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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".

A DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

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"WINNING" THE WHITE WORKING
CLASS. HERE'S WHAT'S REALLY
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BY
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The rise of Donald Trump has generated tremendous concern among Democrats about the possible defection of white working class voters to his bigoted, right wing brand of populism in the coming elections. Although the number of white, less than college voters is in gradual decline, they are still vital to insure Democratic victories in key states in the Midwest and Rust Belt.¹

Among the supporters of Bernie Sanders there is simultaneously a substantial hope and optimism that Sanders’ progressive version of populism can successfully compete with Trump for the allegiance of these voters.

Amid a vast amount of speculation, however, there is a painful lack of hard data on what white working class Americans really think. Journalistic accounts of Trump’s rallies and anecdotal interviews with Trump supporters and local Democratic and Republican party officials suggest a very wide base of white working class support for Trump’s candidacy but anecdotes and journalistic accounts of this kind do not provide a basis for drawing any firm conclusions. In fact, they frequently lead commentators to misinterpret the very scanty data that is available.

For example, the often-cited fact that Trump’s “base of support” within the Republican party—in some states exceeding 50 percent of GOP primary voters—is indeed composed of white less than college voters easily becomes garbled into the very different and (as we will see) entirely false statement that most white working class voters support Donald Trump

The confusion is reinforced by fact that virtually all of the polling data from the major opinion research firms is narrowly focused on horserace comparisons of the support for candidates within either the Democratic or Republican primaries. The polls consequently report the percentage of white working class support for different candidates only within each of the two major parties rather than for the electorate as a whole.

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¹ While traditionally visualized as limited to blue collar men, pollsters now generally define the white working class more broadly as men and women with a high school or less than college education because in the modern economy they are heavily concentrated in lower-wage, relatively insecure jobs that provide a reduced standard of living. This definition therefore includes within it millions of single women and youth working as restaurant servers and sales clerks as well as older, married blue collar men.

This obscures a fundamental part of the picture. In 2012 65 percent of the white working class voted for Mitt Romney but this support was provided not just by Republicans but by three distinct groups—self-identified Republicans, self-identified independents who nonetheless consistently vote for GOP candidates and “Reagan Democrats”—men and women registered as Democrats who frequently or consistently vote for the GOP.

To genuinely understand the real range of opinion in the white working class America what is needed is to set aside these various artificial categories and find out four basic facts: what percent of **all** white working class voters now support Donald Trump, what percent now supports Bernie Sanders, what percent now support Hillary Clinton and what percent support other GOP candidates?

This question would seem to be straightforward but until the recent primaries began meaningful data was simply not available. Calculations based on the exit polls in these contests however, now provide the first solid information.

The most striking fact that emerges from Super Tuesday and other recent primaries is the huge differences in support that exist for Trump, Sanders and Clinton in different regions of the country.

In the relatively liberal, Northeastern state of Massachusetts, for example, Sanders received 36 percent of the total white working class vote in contrast to only 27 percent for Donald Trump. The total white working class vote for Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton combined was 60 percent in contrast to only 41 percent for all the candidates of the GOP.

In Georgia, on the other hand, Trump received 40 percent of the white working class vote, in contrast to only 7 percent for Bernie Sanders. The total vote for GOP candidates was 85 percent; the combined vote for Hillary and Sanders was a minuscule 16 percent. Virginia was only slightly better for the Democrats with Trump earning 33 percent of the white working class vote to Sanders 15 percent. The total vote for GOP candidates was over 70 percent while the combined vote for Hillary and Sanders was 30 percent.

This tremendous geographic variation makes any discussion of Trump, Sander’s and Clinton’s white working class support that is based on broad national averages of very little use. For the 2016 election, however, one pivotal geographic region that must be viewed as a distinct political unit is the Midwestern states of the rust belt. These states are key “swing states” whose white working class electorate can change the result of the 2016 election.

In the last two weeks, three of these states—Michigan, Illinois and Ohio—have held primaries. The results are presented in the table on the next page:

Percentage of Total White Working Class Vote			
	Michigan	Illinois	Ohio
Trump	27	26	30
Other GOP	31	30	37
Total GOP vote	58	56	67
Saunders	23	24	15
Clinton	17	18	16
Total Democratic vote	40	42	31
2012 Vote for Obama	45	41	41

Note: Percentages do not add to exactly 100 because of rounding.

