

THE DEMOCRATIC  
**strategist**

presents

a roundtable on  
progressives and the  
white working class

**What do you think is the most important single step progressives and Democrats can take to regain support among white working class Americans?**



Articles by:

**Stan Greenberg and Ruy Teixeira**



with Comments by:

**Harold Meyerson, Theda Skocpol, Joan Walsh, Michael Kazin, Karen Nussbaum,  
Mark Schmitt, Richard Yeselson, Richard D. Kahlenberg, Lane Kenworthy,  
Joel Rogers, Andrew Levison, John Russo, and Jack Metzgar**

with an introduction by:

**Ed Kilgore and Andrew Levison**

# A Democratic Strategist Roundtable on Progressives and the White Working Class

## Introduction

By Ed Kilgore and Andrew Levison

The Democratic Strategist is pleased to present this very important roundtable discussion about progressives and the white working class.

It has become increasingly clear that progressives and Democrats have no alternative except to challenge the hold that conservative and the GOP have established over white working Americans. The “Obama coalition” or “Rising American Electorate” that successfully elected Barack Obama twice to the presidency by itself cannot insure a stable and enduring Democratic majority in Congress or even provide the certainty of electing a Democratic president again in 2016.

To put it simply, there is no practical alternative to expanding the Democratic coalition if we wish to achieve these critically important goals and the group with the greatest potential in this regard is the white working class.

To begin the serious planning necessary to pursue this goal The Democratic Strategist reached out to an extraordinary range of leading progressive and Democratic thinkers and strategists. Even a cursory look at the list of contributors reveals that they represent without the slightest exaggeration the most impressive group brought together to discuss this issue in many decades.

Working in collaboration with *The Washington Monthly*, The Democratic Strategist recruited two leading progressive and Democratic strategists – Stan Greenberg of the polling firm Democracy Corps and Ruy Teixeira, author of *The Emerging Democratic Majority* – to review the basic polling and demographic data regarding white working class Americans. We then asked a very large and distinguished group to respond to a key initial question: “*What is the most important thing progressives and Democrats can do to regain support among white working class voters?*”

The responses covered an extremely wide range of topics and recommendations, some of them familiar and others quite original. But within this wide range of ideas, there were three clear areas of agreement.

1. *Winning greater support from among white working class voters is vitally important.* In presidential elections, white working class voters can add the critical margin of safety for a Democratic candidate, in close statewide races they can make the difference between victory and defeat and even in heavily Republican areas, a shift in their attitudes can weaken the very powerful ideological hegemony the GOP now enjoys.
2. *Greater support from the white working class can be won.* The large regional variations in Democratic support that exist within the white working class indicate that there are many targets of opportunity. On a national level, winning even just a

---

10 percent greater share of the white working class vote can contribute a vital 2-2.5 percent increase in the overall presidential vote for a Democratic candidate.

3. *Winning greater support from white working class voters will require a sustained and organized commitment* and not just some better TV ads or more sophisticated voter targeting technology. Democratic candidates must offer white working people not simply promises but meaningful and genuine representation.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that this roundtable is not a one-time event but the beginning of an ongoing process of discussion. The many submissions presented here are best understood as essentially a set of “opening statements” designed to create a starting point for the continuing discussion and planning that has to occur. Over the next weeks and months the conclusions of this initial roundtable will be developed and extended as participants examine more carefully and systematically how to achieve the ambitious long range goal of increasing white working class support for progressives and the Democratic coalition.

It was not so very long ago that ordinary working Americans were a central pillar of the New Deal coalition and supported its ethos of broadly based progressive change. Every one of the participants in this roundtable forum firmly and deeply believes that they can be once again.

## Table of Contents

<b>THE BATTLE FOR THE WHITE WORKING CLASS IS JUST BEGINNING</b> <i>BY Stan Greenberg</i> .....	1
<b>THE CHALLENGE OF THE WHITE WORKING CLASS VOTE</b> <i>BY Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin</i> .....	8
<b>WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?</b>	
<b>COMMENTS:</b>	
<i>BY Harold Meyerson</i> .....	13
<i>BY Theda Skocpol</i> .....	14
<i>BY Joan Walsh</i> .....	16
<i>BY Michael Kazin</i> .....	17
<i>BY Karen Nussbaum</i> .....	18
<i>BY Mark Scmitt</i> .....	20
<i>BY Richard Yeselson</i> .....	21
<i>BY Richard D. Kahlenberg</i> .....	24

**Table of Contents (cont.)**

*BY Lane Kenworthy*.....26

*BY Joel Rogers* .....28

*BY Andrew Levison* .....30

*BY John Russo* .....32

*BY Jack Metzgar*.....33

## THE BATTLE FOR THE WHITE WORKING CLASS IS JUST BEGINNING

By STAN GREENBERG

There is no more oft-repeated statistic than the fact that Barack Obama won just 39 percent of white voters in 2012. “This much is undisputed,” Ron Brownstein declared in 2012: “President Obama lost white voters by a larger margin than any winning presidential candidate in U.S. history.”

Obama was noticeably weak with a number of groups, but particularly white blue collar and non-college white men – which Brownstein describes as “once the brawny backbone of the New Deal-era Democratic coalition.” Mitt Romney ran as well as Dwight Eisenhower and George H. W. Bush among these key groups yet did not get close to the White House.<sup>1</sup>

With Democrats clearly in trouble with the white working class, both parties have moved to the same conclusion: Democrats have a structural advantage in the presidential years and in winning the White House because the new “rising American electorate” (RAE) votes in large numbers in those elections but is at a marked disadvantage in winning and sustaining control of the House and Senate, where the smaller states and most rural parts of the country have their biggest say, and in elections during the off-years when white working class voters play a bigger role in the outcome.

This basic conclusion about the white working class figures in the debates going on among conservatives and the official Republican Party today as well as in the debates among the Democrats. Many conservatives believe that there were up to six million mostly working class, religiously faithful voters who stayed home because the plutocratic Mitt Romney did not engage them. Some suggest that Republicans need only increase turnout among these white voters to be fully competitive on a national level. Others believe that Republicans must run better among minorities, particularly Hispanics, but both groups agree that Obama ran disastrously with whites, particularly with white working class voters.

### There Are Three Reasons the Common Wisdom is Wrong

Democrats have not challenged the assertion that Barack Obama and Democratic candidates fared poorly with white working class voters nor have they examined the vision of the white working class that is being employed to reach this conclusion. This article will show that the common wisdom which holds that white working class voters were a disaster for Obama and the Democrats and are no longer central to Democratic electoral strategy is wrong on three counts.

---

Stan Greenberg is the CEO of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, a polling and consulting firm, and co-founder (with James Carville and Bob Shrum) of Democracy Corps, a non-profit organization which produces left-leaning political strategy.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ron Brownstein, “Bad Bet: Why Republicans Can’t Win With Whites Alone,” *New Republic*, September 5, 2013.

- First, this common wisdom is wrong about how much trouble Democrats are in among white working class voters.
- Second, this common wisdom misses the regionally limited character of white working class support for the Republican Party and underestimates the scale of its future problems with these voters.
- Third, this common wisdom is wrong about the basic character and future of the American working class.

## The geography of the white working class vote

Regarding the first issue, the key fact is that the elevated white working class vote for Mitt Romney, and increasingly for national Republicans, is largely a product of white voters in the South, Border South and Rocky Mountain states – and not of the white working class in the rest of the country. Nate Cohn highlighted this reality with his headline, “The GOP Has Problems with White Voters, Too.”<sup>2</sup>

Combining over 13,000 interviews that Democracy Corps conducted in 2012 showed that Obama received a pathetic 25 percent of the white non-college vote in the South and just 33 percent in the Mountain West; Romney, in contrast, was getting around two-thirds of this vote.<sup>3</sup>

The scale of the rejection of President Obama in the Southern and Western base of the Republican Party obscured the fact that Obama was far more competitive among white voters elsewhere in the country. In Democracy Corps’ combined interviews for 2012, Obama won white non-college voters in New England by 51 to 42 percent, tied Romney in the West North Central states by 47 to 46 percent and trailed by only 7 points in the Mid-Atlantic by 44 to 51 percent. At the same time Obama received 41 percent of the vote of white non-college voters in the East North Central and Pacific Coast states where he trailed Romney by just over 10 points.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Nate Cohen, “The GOP Has Problems With White Voters, Too,” *New Republic*, November 12, 2012.

<sup>3</sup>Based on surveys with a total of 13,197 adults conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy Corps throughout 2012, overall margin of error of  $\pm 3$  percent. The actual 2012 election results were within the margin of error. Working class is defined by education as those without a four-year college degree.

<sup>4</sup>Democracy Corps defines the New England region as Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. The West North Central region is defined as Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The East North Central region consists of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The Mid-Atlantic region consists of Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. The Pacific Coast region consists of Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington. The Deep South region consists of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia. The Border South states are Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, Tennessee, West Virginia and D.C. Finally, the Mountain States are Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.

<sup>5</sup>The median household income in the Midwest in 2012 was \$800 below what it was prior to the 2008 economic crash when you adjust for inflation. U.S. Census, “Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012,” September 17, 2013; Federal Reserve, “Changes in U.S. Family Finances from 2007 to 2010: Evidence from the Survey of Consumer Finances,” Federal Reserve Bulletin, June 22, 2012.

