

THE DEMOCRATIC

# strategist

and

Washington Monthly

present

the second roundtable  
on the  
white working class

Featuring an analysis by:

Stanley B. Greenberg

## The Battle for Working People Begins with Government Reform

with a Roundtable Discussion by:

Ed Kilgore

Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin

John Judis

Mark Schmitt

Joan Walsh

Karen Nussbaum

Richard D. Kahlenberg

Andrew Levison

John Russo

Jack Metzgar

with a welcome by Ed Kilgore and Andrew Levison

**Welcome to the second white working class roundtable,  
a project of The Democratic Strategist in collaboration  
with the Washington Monthly.**

The first white working class roundtable, held in June 2014, brought together 15 leading pro-Democratic strategists and observers to discuss the subject of “progressives and the white working class” and had a very significant effect on the national debate regarding the white working class vote that emerged after the 2014 elections. 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 was cited by many other commentaries that used data and quotes drawn from the contributions to the June 2014 roundtable discussion.

As a follow-up to this debate, The Democratic Strategist published an in-depth review of the post-2014 discussion in December, 2014. It is available [HERE](#).<sup>i</sup>

The present White working class roundtable is organized around a provocative strategy paper by leading opinion analyst Stan Greenberg that is entitled, “The Fight for Working People Begins with Government Reform.” Stan’s analysis, which also appears in the June issue of the Washington Monthly, is discussed by a distinguished group of progressive thinkers including Ed Kilgore, Ruy Teixeira, John Halpin, John Judis, Mark Schmitt, Joan Walsh, Karen Nussbaum, Richard Kahlenberg, Andrew Levison and others.

The contributions to this roundtable discussion will be regularly featured in Ed Kilgore’s Political Animal blog at the Washington Monthly during the month of June and will also be disseminated through ads in the National Journal and The American Prospect as well as through an extensive e-mail distribution campaign.

We look forward to your comments and reactions to this unique roundtable discussion.

Ed Kilgore

Andrew Levison

Directors, the White Working Class Roundtable

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<sup>i</sup>[http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_SM\\_Levison\\_2014\\_elec\\_WWC.pdf](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_2014_elec_WWC.pdf)

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

By STAN GREENBERG

Democrats cannot win big or consistently enough, deep enough down the ticket or broadly enough in the states, unless they run much stronger with white working-class and downscale voters. That includes running better with white working-class swing voters, of course. But it also includes winning more decisively with white unmarried women, a demographic group that, along with minority and Millennial voters, is integral to the Democrats' base in a growing American majority that I call the Rising American Electorate. Working-class whites and white unmarried women are both key to competing in the states where Republicans are pursuing a conservative governing agenda unchecked and to keeping Democratic voters engaged in both presidential and off-year elections.

When the economy crashed in 2008, Obama won white unmarried women by a whopping 20 points (60 to 40 percent) and came within 6 points of winning white working-class women (47 to 53 percent), though he still lost white male working-class voters by 24 points and got only 37 percent of the white working-class vote. But the size of the Democrats' prospective national majority was clearly diminished by what then happened with these downscale, mostly working-class voters. In his reelection in 2012, Obama won white unmarried women by just a 4-point margin, and in the 2014 midterms, Democrats almost split their votes with the Republicans, getting only a 2-point margin. Hillary Clinton is just running even with the prospective Republican candidates among white unmarried women right now.<sup>1</sup>

After the 2008 wave election that rejected the policies of George W. Bush, white working-class women quickly dialed down their Democratic support to about 38 percent, working-class men to 33 percent. That holds true for Clinton against her potential Republican rivals. There remains an undecided bloc that could allow Clinton to run stronger than this suggests, though she clearly has inherited the problem with struggling, downscale white working-class voters, both inside and outside the Democrats' base.

These voters, as we shall see, are open to an expansive Democratic economic agenda—to more benefits for child care and higher education, to tax hikes on the wealthy, to investment in infrastructure spending, and to economic policies that lead employers to boost salaries for

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<sup>1</sup>National election night survey among 2,000 voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps and Campaign for America's Future, November 4-5, 2008; Combined national election night surveys among 3,617 voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps, November 5-8, 2012; National election night survey of 1,429 likely 2016 voters, including 1,030 2014 voters, conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy Corps, November 3-5, 2014; National survey of 950 likely 2016 voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps and Women's Voices Women Vote Action Fund, January 7-11, 2015.

middle- and working-class Americans, especially women. Yet they are only ready to listen when they think that Democrats understand their deeply held belief that politics has been corrupted and government has failed. Championing reform of government and the political process is the price of admission with these voters. These white working-class and downscale voters are acutely conscious of the growing role of big money in politics and of a government that works for the 1 percent, not them.

It is possible that their cynicism about government is grounded in a fundamental individualism and long-standing American skepticism about intrusive government. And it also may be rooted in a race-conscious aversion to government spending that they believe fosters dependency and idleness—the principal critique of today’s conservative Republicans. If that is the prevailing dynamic, no appeal, no matter how compelling, would bring increased support for government activism.

Yet the white working-class and downscale voters in our surveys do support major parts of a progressive, activist agenda, particularly when a Democratic candidate boldly attacks the role of money and special interests dominating government and aggressively promotes reforms to ensure that average citizens get both their say and their money’s worth. These findings came out of innovative research conducted in partnership with Page Gardner’s Women’s Voices Women Vote Action Fund and David Donnelly’s Every Voice.

In recent years, too many Democrats have presumed that the white working class is out of the party’s reach and that talk of reforming government and the political process simply does not move voters. My contention is that both of those presumptions are wrong. An agenda of reform is the key to Democrats winning the greater share of white working-class and unmarried women votes that will give the party the majorities it needs to govern.

The macro economy is recovering and job growth is robust, yet this hasn’t altered the structural changes that leave all working-class Americans struggling to keep up with the cost of living or struggling just to afford something extra. This includes key segments of the new American majority, like white unmarried women. They are more likely to be raising children on their own; a majority never attained a four-year college degree; and their median income of \$37,410 is \$13,607 below the national median. It also includes broad swaths of the white working class, both women and men.<sup>2</sup>

Both groups are almost equally frustrated with the direction of the country, the political class, and government. A striking three-quarters of white working-class Americans now think that the country is on the wrong track, as do two-thirds of white unmarried women from all income levels. A daunting 71 percent of white working-class men and 64 percent of white working-class women disapprove of the job Obama is doing, but so do 55 percent of white unmarried women.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Census’s CPS Table Creator. Median income among unmarried white non-Hispanic women, full-time, year-round workers in 2013. Unmarried includes widowed, divorced, separated and never married, but not married with spouse absent; “Table H-6.Regions – All Races by Median and Mean Income: 1975 to 2012,” U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, Historical Income Tables: Households, accessed August 7, 2014

<sup>3</sup>National survey of 950 likely 2016 voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Democracy Corps and Women’s Voices Women Vote Action Fund, January 7-11, 2015.

