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MANAGING EDITOR:

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".

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DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST  
STRATEGY MEMO

**THE 2014 ELECTION PRODUCED THE MOST SERIOUS DISCUSSION ABOUT DEMOCRATS AND THE WHITE WORKING CLASS IN MANY YEARS.**

**WHAT DEMOCRATS NEED TO DO NOW IS TO CAREFULLY REVIEW THAT DEBATE, IDENTIFY DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT FACTS AND THEN SEEK THE DATA TO RESOLVE THEM**

BY  
ANDREW LEVISON

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By ANDREW LEVISON

The 2014 elections generated the most robust discussion about Democrats and the white working class in several decades. In the last few weeks opinion articles about this critical challenge for the Dems have appeared in the New York Times, The Washington Post, The National Journal, Politico, The New Republic, The Washington Monthly, The American Prospect, The Nation, Mother Jones, Slate, Salon, Talking Points Memo, The Daily Beast and a range of other publications.

The first-of-its-kind *June 2014 Roundtable on Progressives and the White Working Class*—a roundtable organized and published jointly by The Democratic Strategist and The Washington Monthly—played an important role in this unique discussion. The roundtable was directly cited by Thomas Edsall in The New York Times, E.J. Dionne in The Washington Post, Noam Scheiber in The New Republic, Kevin Drum in Mother Jones, Jamelle Bouie in Slate and many other commentaries used data and quotes drawn from the contributions to the June 2014 roundtable discussion.

This degree of attention to the White Working Class Roundtable is both important and gratifying. But to derive the maximum benefit from the entire post 2014 election discussion it is vital that Democratic strategists pursue the analysis to the next level. All too often valuable intra-Democratic debates peter out and are forgotten because there is no organized follow up to the initial burst of discussion.

This has become even more crucial in recent weeks because the growing media attention to Elizabeth Warren has elevated to central importance the question of whether her progressive-populist message and agenda can actually prove more attractive to white working class voters in 2016 than a more cautious and conventional Democratic platform. Democrats have debated the issue of populism versus centrism for decades without reaching a consensus, but the need to seek empirically based answers to this question is now greater and more urgent than ever before.\*

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\*Note: A number of commentators have noted that the term “populism” has negative connotations tracing back to its roots in the original populist movement at the turn of the last century and its application to less than admirable historical figures like Huey Long of Louisiana. In this discussion the term “progressive-populist” will be used rather than simply “populist” in order to indicate that it is the progressive ethos and philosophy of New Deal/trade union liberalism with its central concern for the welfare of the working class that is being referenced and not the turn of the century or the Huey Long political tradition and perspective.

There are three steps that should be taken to advance the discussion:

1. *Identify the main viewpoints and perspectives expressed in the recent round of commentaries on the white working class and determine the areas where significant unresolved questions or disagreements over facts exist.*
2. *Reformulate the main views into propositions that are—at least in principle—possible to evaluate empirically.*
3. *Determine the kind of evidence needed to validate or refute each of these propositions and create an organized plan to obtain it.*

The following pages present an initial analysis that follows this approach. It reviews the recent intra-progressive discussion regarding the Democratic Party and the white working class expressed in key articles by Bob Kuttner, William Greider, Kevin Drum, Noam Scheiber, Greg Sargent, Jamelle Bouie, Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin and Tom Edsall.\*

In the coming weeks the Democratic Strategist will seek to stimulate a wide discussion and debate among all perspectives and sectors of the Democratic coalition regarding the issues raised in these analyses – issues that are absolutely central to Democrats hopes for 2016 and beyond.

To begin, however, we need to quickly review the basic facts about white working class voters that emerged from the election results.

## **Part I. The White Working Class and the 2014 Elections**

Using the 2014 exit polls, Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin **concluded the following**:<sup>1</sup>

Congressional Democrats lost white, non-college—or working-class—voters by a whopping 30 points in 2014—34 percent to 64 percent—essentially identical to their 2010 performance of 33 percent to 63 percent.

However, the 30-point deficit for House Democrats in 2014 represents a significant slippage when measured against their 23-point deficit in 2012.

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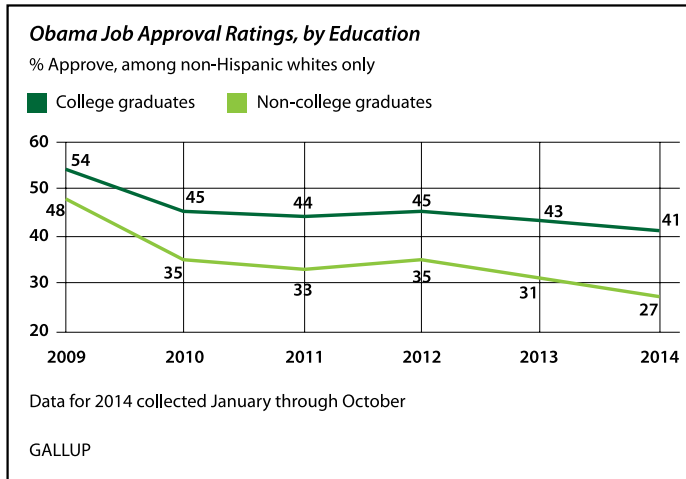
*\*Note: this review is explicitly limited to analyses by firmly pro-Democratic commentators and therefore does not discuss a number of post-2014 election articles that propose methods by which the GOP can win even greater white working class support than it currently enjoys. It also does not review Joel Kotkin's idiosyncratic analysis of "The New Class Conflict" which updates the familiar Newt Gingrich-Fox News faux-populist argument that the modern Democratic Party is actually run by a "new ruling class" of Silicon Valley-Hollywood-Ivy League-Wall Street "gentry" liberal elitists who hold white working class people in utter contempt and maintain their political power by channeling taxpayer funds to programs that buy the political support of undeserving minorities, feminists, environmentalists and other liberal constituencies at the expense of working Americans. Although **in a recent article**<sup>2</sup> Kotkin suggests "Truman Democrats" as an alternative, the political coalition and party platform he advocates would politically and sociologically more closely resemble today's Republican Party.*