While Obama's performance in the Midwest was probably slightly weaker than it might have otherwise been because of the weak economic recovery and stagnant incomes in the region,<sup>5</sup> white working class voters in the great middle of the country and coasts were still very competitive for Obama in 2012. They thus remain central to Democratic priorities in any strategy for 2014 and 2016.

## **The Shrinking Regional Base of the GOP in White Working Class America**

Regarding the second issue – the dynamics and trends in the Republican Party – the future is not promising for the GOP's ability to maintain its hold on the white working class vote outside its geographic core. The GOP is encamped in the race conscious South and Evangelical and religiously observant Appalachian Valley and Mountain West where its candidates and representatives seek to wage a conservative counter-revolution against emerging trends and associated values in the rest of the country.

We are all aware that the GOP is aligned with the oldest, most rural, most religiously observant, married white voters while it is shunned by younger voters and Millennials, metropolitan area residents, the secular and religious mainstream, foreign born immigrants and all racial minorities.

In consequence, the Republican Party is now at its lowest standing with the public and has the smallest number of people identifying with the party in the history of polling.<sup>6</sup> Less than a quarter of the country identifies with the party – and its problems go beyond the demographic trends.

Racial identity has deep roots in the South – confirmed by a stunning recent study on the persistence of conservative politics in the slaveholding counties of the Black Belt – and that racial identity continues to shape responses under the Obama Presidency, as Jonathan Chait has underscored.<sup>7</sup> But Evangelicals are also concentrated in Deep South and Border States, along with the Mountain West where Mormons are also important.<sup>8</sup>

This overlapping conservative racial and religious perspective in the South and Mountain West, has led the GOP to fervently join the culture war to re-assert endangered values. America's civil rights, women's rights, immigrant and gay rights revolutions have fundamentally changed the country, but the values they uphold are still deeply contested because of the Republican Party's regional conservative base.

With race and religion the dominant dynamic in their regional base, virtually all other demographic divides within the GOP get suppressed. Whites in the South – men and women, college and non-college, young and old – all gave President Obama very similar and low percentages

---

<sup>6</sup>National survey of 950 2012 voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy Corps and Women's Voices. Women Vote, March 19-23, 2014.

<sup>7</sup>Jonathan Chait, "The Color of His Presidency," *New York Magazine*, April 6, 2014; Avidit Acharya, Matthew Blackwell and Maya Sen, "The Political Legacy of American Slavery," *University of Rochester*, February 13, 2014.

<sup>8</sup>The most observant are in the Border States and Appalachian Valley where 53 percent attend church every week, followed by 51 percent in the Deep South and 47 percent in the Mountain States. Just 26 percent in the East and 30 percent on the West Coast attend church weekly, and while just over 40 percent do in the Midwest, the Evangelical churches play a much smaller role there.

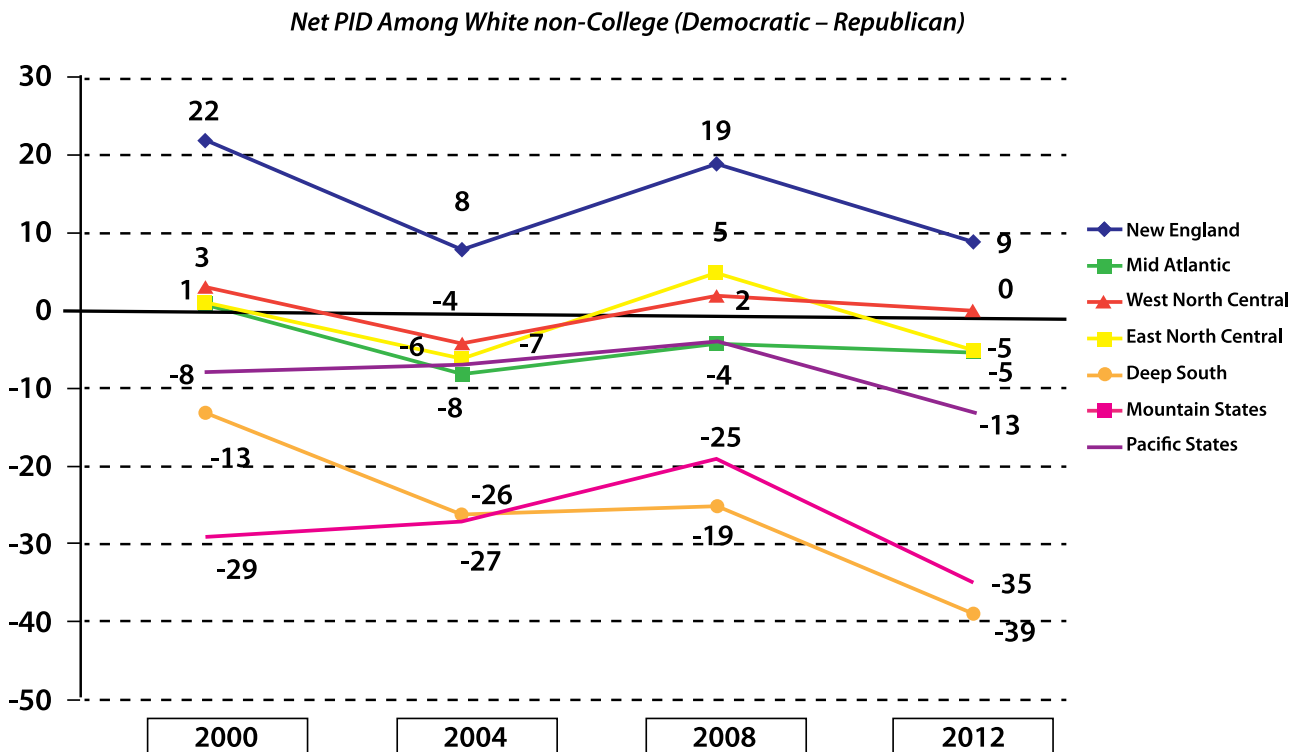


of the vote. The rest of the country, in contrast, is divided by more healthy racial, gender, class and generational gaps. But, there is no gender or generation gap in the white working class in the Republican South. Nor is there a class-based education gap either. White college-educated men and white Millennials alike across the South and Mountain West gave just 30 percent of their votes to Obama – right at the norm for the Republican heartland.

In short, national trends and rules do not seem to apply in the Republican regions, as reflected in the story of white working class defection from the Democrats since 2000. During the 2000 election between Gore and Bush, white non-college voters in the South identified Republican by 10 points. That margin doubled to 21 points in the polarizing 2004 Iraq war/gay marriage election and held steady in 2008 when Obama was elected. It then surged to a 33 point advantage for Republicans in 2012 elections. By then, only 29 percent of white non-college voters in the South identified with the Democratic Party. In the Mountain West, the Republican advantage surged to 35 percent during the Obama administration, while Democratic support sunk to only 29 percent of white workers in the western part of the Republican base region.<sup>9</sup>

But the key fact is that there is no comparable trend in white working class votes elsewhere in the country. In all of the other regions, the Republicans' advantage among white working class voters over time has either been relatively stable, bounced around or even trended Democratic. At the end of the day, the Democrats had a 3 point advantage among white workers in the East and Republicans enjoyed just a 5 point advantage in the whole of the Midwest in 2012.

Democratic party identification margin in presidential years:



<sup>9</sup>Based on combined data from national surveys conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research on behalf of Democracy Corps, 2010-2012.

There are cracks in the Republicans regional base led by the modest defection of college-educated white women in the South who gave Obama 6 points more than the college men and college-educated women in the Mountain West who gave Obama 12 points more support than the men. These gender disparities have probably played a role in the growing Democratic support in the growing metropolitan centers at the fringe of the South in northern Virginia, in Atlanta and Tampa in the Deep South, and in Denver in the heart of the Mountain West.

These are all places where there is broader receptivity to racial diversity, immigration, multi-culturalism, the pluralism of family types and independence of women. These female voters notice when the party not only nominates a Tea Party extremist, but also when the party denies that women face a wage gap or fight to limit contraceptive coverage or to stop state legalization of same sex marriages.

### **The Key to Winning White Working Class Support is Understanding Who They Are**

The third issue, the mistaken common wisdom about the basic characteristics of the white working class, misses the profound changes that have occurred in the working class itself.

At the time I and a number of other Democrats took up the political project of bringing back Reagan Democrats and white working class voters to the Democratic Party (a project that culminated in the election of Bill Clinton) nearly 27 percent of employment was in blue color jobs like manufacturing, construction and mining, while professional or business services and health care employment only contributed about 10 percent each. Employment in the production of goods dominated blue collar employment, followed by employment in transportation and moving materials.<sup>10</sup> That is why the Republican-voting white, blue collar, unionized UAW workers were so important to the Clinton project to renew the Democratic Party “from the bottom-up.”