Nearly 60 percent of white unmarried women say that the path to the middle class is blocked because jobs don't pay enough to live on, and they reject the idea that you can still reach the middle class in tough times through hard work. Unmarried women are the heart of the new majority, yet unmarried white women feel stymied more than any other section of the Rising American Electorate. And they look very similar in attitude to white working-class women, 56 percent of whom say they are prevented from reaching the middle class. A small plurality of white working-class men still thinks hard work can get you there. So the white working-class women and the unmarried women evidently are struggling more and feel more hindered than white working-class men in this low-wage economy.

Given the huge economic changes and challenges facing working people, we should not be surprised that they think government has not been part of the solution for them. In the spring of 2010—a year into the implementation of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—Democracy Corps asked voters, “Who are the main beneficiaries of the Economic Recovery Act?” Almost half, 45 percent, said that unemployed Americans benefited a lot or some from the act, and a lesser amount, 34 percent, said the middle class was benefiting. But three-quarters said the big banks and financial institutions were the beneficiaries, and 50 percent said they benefited a lot—more than eight times the number who said that for the middle class. White working-class men were particularly outraged, with six in ten saying that the banks benefited a lot. White working-class respondents were the ones most likely to say that they themselves were not benefiting: just one in five said they benefited from the Economic Recovery Act.<sup>4</sup>

After that, they watched the Supreme Court rally to protect the free speech rights of corporations and saw the flood of unregulated and secret campaign donations and TV advertising. This has led to a new level of public revulsion with politics and support for fundamental reforms. Super PACs are not arcane institutions. They are known by more than half of the voters and detested: seven times as many people react to them negatively as positively. The public knew that the Citizens United Supreme Court decision was a sham from the outset and very quickly concluded that the new fund-raising regime of big donors and secret money damaged something fundamental. Two-thirds were convinced that the system “undermines democracy”—54 percent believed that strongly.<sup>5</sup>

For the public, the consequences of this legalized system of secret and unlimited donations are self-evident. When they are asked which of the following has the most influence on members of Congress, the public puts “special interest groups and lobbyists” and “campaign contributors” in a league of their own: 59 percent say the first has the most influence, and 46 percent the second. Those groups are seen to wield the influence in Washington, as political parties pale in power: just 29 percent choose party leaders as most influential. And when it comes to the “views of constituents,” only 15 percent say they matter the most.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Web survey of 2,671 adults nationwide conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Citizen Opinion and the Center for American Progress, April 18-19, 2010.

<sup>5</sup>National election night survey of 1,429 likely 2016 voters, including 1,030 2014 voters, conducted by Democracy Corps for Every Voice, November 3-5, 2014; National survey of 1,004 adults nationwide conducted for ABC News/Washington Post, February 4-8, 2010; National election night survey of 1,000 2012 voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy Corps and Public Campaign Action Fund, November 6-7, 2012 – the night of and night after the election.

<sup>6</sup>National election night survey of 1,429 likely 2016 voters, including 1,030 2014 voters, conducted by Democracy Corps for Every Voice, November 3-5, 2014.

While white working-class women are more likely to see campaign contributors and party leaders as having the most influence, white working-class men again cite special interest groups and lobbyists: amazingly, 60 percent say these groups hold the cards in Washington.

Why, then, would working-class voters and lower-income Americans turn to government to bring change? They are not crazy. Everything they have seen says that government is gridlocked and is bought and paid for by big donors and special interests, and politicians rig the system for the most irresponsible companies. Special interests push up spending and lobby for special tax breaks for themselves, and government spends with little thought for the average citizen.

Democrats have run so poorly with white working-class and downscale voters since 2008 that some observers have concluded that Democrats are blocked structurally. Democratic identification with the new American majority presumably puts these white working-class voters out of reach. Trying to win these voters is seen as a fool's errand.

That conclusion is misguided. First, as we have seen, many white downscale voters in the Democratic base hold similar views about the economy and government as do white working-class swing voters. Second, the conclusion presumes that the white working class is still largely employed in industrial occupations, while, in fact, large portions are lower-paid, service-sector employees, a majority of whom are women. And third, the belief that the white working class is increasingly out of reach for Democrats is to a large degree a story of the South and the rural Conservative Heartland, not the story of white working-class voters in the rest of the country. Democrats still can and do compete for white working-class voters in three-quarters of the country.

A majority—54 percent—of white non-college-educated voters are women. Job growth today mostly comes for customer service professionals, retail and sales clerks, home health aides, and fast food workers—professions dominated by women—and the average wage for those jobs is dramatically below the median income. These women struggle with jobs that don't pay enough to live on, manage employment and kids without help, suffer from the enduring gender pay gap, and often have to piece together multiple jobs to get to a decent income. They get by without much help balancing work and family obligations from either businesses or government. They may notice that things are quite different for the 1 percent, which gets all the help it needs.

The 19 percent of the electorate comprised of white non-college-educated women is indeed very open to government helping working families with education and college affordability and building a more secure safety net. These lower-income women want their money's worth, but they are very much within the Democratic Party's reach.

The hurdles to reaching the white working class look so daunting because of the success of Republicans in building up huge margins with those voters in the South, the plains, and the Rocky Mountain region. Obama won only 25 percent of white non-college-educated voters in the South and 33 percent in the Mountain West. And Democrats have been losing ground

in political support and party identification with the most religiously observant, racially conscious, and rural white working-class voters in those regions. Voter attitudes about blacks and Hispanics, the role of women, traditional marriage, abortion, and religion there pose very different challenges that do indeed put most of these voters out of reach.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to remember, however, that three-quarters of American voters live outside these conservative Republican strongholds. In the rest of the country, the battle for the swing white working-class and downscale voters is very much alive. In the East and the Midwest, support for the two parties is split down the middle, and since 2000 this identification with the two parties has remained very stable. On election day in 2012, Obama won 40 percent of the white non-college-educated voters outside the Republicans' regional bases.<sup>8</sup> That number still poses a problem, but it would not take major gains with these voters to change the Democrat Party's fortunes in these areas.