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2014/11/teixeira\\_and\\_halpin\\_the\\_politi.php](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2014/11/teixeira_and_halpin_the_politi.php)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/12/21/time-to-bring-back-the-truman-democrats.html>

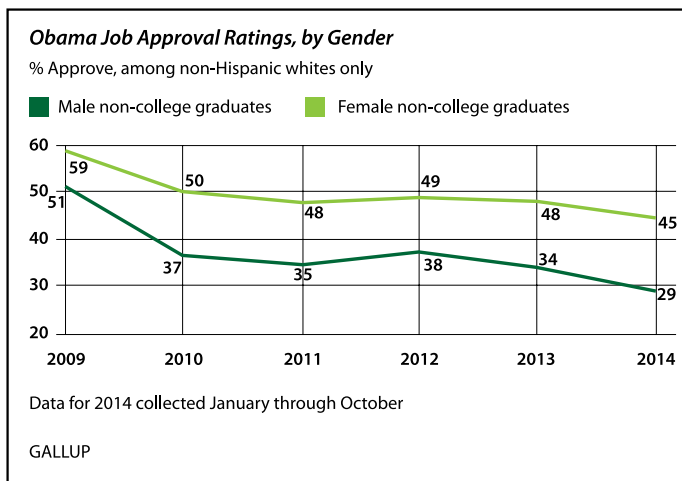
It is misleading to directly compare the results of presidential year elections like 2008 and 2012 with off-year elections like 2010 and 2014, however, because a much smaller and different pool of voters turns out in the off-year contests. One can get a more consistent picture of recent changes in white working class attitudes by looking instead at the trends in Obama's job approval over the entire period from 2008 to 2014.

Here's what the **most recent Gallup survey shows:**\*



While a decline is evident among both white college graduates and white non-college graduates the decline is clearly sharper and deeper for the non-college graduates.\*

Now consider the difference between white working class men and women:



\* Note: Although non-college graduates include some individuals who one would not necessarily consider working class, the overlap is quite substantial. Roughly 2/3rds of non-college graduates are in jobs most people would consider "blue collar" or "working class" rather than "white collar" or "middle class."

And here is an even more detailed look at differences in **support for the Democratic Party by education**<sup>3</sup>

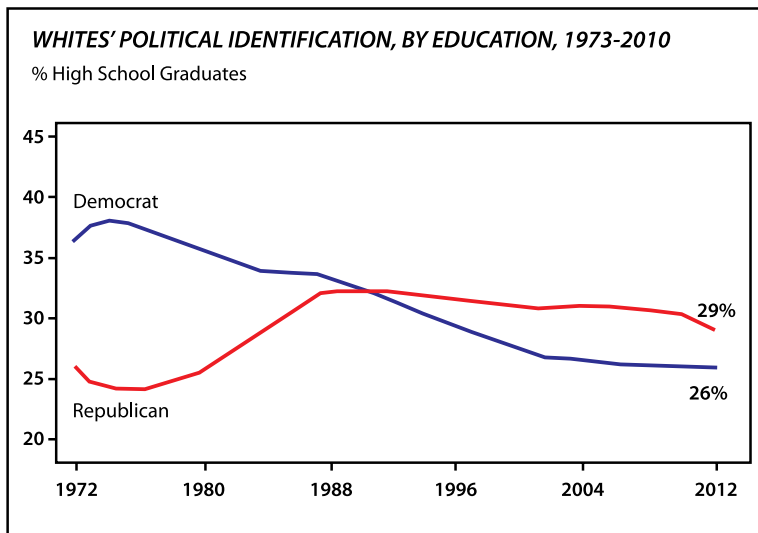
<sup>3</sup><http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/11/20/the-democratic-partys-number-one-problem-visualized/>

Men are significantly more negative toward Obama than are women, but the downward trend in approval over the last 6 years is similar for both sexes.

Turning to differences between younger and older white working people, the post-November Gallup results do not seem to show the kinds of significant differences between Millennials and older workers than appear on a variety of questions regarding many specific social and economic issues. Among white working class voters 50 and above, for example, the Gallup survey showed that Obama's job approval stood at 28 percent and at 24 percent among those 30 to 49. Among Millennial workers, however, Obama's job approval was still only 30%, a level of support not substantially different from that of older working Americans. This Gallup poll is, of course, only one survey but the size of the sample is substantially larger than in many other opinion polls, making it particularly significant.

Most important, in every age group the absolute level of Obama's job approval was profoundly low, representing levels of white working class support far below that which would be needed for Obama to win reelection were he legally able to run again in 2016.

It is important to note, however, that the disaffection of white working class voters toward Obama is not a departure from the past but rather part of a deep, decades-long trend of increasing alienation and rejection of the Democratic Party as a whole. [Here, for example, is a chart<sup>4</sup>](#) of changes in white political identification with the two political parties since 1973.\*



It is clear that the decline in white working class support for the Democratic Party neither began with the election of Barack Obama nor that support for the Democrats would necessarily rebound when some other candidate begin to campaign for the oval office.

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\*Note: this chart is limited to high school graduates rather than including all non-college graduates but the basic trend is similar for both groups. Limiting the sample to high school graduates also has the advantage of focusing on a more sociologically "pure" group of working class voters. 80% of individuals with only a high school diploma are in jobs most people would clearly consider blue collar or working class.

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<sup>4</sup><http://madeinamericathebook.wordpress.com/2012/01/04/the-working-class-party/>

## Part II. How progressive and Democratic strategists interpret the voting behavior of the white working class in the elections of 2014:

### 1. Among progressive Democrats an inadequate embrace of populism is the most popular explanation for white working class disaffection.

Without question, among progressive Democrats the most popular explanation for the lack of support Democrats received from white working people in 2014 was the Democrats failure to offer a robust populist message and agenda.

Here, for example is Bob Kuttner [writing in The American Prospect](#)<sup>5</sup>

Obama failed to rally much enthusiasm from either camp [the white working class or minorities] because his proposals were so feeble, and because the administration continues to coddle the big banks, suggesting whose side Obama is really on.