Even today much of the literature on the white working class focuses on the imagery of “Joe six-pack” or “Joe the plumber.” In his excellent book, *The White Working Class Today*, however, Andrew Levison focuses on the actual occupational characteristics of “working class” employment – jobs that involve routine and repetitive tasks, require limited skills, are closely supervised and offer no autonomy during working hours – and concludes that half of white working men and almost 40 percent of white working women today are “basically [in] working class jobs.”<sup>11</sup>

This valid conclusion leads some democrats to fall into the trap of thinking that “the white working class” is still composed of traditional white blue-collar men working in factories or large, unionized construction projects. As Levison rightly points out, however, a lot of blue collar work today takes place in small groups rather than in factory settings and a vast number of blue collar construction workers are self-employed contractors rather than unionized employees.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Larry Mishel, Josh Biven, Elise Gould and Heidi Shierholz, “The State of Working America,” *Economic Policy Institute*, 12th Edition, November 2012; Barry Hirsch and David McPherson, “Union Membership, Coverage, Density and Employment Among All Wages and Salary Workers, 1973-2013,” *UnionStats.com*, accessed April 14, 2014.

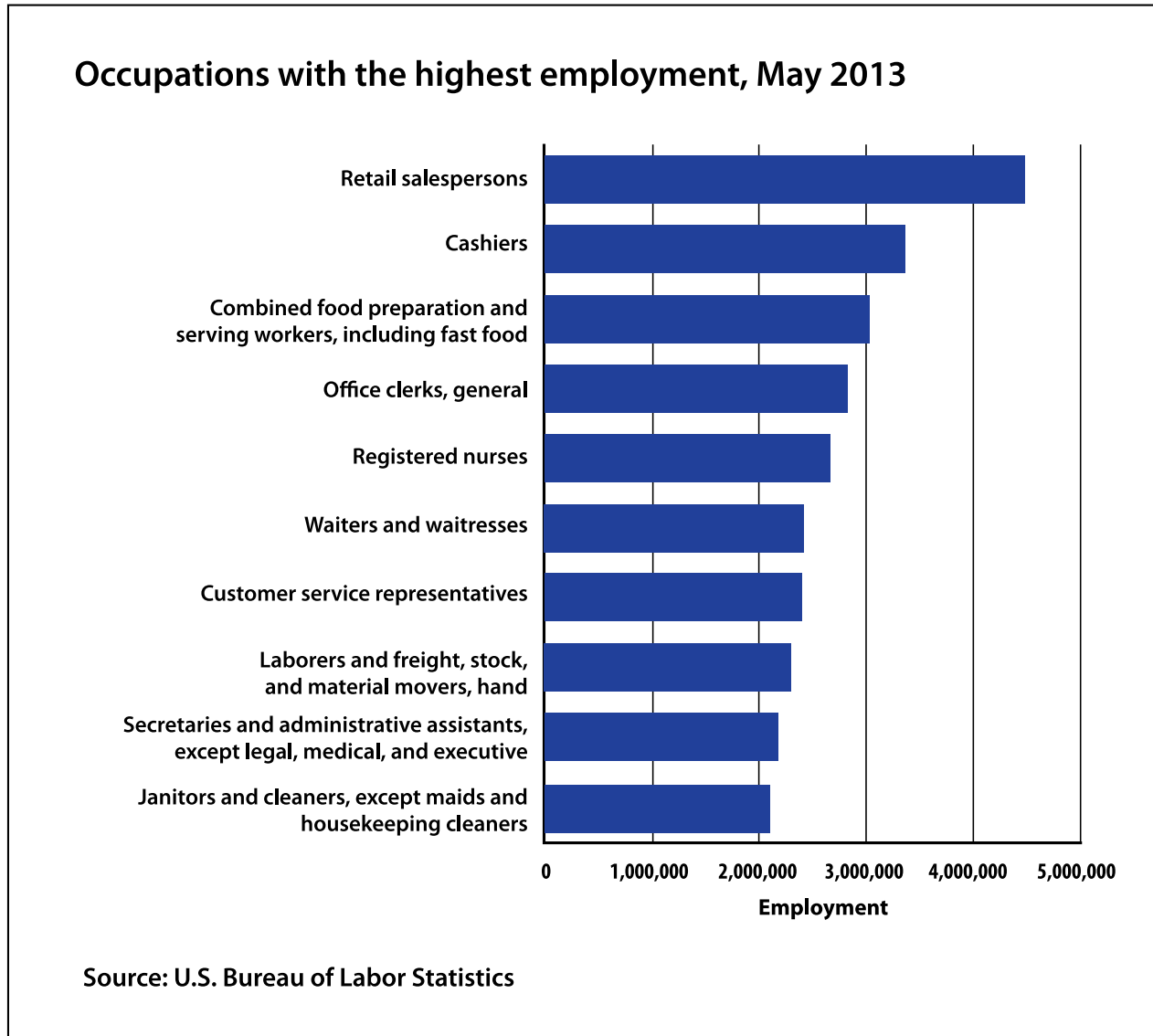
<sup>11</sup>Andrew Levison, *The White Working Class Today* (Democratic Strategist Press, 2013), p. 28, 32.

<sup>12</sup>Levison, *The White Working Class Today*, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup>“The State of Working America,” *Economic Policy Institute*, 2012.

In fact, many traditional areas of “old fashioned” blue-collar employment have sharply declined, led by goods-producing occupations. Manufacturing accounts for only 8.9 percent of employment today. At the same time, there is a surge of employment in health care, leisure and hospitality and lower level professional and business services.<sup>13</sup>

If you want to get a sense of the center of the modern working class, look at the jobs that form the heart of the economy.<sup>14</sup>



Nearly all of the people in these jobs have not seen a raise in years; moreover, the maids and housekeepers, waitresses and hostesses, cooks and dishwashers, counter attendants and ticket takers, janitors and hairdressers and child care workers earn about \$400 a week on average and rarely receive the health and retirement benefits presumed during the industrial era.<sup>15</sup> Female participation equals male participation now and mothers are the sole or primary providers in four in ten households.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>“The State of Working America,” *Economic Policy Institute*, 2012.

<sup>15</sup>Levinson, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup>Wendy Wang, Kim Parker, and Paul Taylor, “Breadwinner Moms,” *Pew Research Center*, May 29, 2013.

---

These white working class voters are a potential part of a new and enlarged Democratic base. The problem is not that they can't be won to the Democratic coalition but that the mistaken common wisdom about them has led all too many Democrats to declare defeat before they even try.

But the facts are clear. The extreme pro-Republican tilt of the white working class today is disproportionately based on voters in the South and Mountain West. The GOP's platform is increasingly divorced from the values and needs of white working class voters in other areas of the country and the "new" white working class has profound social and economic needs that the GOP cannot and will not address.

In short, the battle for the white working class is not a "lost cause" for progressives and Democrats. On the contrary, it is a battle that has only just begun.

## THE CHALLENGE OF THE WHITE WORKING CLASS VOTE

By RUY TEIXEIRA AND JOHN HALPIN

In the last three presidential elections, the Democratic candidate lost among white working-class (non-college) voters by an average of 22 points. The worst performance came in 2012 when Obama lost this group—once the bulwark of the Democratic coalition—by a staggering 26 points (62-36).

The loss of this key demographic is mitigated to some degree by its shrinking size. The numbers of white working-class voters will probably dip to just 30 percent of all voters by 2020 and 44 percent of white voters. This is a dramatic decline from 1988, when white working-class voters were 54 percent of all voters and almost two-thirds (64 percent) of white voters.

Some argue that since the ranks of the white working class are declining, Democrats should simply rely instead on their rising “Obama coalition” of minorities, unmarried and working women, seculars, Millennial generation voters, and educated whites living in more urbanized states. Yet it would be a grave mistake for Democrats to count on this strategy.

For one, the Democrat’s deficit with working-class whites was the key reason for the G.O.P. landslide in 2010, and could hand the Republicans another big win in the upcoming mid-terms. Despite their declining numbers, white working-class voters will be an ever-present threat to progressives in elections and to progressive governance as long as so many remain so hostile to the party.

The Democrats don’t need a majority of white working-class voters to come over to their side. But Democrats do need to deny the Republicans the supermajorities of white working class-voters that they counter-mobilize today. Moreover, broadening the party’s appeal to white working-class voters should greatly reduce the threat posed to the Democrats when other constituencies, such as Latinos or younger voters, for example, exhibit only modest turnout, which is particularly a problem during off year elections, or waiver in their support for the Democrats.

Furthermore—and this is critical—by depriving the GOP of their uncontested supermajorities among white working-class voters, Democrats would finally force today’s intransigent Republican party toward the center. It is only those supermajorities that allow Republicans to thumb their noses at the rising Obama coalition and dig in their heels at the smallest progressive change.

---

Ruy Teixeira is a Senior Fellow at both the Century Foundation and the Center for American Progress. He is also a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution and the author or co-author of six books.

---

John Halpin is a Senior Fellow at American Progress. He is the co-director and creator of the Progressive Studies Program at CAP.

Take that crutch away and the electoral arithmetic becomes so dire that GOP strategy will have to change simply to remain competitive. True, a more moderate and reasonable Republican party would attract more voters who now vote Democratic, but overall it would be a plus for progressive governance by improving the climate for legislation that actually addresses social problems.