Voters in the midterm elections of 2014 were ready to rally to candidates who would attack this corrupt system. Precious few candidates understood that voters had moved far ahead of the politicians.

Three-quarters of voters in the twelve most competitive Senate battleground states in 2014—states flooded with campaign money—support a constitutional amendment to overturn the Citizens United ruling. Three in five of those voters support “a plan to overhaul campaign spending by getting rid of big donations and allowing only small donations to candidates, matched by taxpayer funds.” The American citizenry has become progressively more supportive of barring big donors and corporate mega-contributions and using public funds to empower small donations. Even in the face of charges that public funding is “welfare for politicians,” voters in the midterms said that they would rally to a candidate who argues that “we need a government of, by and for the people—not government bought and paid for by wealthy donors.”<sup>9</sup>

Democrats lost badly in the Senate battleground states, located primarily in the South and most rural areas of the country. Yet one of the most effective campaign attacks we tested linked big donations to politicians advancing the interests of wealthy donors who used unlimited, secret money to make sure that billionaires' and CEOs' taxes remained artificially low and their loopholes stayed protected.

The power of this attack comes from the central role of the corrupt Washington and Wall Street nexus in the new economy. While working-class men struggled, the Republican candidate was helping government work for big corporations and special interests.

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<sup>7</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>8</sup>Based on 13,197 interviews from national surveys conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research on behalf of Democracy Corps in 2012.

<sup>9</sup>Survey of 1,000 likely 2014 voters across the 12 most competitive Senate battleground states conducted for Democracy Corps and Every Voice, July 12-16, 2014; National election night survey of 1,429 likely 2016 voters, including 1,030 2014 voters, conducted by Democracy Corps for Every Voice, November 3-5, 2014.

When Democracy Corps tested this attack in Louisiana, North Carolina, Georgia, Iowa, Colorado, and the other Senate battleground states, it was among the most powerful attacks on the Republican candidates.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, none of the Democratic candidates ran that ad.

We asked presidential-year voters to react to a battery of bold initiatives that could form a Democratic economic agenda for 2016. They include policies to protect Medicare and Social Security, investments in infrastructure to modernize the country, a cluster of policies to help working families with child care and paid leave, and new efforts to ensure equal pay and family leave for women. Voters embraced these initiatives, and they tested more strongly than a Republican alternative.

Yet most important for our purposes are the results for white unmarried women and working-class women. These groups both put a “streamline government” initiative ahead of everything except protecting Social Security and Medicare. They want to “streamline government and reduce waste and bureaucracy to make sure every dollar spent is a dollar spent serving people, not serving government.” They gave even greater importance than white working-class men to streamlining government. For these women, being on the edge means feeling more strongly that government should pinch pennies and start working for them.

At the outset of the 2016 presidential election cycle, I tested a middle-class economic narrative that ended with a call for an economy that works for working people and the middle class again. The narrative begins with the recognition that people are drowning, jobs don’t pay enough, and people are struggling to pay the bills despite all their hard work. At the heart of the narrative is an intention to use government to help, including assistance with making college and child care affordable and ensuring equal pay for working women. It also includes tax credits for low-wage workers and the middle class and a promise to protect Medicare and Social Security.

When we tested this narrative among likely 2016 voters in January 2015 in a poll conducted for Democracy Corps and the Women’s Voices Women Vote Action Fund, over 70 percent of presidential-year voters said that they found it convincing, and almost 40 percent responded with intense support. More important in the context of the national elections, that narrative tested about 20 points more convincing to voters than an alternative conservative economic narrative that faulted Democrats for leaving so many people struggling and offered instead a small government route to growth; it similarly outperformed a conservative Tea Party narrative that pushed back against government overreach.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Statewide survey of 456 white persuadable likely voters in Louisiana conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy Corps; Survey of 1,000 likely voters in the 12 most competitive Senate races across the country conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy Corps and Women’s Voice Women Vote Acton Function, September 20-24, 2014 including an oversample of 1,200 voters across Georgia, Iowa, North Carolina and Colorado conducted September 12-October 1, 2014.

<sup>11</sup>National survey of 950 likely 2016 voters conducted for Democracy Corps and Women’s Voice Women Vote Action Fund and The Voter Participation Center, January 7-11, 2015; National election survey of 1,001 likely 2012 voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Democracy corps and The Voter Participation Center, November 5-7, 2012. Survey results were weighted to reflect the National Exit survey.

This narrative speaks to all members of the Rising American Electorate. Fully 78 percent of the growing coalition of young people, unmarried women, and minorities said the narrative was convincing—dramatically higher than the vote share they gave to Democrats even in the best years. Unmarried women, in particular, were moved. A stunning eight in ten found it convincing, and nearly half chose “very convincing.” The narrative got its strongest generational support from the Millennials, but it was nearly matched by the enthusiasm of the Baby Boomers.<sup>12</sup>

The middle-class economic narrative got the attention of white working-class voters, too. They have not been great fans of government activism in recent decades, to put it mildly, and they have only been giving Democrats about a third of their votes. Yet an impressive 71 percent of white non-college-educated women embrace this narrative when it is presented to them; 41 percent do so strongly. In a head-to-head comparison, white working-class women find the Democrats’ middle-class economic narrative slightly more convincing than the Republicans’ conservative, small government economic narrative. While white working-class men responded less intensely to this middle-class economic narrative, 62 percent still found it convincing—and that is only 5 points below their support for the competing conservative small government narrative.

Independents also gave a slight edge (60 to 55 percent) to the Democrats’ middle-class economic narrative that places government activism on behalf of the working and middle class at its core.

What really strengthens and empowers the progressive economic narrative, however, is a commitment to reform politics and government. That may seem ironic or contradictory, since the narrative calls for a period of government activism. But, of course, it does make sense: Why would you expect government to act on behalf of the ordinary citizen when it is clearly dominated by special interests? Why would you expect people who are financially on the edge, earning flat or falling wages and paying a fair amount of taxes and fees, not to be upset about tax money being wasted or channeled to individuals and corporations vastly more wealthy and powerful than themselves?