Why not just embrace the \$15.00 minimum wage? ...Minimum wage increases were approved in Alaska, Arkansas, Nebraska and South Dakota—not states with large minority populations. Guess who turned out to support these? The white working class! Why wasn't our president leading this parade? ...Or how about embracing serious public investments on infrastructure to create good blue-collar jobs? Republicans, of course, will oppose these outlays. But that's the whole point. Make it clear who is on which side.

...There was a time when the black and white working class, the old and the young, could unite behind robust Democratic demands for a fair economy—a time when Democratic presidents played the role of teachers, and made clear which party was on the side of regular people. Until those demands are heard again, white working class voters disgusted with government are likely be swayed by Republicans—and blacks, Hispanics and young people are likely to stay home.

[Writing in The Nation magazine](#)<sup>6</sup>, William Greider echoed Kuttner's view and went even further by arguing that the Democrats as a whole had actively and deliberately betrayed their former white working class supporters:

...the Democrats ran on a cowardly, uninspiring platform: the Republicans are worse than we are. Undoubtedly, that's true—but so what? The president and his party have no credible solutions to offer. To get serious about **inequality** and the deteriorating middle class, Democrats would have to undo a lot of the damage their own party has done to the economy over the past thirty years....Long ago, the party abandoned its working-class base (of all colors) and steadily distanced itself from the unglamorous conditions that matter most in people's lives. Traditional party bulwarks like organized **labor** and racial minorities became second-string players in the hierarchy that influences party policy. But the Dems didn't just lose touch with the people they claimed to speak for; they betrayed core constituencies and adopted pro-business, pro-finance policies that actively injure working people.

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<sup>5</sup><http://prospect.org/article/how-democrats-can-win-back-white-working-class-and-increase-turnout-among-blacks-and-latinos>

<sup>6</sup><http://www.thenation.com/article/190385/how-democratic-party-lost-its-soul>

There is widespread support for this general view among progressive-populist Democrats but a significant question that a number of progressive commentators have raised regards the relatively vague character of the recommendations that Obama and the Democrats should have more clearly “focused” or “concentrated” on the economy or should have more forcefully “sided with workers.” Aside from Chuck Schumer’s suggestion that Democrats should have refused to pursue health care reform, which few if any other progressives were willing to endorse, the question is exactly what specific policy actions should Democrats have taken that would have won strong white working class support and have **actually been passed by Congress**.<sup>7</sup> Kevin Drum lays out the question clearly. He says:

Paul Krugman has it exactly right:

When people say that Obama should have “focused” on the economy, what, specifically, are they saying he should have done... What do they mean? Obama should have gone around squinting and saying “I’m focused on the economy”... But “focusing”, whatever that means, wouldn’t have delivered more job growth. What should Obama have done that he **actually could have done** in the face of scorched-earth Republican opposition?

Drum then continues:

[And, going forward] Democrats have a much bigger problem. It’s this: what can they actually do? That is, what *big ticket items* are left that would buy the loyalty of the middle class for another generation? We already have Social Security and Medicare. We have Obamacare. We have the mortgage interest deduction. What’s left?

I’m all in favor of using the power of government to help the middle classes. But what does that mean in terms of **concrete political programs** that (a) the middle class will associate with Democrats and help win them loyalty and votes, and (b) have even a snowball’s chance of getting passed by Congress? Expansion of Social Security? Expansion of Medicare? Bigger subsidies for Obamacare? Universal pre-K? A massive infrastructure program? Let’s get specific, and let’s not nibble around the edges. Little programs here and there aren’t going to make much difference to the Democrats’ political fortunes. Nor will heroic but vague formulations about rescuing unions or raising taxes on the wealthy by a few points.

Progressive-populist Democratic will, of course, energetically argue that there is indeed some mixture of specific programs and passionate populist fervor that can excite and inspire white working class voters to support Democratic candidates once again. Senator Bernie Sanders, for example, has put forth one **possible populist agenda**<sup>8</sup> and the Progressive Change Campaign and others are currently preparing other proposals. At the same time the growing popularity of Elizabeth Warren among progressive Democrats is often assumed to represent essentially conclusive prima face evidence that someone with a passion and rhetoric like hers can win widespread white working class support.

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<sup>7</sup><http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2014/12/tell-me-chuck-what-should-dems-do-win-back-middle-class>

<sup>8</sup><http://www.dailykos.com/story/2014/12/02/1348797/-An-Economic-Agenda-for-America-12-Steps-Forward>

But at this time it must be recognized that the evidence is simply not available to convincingly demonstrate that a progressive-populist program or message will necessarily win back lost white working class support. Democrats do not currently have any specific examples either of progressive-populist candidates defeating Republicans in white working class Republican districts nor of a leading Democrat like Elizabeth Warren actually demonstrating widespread popularity and support among white working class voters on national opinion surveys.

To be clear, the case that a progressive-populist appeal can turn the tide is logically plausible and emotionally appealing but the inescapable fact is that it is a case that has not yet been convincingly demonstrated.

And there is also a second significant question for which adequate data is not currently available. It is the following: do white working class people actually see opposition to inequality and hostility to the one percent, on the one hand, and support for specific issues like raising the minimum wage or infrastructure investment, on the other hand, as part of a single integrated mental schema? Progressive Democrats largely assume that white working class people see the issues this way because to them the relationship between the two things seems utterly and entirely self-evident.

Here, for example, is Robert Reich expressing this view in a letter to members of the progressive group Democracy for America:

If you want a single reason why so many Democratic candidates lost big on Election Day, it is this: **Income inequality.**

While our economy remains on a path to recovery, most of the gains continue to go to the top 1%, as median household income sags. People rightly believe that our government too often serves the interests of the moneyed few, leaving behind the many Americans who struggle to make ends meet.

**The good news is that progressive Democrats and activists actually scored significant victories against income inequality this year.** From minimum wage ballot measure victories in Arkansas, Nebraska and South Dakota, to a big win on paid sick leave in Massachusetts, to President Obama's executive order to protect federally contracted workers, your actions made a strong impact in 2014.

It may seem paradoxical that frustrated voters would overwhelmingly approve state-wide minimum wage increases while also supporting Republican candidates at the same time. But this only underscores the corroding power of big money on our elections and the too many Democrats who failed to articulate their values.