**Is there reasonable hope that such a coalition can be formed? We believe there is.**

Start with the evolution of the white working class itself. Over time, we expect that generational change will make the white working class more liberal and open to progressive agendas. This will occur as white working-class Millennials gradually take the place of generally more conservative white working-class Baby Boomers and older Americans.

Democrats generally receive greater support among Millennial white working-class voters than among older white working-class voters. This gap peaked in 2008 when Obama's margin was 30 points better among 18-29 year old white working class Millennial voters than among their older counterparts.

This generation gap is partially explained by the fact that white working class Millennials are substantially more liberal on social issues. For example, in the 2012 National Election Study, 54 percent of white working class Millennials thought gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to legally marry, compared to just 34 percent of older white working class cohorts. They are also more likely than older cohorts to be secular in religious orientation, another indicator of liberalism. In the 2012 Democracy Corps post-election survey, 33 percent of white working class Millennials reported no religious affiliation compared to 14 percent of their older counterparts.

And perhaps most important, today's young white working-class voters are notably more liberal on issues concerning the role of government, which have been an especially strong factor in moving the white working class to the right over time. (Most academic analyses agree that these issues were far more important in causing white working class defection from the Democrats than were social/cultural issues).

An example of how large a generation gap exists within the white working class on the role of government comes from a 2010 Hart Research/CAP survey. It found that 61 percent of Millennial non-college-educated whites favored a strong government to deal with today's complex economic problems, compared to just 38 percent of older working-class whites. White working-class Millennials are also very close to white college-educated Millennials in their views on this issue, in contrast to older white working-class individuals who are more conservative than older white college-educated cohorts.

One might fear a growing, reactionary backlash among the white working class, young and old, as they find themselves contending with an increasingly diverse society. This is possible but data from a 2013 CAP/PolicyLink/Latino Decisions poll suggest that the white working class is far less resistant to diversity than generally supposed.

The poll asked, for example, whether “Americans will learn more from one another and be enriched by exposure to many different cultures.” Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of the white working class agreed.

The same number agreed that “A bigger, more diverse workforce will lead to more economic growth.” Similarly, 62 percent agreed that “diverse workplaces and schools will help make American businesses more innovative and competitive,” while 58 percent agreed that “people will become more accepting of their differences and more willing to find common ground.”

Or again, 57 percent agreed that “with more diverse people working and living together, discrimination will decrease.” Finally, 52 percent agreed that “the entry of new people into the American workforce will increase our tax base and help support our retiree population”.

Further, as we would expect, white working-class Millennials are significantly more open to rising diversity than the white working class as a whole, so generational replacement will simply enhance these positive sentiments. For example, 75 percent of white working-class Millennials think Americans will be enriched by exposure to many cultures and 73 percent believe a bigger, more diverse workforce will lead to more economic growth.

All this suggests that the white working class is likely to change over time in ways that should make it more receptive to progressive appeals. But which appeals? It is not enough to gain a somewhat more receptive audience; the sale must still be made. What, if anything, do progressives have in their portfolio that might particularly appeal to the white working class, while also appealing to the base groups of their rising coalition?

There is a burgeoning progressive narrative and policy focus that might be able to fulfill this role. This new narrative is based on the idea that rising inequality actually undermines rather than fuels growth. This “equitable growth” or “middle out economics” school of thought points to a growing body of evidence that reducing inequality is not merely compatible with growth, but can be a significant contributor to both the quantity and quality of growth. The broad argument is that the economy grows from the “middle-out,” and that the true heroes in our economic drama are not corporations and the wealthy but rather a robust and growing middle class. With such an approach, the economy can work for everyone, not just the wealthy few, as it does today.

Data from a 2013 CAP/Hart Research poll show that this argument has strong support from the American public. Start with the idea that the economy should work for everyone, not just the wealthy few. In the poll, Americans identified this as the single most important goal for the nation’s economic future. While voters also rated many other goals as priorities—job creation, a strong future for the next generation, a stronger middle class—none resonated nearly as strongly as having an economy that works for all Americans.

And note that this is more than a call for a larger economic pie. The final clause—not just the wealthy few—is what makes this phrase so resonant. It speaks to Americans’ growing conviction that our economic system now benefits only the wealthy and corporations, while the deck is stacked against everyone else.

This approach offers a compelling contrast to the discredited conservative agenda of plying the rich with tax cuts and other goodies on the trickle-down theory that the wealthy will create jobs for the rest of us. Instead, it posits that a relentless focus on the economic health of the middle class, together with expanding opportunities for the poor and working class to move into the middle class, are the best ways to grow the economy.

This in turn points to a policy agenda heavy on investment in the middle class—its living conditions and sense of security, its skills, its entrepreneurial capabilities—and in the conditions that allow the middle class to succeed—modern infrastructure, cutting-edge scientific research and dynamic new industries that can provide middle-class jobs. And it leads away from a policy agenda focused on deficit reduction, which has been a loser for progressives and simply reinforces already-existing anti-government tendencies.

For most Americans, this is a moral as well as an economic story. The public believes that virtuous behavior (especially hard work) is not being properly rewarded today because of barriers erected by the wealthy and powerful. In the CAP/Hart poll, three quarters agreed that “the rules in America have changed—hard work and sacrifice are not rewarded anymore.” And 63 percent say a very high priority is providing more opportunity to those who work hard and struggle to provide for their families.

This approach draws strong support from the various elements of Obama’s “coalition of the ascendant”— minorities, unmarried and working women, Millennial generation and more secular voters, and educated whites living in more urbanized states. But crucially this “middle-out” approach also draws solid support from white working-class voters.

For example, two thirds of the white working class characterizes “an economy that works for everyone, not just the richest 1 percent” as exactly what America needs today (9-10 on a 10 point scale). And 82 percent of these voters agree that “the middle class is being squeezed and we are increasingly becoming a nation divided between the rich and everyone else.” In addition, by a 2:1 margin (67-33) white working class voters agree more that “Government is too concerned with what big corporations and the wealthy want, instead of helping the middle class” than that “Government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals”.

These data suggest that the middle-out approach is the most feasible way to fend off continued anti-progressive surges among white working-class voters, who are inclined to indict the government for their increasing economic insecurity. Provide these voters with upward mobility into an expanding and dynamic middle class and progressives will be able to capture more of their votes—not a majority, but a strong enough minority to stabilize the new progressive coalition and insulate it from rightwing backlash, as well as force the GOP to move toward the center. Conversely, leaving these voters in their current frustrated condition (Obama approval rating: 29 percent) is guaranteed to produce periodic meltdowns that will play havoc with progressives’ ability to win elections and govern, while allowing extremists to continue to dominate the Republican party.

How should this middle-out economic model be presented to white working-class voters? For starters, it’s imperative that progressives begin framing their economic and social agenda in class-based terms that allow white voters to feel that they, too, are part of a movement to



---

use government action in support of working people. The toxic racially-focused discourse about the social welfare state that underlies many contemporary and historical debates about the role of government serves no one's interests, particularly progressive proponents of an activist state. There's simply no reason for progressives not to broaden their appeals based on class lines.

The survey evidence is clear that white working-class voters are as supportive as others for large-scale public action to address chronic joblessness, income disparities, and unequal education and social opportunities. A massive study on the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty conducted by the Half in Ten Campaign and the Center for American Progress found that more than two-thirds of white non-college voters supported 11 out of 11 policies to fight poverty—from an increase in the minimum wage and subsidized child care to an expanded Earned Income Tax Credit and even a national jobs program to combat unemployment. Support among these voters topped 80 percent for universal pre-k, expanded Pell grants for low-income families, and affordable child care. White non-college support slightly outpaced white college graduate support in many cases and was basically on par with the views of African Americans and Latinos.

This “Bobby Kennedy” vision of an activist and supportive government that serves the values and interests of all working people across racial and ethnic lines is vital to the long term success of progressive governance. To succeed, progressives must resurrect his dream.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By HAROLD MEYERSON

No group has seen its fortunes decline more over the past 40 years than the white working class. Income, job security, even life-expectancy have either stagnated or dropped for the constituency that once was the linchpin of the New Deal coalition.

No group would benefit more from such key points in the Democrats' agenda as universal health care, labor law reform or public works programs. The problem is that political support within the white working class for many such programs has dropped nearly to an all-time low. Some of that lack of support is due more to the source of such programs (the Democrats, particularly the Obama Democrats) than their substance: The white poor of Kentucky, for instance, have signed up in droves for that state's Medicaid program, which the Affordable Care Act expanded, all the while maintaining their hostility to President Obama. The success of that program suggests that in time, the merits of universal programs – particularly when whites understand that they themselves, and not just minorities, are beneficiaries – may come to outweigh the antipathy to their creators. But the Democratic strategy can't be to wait for this epiphany to arrive. More fundamentally, government has been so discredited within the white working class – in response to decades of Republican attacks on government, racially-targeted programs devised by Democrats, and the failure of government to arrest the long-term decline of the middle class – that the Democrats can advance only a few basic policies that have any chance of white-working-class support.