We have arrived at a tipping point at the outset of the 2016 election cycle, where the demand to reform government is equal to or stronger than the demand to reform the economy. More accurately, reform can make it possible to use governmental policies to help the middle class. In short, it is reform first.

In a straight test, the presidential electorate is as enthusiastic about a reform narrative as the middle-class economic one. The first part of the narrative focuses on big business and special interests that give big money to politicians and then use lobbyists to win special tax breaks and special laws that cost the country billions. The second part emphasizes how special interests and the bureaucracy protect out-of-date programs that don’t work. The bottom line of the narrative is that government reform would free up money so the government could work for middle-class and working families rather than big donors.

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<sup>12</sup>National survey of 950 likely 2016 voters conducted for Democracy Corps and Women’s Voice Women Vote Action Fund and The Voter Participation Center, January 7-11, 2015.

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Most importantly, when voters hear the reform narrative first, they are then dramatically more open to the middle-class economic narrative that calls for government activism in response to America's problems.

Among voters who heard the reform message first, 43 percent describe the middle-class economic narrative as very convincing—11 points higher than when they hear the economic message first. Among white working-class voters in particular, this effect produced a 13-point jump in intensity for the Democrats' middle-class economic message (from 27 to 40 percent).

Clearly, these white working-class and downscale voters are open to a bold Democratic agenda and prefer it to a conservative Republican vision for the country. To win their support, however, voters are demanding, with growing ferocity, that Democrats battle against America's corrupted politics and for a government that really works for the average citizen. This is the route to a stronger result with white working-class and unmarried women voters and more sustainable victories for Democrats, in 2016 and beyond.

**CAN A MIDDLE-CLASS ECONOMIC AGENDA AND A REFORM GOVERNMENT AGENDA UNITE THE OBAMA COALITION AND THE WHITE WORKING CLASS?**

BY ED KILGORE

One of the hardest of perennials in progressive political discussion is the direction of non-college educated white voters--a.k.a., in the era of mass higher education, the White Working Class. There are a variety of reasons for this preoccupation. For one thing, much of the progressive policy legacy that has been extended and contested in recent decades is rooted in a New Deal Democratic Coalition squarely based on the white working class. That this group of voters is now arguably a component of the Republican "base" is a source of both political frustration and moral self-doubt for progressives.

At the practical level, steady declines in support among white working class voters have diminished Democrats' geographical reach while increasing the party's already heavy dependence on young and minority voters who do not participate proportionately in non-presidential elections. More generally, white working class Americans represent a puzzle to Democrats who constantly appeal to their economic self-interest and the positive role of government in their lives, but who nonetheless for hotly debated reasons continue to give a majority of their votes (at least in presidential elections) to a Republican Party deeply committed to trickle-down economics and limited--sometimes disabled--government. In the past many Democrats sought to neutralize alleged cultural conservatism among these voters by muting or even negating their own cultural liberalism, with mixed results and a lot of regrets. More recently, many progressives have come to rationalize the problem as a product of inherently reactionary southerners saturated with racial resentments, or dismiss it as a phenomenon prevailing among a shrinking minority of economic and demographic losers.

No progressive political analyst has devoted more passionate attention to this dilemma over the years than Stan Greenberg, an adviser to presidents and global leaders who first came to national prominence studying the Reagan Democrats of suburban Detroit. Greenberg has returned to this topic again and again in his polling and strategic work, and now is offering fresh data and analysis suggesting a path--though not an easy path--for a Democratic revival in key segments of the white working class, and among the unmarried women who overlap with the white working class by definition and by affinity of views.

Greenberg concedes that certain non-college educated white voters, the "most religiously observant, racially conscious and rural" voters in the South and the Mountain West, are mostly beyond reach of any progressive message at present; most also live in states with for-

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midable Republican majorities. But beyond those limitations, he finds robust support for a progressive agenda and message that includes “policies to protect Medicare and Social Security, investments in infrastructure to modernize the country, a cluster of policies to help working families with child care and paid leave, and new efforts to ensure equal pay and family leave for women.” But among both white working class voters and unmarried women, what undermines support for this agenda is a deeply felt antipathy to government as corrupt, beholden to wealthy special interests, and incompetent to achieve progressive goals.

This is a dynamic that observers like Greenberg have been noting for years. But now, he believes, it has become critical:

We have arrived at a tipping point at the outset of the 2016 election cycle, where the demand to reform government is equal to or stronger than the demand to reform the economy. More accurately, reform can make it possible to use governmental policies to help the middle class. In short, it is reform first.

Greenberg is convinced the conventional wisdom that issues like cleaning up the influence of money over Congress or campaigns are bloodless “process issues” of interest only to “wine-track” voters is dead wrong.

White working-class and downscale voters are open to a bold Democratic agenda and prefer it to a conservative Republican vision for the country. To win their support, however, voters are demanding, with growing ferocity, that Democrats battle against America’s corrupted politics and for a government that really works for the average citizen.

This second part of the “reform” agenda is especially difficult for some progressives: a demand that government be streamlined to become a more efficient instrument for vindicating middle-class interests. This is, interestingly enough, of particular concern to women (both white working-class women and unmarried women generally).

Add together the middle-class economic agenda and a reform agenda and you have, says Greenberg, a potent message that can unite the Obama Coalition with a higher percentage of the white working class, with women from all backgrounds especially supportive.

The “reform first” strategy is sufficiently provocative that this Second White Working Class Roundtable – sponsored jointly by The Democratic Strategist and The Washington Monthly, is devoted to discussing its implications. The contributors will include John Judis; Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin; Mark Schmitt; Joan Walsh; Richard Kahlenberg; Karen Nussbaum; John Russo; and Jack Metzgar; Andrew Levison; and myself. The Washington Monthly will roll out an essay in my Political Animal column each day and we may hold follow-up discussions as well.

We hope this will become a watershed discussion that will not only cast light on what progressives can do to appeal to a broader coalition of voters, but dispel some myths as well.

## THE PROMISE AND LIMITATIONS OF POPULIST REFORM

By RUY TEIXEIRA AND JOHN HALPIN

As the ideological group most committed to activist government, progressives have a special duty to strive for the best social and economic outcomes achievable and the widest public support possible for the major institutions of government. Right now, we are failing on both fronts. The economic status of many working families remains precarious while public trust in government is abysmal.