As Reich's argument suggests, for many progressive Democrats the connection between growing income inequality and pro-working class economic reforms is seen as self-evident. But it is crucial to recognize that for white working class people the cognitive link between income inequality and progressive-populist measures like increasing the minimum wage may not actually be equally direct. While majorities of white working people may feel and express



support for creating jobs, rebuilding infrastructure and increasing the minimum wage they may not necessarily also agree with demands for criminal prosecution of Wall Street executives who violated securities law, cutting executive pay or more heavily taxing the rich.

One can, of course, select a subset of polls from the many that are available to suggest that majorities of American voters as a whole do favor of both these kinds of measures but, as will be discussed more fully later, this does not mean it can be automatically assumed that these two sets of opinions necessarily coexist within the minds of any particular individual or social group. 60 percent of the population may agree that the taxes on the wealthy should be increased and 60 percent may agree that prayer should be allowed in schools, but they are not necessarily the same 60 percent in both cases. A different kind of survey methodology than simply comparing isolated opinion polls is necessary to disentangle questions of this nature.

To be clear, it is indeed possible that white workers do indeed support both income redistribution and pro-working class economic policies at the same time. But the currently available evidence simply does not yet provide sufficient evidence for Democratic strategists to firmly conclude that this is necessarily the case.

## **2. Are young workers the Democrats salvation? Attitudes on social issues are changing among Millennials**

Since the Reagan years, one consistent explanation for the defection of the white working class from the Democrats has been the Dems support for progressive positions on a variety of social issues such as gay rights, reproductive choice, contraception, global warming and opposition to the essentially crypto-theocratic agenda of the religious right.

Recently however, American social attitudes on a number of social issues have moved toward more tolerant or progressive positions. This includes the white working class and particularly millennial workers. [Writing in the New Republic](#)<sup>9</sup>, Noam Scheiber therefore argued that the problem of “social issues” was now in the process of being resolved. As he said:

At first blush, the white working class would appear to pose a real dilemma. The set of issues on which the Democratic Party is most coherent these days is social progressivism. ...But while these issues unite college-educated voters and working-class *minority* voters, they've historically alienated the white working class.

...How to square this circle? Well, it turns out we don't really have to, since the analysis is outdated. The white working class is increasingly open to social liberalism, or at least not put off by it. As Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin observed this summer, 54 percent of the white working class born after 1980 think gays and lesbians should have the right to marry, according to data assembled from the 2012 election... In [a Center for American Progress] poll, 64 percent of white working class voters (overall, not just Millennials) agreed that “Americans will learn more from one another and be enriched by exposure to many different cultures.” Sixty-two percent agreed that “diverse workplaces and schools will help make American businesses more innovative

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<sup>9</sup><http://www.newrepublic.com/article/120256/hillary-clinton-presidency-could-have-same-problem-obama>

and competitive.” A slight majority even agreed that “the entry of new people into the American workforce will increase our tax base and help support our retiree population.”

Long story short, there’s a coalition available to Democrats that knits together working class minorities and college-educated voters *and* slices heavily into the GOP’s margins among the white working class... The basis of the coalition isn’t a retreat from social progressivism, but making economic populism the party’s centerpiece, as opposed to the mix of mildly progressive economic policies (marginally higher taxes on the wealthy, marginally tougher regulation of Wall Street) and staunchly progressive social policies that define the party today. The politics of this approach work not just because populism is a “message” that a majority of voters want to hear, but because, unlike the status quo, it can actually improve their economic prospects.

Teixeira and Halpin have detected this progressive trend among young white workers in a number of their previous surveys and a certain degree of progressive evolution on various “social issues” seems clear. But there is not yet sufficient data to conclude that this trend is now significant enough to actually shift the outcome of future elections. After Obama received an unprecedented level of support from millennial white workers in 2008, this possibility seemed quite plausible. But after the elections of 2010, 2012 and 2014 it now no longer seems quite as certain. As the polls about Obama’s job approval noted above indicate, there is a very substantial disconnect between the gradual movement among young white working class voters toward progressive views on social issues and their attitudes toward Obama and the Democrats.

The question of white workers social attitudes also leads to a deeper question: do gradually more progressive attitudes about specific social issues emerging among white working class Americans also extend to a similar progressive change in more general attitudes about culture and social values. Along with changes in opinion about specific issues like gay marriage, are younger workers also less supportive of the broader “cultural traditionalism” that ties many older workers to the Republican Party?

**Greg Sargent raised this issue**<sup>10</sup> in The Plum Line, in a post entitled “the Democratic party has a cultural problem.”

As I’ve reported, Democratic pollsters believe the inability to win enough working, middle class, and older whites is partly due to the Dem failure to address anxieties rooted in stagnating wages. But today Michael Gerson suggests there’s a cultural component as well:

*Democrats need to contend for rural and small-town voters, for older voters, for working-class white voters, for white Catholics, even for suburban evangelicals. This requires not just a populist economic message (which is important) but the recognition of a set of values—a predisposition toward social order, family and faith—that is foreign to most liberal bloggers and Democratic strategists.*

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<sup>10</sup><http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2014/11/07/morning-plum-the-democratic-party-has-a-cultural-problem/>

As it happens, multiple leading Dem strategists I spoke to this week made similar observations about the party's cultural perception problem with these voters, particularly southern whites, arguing that they see the national Democratic Party as having a "liberal brand." ... As one strategist who worked on multiple races put it, a key obstacle is these voters' gut sense that "Democrats don't represent hard-working folks who have good fundamental values."

To clarify, the point these consultants were making, as I understand it, isn't that the Democratic Party should "move right" on the cultural priorities of its new national coalition. It's that economic and cultural perceptions of the party among non-college and older white voters are intertwined—hence perceptions of the party as "not on their side"

It is complicated to formulate specific opinion poll questions that probe these kinds of issues because they are most often embedded in very diffuse patterns of support for "mom and apple pie" virtues like religious piety, patriotism and free enterprise. Republican candidates appeal to these diffuse kind of feelings not necessarily with specific programs but by portraying themselves as "Real, mainstream Americans" as opposed to liberal elites.