But those policy options do exist. To begin, Democrats could propose major investment in the nation's sagging infrastructure, which would create millions of construction jobs. They could require much more domestic content in governmental procurement, and promote trade policies that discourage offshoring – policies that would boost employment in manufacturing. They could attack Wall Street for its role in promoting offshoring, and limit Wall Street's clout by resurrecting Glass Steagall. They could propose anti-plutocratic corporate tax reforms – for instance, greatly reducing corporate taxes on those companies with low CEO-pay-to-median-worker-pay ratios, and greatly raising corporate taxes on those companies with high ratios. Polling shows near universal support for policies that revive domestic manufacturing, improve our infrastructure and attack the overpayment of top corporate and bank executives. If Democrats can disentrail themselves from Wall Street and its contributions, they may win back some of the white working class yet.

---

Harold Meyerson is the editor-at-large at The American Prospect and a columnist for *The Washington Post*

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

*By THEDA SKOCPOL, HARVARD UNIVERSITY AND SCHOLARS STRATEGY NETWORK*

For today's Democratic Party, gaining trust and support from white working Americans, men and women without college degrees, is no easy project. In many states, Democrats appear to be an alliance of upper-middle-class professionals and low-income racial minorities, yet votes must be attracted from any white working men and women, too. The white working class may be a gradually declining segment of the U.S. electorate, but it remains electorally and morally vital for a party that claims to speak for the American majority. In the South, attracting much more white working class support any time soon may be Mission Impossible for Democrats. But it can be done in all other regions including the Midwest if Democrats are prepared to make jobs and higher wages central.

White men and women without college degrees are deeply skeptical that either government or the Democratic Party is on their side. That's what pollsters reveal – but why would anyone need polls to know this? Just drive around America outside of upper-middle-class enclaves. Look around and listen to people living in exurbs, rural areas, and small or medium-sized cities. Steady jobs with decent wages have disappeared; roads and bridges are in decay; businesses are often struggling. Pawn shops and dollar stores pepper the landscape amidst shuttered shopping malls. Families struggle and often fall apart. Women feel overburdened working low-wage jobs while raising children, and men feel defiantly resentful because they cannot find jobs with wages and benefits sufficient to sustain a family. Why would people living and working in these circumstances feel anything but left behind and ignored by government – and why would they believe Democratic candidates who repeatedly promise to make things better at election time and then fail to deliver?

Republicans captured by far-right voters and monied ideologues have succeeded in undermining government and creating gridlock – and let face it, this is a big problem for Democrats who must use government to deliver real economic improvements to many constituents, or else look impotent. The spectacle of gridlock in Washington DC, especially when a Democratic president arrives at the White House with solid electoral majorities, naturally leads working people (of any color, really) to lose faith that government can act on their behalf. The laws Democrats do manage to pass fail to address core working class concerns about jobs and better wages; and their occasionally successful enactments are easily pilloried as special rights for groups like gays or welfare benefits aimed at racial minorities. The charges may not be true at all – Affordable Care is good for all working Americans, for example – but working people, especially white men, are deeply skeptical of

---

Theda Skocpol is the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University, and the Director of the Scholars Strategy Network, a national association devoted to expanding the public contributions of university-based research scholars.

---

complicated laws designed to compensate for low wages rather than improve the supply of well-paid jobs that people can use to boost family fortunes through their own efforts at work. Their skepticism is easily stoked into resentment against Democrats, especially when a black president is in the White House.

The only way Democrats are going to make headway with these men and women is to *champion straightforward, easy to understand measures* like big minimum wage hikes and equal pay for equal work rules. Calls to fund obvious job-creating projects like weatherizing buildings, repairing bridges, and spreading high-speed Internet services to all communities make sense too. And so do calls for paid family leave, because such laws can be enacted in the states or nationally without taxpayer funds. They can use a simple social insurance model, in which small payroll contributions from employers and employees create a vital new family benefit for all employees.

Democrats will never appeal to most ordinary working Americans by amping up promises to enact new rights rules, environmental laws, or government programs preferred by this or that sliver of privileged constituents. Calls for straightforward job creation, wage increases, and benefits for working-aged families are the kinds of steps all working Americans can readily understand and support. If Democrats continue to champion these priorities year after year, and enact them in states or at the national level whenever they can, working-class voters, whites as well as minorities, will come to see that it really matters for them if Democrats gain majorities.

Another Clinton in the White House won't hurt, either. For many working-class Americans, including whites, "the Clintons" signify better economic times for regular people. Whatever happens in 2014, Democrats have real openings in 2016 and beyond, if they make the right appeals to working class whites and manage to deliver for them.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By JOAN WALSH

Our discussions of “the white working class” sometimes seem framed by understandings we reached three decades ago, as though we’re still fighting over how to win back Joe Lunchbucket, Reagan Democrat. But Joe and most of his buddies – and most, though not all, were male – are probably committed Republicans now. The most important single step we can take to court whites without a college degree is to remember they aren’t a monolithic or homogenous group. Organizing among women and young people – particularly unmarried younger women – is probably going to yield the most voters.

To say this is not to recommend that we ignore older white men. I have no doubt that a firm commitment to economic populism will help Democrats with many of these voters, male and female. Although Obama lost white non-college voters to Mitt Romney 2-1 in 2012, he essentially tied with that group in Ohio and Wisconsin, thanks to strong campaigns focused on the president’s efforts to rescue the auto industry and save manufacturing jobs.

While polls show that decades of GOP messaging tying government to minorities has led them to distrust government and be skeptical of its expansion, there remain a few issues on which white working class voters are even more liberal than the norm.<sup>1</sup> They support expanded family and sick leave, for instance, another sign that so-called women’s issues have become economic issues for struggling families, even if Democrats have been slow to pitch them that way. White working class voters also want Medicare benefits protected, so Democrats ought to put a stop to the austerity politics that have led party leaders to flirt with destructive “grand bargains” that would cut Social Security and Medicare. They are also more likely than others to say “Wall Street hurts the American economy more than it helps,” meaning the rise of populist Wall Street critics like Sen. Elizabeth Warren and Sen. Sherrod Brown, to name just two, ought to help appeal to this group.

Finally, it’s important that Democrats make clear they want the votes of the white working class, and don’t talk down to them. I’m wary of using language like the “coalition of the ascendant” or the “rising American electorate,” though I understand their appeal. But such terms seem to be consigning white working class voters to a coalition of decline and irrelevance. Luckily these voters are probably not a demographic that’s tuned into recent Web debates over whether certain radical “people of color” even want white allies. But even sensible liberals can talk about the white working class in condescending, off-putting ways. We should remember that “white” is not a synonym for “Republican,” and make clear we want to not merely consolidate the Obama coalition but expand it.

---

Joan Walsh is an editor-at-large of Salon.com and an MSNBC political analyst.

---

<sup>1</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/12/opinion/edsall-how-democrats-can-compete-for-the-white-working-class.html?list-no-overhaul-needed-86757.html>

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By MICHAEL KAZIN

Is there a white working class? During the 20th century, it was not a term most wage-earning, European-Americans called themselves; regional, ethnic, religious, occupational, and political divisions mattered to them more than any unified identity – except American. I think that is pretty much the case today as well. Does a 55-year-old churchgoing Southern Baptist grandmother who clerks at a Wal-Mart in rural Alabama consider herself part of the same group as a 25-year-old UPS driver from New York City who believes in no religion, has tattoos all over his arms, and wants his union to more aggressively defend his interests? And what about the increasing number of white working people who are marrying and/or having children with Latinos, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans?

The lack of a strong group consciousness doesn't mean progressives cannot appeal effectively to both that Wal-Mart worker and that UPS driver. The "most important single step" would be a program one might call "common-sense liberalism" and a rhetoric to match it. The program would include: affordable, reliable health care; a minimum wage which increases along with the cost-of-living; a job creation plan focused on repairing the nation's infrastructure and developing a green economy; a progressive income tax which eliminates corporate loopholes; stricter regulation of the financial industry, including mandatory jail terms for the worst white-collar criminals; and a constitutional amendment, like that sponsored by Senators Bernie Sanders (D-VT) and Mark Begich (D-AK), which would ban any spending by "corporate and private entities" on candidates and ballot measures.

Yes, these are familiar ideas. But they are also popular ones. White wage-earners without a college education know the odds against them being able to lead a secure life with better opportunities for their children have grown longer in recent years. The election and re-election of a black president lionized by wealthy liberals may have increased the deep cynicism they already had about the federal government. A sincere and ardent advocacy of ideas that would help balance the economic scales may not succeed in winning the hearts and minds of alienated white working people. But short of an unlikely mass revival of unions in the private sector, I cannot imagine anything else that can.

---

Michael Kazin is editor of *Dissent*, [[www.dissentmagazine.org](http://www.dissentmagazine.org)] and teaches history at Georgetown University. His latest book is *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation*.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By *KAREN NUSSBAUM*

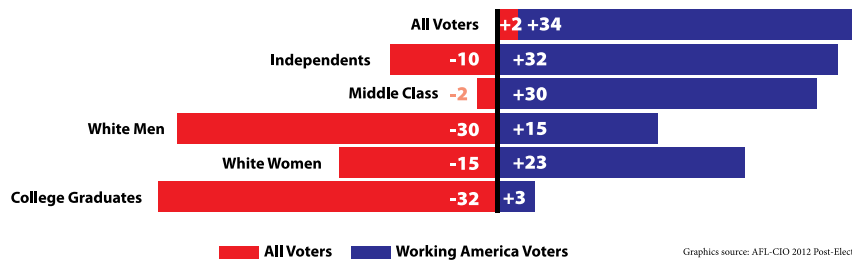
How do we counter corporate excess with working-class power? How do we foster a progressive multi-racial movement and keep the economically fragile, and diminishing, white working class as part of it?