Much of the blame can be heaped on an obstructionist right blocking policies designed to help working families and on the priorities of conservatives in Congress and state legislatures seeking to advance the agenda of the wealthy. But progressives' own deficiencies in articulating a vision of government that links collective action to individual empowerment and opportunity, and in defending the institutions of government from the predatory influence of outside interests, has also contributed to the steep decline in public support for government.

Voters today, particularly the white working class voters that Stan Greenberg focuses on in his strong article, have little confidence that government can address the most serious problems facing the country, spend taxpayer wisely on the right priorities, and provide real accountability and make necessary changes when actions fail. These voters are not libertarians. They believe that government plays a vital role in protecting people from hardship and expanding economic opportunity.

What they do not see at all is a government capable of putting aside personal agendas, partisan concerns, and the narrow interests of corporations and the wealthy to serve the greater public good and their own economic standing.

As Stan argues correctly, progressives must take this challenge of trust in government seriously if they want to maintain electoral strength and build long-term support for progressive policy solutions. "Championing reform of government and the political process is the price of admission with these voters," he writes.

Evidence across multiple survey research and communications projects confirms his ideas about the potential of a government reform message. Candidates and activists would be wise to develop these narratives for 2016 and beyond.

But it's clear from years of data, that efforts to restore trust in government must go well beyond

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better messaging. Since the 1960's, the American National Election Studies has asked voters the question, "Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?" Majorities of Americans throughout the 1960's believed government was run for the benefit of all people, and subsequently trusted it to do what is right in the classic measure of trust in government.

At no point since 1970, with the exception of a brief time after 9/11, has the ANES reported a majority of voters saying the government was run for the benefit of all people. These beliefs cut across partisan and ideological lines suggesting that Americans have serious doubts not only with the performance or direction of government but more importantly with its basic orientation as a guarantor of the public good.

Trust in government is a huge and complicated issue to understand and is more of a system design challenge rather than a public communications one. How do we as progressives ensure that policymaking and legislation are developed openly with adequate democratic input? How do we resolve deep ideological and partisan disputes to produce policies that invest in people and our economy? How should we restructure government and elections to drastically reduce the influence of outside money and corporate interests in setting priorities and making policy decisions? And most importantly, how do we get tangible outcomes for people that deliver on their expectations and needs in terms of security, health and education, and economic opportunity?

What progressives and Democrats need to do more than anything is back-up their populist narratives about reform with legitimate structural changes to the corrupt and undemocratic processes of government and sustained efforts to pursue economic policies that will benefit a wide cross-section of working class families and voters.

**IN THE 2016 ELECTION, THE DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE SHOULD NOT BE LIMITED TO THE PROMISE OF REFORM**

By JOHN JUDIS

The analysis of the white working class's voting patterns has been an important task for Democratic consultants and pollsters and political analysts over many election cycles—going back to Stan's early focus groups in Macomb County—but I worry that it is becoming a cul-de-sac. Along with the blanket designation of minorities or people of color as automatic Democrats, it has mainly served simply to provide calculations that either produce or deny a “rising Democratic majority,” and these exercises may provide less insight about the present or the future than they have in the past.

Stan correctly points us to a discussion of Americans' attitude toward government as a critical issue, which is relevant, incidentally, not just to the non-college educated or non-college graduated, but to a wide range of the voters Democrats need to attract. The Democrats, once known as the party of the common man—a sure winner in American politics—have become known as the party of government, and that is indeed a problem for some of the reasons Stan cites. Bill Clinton, the DLC, and Dave Osborne tried to dispel this impression through launching a campaign in the early '90s to “reinvent government.” That put Democrats on the right side of the debate, or at least inoculated them against the usual charges. But when I read the current proposals circulating among Democratic candidates and think-tanks and policy groups—highlighted in my mind by the idea of turning the ill-functioning post office into a public banking system—I worry that on the question of government Democrats are going in exactly the wrong direction.

Right now, the Democrats need to focus on thematics rather than on demographics. Yes, government reform is the right direction, as long as the proposals (like the perennial middle class tax cut) take into account how American voters actually think and not how Democrats in certain zip codes on the east or west coasts believe they think. Done correctly such an approach will allow Democrats to gain votes among some constituencies that spurned them.

There will a problem in 2016, however, in presenting “government reform” as the centerpiece of a Democratic agenda. This kind of agenda works best when presented by the party that is out of power—like the Democrats were in 1992 or 2008. It falls flat, on the other hand, when a Democrat or Republican is attempting to succeed someone from their own party. In that case, the candidates' success depends primarily on convincing voters that their opponent would screw up government—as GHW Bush was able to do in 1988 with Dukakis or as Obama was able to do with Romney in 2012. For this reason, in 2016 the Democrats should basically frame their appeal around the appalling consequences that would result from a GOP victory and hope that the Republicans don't move to the center in 2016, but instead proudly present themselves as the party of governmental obstruction, religious fanaticism, and welfare for billionaires.

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John Judis is a senior writer at the *National Journal*.

## A ROBUST DEFENSE OF GOVERNMENT – NOT AS IT IS, BUT AS IT COULD BE

By MARK SCHMITT

Two insights from Stan Greenberg’s analysis and data suggest the foundations of a significant new approach to politics in the years ahead. The first insight is that Americans (and especially the working-class white men and women oversampled in the poll) are enthusiastic about a supportive government role that helps them take advantage of economic and personal opportunities—but that pervasive distrust of government, in all its forms, overshadows that positive feeling. The second insight is that a strong commitment to “reform” or “streamline” government can help to overcome that distrust.

These insights, taken together, should inspire a coherent alternative to the complacent, established messages of progressive politics. The first existing message has been simply to defend and market specific government programs that promise to support economic opportunity—not only existing programs such as the Affordable Care Act, but also paid family leave, affordable student loans and the rest of the modest agenda that goes by the name, “populism.” Good programs sell themselves, the assumption goes, perhaps aided by messages such as the 2012 Obama campaign video, “The Life Of Julia,” that showed government helping a woman along the path from HeadStart to Social Security and Medicare. But as Suzanne Mettler’s book *The Submerged State* and other research suggest, citizens may like the programs, but programs and policies alone, especially when they aren’t clearly shown to be government programs, don’t shake their doubts about the proposition that government can be a force for good.