What conclusions can be drawn from these figures?

The first, crucial conclusion is that Donald Trump is not actually winning a majority of the white working class in the rust belt region. His support ranges from 26 percent to 30 percent of all white working class voters in these three Midwestern states. In fact, based on many existing surveys of white working class opinion it is entirely plausible to conjecture that a large proportion of the 26-30 percent of white working people that Trump has mobilized and energized to support him are people who were already firmly committed conservatives and who would vote for some other right-wing candidate if Trump were not on the ballot. It is significant that Trump actually does best in the South rather than in the rust belt suggesting that for many of his white working class supporters the racial and xenophobic elements of his platform are even more powerful elements in his appeal than his right wing version of economic populism.

A second key conclusion is that when Bernie Sanders progressive populist appeal goes head to head with Trump, Sanders does reasonably well but does not equal Trump's appeal to white working class voters. Sanders comes close to Trump in Michigan with 23 percent to Trump's 27 percent and in Illinois with 24 percent to Trump's 26 percent. In Ohio and Virginia, however, Sanders only draws half of Trump's support—15 percent to Trump's 30 percent and he is completely overwhelmed in the South.

Sander's advocates believe that he could substantially improve on these results if given more time to disseminate his message. But in this regard very important to note that these three primaries actually provided Sanders the best opportunity he could possibly have had

and that he most certainly would not enjoy in a general election. For quite different reasons neither Hillary Clinton nor the GOP chose to unleash the kind of savage red-baiting attacks on Sanders “socialism” that were available to them. It would have been remarkably easy to **create lurid 30 second TV commercials**² that distorted Sanders’ social democratic views into support for Putin, Russia, Marxism and communism complete with photographs of his meetings with Castro in Cuba and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and with ominous narration describing the covert subversive agenda behind the Soviet “sister city” he linked with Burlington, Vermont. Even if most white working class viewers were wise enough to discount 90 percent of what was said in these ads, just the remaining doubt and suspicion would still profoundly limit Sanders’ ability to substantially increase his popularity much beyond the democratic-voting sector of the white working class.

The third important conclusion that can be drawn from the recent primaries is that Sanders is indeed more popular than Hillary Clinton among white working class primary voters but only by a few percentage points. In Michigan Sanders received the support of 23 percent of white working people in contrast to 17 percent for Clinton. In Illinois, Sanders received 24 percent of their votes again compared to 17 percent for Clinton. And in Ohio and Virginia Clinton and Sanders were tied with 15-16 percent each.

What are the implications of these facts for the general election in November?

First, the results suggest that a significant danger does indeed exist in the rust belt region. While the Democratic total in the Illinois primary is close to the 2012 white working class vote for Obama, in Michigan it is 5 percent below the 2012 Democratic total and in Ohio a gaping 10 percent below.

It is certainly true that, **as Harry Enten says**³ “voter turnout is an indication of the competitiveness of a primary contest, not of what will happen in the general election [and] The 2016 GOP presidential primary is more competitive than the Democratic race.” But there is reason to fear that several other key Midwestern states such as Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, which have not yet had their primaries, may produce results closer to those in Ohio than to Illinois or Michigan.

As leading political demographer **Ruy Teixeira noted**⁴ in an interview with the *New Yorker’s* John Cassidy:

If [Trump’s] populist message boosts turnout and margins with working class white voters high enough in the Rust Belt and Upper Midwest, you could see a situation where someone like Trump could carry Ohio, Iowa, Wisconsin, maybe Pennsylvania, That would put a real dent in the Democratic coalition.”

Teixeira’s demographic studies indicate that a Republican candidate would need to win unprecedentedly high levels of white support in order to win a presidential election without more minority support than opinion polls currently show for any GOP candidate and

²<http://nypost.com/2016/01/16/dont-be-fooled-by-bernie-sanders-hes-a-diehard-communist/>

³<http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/primary-turnout-means-nothing-for-the-general-election/>

⁴http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/could-donald-trump-win-the-general-election?mbid=social_twitter&ncid=swlstushpmg00000003

that Democrats can consistently win presidential races with any level of white working class support that approaches 40%. But any Democratic hope for regaining the Senate and House of Representatives heavily depends on increasing the level of white working class support for Democratic contenders.