Working America reaches working-class moderates with a conversation about the economy and a focus on greater equity: hundreds of conversations every night, hundreds of thousands a year. Instead of asking them to vote for a particular candidate, we talk with them. Instead of giving them standard campaign rhetoric, we listen.

**MEMBERSHIP MATTERS: The Working America Advantage**

**OBAMA VS. ROMNEY MARGINS**

Across the country, Working America members—who are mostly working class moderates and conservatives—supported Obama much more than the general public.



Graphics source: AFL-CIO 2012 Post-Election Survey, Hart Research

And that makes a big difference.

In June of 2012, in Massachusetts, the pick-up-driving Republican Sen. Scott Brown was outpolling pro-worker Democrat Elizabeth Warren by serious margins among white working-class voters. Working America helped change that equation, successfully flipping 8 of 17 towns that had voted for Scott Brown only two years earlier.

How did we do it? By identifying the people who most needed to hear from us and having thoughtful, personalized conversations with voters about the economic issues that affected them the most: jobs, outsourcing and retirement.

We reminded them of what they already know instinctually: that the corporate interests—and the politicians that support them—are not their friends. When put in those terms, working-class

---

Karen Nussbaum, Executive Director of Working America.

---

voters were able to see past Sen. Brown's rhetoric on 'Obamacare' or taxes—and his faux working-class persona. As a result, nearly half of the people we engaged ended up switching their vote to Elizabeth Warren—enough to win.

The economic struggles of many white working-class folks, combined with a feeling of powerlessness, have undoubtedly made them much more susceptible to right-wing rhetoric—a major coup for Republicans. But the key to winning over this demographic is more about focusing on the populist issues that plague them, and less about cheap ploys to superficially connect to them. And that can give us the edge.

While Fox News is often the backdrop for our conversations, most working-class people are not right-wing ideologues. They're looking for solutions to very real problems, and if we walk away, they're going to get their answers in all the wrong places.

But reach out with meaningful dialogue—and a way to take action together—and we can restore the alliance between working class and progressive, using our shared economic interests as a bridge. And that would make us all more powerful.



**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By *MARK SCHMITT*

The “white working class,” as a demographic concept, is elusive – its politics look different if you define it by income or education (whites without a college degree is a group that skews much older, but using income includes many younger people who will ultimately earn more), if you exclude the South, or look at men and women separately. Some portion of the white working class, especially men in the South and border states, are now the very core of the Republican base, and that won’t change, while white union members, especially in key states in the upper Midwest, remain strong Democrats. Andrew Levison has argued that the white working class should be understood “as a coherent and cohesive social group,” but there’s little evidence of it. Does a young single-mother nurse in Maine really feel she has more in common with an angry Tea Party retiree in Arizona than with her Latino co-worker or neighbor? Still, Levison is correct that narrowcasting solely to the young and female among the white working class is too limiting.

On the ground organizing, such as Working America’s strategy to reach households that aren’t union members but look like them, is one part of the solution. The other is an agenda that actually speaks to the lived experience of those white working class voters who aren’t already committed to economic and social conservatism. Democrats have finally begun to embrace the basics of an economic agenda – a minimum wage increase, a commitment to full employment, and of course, the full realization of the Affordable Care Act. But there is more to the well-being of the working class than cash and benefits. Democrats need to talk about the experience of work – and family – in the new economy, as it affects both men and women. The stories pile up about workers’ increasing lack of autonomy – clocks that stop at every break, unpredictable scheduling, inflexible rules, requirements that workers support their bosses’ political activities, jobs with no sick days at all. Sure, much of this is the effect of a slack labor market in which employers can get away with anything. But waiting for full employment doesn’t change the experience of a dad whose daily life is run at the whim of his boss, who can’t be certain that he can leave in time to see his kid’s softball game, and all for \$15 an hour. Time and freedom, and not just cash, need to become part of the progressive conversation with the working class of all races.

The right talks compellingly about freedom and has gained adherents since 2008 – but it’s always as freedom from government. But the lack of freedom that most of us – and especially low- and middle-income working people – actually experience increasingly comes from employers, not government. Progressives need to reclaim the idea of freedom (and not just by the rhetorical trick of redefining freedom as an adequate income and social insurance), and put it in the context of family and personal time.

---

Mark Schmitt, Director of the Fellows Program at the Roosevelt Institute

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By RICHARD YESELSON

The “single step” that Dems and liberal left allies could do is not directly policy related or even a matter of rhetorical repositioning, but, instead, a vast procedural project: put all available resources into revising the antiquated, frequently anti-democratic (small d) protocols of American politics.

As sharp observers of American politics like Jonathan Chait, Thomas Mann and Norm Ornstein have argued, the “dysfunction” in Washington of which everybody speaks is because we now have two ideologically homogeneous parliamentary style major parties trapped within a presidential system of government with separation of powers. The Speaker of the House of one party has as much power and legitimation in our system of government as does the president of the other party. Thus John Boehner can claim accurately that he and his caucus were as much elected as Barack Obama and are entitled to equal political power; the result is, on domestic policy, stalemate. Divided government does not lead to the vaunted bipartisan compromise beloved by centrist pundits, but, instead, a zero sum contest between the parties to block the agenda of the other party, yet displace any accountability for doing so. Our parties don’t merely oppose, as do their counterparts in other advanced democracies; they obstruct.

Yet American voters have little knowledge or interest in these procedural wrangles, and tend to assume that a presidential party should obtain “results.” The only real result, however, is increasing alienation and contempt from voters for a now ludicrously anachronistic system of government which not only fails to address critical areas of public policy, but also does not reflect that the preferred policies of the presidential candidates they elect unless voters over three election cycles also elect a Congress in both houses from the same party—and also elect at least 60 Senators of the president’s party, too.

This is all nuts, and veneration for the Founders should not obscure the fact that they did not anticipate political parties as they themselves were to join a few years after the Philadelphia convention, let alone the disciplined ones we have today—and further, one as ideologically extreme and polarizing as today’s Republican party.

So, sure, there are plenty of great policies that would help white working class people (and working class people of color, too). You can read about them in, for example, Lane Kenworthy’s *Social Democratic America*, which lucidly lays out Americanized versions of the kind of

---

Rich Yeselson is a writer who lives in Washington, D.C.

---

universal social welfare programs found in Western European countries. Or read the work of Dean Baker, who takes on our system of crony capitalism, which rewards incumbent rent seekers with subsidies and tax breaks, enriching pharmaceutical corporations and patent monopolies at the expense of patients and consumers.

But before we can even talk about how to appeal to white working class voters, or analyze the vexed nature of a Democratic Party heavily influenced by Wall Street, we have to do what we can to eliminate the procedural snafus the founders built into the system. In short, unless we change the protocols of our national political system, the Democratic Party, no less than the GOP, will be reduced to provincial status, creating in blue states a liberal analogue to the revanchist extremism we now see in the red states of the South and parts of the Midwest.

Ideally, we would build to the moment where we could call together a second constitutional convention, and transform our political system into a parliamentary one. Following a single election of one governing party, there would be clear lines of authority to propose and implement policy, and then clear lines of accountability for the success or failure of those policies.

This convention will convene right around the time we are collecting the first proceeds from Thomas Piketty's global wealth tax. In the meantime, we should build on what Senate Democrats did last year, and organize to eliminate the supermajority filibuster for legislation, and not only for federal judgeships and executive branch positions. With all of its flaws, the Affordable Care Act is something of a modern miracle—it required every single Democratic senator to vote for it. It's hard to imagine that either party can obtain 60 seats in the Senate again anytime soon. In order to pass progressive legislation—anything from liberalized unionization laws to a national child care program—it is essential that bills become laws via a mere majority, just like they do on the rest of the planet earth (and in the rest of the United States, too). This still leaves the challenge for the Democrats of winning both houses of Congress and the presidency, but, if they did, the party could fairly come to the electorate with a comprehensive program it could actually shepherd into law.

Other procedural changes that voters don't think about, but pundits, politicians, and other progressive elites need to include switching from the lifetime tenure of justices on the Supreme Court to 18-year terms. It's often forgotten that, among this Court's many failings, it is also, arguably, the more pro-business and anti-employee and consumer Supreme Court in US history. Shortening the terms of the justices—which many experts argue could be done via legislation—will prevent the luck of the actuarial tables from foreclosing a liberal left court majority for decades, as per the situation today. Progressives must also do whatever they can to federalize and rationalize our national election system. Republicans are systematically seeking to suppress the votes of Democratic voting blocs, and, at present, there is no constitutional protected right to vote (yes, hard to believe, but true.) Currently, the secretary of state, the state officer in charge of making and enforcing election rules, is a partisan figure. A state-by-state national movement to end partisan electioneering—which, effectively, means ending Republican voter suppression—is essential.