The other prevailing progressive message has tried to connect with voters’ sense that politics “is bought and paid for by big donors and special interests.” This is language that Hillary Clinton, along with most incumbent Democrats, has enthusiastically embraced. A reader who takes in only this aspect of Greenberg’s article might be tempted to double down on the familiar denunciations of SuperPACs, the Koch brothers, and *Citizens United*, and, like Clinton, call for an amendment to the Constitution that would “fix our dysfunctional political system and get unaccountable money out of it once and for all.”

While this language mobilizes the activist base, and, ironically, seems to make for a lucrative fundraising pitch, there is at least one major drawback: It is not a positive solution and it digs the hole of distrust even deeper. For voters who aren’t members of MoveOn.org, amending the Constitution is distant, implausible and confusing. To insist that the only solution is something that will never happen can only deepen cynicism about government, made worse the higher the volume is turned up on the language of corruption, plutocrats, and special interests, without any realistic alternative.

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Mark Schmitt, Director, Political Reform Program, New America.

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A better approach would link an explicit defense of government, and an aggressive challenge to the anti-government ethos of the modern right, with a clear recognition that government can and should do much better, not only at elections and legislation, but in providing services in innovative, modern ways. Other opinion research suggests that the public's view of politics—that ugly, avoidable zone of mean elections and poisonous legislative fight—is inseparable from their doubts about government as a provider of benefits and security. That is, people distrust government to provide services fairly and efficiently, not because they have a bad experience at the Department of Motor Vehicles (most DMV's have become vastly more efficient), but because they see Congress is a highly visible zone of dysfunctional conflict. This is not an accident: Ugly politics sows doubts about government, and those who benefit from doubts about government and from inaction have little reason to practice compromise.

Reform of government, then, means more than just getting money out: It should involve specific, plausible reforms that would reengage citizens in the process of government, creating new ways to make all our voices matter. It should go well beyond the technocratic “Reinventing Government” initiatives of the Clinton Administration, with high-profile efforts to show that government can be as innovative as Silicon Valley, as well as accessible and responsive. “Streamlining” government does not have to involve only cutting costs, though that might be a part of it. The tax code, for example, is now as complex for low- and middle-income taxpayers as for the wealthy, littered with credits and deductions, some refundable and some not. Streamlining government could include a strong commitment to making the tax code simpler at the low end and shifting resources to fight fraud at the top end. It could include, for example, efforts to create a single, simple portal to government services ranging from health insurance under the Affordable Care Act to small business assistance—similar to the “no wrong door” initiatives in several states.

Above all, it should include a positive vision of reform of the political process, and the role of money, that does more than reimpose limits on the political influence of the very wealthy, but empowers citizens as donors and participants. And, the most difficult challenge of all, there has to be an effort to restore to the public face of government, the legislative process, a sense of compromise and shared commitment to the public good, despite deep disagreements.

All of this should fit into the context of a reaffirmation of the importance of government, not as a force outside of our lives, for good or ill, but as an expression of our shared aspirations. Stan Greenberg's article and data marks a new course, especially if progressives can recognize just how deeply it challenges the lines of argument that they have become comfortable with.

**GREENBERG OFFERS DEMOCRATS AN INTRIGUING WAY TO COMPETE FOR WHITE WORKING CLASS VOTERS WITHOUT COMPROMISING THEIR VALUES OR INDULGING RACIAL ANIMUS**

By JOAN WALSH

More than two decades after he helped us understand so-called “Reagan Democrats” back in the Bill Clinton years, Stan Greenberg continues to mine the thinking of the elusive (for Democrats) white working class voter as we head into what may be the Hillary Clinton years. His analysis offers intriguing clues about how Democrats can win key blocs of working class whites, most notably women, and particularly unmarried women.

Even after all this time—after eight years of economic growth under Clinton, and almost two terms of recovery under President Obama—cynicism about government continues to make the white working class skeptical of Democrats, who are perceived as the party of government. Back in the ‘80s, Reagan Democrats left their party because they explicitly identified “government” as the province of minorities who benefited at their expense, abetted by Democrats. Sadly, a sizeable subset of white working class voters believe the same thing today, and those whose views are driven by racial animus are probably beyond the reach of Democrats.

But for many of these voters—I so wanted to write “most,” but I don’t think any research, including Greenberg’s, lets us make that case—distrust of government isn’t about race. It comes from the perception (correct, in my view) that the rules have been rigged by the rich, and that government is controlled by the wealthy. White working class women and unmarried white women are the groups most likely to feel this way—and it’s Greenberg’s project to show how Democrats can craft a message that reassures these voters that they will reform and streamline government, not merely expand it.

It makes sense. Polling consistently shows that white non-college voters are the group that’s the least optimistic about the future. And correctly or not, they don’t see government helping them. In Democracy Corps polling, white working class voters are also the most likely to believe that big banks were the primary beneficiaries of the 2009 stimulus: 50 percent said the banks benefited a lot, more than eight times the number of middle class folks who said that. Only one in five said the Economic Recovery Act helped people like them.

But it’s the women among them, especially unmarried women, who are most pessimistic about their chances of getting ahead, and most convinced the rules are rigged for the wealthy. These pessimistic, downscale white women, Greenberg’s research found, need a promise to “streamline” government and lessen the power of money in politics before they’ll listen to Democrats pitch an agenda to improve their lives.

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Greenberg acknowledges up front my first twinge of skepticism about his pitch: prior research that's found "process concerns" like campaign finance reform, or getting money out of politics, are widely shared, but they don't ultimately drive votes. He shows how his work, along with research by Page Gardner's Women's Voices Women's Vote Action Fund, and David Donnelly's Every Voice, found that white working class voters, especially women, were much more receptive to Democratic priorities—expanding and strengthening Social Security and Medicare, investing in infrastructure, implementing family-friendly policies like paid leave, and efforts to insure equal pay for women—when it was preceded by messaging that committed to reform politics and government.

He's also up against Democrats who argue that the party ought to give up mooning after its lost white working class base. After all, Obama won just over a third of white non-college voters in 2012, but he trounced Mitt Romney anyway. Those arguments ignore the paradox of Obama's success. Yes, the president, and maybe future Democrats, had the capacity to get to 270 electoral votes (and well beyond) and win the White House despite doing poorly with white voters, and the white working class in particular. And yes, his or her coat tails often bring along Democratic House members and senators in those presidential election years, and even some governors.