But the issue that Gerson and Sargent raise is must be confronted. One cannot assume changing attitudes on specific social issues automatically and necessarily imply that a similar change in attitudes about basic culture and values is also occurring.

Moreover, along with specific social issues and broad cultural values, there is yet another set of attitudes that also profoundly influence white working class attitudes toward the Democrats – attitudes about race, racial issues and racial minorities.

### **3. "Us vs. Them" – race and white working class hostility to Democratic policies and candidates**

For Democrats under the age of 40, the discussion of "social issues" automatically brings to mind images of gay rights, feminism, reproductive rights, global warming and conservative demands for an increased role for conservative Christian values in society.

But for Democrats over the age of 50, the term "social issues" also powerfully invokes the memory of the "white backlash" of the late 60's and 1970's, a trend which was almost entirely focused on issues related to race. The four most powerful and emotional "social issues" of that era were riots, welfare, school bussing and crime—all of which were fundamentally about African Americans.

**Writing in Mother Jones**<sup>11</sup>, Kevin Drum took note of Scheiber's discussion of social issues described above and insisted on the particular importance of the racial dimension. As he said:

I'd like to offer a different interpretation [than Scheiber's above]... I agree that social liberalism isn't quite the deal killer it used to be. Scheiber and Teixeira are right about that. It's still an issue—especially gun control, which remains more potent than a lot of

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<sup>11</sup><http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2014/11/can-we-talk-heres-why-white-working-class-hates-democrats>

liberals like to acknowledge—but it's fading somewhat in areas like abortion and gay marriage.

...But if that's the case, why does the WWC continue to loathe Democrats so badly? I think the answer is as old as the discussion itself: They hate welfare. There was a hope among some Democrats that Bill Clinton's 1996 welfare reform would remove this millstone from around Democrats' necks, and for a few years during the dotcom boom it probably did. The combination of tougher work rules and a booming economy made it a less contentious topic.

But when the economy stagnates and life gets harder, people get meaner. That's just human nature. And the economy has been stagnating for the working class for well over a decade—and then practically collapsing ever since 2008.

So who does the WWC take out its anger on? Largely, the answer is the poor. In particular, the *undeserving poor*. Liberals may hate this distinction, but it doesn't matter if we hate it. Lots of ordinary people make this distinction as a matter of simple common sense, and the White Working Class makes it more than any. That's because they're closer to it. For them, the poor aren't merely a set of statistics or a cause to be championed. They're the folks next door who don't do a lick of work but somehow keep getting government checks paid for by their tax dollars. For a lot of members of the WWC, this is personal in a way it just isn't for the kind of people who read this blog.

And who is it that's responsible for this infuriating flow of government money to the shiftless? Democrats. We fight to save food stamps. We fight for WIC. We fight for Medicaid expansion. We fight for Obamacare. We fight to move poor families into nearby housing.

This is a big problem because these are all things that benefit the poor but barely touch the white working class. Does it matter that the white working class barely pays for most of these programs in the first place, since their federal income taxes tend to be pretty low? Nope. They're still paying taxes, and it seems like they never get anything for it. It's always someone else.

It's pointless to argue that this perception is wrong. Maybe it is, maybe it's not. But it's there. And although it's bound up with plenty of other grievances—many of them frankly racial, but also cultural, religious, and geographic—at its core you have a group of people who are struggling and need help, but instead feel like they simply get taxed and taxed for the benefit of someone else. Always someone else.

If this were you, you wouldn't vote for Democrats either.

**Writing in Slate**<sup>12</sup>, Jamelle Bouie extended Drum's analysis

...In a **recent feature** for the *Washington Monthly*, for example, Ruy Teixeira and John

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<sup>12</sup>[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/politics/2014/11/democrats\\_can\\_t\\_win\\_white\\_working\\_class\\_voters\\_the\\_party\\_is\\_too\\_closely.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2014/11/democrats_can_t_win_white_working_class_voters_the_party_is_too_closely.html)

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Halpin argue that Democrats can capitalize on the *generational divide* in the white working class. ...Today's young white working-class voters are notably more liberal on issues concerning the role of government" than their older counterparts note Teixeira and Halpin. And significantly these young whites are "significantly more open to rising diversity than the white working class as a whole."

...The conclusion [that seems to be warranted] is straightforward. Democrats don't have to worry about alienating these voters with their cosmopolitanism. If they can just embrace a populist, forward thinking agenda—in which they tackle stagnation and explicitly attack the wealthy engineers of extreme income inequality—they can win these younger whites who are comfortable with diversity and want a more level society....

But then Bouie very emphatically adds:

**Implicit in all of this is the assumption voters will believe the pitch. That they'll hear the case for stronger programs, higher minimum wages, and higher taxes on the rich, and believe Democrats are advocating for them, and not some other group.**

***The problem is I don't think we can make that assumption.***

After all, working-class whites didn't leave the Democratic Party over insufficiently populist policy and rhetoric. The liberal economic reforms of 1960's—and Medicare in particular—paid benefits to white working-class families throughout the 1970's and '80's, even as the group moved to a decisive break with the Democrats. No, the proximate cause of the break was the Democratic Party's close identification with black Americans, who—after the riots of the late '60's and '70's—became identified with urban disorder and welfare.

Specifically, whites were bewildered and infuriated with liberals...*Why was the government spending our tax dollars on them, working-class whites asked, when they destroy their neighborhoods and refuse to work, and we're losing our jobs and our homes?* In *Nixonland*, historian Rick Perlstein captures the basic attitude by relaying this comment from a white construction worker, directed at George McGovern, "They're payin' people who are on welfare today doin' nothin'! They're laughin' at our society! And we're all hardworkin' people and we're gettin' laughed at for workin' every day!"

Part of this was just racism... But part of it was something broader. After all, there wasn't a backlash to government programs writ large. Then, as now, working-class whites are ardent supporters of Social Security and Medicare. But to them, our retirement programs came with an implicit social contract: If you work and contribute to society, society will care for you into your old age. By contrast, you didn't have to work to benefit from anti-poverty programs, in fact, you could riot and still receive government benefits. To these whites, the New Deal and its successor programs rewarded self-reliance and independence. The War on Poverty didn't. And they hated it.