Public financing is yet another area where progressives must do what they can to make changes. "We" have a few billionaires on our side, but, in general, plutocrats prefer the party of the lowest possible tax, the least possible regulations, and the weakest possible unions. Again,

---

voters little neither know nor care about electoral fundraising—but electoral fundraising cares about them. Gerrymandering is not quite as much of an obstacle to Democrats as some observers believe, but, on balance, Democrats would improve their odds to retake the House, if neutral commissions devised House districts.

This is all but a grand prelude. The procedural struggle will only clear away the brush and permit Dems and the liberal left to compete for white working class votes. Only about 55 percent of Dems are white, compared to close to 90 percent of Republicans. Democrats today are the representatives of urban, cosmopolitan, multi-racial, atheist, feminist and gay America. Many white working class Americans, especially men and especially those over 55, feel threatened by the enormous cultural and demographic shifts in American life since the sixties. So merely proposing “common sense” proposals like those in Kenworthy’s book won’t compensate for the mistrust many white working people feel toward the Democratic Party. There are too many anecdotes about white people without insurance who reject the benefits of Obamacare merely because of the name of the president who signed it into law.

So there’s no easy sell here—the cultural anxieties are real and grounded in profound historical transformations. The best thing that Democrats and lefties can do is try to make it as procedurally easy as possible to get themselves elected, enact the programs they support, and protect those programs from evisceration in the federal courts. Only then will the party see whether it will get a political reward for these changes. The white working class will need to see if these laws benefit them first. But there won’t be any such reckoning unless the left changes the rules of a game it currently can’t win.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By *RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG*

The single most important thing Democrats could do to grab the attention of working-class whites would be to shift their support for racial preferences in college admissions and employment to preferences for economically disadvantaged people of all races.

At first blush, this may seem an odd priority. Affirmative action is barely discussed in policy circles, even by Republicans, who worry that mentioning the issue will boost turnout of minority voters. Racial preferences rarely if ever surface in discussions of top issues for voters.

But it is hard to think of another issue that more directly connects white working-class voters to the Republican Party and alienates them from Democrats.

When white-working class voters are encouraged to think of themselves in racial terms, they are more likely to vote Republican; when they are reminded of their class position, they may be more likely to vote for Democrats. Racial preferences define inequality purely in terms of race, telling white working-class voters, who hardly consider themselves privileged in American society, that even the wealthiest people of color are more deserving of special consideration.

While affirmative action seems like a minor issue, it appears to have a very real affect on white working-class attitudes. A 2012 poll<sup>1</sup> of working-class whites by the Public Religion Research Institute uncovered a fascinating finding: 60 percent of working-class whites (compared with 39 percent of college educated whites) believed discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities. In a society where African Americans continue to suffer racial discrimination in housing, employment, even catching a taxicab, the only plausible reading of these results is that working-class whites equate affirmative action in education and employment with discrimination against them.

Democrats have largely defanged two potent racially-charged issues from the 1980s – moving to the center on crime and on welfare. But Democrats never recalibrated their position on racial preferences, and the polling data seem to suggest that white working class voters are highly cognizant of such policies.

---

Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, is author of *The Remedy: Class, Race, and Affirmative Action*.

---

<sup>1</sup><http://publicreligion.org/research/2012/09/race-class-culture-survey-2012/>

---

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. understood this well. He recognized the need to take affirmative steps to address our history of discrimination, and wrote in his book, *Why We Can't Wait*, “for it is obvious that if a man is entered at the starting line in a race three hundred years after another man, the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up to his fellow runner.” Yet King endorsed not for a Bill of Rights for Blacks, but a Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged of all races. “It is a simple matter of justice that America, in dealing creatively with the task of raising the Negro from backwardness, should also be rescuing a large stratum of the forgotten white poor.”

In a letter to his freelance editor for the book, King explained the politics of including working-class whites. “It is my opinion that many white workers whose economic condition is not too far removed from the economic condition of his black brother, will find it difficult to accept a ‘Negro Bill of Rights,’ which seeks to give special consideration to the Negro in the context of unemployment, joblessness, etc. and does not take into sufficient account their plight (that of the white worker).”

At a time when disadvantage is increasingly a matter of economics rather than race, what moral and political sense does it make for Democrats to continue to cling to a policy of class-blind racial preferences?

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By LANE KENWORTHY

What do I think is the most important single step progressives and Democrats can take to regain support among white working class Americans? My interest is mainly in policy (rather than framing, organizing, or campaigning), so I'll focus on that sphere. The ideal policy choice would be one that both improves working-class whites' well-being and encourages them to identify with and vote Democratic.

A good example is Bill Clinton's early-1990s proposal to hire 100,000 more police. At that time crime was at or near the top of popular concerns, and Republicans more or less owned the issue. Adding more police was likely to be of genuine help in reducing crime and to reduce Republicans' advantage on the issue among working-class whites.

Today there are plenty of good candidates, including early education, school choice, a beefed-up child tax credit, expansion of affordable housing in cities, enhancing college affordability, and higher taxes on the rich, among others. Let me suggest one that isn't currently part of the debate: a restructuring and expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

Since the late 1970s, incomes for Americans on the bottom half of the ladder, including many working-class whites, have increased very slowly despite reasonably strong economic growth (prior to 2008). The main reason is that wages for this segment of the population have been essentially stagnant. Unfortunately, wage stagnation is likely to continue. It owes to a host of developments – technological advance, globalization, fierce product market competition, shareholder short-termism, union decline, and more – that are unlikely to reverse.

In the 1980s and 1990s household incomes rose despite wage stagnation because many added a second earner. But the rise in employment stopped in the 2000s, even before the Great Recession. We don't know exactly why, but it doesn't bode well for the future. Many households compensated by taking on additional debt, facilitated by rising home values, the advent of home equity loans, and expanded access to credit cards. But that came crashing to a halt in 2008, and it was never a viable long-term solution in any case.

Public insurance is an effective tool for mitigating economic and social risks such as bad health, sickness, unemployment, and old age. We contribute collectively via tax payments, and those who experience the risk event or condition receive transfers or services. Wage stagnation is a new social risk. The EITC is a public insurance tool that helps to compensate for low wage levels. It could be restructured to also help address the problem of wage stagnation by rising over time in sync with economic growth. A simple way to achieve this would be to index it to real GDP per capita.

---

Lane Kenworthy is professor of sociology and political science at the University of Arizona. His most recent book is *Social Democratic America*.

---

In addition, the EITC's scope should be expanded. Currently it goes to about 20 percent of households. In order to help more than just low earners, it should be extended well into the middle class. Ideally, in order to ensure its political durability, we could make it a universal benefit – give it to everyone with some earnings and then, to keep it affordable, tax back part or all of it for those with higher incomes.

This would be only a partial remedy: if the EITC amounts to one third or so of a household's earnings and the EITC rises in line with the economy but earnings don't, then the household's income (earnings plus EITC) growth will lag behind growth of the economy. Yet it would be a big help, and it might be quite popular among white working-class Americans who find themselves, and feel themselves, falling farther and farther behind where they should be in one of history's richest nations.



**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

*By JOEL ROGERS*

I don't think Democratic Party elites are interested in activating even progressive portions of the white working class, or that progressives currently have the focus and power to get that done. Some of these folks flatly oppose the class-based but socially inclusive political project you're proposing. Many others still don't accept your premise that the "new American electorate" will not be enough, at least for decades, to forge the sort of broad majoritarian support needed for lasting progressive change. Maybe their goals aren't ambitious enough to see that as necessary.

But, helping myself to the assumption that there's a will and some way here, I don't think this question is so difficult to answer.

Most members of the white working class correctly think that their economic, social, and political interests and values are neither advanced nor particularly respected by most Democrats and progressives. Progressives (let's leave aside those DP elites for the moment) need to persuade them that that need not be so, and that life would be exciting again were it not, but that a condition of it not being so is their support and co-creation of a political project of real significance. So, let's start the party.

That begins with a conversation with them, admitting both our and their confusion, failures, hopes, and dreams, but emphatically affirming our common devotion to the core values of this wild, diverse, once radical, still beautiful, rock 'n' roll nation we all belong to — that in this place dedicated to a proposition, birth doesn't determine fate, and everybody gets a say in making that miracle a reality.

This conversation can be had anywhere and anyhow... in bars, bowling alleys, churches, supermarkets, union halls (they still exist!); through televised town halls, focus groups galore, or deliberation days; in football stadia, on door steps, in living rooms, or even bed. Some of it is already going on. What is going on should be better targeted and massively scaled up and made effectively permanent as an inviting feature of our everyday lives, everywhere. Of course, we should always be looking for ways to improve that conversation's quality, and use any and all technology to widen and deepen it. But first, it just needs to happen, much more than it is now. And it must be serious, effectively about first principles. Consistent with our values, what should we be doing together as a nation, or most of one? Is there any other political question worth asking?

---

Joel Rogers directs COWS, the high-road think-and-do tank, and teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

---

Of course, recommending a conversation assumes some ability to have one, or a willingness to learn how to. To talk with white working class members — not just at them. To be willing to listen — not just wait to make a point. To show some respect for their values — without hiding yours. This will sometimes be difficult. But it'll be infinitely easier if we don't assume they're idiots who care only about themselves, or blankly irrational and unwilling to consider evidence, or at least not as devoted to achieving this country as we are.