But every two years, Democrats get creamed in midterm elections, at the congressional level and in statehouses as well, when the older, whiter GOP base reliably turns out and much of the Democratic base does not. Their candidates, and their voters too, suffer from this structural weakness. Republicans' success in winning statehouses, and controlling the redistricting process, then compounds that structural advantage; gerrymandered districts could keep the House out of reach for Democrats through 2020. Cutting the GOP's edge with some subgroups of white working class voters seems important—and Greenberg argues, it's possible.

I absolutely agree. And yet, in the real world, arguments to focus on white working class voters are often heard as a call to lessen reliance on the "rising American electorate," also known as "the Obama coalition:" African Americans, Latinos, Asians, millennials and unmarried women. I've always rejected a zero sum approach to these questions, as though the only way to reach white working class voters involved policies that would alienate non-whites. (That may be true, as Greenberg acknowledges, when it comes to southern working class whites).

Still, there's a finite amount of time, money and energy in the world of politics, and telling candidates, donors or foundations to devote resources to these as yet unreliable Democratic voters can be a tough sell in the world of politics. At one roundtable I attended after the 2012 election, there was candor about the difficulty of getting resources even to study approaches to reaching the white working class, since it would shave off money not going to projects mobilizing African Americans, Latinos, women or millennials.

It certainly looks like Hillary Clinton's campaign has decided it's smarter to focus on consolidating the Obama coalition than try to reassemble the Bill Clinton coalition of minorities plus downscale whites. Clinton's policy stands on mass incarceration and

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immigration reform reflect her genuine political beliefs; they're also evidence that she'll focus on the issues most pressing to African American and Latino voters, without worrying about traditional white working class concerns about crime and immigrants.

But Clinton's team is also clearly focused on subsets of white working class voters, particularly unmarried women. When I heard Clinton say she'd consider the pursuit of a constitutional amendment to overturn Citizens United, my immediate thought was: she's read this Greenberg piece! I was also impressed by the way she wove declining life expectancy among working class white women into her important speech calling for an end to the era of mass incarceration. Her campaign believes she has enormous potential to win the support of white unmarried women, senior officials told me recently. Obama won them by 20 points in 2008; his edge dropped to 4 points in 2012, but he still carried them; it's reasonable to believe Clinton could restore the 2008 margin, or possibly better.

I'm agnostic about Greenberg's particular approach: meaning, I don't know enough to say whether he's right that a good government, streamline bureaucracy, and get-big-money-out-of-politics argument will work. But he offers Democrats an intriguing way to compete for white working class voters—especially women—without compromising their values, or playing on the edges of indulging racial animus. And intuitively, I think it's probably correct: yes, Republicans worked hard to convince white working class voters that Democrats were giving their hard earned money to minorities. But those voters aren't wrong to observe that their former party became much more focused on winning over the wealthy than improving their lives.

My personal bias is that a clean up government pitch should be combined with a promise to rein in the power of Wall Street. I've always hung onto a data point from 2008 and 2010: In the Obama-McCain race, a majority of voters in CNN exit polls who blamed Wall Street for the economy's crash voted for Democrats; in the 2010 midterms, they went Republican, believing Obama hadn't done enough to punish the banks or help their victims.

Still, I don't expect any presidential campaign to make this its major focus; again, the nominee's job is to get to 270. Still, getting to 270 is made easier when Democrats can count on swing states like Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan, which are heavy on white working class voters, and where Obama did better with those voters than he did in the rest of the country in 2012. Greenberg reminds us that outside the South and rural America, Democrats can compete for working class whites, and especially women, with a pitch that plays to their core values, and won't alienate other groups. There's no downside to trying.

## THE BATTLE FOR WORKING PEOPLE BEGINS WITH REACHING THEM

By *KAREN NUSSBAUM*

Two concepts lurk at the heart of political strategist Stan Greenberg's piece about how Democrats can cohere a winning election strategy. First, garnering the vote of the Rising American Electorate—people of color, young people and single women—is not sufficient; progressives need to reach the white working class, especially white, working-class single women—to build a New American Majority that can win elections and push through progressive policies. Second, Greenberg asserts that in order to persuade working people and white single women to embrace a progressive agenda, one needs to acknowledge and respond to their deep distrust of government, which they see as corrupt and deaf to their problems.

Given those insights, Greenberg and others in search of progressive gains have an avenue for success with Working America. Every day, all year long, year after year, Working America reaches white, working-class people who don't have a union on the job—and more than half of those are working-class women. Whether Working America canvassers knock on doors in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, or Pine Bluff, Arkansas, they have proven the effectiveness of conversations that couple the corrosive effect of money in politics with an appealing progressive platform for change. While our experience supports much of what Greenberg argues, including the notion that white, working-class, women voters are, in fact, winnable, we would go a step further: Our experience suggests that even Republican strongholds such as the South and West show signs of weakness when voters are engaged.

White women are the largest demographic among Working America's membership, accounting for 1.3 million of our 3 million members. Based on what we hear at the doors every night, it's little wonder that white, working-class and single women voters react positively to Greenberg's narrative about streamlining and reforming government. After all, what's government to them? Democrats have done far too little to reach out to white, working-class voters in recent elections, and government has lagged on addressing their core economic needs. In fact, though these voters may be rising in the electorate, they are sinking fast in today's economy. These women are reachable in 2016, and Democrats must actively engage them with policies that outline new and far-reaching economic solutions.

Working women and men are deep in the midst of a dramatic change process, because they simply have no choice in the matter. America's white, working-class experience is not the same one of 35 years ago, when Ronald Reagan came into office, nor is it the same as more than 20 years ago, when Bill Clinton first took the White House. Today's members of the working class are confronted with the realities of the emerging precarious economy,

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which has unstable, erratic work as one of its centerpieces. Unpredictable scheduling demands, relentless low pay, nonexistent benefits and part-time work are today's normal. Greenberg is correct to point out that women often bear the brunt of these new burdens. They're more likely than men to hold the part-time, low-paying jobs and are saddled with much of the child and elder care responsibilities.

