greater support from some segment of white working class voters (or at least by convincing them to withhold their support from Republican candidates) is greater at this moment in time than it has been in many years. Donald Trump has deeply split the Republican “*Real America*” coalition, motivating a substantial segment of generally GOP-voting white less than college voters to reject the pattern of automatically voting for the preferred candidate of the Republican leadership.

A very wide variety of opinion data indicates that there are two quite distinct groups within Trump’s white working class supporters. On the one hand there are voters who are primarily attracted by his appeals to bigotry and xenophobia (including virtually the entire grass-roots

base of the organized white supremacist movement), and, on the other, voters who are primarily attracted by Trump's challenge to the GOP establishment for its failure to pay any attention to a wide range of other economic and social white working class discontents.

It is highly probable that this coalition will endure until November if Trump is chosen as the Republican candidate or if he runs as an independent. But after the election it is likely to fragment once the unifying energy of a celebrity candidate and an insurgent political campaign is removed. The substantial racist and ultra-right elements of Trump's coalition will energetically attempt to shape any longer-term "Trumpist" political formation to serve their own specific agenda which will then necessarily alienate other white working class voters who do not share their ideology and goals.

As a result there will be new opportunities for both progressive populist Democrats and also moderate but culturally traditional independent candidates to compete with the GOP for white working class voters. Even if these campaigns do not lead to victories for Democratic or independent candidates in many cases, this process will nonetheless produce significant benefits for both Democrats and for American Democracy in general by reducing GOP supermajorities and thereby undermining the basic social foundation of the growing GOP extremism. It is an eminently worthwhile objective to pursue.