You didn't have to be an especially astute politician to see this was an electoral winner. Richard Nixon ran—and won—on resentment to black demands for equality, and Ronald Reagan channeled anti-welfare attitudes into two landslide wins for a muscular, hard right conservatism.

*...Democrats can adopt populist rhetoric, but there's no guarantee working-class whites will buy it. ...Put another way, for a new rhetoric of populism to work—or at least, attract the winnable whites identified by Teixeira and Halpin—it needs to come with a commitment to universal policies that working-class whites like and support. ...But the United States doesn't have a political party to support that kind of social democracy. Instead, it has the Democratic Party, a collection of disparate interests which—at its best—is nervous about economic liberalism and hesitant to push anything outside the mainstream.*

Bouie's final sentences point to a well-known traditional progressive analysis regarding welfare—that European social democratic policies retained greater working class support than did liberal programs in the U.S. in the post World War Two era because the European programs were all essentially universal, guaranteeing social benefits that would be available to every citizen rather than to any specific social groups (It did not hurt, of course, that until the arrival of significant numbers of north African immigrants in the 1970's most social democratic countries in Europe did not have a large ethnically distinct underclass as did the U.S. But the general point still remains valid).

There is little question that many of the welfare and poverty programs of the 1960's would have had much greater popular appeal if they had been more work-centered and universal in character and the same considerations are equally relevant today. But the recent debate over Senator Charles Schumer's suggestion that Obama should have set aside the goal of health care reform because it largely benefited the poor rather than the white working class suggests an even more bleak hypothesis—that policies needed to win the support of white working class people have to benefit them exclusively or even at the direct expense of the poor.

Although it is unlikely that he personally approves of this view, [in a recent column](#),<sup>13</sup> Tom Edsall strongly implied that Democrats needed to accept that this is the new reality:

Obamacare shifts health care benefits and tax burdens from upper-income Americans to lower-income Americans and from largely white constituencies to beneficiaries disproportionately made up of racial and ethnic minorities. ..

...the overall goal of Obamacare is to provide health coverage for the uninsured, a population that, in 2010 when the program was enacted, was 47 percent white, and 53 percent black, Hispanic, Asian-American and other minorities.

He then concludes:

It's not hard to see, then, why a majority of white midterm voters withheld support from Democrats and cast their votes for Republicans.

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<sup>13</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/12/opinion/thomas-edsall-the-demise-of-the-white-democratic-voter.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/12/opinion/thomas-edsall-the-demise-of-the-white-democratic-voter.html?_r=0)

In point of fact, it is deeply misleading to look at who currently receives the financial benefits of Obamacare as accurately representing a complete picture of its value for white working class people. Like other universal programs, Obamacare provides a social safety net not just for current recipients but for millions of white workers currently covered by employer or private coverage who in the past would lose their employer-provided health benefits if they happened to lose their job or be unable to obtain new coverage if they took a new job and had a pre-existing condition.

But the possibility that white workers perceive Democratic programs in the way Edsall suggests cannot be ignored. If white workers will indeed actually oppose Democrats who propose universal populist programs unless they are sure they themselves will receive the lion's share of the benefits rather than minorities or the poor, the challenge for Democrats is even greater than the advocates of universal programs ever anticipated.

It is not clear that this is really the case, but it cannot be discounted out of hand. Unlike their European counterparts, after World War Two American workers quickly lost the ideal of working class "solidarity" as a social value. American industrial workers received their health care coverage and old age pensions from their specific union rather than from a universal program and (in significant measure because of racial prejudice) never fully accepted the idea of working class solidarity as did their European counterparts who saw such solidarity as something that was not only morally right but also as the best way to defend their common interests as a social class and maximize their strength against capital.

As a result, even universal programs cannot be automatically assumed to necessarily be capable of winning white working class support. It is possible that they can but the case remains to be proven.

#### **4. Pulling together the issues in the recent debate**

The various articles quoted above present an unusually broad and diverse set of ideas about the political attitudes of the white working class. In many respects they echo the perennial intra-democratic debate about whether a sufficiently muscular progressive-populist appeal can overcome the influence of social conservatism and racial prejudice on white working class political choices.

As a starting point, let us attempt to re-state the major ideas in the articles above as clear declarative statements that can—at least in principle—be validated or falsified by data:

1. Voters in 2014 rejected Democratic candidates primarily because of their failure to present a robust populist appeal and agenda. Presenting an appeal and agenda of that kind is all that is needed to regain white working class support (Kuttner/Greider)
2. White working class voters are alienated from the Democrats on a range of social issues but this is declining with time as younger workers become a larger share of the electorate. Democrats can therefore build a winning coalition by maintaining their current progressive social values but combining them with an enhanced populist appeal – (Scheiber)

3. Conservative views on specific social issues are distinct from support for the broad cultural traditionalism of the white working class and their cultural identification with the “Real America” as opposed to coastal educated elites. Democrats must learn how to speak to white workers in ways that respect their distinct culture and values even as Dems refuse to compromise their progressive stances on specific social issues or they will not be able to regain white working class support –(Sargent)
4. White working class voters think the Democratic Party represents the interests of minorities rather than themselves. Progressive-populist rhetoric by Democratic candidates may therefore be widely disbelieved and distrusted. As a result, even programs carefully designed to deliver universal benefits may not be able to overcome this distrust –(Drum/Bouie)

These four propositions can also be restated as questions. For example:

1. Do white workers support both income redistribution and progressive-populist economic policies or do they generally support only the second? To what degree, in fact, do they actually support progressive-populist proposals at all?
2. Do polls indicating more progressive attitudes among younger white workers on specific social issues necessarily imply that a similar change in attitudes on broader views about culture and values is also occurring? Are young workers a large enough proportion of the white working class that changes in their attitudes will actually change the outcome of elections?
3. How deep are white workers racial and ethnic antipathies? Will white workers actually oppose Democrats who propose even universal populist programs unless they themselves are sure to receive the lion’s share of the benefits?

Understanding white working class attitudes on specific questions like these will be critical for improving Democrats ability to effectively communicate with them and win their support in 2016 and beyond. Such understanding will also provide the basis for answering the fundamental question that Democrats now face.