And of course too, more than talk is needed. We'll need some sort of program, and some candidates willing to run on it, and their support and discipline by a much better organized and coordinated movement willing to replace some Democrats, not just keep electing incumbents (more crazy assumptions, I know, but you started it). But assuming enough power to make the discussion not completely abstract, I'm not too concerned about the difficulty of putting together such a program. I'd suggest that it focus on changes in the basic rules by which we govern ourselves, not more kludges and 3,000-page bills, and that ordinary citizens and their organizations be recruited to monitor and enforce the new ones.

What might this program include? Well, we might get some accountability on the job by extending our legal definition of employer and giving jail time and penalties for criminal ones, and restore some semblance of a social contract by tying wages to gains in productivity. We might save the planet by putting a price on the nature we're now destroying, and incenting its more efficient and restorative use. We might begin to repair our democracy by — automatically registering everyone over 18 and giving them a photo ID, changing lobbying laws to jam revolving doors, securing a path to citizenship for immigrants, trying out better voting rules to make every vote count, and of course declare and demonstrate, with public funding matches to small donors, that democracy's not for sale. We might even decide, in foreign affairs, to lead more by the force of our example than more examples of our force, dedicating ourselves to making tangible contributions to peace and development rather than unending war.

I'm not worried that we've closed the patent house on good ideas, and am confident there'll be better ones than these. But I do think a fairly fundamental reform of the way we now do the people's business is needed, that that will indeed require the enthusiastic support and help of a durable majority of citizens, both active and informed. I don't doubt that many of this new majority will and must come from the white working class. But you've got to talk with them first.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By ANDREW LEVISON

When progressives discuss strategies for winning white working class support they invariably focus on three factors – policies, narratives and candidates. The widely shared belief is that a charismatic campaigner with a firm populist program and clear progressive narratives could win back the support of white working class America.

There is however, one reality that this approach ignores. The fine-tuning of platforms, narratives and candidates was emphatically NOT the method by which Dems won and retained the support of white working class voters in the past. White working class support for the Democrats in the 1940's, 1950's and early 1960's was based on two quite different factors – (1) that Dems from every sector of the party genuinely and sincerely viewed American workers as the heart and soul of their political coalition and (2) that workers had a set of important, bottom-up institutions that represented their needs and interests on a day to day basis and simultaneously cemented their allegiance to the Democratic Party. Trade unions, local Democratic organizations and liberal catholic and protestant churches all reinforced the sense of connection white working class people had with the Democratic Party.

**Today, Republicans have grass roots connections with white working class voters and Democrats do not. This is the fundamental source of Democrats' weakness.** Without trusted grass-roots institutions as intermediaries to defend Democratic policies, reinforce and interpret Democratic narratives and produce "hometown" Democratic candidates, Democratic policies are easily caricatured as wild-eyed radicalism, Democratic narratives are easily ridiculed as the product of "limousine liberals" and Democratic candidates easily scorned as elitists. Even the most exquisitely polished candidate, platform and narrative cannot succeed if it is not linked to grass-roots institutions and advocates in the everyday community life of white working class America. The reality must be faced: rooms full of well-dressed professionals sitting around conference tables carefully discussing the selection of candidates and the fine-tuning of narratives and policies can never and will never by themselves solve the problem.

Building a grass-roots Democratic organization in working class America will not require compromising central Democratic values. The sector of the white working class that can feasibly co-exist within the Democratic coalition is the sector that is religiously and racially tolerant, non-interventionist in military affairs and pro-New Deal, suspicious of large

---

Andrew Levison is the author of *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*

---

corporations and unwilling to defer to agendas of the rich and powerful. As documented in my book, *The White Working Class Today*, there is a significant sector of working class America that embraces these views.

These white working class Democrats will, however, need to have their own clear and quite distinct identity within the Democratic coalition—a distinct “brand” that might be called “*heartland democrats*” or “*traditional values democrats*.” This “brand” would identify a distinct outlook that is culturally traditional, moderate on social issues and mildly progressive on economic issues.

Of course, Democrats do have another choice: they can go on hoping that new charismatic Democratic candidates will somehow begin to miraculously appear – candidates who combine the physical magnetism of Russell Crowe, the soaring oratory of John Kennedy and the progressive platform of Paul Krugman. It is now close to 50 years since Dems lost their working class support, however, and such Democratic saviors have still not appeared. It is better to finally accept that it is necessary to slowly, systematically and patiently rebuild the kind of community-level institutions and organizations that provided the foundation for winning working class support for Democrats in the past.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By JOHN RUSSO

It is important to emphasize at the outset that there are wide variations in the voting patterns among the white working class by state. As Jack Metzgar and I found in 2008, even among seemingly similar states like Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, there is significant variation. This is an important consideration in framing a message that will attract the WWC.

Working-class whites will vote their economic interest if it is fully explained and accessible. For example, many WWC voters may have been more attracted to President Obama's recent speech on "infrastructure projects" if he had referred to 'public works' and explained the kinds of construction, engineering and support jobs they would create. Several years ago, think how quickly the Occupy Movement changed the national debate from austerity by using percentages to highlight inequality.

Macroeconomic programs can be easily understood if framed properly. For example, federal programs can be better understood by explaining direct benefits on individuals, multiplier effects, job creation, and impact of tax policies and education in creating employment opportunities. Simplicity in messaging is important, but Democrats need to go at least one level deeper in the explaining "workers' spending power" as the primary engine of economic growth.

This is not rocket science. Senator Sherrod Brown is among the most progressive members of the Senate and he hails from a State that has a significant WWC electorate. Yet, his programmatic explanations to constituents are clear and straightforward, leaving his critics disarmed.

Lastly, progressive messages cannot be didactic. White workers are especially resentful of how they are represented and, often, devalued and used. This is particularly important now with the discussion of the "new service economy." Many feel they have been reduced to electoral artifacts, erased from current political debates except during political campaigns.

It is doubtful that progressives can ever attract a majority of the WWC nationally. But if demographic change continues, progressives only need to swing 10 percent of the WWC to achieve decisive electoral victories. This will be difficult given the differences between what is said during campaigns and the realpolitik of governing.

---

John Russo is the former director of the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University and is current a visiting research fellow at the Metropolitan Institute (Alexandria) at Virginia Tech.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

By JACK METZGAR

First, do no harm – avoid any semblance of bragging about how well the economy is doing. Instead recite lists of Dem proposals to create jobs and grow the economy that have been blocked by Republicans in Congress. Focus on an economic message that consistently and repeatedly insists on **more and faster economic growth based on increasing worker spending power**. And then promise (a la “the contract with America”) that if Democratic majorities are elected in the House and Senate, Democrats will pass a specific program to create jobs and increase wages and family incomes.

The core of such a specific program could easily be the Democrats’ advocacy of a \$10.10 federal minimum wage and a beefed-up version of President Obama’s proposed public works program (aka “infrastructure”). But these two pillars need to be linked – to each other and to a larger Fordist theme that stagnant wages and incomes are what’s slowing our economy down.

Though the Congressional Budget Office’s estimate that 500,000 jobs could be lost with a minimum wage set at \$10.10 is undoubtedly on the high side, it would be refreshing if progressive Democrats granted that some low-wage jobs would be threatened if the economy continues to limp along at a 2 percent growth rate. But with an ambitious job-creating public works program (closer to Bob Kuttner’s massive outlay based on actual engineering estimates of need than to Obama’s 2015 budget) increasing economic growth by a percentage point or so, the threat of job loss would be greatly reduced or eliminated. Meanwhile more than 16 million workers would get substantial increases in their wages and millions of construction and related workers would be employed.

The public works program would have to be paid for over time, and the complicated list of tax measures in the President’s budget is too small, too “measured,” and hard to remember. Better (for both political and economic purposes) would be the so-called Robin Hood Tax, as advocated since late in 2009 by a coalition of unions, progressive think tanks, civil rights and women’s groups.<sup>1</sup> A small sales tax on the buying and selling of stocks and bonds, Robin Hood is designed to reduce the kinds of speculative activity on Wall Street that helped crash our economy in 2008-09. It would also produce about \$100 billion a year to fund at least part of a vigorous public works program. This is an economically sound proposal, but it is even better politically in order to more thoroughly and permanently brand the already-branded-GOP as the party of the 1 percent—a party that is blocking a minimum wage increase and the creation of construction jobs in order to protect Wall Street.

---

Jack Metzgar, Roosevelt University, Chicago

---

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.epi.org/publication/american\\_jobs\\_plan/](http://www.epi.org/publication/american_jobs_plan/)

Such a simple, bold “economic populist” program would help fire up all parts of the Democratic base, including the 2/5ths of the white working class that consistently votes Dem in Presidential elections. But if it’s big enough and tied to a well-reasoned, clearly explained economic growth program based on a long-term (and real) commitment to increasing wages and incomes, it could attract and persuade that 20 percent or more of working-class whites who Andrew Levison describes as open-minded “on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand thinkers.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup><http://thewhiteworkingclasstoday.com/>