Second, while Bernie Sanders progressive populism is indeed popular with many white working class Americans there is a very firm ceiling on how high his support can rise. The reason is that the white working class is divided into three very distinct ideological groups that have dramatically different reactions to Sander's platform and agenda.

This central fact is one of the key conclusions that emerges from [the most in-depth study of white workers in the rust belt](#)⁵, a study conducted by Working America, the largest progressive grass-roots organizing effort in white working class America. During a period of five weeks in December and January they conducted door to door interviews with 1,689 white working class voters in working class neighborhoods in Cleveland and Pittsburgh. This is a larger number of interviews than in most national opinion polls and involved far more in-depth conversations.

This research reaffirmed the results of previous Working America surveys which had found that there are three very distinct ideological groups within white working class America.

The first group is composed of firm conservatives who have substantially internalized the Rush Limbaugh-Fox News right-wing vision of America and who are therefore entirely resistant to any conceivable Democratic appeal. The second group is composed of firmly progressive and Democratic white working people. Among older workers these are voters who still remember and uphold the progressive traditions of the trade union movement and the New Deal. Among younger workers they include socially tolerant millennials whose views have been influenced by the Occupy movement and the frustrations of their own limited economic prospects.

Within this younger group overcoming a lack of enthusiasm and low turnout actually presents a greater challenge for Democrats than any attraction to Donald Trump and his right-wing platform and philosophy. A December 2015 Democracy Corps survey, for example, found that only 44 percent of young whites and 58 percent of white working class women were "extremely interested" in the 2016 elections in contrast to 70 percent of white working class men.

The final sector of the white working class is what the Working America study termed "*Fed up voters who value being independent but had little information.*" In fact, their door to door canvassing has revealed that many white working people who vote for Republican candidates do not fit the stereotype of the bitterly angry, intolerant ultra conservative. Rather, It is often a pleasant, easy-going, basically down-to-earth man or woman who opens the door, one who cares very little about politics or Rush Limbaugh conservative ideology and instead likes to "*use common sense*", "*think for themselves*" and "*see both sides*" of an issue. While they often vote Republican, they are far more likely to abstain from voting than support a bitter, racially prejudiced, belligerent right-winger.

⁵<http://static.politico.com/bb/17/0fe35aa645d29b3618babf398bb0/working-america-survey-on-donald-trump.pdf>

This third group is by both temperament and outlook unlikely to be won over by a progressive populist platform that calls for them to support a political “revolution” that requires an active and passionate commitment to political reform and social change. They will respond however to an appeal to “simple common sense” and “being reasonable” as an alternative to Trump’s extreme right wing ideology.

What this implies is that neither populism nor any other “one size fits all” strategy can successfully compete with Donald Trump for the votes of white working class Americans. To defeat Trump Democrats must employ a three pronged strategy that combines the most popular elements of a populist agenda, an appeal that reflects “simple common sense” and significant efforts to increase the political mobilization of young white working people, particularly younger women who are most open to the Democratic alternative.

The overall conclusion is clear. Donald Trump has not yet won the support of a majority of the white working class but he poses a threat that cannot be ignored. Ironically, however, Trump’s candidacy may also actually provide the first major opportunity in decades for Democrats to significantly expand their white working class support. Since the Reagan era the Republican coalition has been held together by a form of conservative identity politics which united both the deeply conservative and the “common sense” sectors of white working class people together with more affluent Republicans as all being “Real Americans” in contrast and opposition to the minorities and liberal ivory tower intellectuals of the Democratic Party.

Trump has decisively fragmented this Republican political coalition, leaving the more tolerant and non-ideological sector of the Republican-voting white working class in a deeply ambivalent position, to some degree attracted by his demagogic version of pro-working class populism but alienated by his right-wing racial and authoritarian views. This leaves them without an obvious political home or champion and therefore offers progressives and Democrats a unique opportunity to reach out and regain their support once again. It is an opportunity that should be aggressively pursued.