4. Are progressive-populist messages and proposals sufficiently appealing to win the support of white working class voters for Democratic candidates, outweighing conservative attitudes and concerns regarding many social and racial issues, or will these latter issues prevent them from abandoning the GOP?

### **Part III. The choice Democrats must make**

In seeking to understand white working class attitudes toward the kinds of propositions and questions noted above, the traditional response of strategists from different sectors of the Democratic coalition has generally been to “cherry-pick” some subset of the available opinion polls and then argue that the results demonstrate the existence of clear support for either progressive-populist or centrist policies and messages.

Anyone familiar with the many, many debates along these lines over the last 40 years will concede that this approach has never actually provided sufficiently convincing evidence to produce any meaningful consensus within the Democratic coalition. Strategists from all of the perspectives within the Democratic community are clearly aware that even very minor



variations in question wording can produce dramatically different responses to opinion poll questions and that the opinions people express on opinion polls are often widely at variance with the opinions they express when they make choices in the voting booth. As a result, debates that employ nothing but standard opinion poll questions as evidence have invariably been inconclusive.

Democrats now have a choice. There are now about two years until the 2016 elections and six years until the elections of 2020. Progressive and centrist Democrats can either spend the next several years debating the data in the same conventional opinion polls as they always have in the past—and find themselves in largely the same position at the end as they were at the beginning—or they can accept the challenge of seeking to dramatically increase the amount of knowledge they have regarding the attitudes and opinions of white working class Americans.

Assuming that Democrats rise to this challenge, the question, of course, is how this can be done.

#### **Part IV. How to obtain the data Democrats need about white working class Americans.**

In order to evaluate the four propositions above, the first step is to recognize that the attitudes they express can actually be sorted into five distinct categories or “clusters”. They are:

- a. Attitudes toward specific progressive-populist economic programs and policies
- b. Attitudes toward income inequality and wealth
- c. Attitudes toward specific social issues
- d. Attitudes toward cultural traditionalism and the division between the “Real America” and coastal educated elites
- e. Attitudes toward minorities, government programs and their relationship to the Democratic Party

In order to understand why white working class people make the political choices that they do, the essential question that must be answered is how the diverse mental networks of attitudes contained within the five attitude clusters noted above are cognitively organized in white workers minds. It is quite certain that some attitudes are viewed as more central or important while others are seen as relatively secondary. Equally, some of these attitudes are conceptually organized into larger cognitive schemas (for example, about broad subjects like “government” or “politicians”) while others are relatively isolated and independent. And most important, when white working class people are standing in the voting booth, the critical question that has to be answered is how they cognitively weigh, sort, process and combine all of these different categories and layers of attitudes into a single electoral choice.

The affordable care act provided a dramatic example of the essential problem. Democratic analysts looked at opinion poll data on the major individual features of the law like universal coverage and guaranteed coverage for pre-existing conditions and concluded that the law would be broadly popular. GOP strategists, in contrast, created an entirely different framing of

the law as representing “socialism,” “a government takeover of health care,” and as a program that was designed by arrogant, untrustworthy elites and “rammed through” congress against the will of the American people. The polling data the Democratic strategists were using was not wrong, but it did not capture the larger cognitive framework in which the debate actually unfolded.

There are, in fact, a number of more sophisticated polling methodologies than the standard poll questions that can provide substantial additional insight into the thinking of white working class people. At the same time, however, poll results must also be significantly supplemented with other forms of information to gain the kind of robust, three-dimensional picture of white working class attitudes that is needed for the design of a successful Democratic strategy. Let us look at them in turn.

### 1. More in-depth polling methods

There are alternative strategies of opinion poll question design that can be used to extract information about the cognitive structure of white working class attitudes, information that standard methods do not provide. For example, in trying to understand how working people organize their ideas about the five empirical propositions presented above, a poll can ask individuals who have a negative opinion of Democrats and the Democratic Party questions like the following: “*which of these criticisms of the Democrats do you consider the most important?*”

- a. Democrats are too close to Wall Street and do not champion economic policies to help the average worker
- b. Democrats do not share or understand my social and personal values
- c. Democrats support a number of specific social policies that I oppose
- d. Democrats constantly support the demands of minorities and constantly design policies to benefit them rather than white working Americans\*

In order to answer this question, the person could be instructed to either choose which criticism they felt was the most important single issue or they could be told to rank the issues in importance from one to four. The answers that the respondents would provide to this question would begin to suggest the way they cognitively organize these distinct attitudes.

This way of asking the question, however, suffers from an important limitation: it assumes that in ordinary life the respondent naturally ranks or categorizes these distinct attitudes in order from most to least important. In effect, it forces the respondents to express their attitudes in this format even if it does not correspond to their normal way of thinking about these issues.

A more open-ended approach is to attach a scale from 1 to 5 alongside each of the four criticisms and then for each criticism ask the respondent “*on a scale of one to five, how important do you consider this particular criticism of Democrats and the Democratic Party.*” This question design allows the person to express the intensity of his or her feelings about

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\*Note: It should be mentioned that for simplicity I am ignoring a number of technical issues about proper question design that would realistically have to be addressed in designing an actual opinion poll of this kind.

each of these criticisms independently. One can suspect that a question of this kind would be likely to reveal the existence of a certain group of relatively progressive white workers who would rank the first criticism with a “5” and the remaining three criticisms with a “1” while more conservative workers would do exactly the reverse. More uncertain or ambivalent respondents might choose values somewhere in the middle.

Question designs similar to these can make it possible to estimate the relative sizes of the strongly progressive, strongly conservative and relatively uncertain or ambivalent groups within white working class America. This is extremely important information for many specific purposes in designing the strategy for a political campaign.

Beyond this particular example, there are also a range of other techniques that can be employed. Stan Greenberg’s Democracy Corps, for example, makes frequent use of short and sharply contrasting one-paragraph political position statements that test the relative appeal of different kinds of persuasive messages. Academic researchers like Shanto Iyengar and his colleagues at Stanford University have developed a related approach that uses controlled video presentations and simulated political advertisements. Other studies use dial tests in which participants listening to a speech indicate their reactions on a real-time basis using a small hand-held device.

All of these techniques extract more nuanced and complex information about political attitudes than can be obtained from standard opinion polls. And beyond this, there are other research methods that can provide an even greater depth of understanding.

## **2. Focus groups**

For many Democrats, focus groups are strongly identified with commercial advertising and their results are viewed with some suspicion as a result. But, in fact, as focus group research conducted for progressive purposes has repeatedly demonstrated, they can also produce political data of significant value. Democracy Corps’ “Economy Project” and “Republican Party Project”, for example, provide clear illustrations of the kinds of in-depth information focus groups can provide information that is simply unobtainable from conventional opinion polls.

Most important, focus groups allow investigators to observe white working people expressing their political views spontaneously, revealing what they consider most emotionally compelling and important in their own words and from within their own conceptual frameworks. When conducted skillfully, focus groups allow the participants to demonstrate the ways they naturally organize their ideas into coherent mental schemas and clusters of attitudes.

What makes the opinions in such basic attitude clusters and schemas unique and distinct from other personal opinions is that when focus group leaders ask participants their opinions about these topics they receive an extended, spontaneous and deeply heartfelt monologue rather than a brief, straightforward reply. People tend to have firm, thought-out views on certain basic topics like “government,” “immigrants” or “politicians” that they buttress with a wide range of anecdotes, narratives and personal experiences. People often express a deep emotional commitment to the views that they articulate on these subjects.

In contrast, if a focus group leader asks a question about other topics like “early child care programs” or “corporate tax reform,” the participants do not respond immediately or at length. On the contrary, they will pause to stop and think. They will consider the information contained in the question itself and then try to access and retrieve relevant information from various places in their memory in order to arrive at a conclusion. To an observer it is obvious that they do not have a firm, fixed and emotional opinion on these questions stored somewhere in memory; instead they are “deducing” or “computing” an opinion on the spot. This distinction can be of particular importance in seeking to judge what the actual appeal of proposals will be that, on paper, seem as though they ought to resonate and be popular with white working class Americans.

Focus groups also allow for a kind of interactive, multi-step discussion that is impossible with opinion polls. Focus group leaders, for example, can ask questions like *“If the Democratic Party sincerely asked you for advice about what people like yourself really need and want, what would you tell them?”* or *“I know you have a low opinion of the Democratic Party but what do you think Democrats could do that would convince you to change your opinion.”* These are questions the participants have never spontaneously considered and not only their conclusions but the thought processes they use to reach their conclusions can provide information that can be extremely useful in understanding how to better appeal for their support.

### **3. Ethnographic field studies**

The most robust, three-dimensional information about the attitudes of white working class Americans has always come from in-depth ethnographic field studies in which investigators work on the job and live in the community as participant-observers. In the late 1970’s some of the most important information about the sources of the “white backlash” and the emergence of the “Reagan Democrats” came from such studies. Jonathan Reider’s *“Canarsie: Jews and Italians against Liberalism”* for example provided insight into the complex mixture of feelings of anger and betrayal that turned workers against the Democrats. David Halle’s, *“America’s Working Man: Work, Home, and Politics Among Blue Collar Property Owners,”* a 7 year-long field study of white workers in an electric power plant, revealed the very different social identities the men felt and displayed at work and in the community. On the job they retained a self-definition as “working men” and continued to express a number of traditional pro-union, militant attitudes while in the community they defined themselves instead as “middle class” and saw themselves as perilously balanced midway between the poor and the affluent. In significant measure it was by skillfully exploiting the divergence between these distinct social identities that Reagan successfully undermined white working class Americans traditional support for the Democrats.

Unfortunately, **as I have documented elsewhere**<sup>14</sup>, extended ethnographic field studies of white working class Americans have virtually disappeared since the mid 1980’s. This represents a critical gap in our knowledge about the lives and attitudes of the people whose support we seek to regain.

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<sup>14</sup><http://thewhiteworkingclasstoday.com/>

#### **4. Journalistic accounts**

Reporters and non-fiction book writers provide a unique class of information that other approaches do not. It was political campaign trail journalists, for example, who first detected the widespread sense among white workers in the rust belt states that Romney was an aloof and condescending candidate who did not really understand them or their problems. Nonfiction books like Joan Walsh's *What's the Matter with White People* and Samuel Friedman's earlier work, *The Inheritance: How Three Families and America Moved from Roosevelt to Reagan and Beyond* depict the decades long process by which the post-war link between white workers and the Democratic Party gradually became frayed.

#### **5. Reports from door-to-door canvassers for progressive candidates and organizations**

A final and uniquely valuable source of information can be derived from the reports of door to door canvassers who work for progressive organizations and Democratic candidates. One of the largest and most sophisticated data-gathering efforts of this kind is continually being conducted by Working America as it seeks to organize working class Americans around a variety of community and national issues. Although data gathering is not the primary purpose of Working America's door to door canvassing, the organization is uniquely serious and dedicated to gathering useful data. Working with the Analyst Institute, for example they have run a number of natural experiments to test the differences between different kinds of issues and appeals. Similar efforts can be mounted by other organizations that reach out to white working class Americans.

### **IV. Conclusion**

As was noted above, Democrats now have a choice. There are now about two years until the 2016 elections and six years until the elections of 2020. Progressive and centrist Democrats can either spend the next several years debating the data in the same collections of conventional opinion polls as they always have in the past—and find themselves in largely the same position as they were at the beginning—or they can accept the challenge of seeking to dramatically increase the amount of knowledge they have regarding the attitudes and opinions of white working class Americans.

The choice should be obvious. If we are honest, we will admit that at this time we do not have enough data to conclusively decide which, if any, of the four propositions drawn from the post-election discussion are correct and we must face the hard truth that we lack the nuanced, three-dimensional understanding of white workers to make a fully compelling appeal for their support. If Democrats sincerely want to regain the support of white working class Americans they must make the firm and serious commitment—backed up by the commitment of substantial financial and material resources—to radically increase the level of their knowledge and understanding of the thinking of white working class Americans. Such knowledge will be absolutely indispensable in 2016, 2020 and for many years beyond.