Working America organizers are out in a dozen states, holding front-porch conversations with working people who struggle to stay afloat. A full 85 percent of our members are in working- or lower-middle-class households making less than \$75,000 a year. Given the reservoir of information on working people we have collected over the years, we looked back at nine years of data gathered on their doorsteps—starting in 2007 (the last contested Democratic primary season) and continuing until now—to identify emerging trends. One clear statistic broke with common assumptions about women voters. Overwhelmingly, our working-class and lower-middle-class women members told us that good jobs were their No. 1 priority (40%), beating out health care (32%) and education (14%). It turns out, these working women's top priority was not so different than that of men in this income bracket, 45 percent of whom chose good jobs as their top priority. And though Greenberg suggests that the white working class is more solidly red in the South and Mountain states, our organizers have found that working women in purplish states such as North Carolina and Colorado are also deeply concerned about good jobs and are open to economic solutions.

When working-class voters talk about “good jobs,” they mean more than tax credits. They mean bold, new policies that help them get a handle on their schedules, their paychecks and their long-term economic security. They mean a government that incentivizes corporations to create and retain full-time, well-paying jobs. And, as Greenberg points out, they're keen on policies and messages that address the power imbalance in elections and in government. Even in conservative-leaning states, programs and laws that counter growing corporate power are key, like reviving workers' ability to join together in collective bargaining.

While Greenberg certainly is right that working people often feel that elected leaders do not prioritize their needs, our experience is that white, working-class Americans are not anti-government. Rather, they are dispirited and disengaged, and have lost belief in their own collective power. Once upon a time unions served as a credible source of information on economic issues for such voters, yet now Fox News and talk radio's call for small government and individual responsibility fills that void.

If Democrats want to win these voters, they must first re-engage with them and repair the base, one by one. Over the last decade and a half, Working America has found that we can go through any working-class neighborhood in this country, sign up members and dramatically influence their votes. We reawakened a nascent belief that average people could do something about jobs and the economy. Just engaging in those conversations was enough, apparently, to inspire voters to vote progressively. In the 2014 election, for instance, research by Hart Research Associates of canvassed and general public voters in five senate battlegrounds reveals that women canvassed by Working America voted for the Democratic candidate at a rate of 13 points higher than you would expect based on their party identification, versus five points for all women. Independent voters who were contacted

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by Working America were 11 points more likely to support the Democratic candidate than those we didn't contact. In addition, Working America members tend to vote in more elections, even though rates are still too low. Women in single-person households who are Working America members are more likely to routinely vote (46%) than are those in the general public (38%), voting in at least three of six major recent elections. What's our secret? We talk to voters about the economy, highlight the outsized role corporate cash plays in electing leaders and influencing government, and give them hope that by uniting with other working people they can tilt the odds in their favor.

"I think the Republicans are trying to create a monarchy, get rid of the middle class, and create a bigger divide," Jan-Marie Weaver of Hastings, Minnesota, recently told one of our canvassers. "They're keeping the poor people poor, and the rich richer." Weaver is clearly ready for a middle-class economic narrative. It's up to the Democratic Party to reach out to her and give her a real reason to believe that greater economic security is on the 2016 horizon.

**A CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT FOR WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE**

By RICHARD D. KAHLBERG

Stanley Greenberg's illuminating *Washington Monthly* article makes two central points: that Democrats need to do better among white working-class voters if progressives wish to bring about major social change; and that the goal of winning more white working-class voters is achievable if the right appeals are made. I think there is good evidence to support both claims. Indeed, we need something akin to a civil rights movement for working people of all races—both to bring working-class whites back into the Democratic fold, and to resurrect the American Dream.

**I. Why the White Working-Class is Necessary for the Democratic Coalition.**

Barack Obama won two presidential elections without much support from working-class whites. This development gave rise to the unfortunate belief that the old George McGovern coalition—educated whites, minorities, women, and young people—was the key to Democratic success in an era when the size of the white working-class vote is shrinking.

Greenberg, however, makes a powerful case that “Democrats cannot win big or consistently enough, deep enough down the ticket, or broadly enough in the state, unless they run much stronger with white working-class and downscale voters.” Obama's electoral success at the presidential level obscures disastrous results for Democrats down ticket. **Robert Draper, writing**<sup>1</sup> in the *New York Times Magazine*, notes Democrats are unlikely to retake the House until 2022 at best. With Democrats holding only 18 or 50 gubernatorial seats and controlling both houses in only 11 state legislatures, Draper concludes, “Not since the Hoover Administration has the Democratic Party's overall power been so low.”

Moreover, Democrats need the white working-class to help fuel major action on the nation's most pressing challenge: skyrocketing income inequality. As **Leo Casey of the Albert Shanker Institute notes**,<sup>2</sup> it was the great dream of labor and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph to create a cross-racial class-based coalition to bring about greater economic equality. Instead, with white working-class voters trending Republican in election after election, the Democrats have a largely race-based cross-class coalition that has less interest in challenging fundamental economic inequalities.

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Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at The Century Foundation, is coauthor (with Moshe Marvit) of *Why Labor Organizing Should Be a Civil Right* (2012).

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/magazine/the-great-democratic-crack-up-of-2016.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/magazine/the-great-democratic-crack-up-of-2016.html?_r=0)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.shankerinstitute.org/event/education-policy-political-polarization>

## II. How to Appeal to the White Working-Class?

How can Democrats today appeal to white-working class voters, who provided solid support from the 1930's through the 1960s? Barney Frank's memoir, *Frank*, suggests<sup>3</sup> that Democrats need not (and should not) turn their back on civil rights advances for minorities but rather expand the progress for working-class people of all races. Frank writes, "The chief political problem for Democrats is not anger at integration but the belief that the Democratic focus on 'pleasing minorities' extends to giving them preference for scarce jobs." He continues, "White working-class and middle-class men have not lost faith in government in general; they have lost faith in the willingness of Democrats to use the power of government to protect them from hurtful economic trends."

In a similar vein, Greenberg's research finds that many white working-class voters believe that "jobs don't pay enough to live on" and that big business interests "give big money to politicians and then use lobbyists to win special tax breaks and special laws that cost the country billions."

In an interesting twist, Greenberg finds that campaign finance reform—normally thought of as a good-government cause embraced mostly by highly-educated liberals—resonates strongly with white working-class voters.

What specific policies could embody Frank's call for broadening civil rights to help working people, and Greenberg's call for restoring our democracy? Throughout much of American history, organized labor has been both the nation's strongest voice for good paying jobs and the chief counterweight in elections to large business interests. So any policy solution should seek ways to resurrect labor unions, as this nation has done in previous periods of grave economic inequality. While raising the minimum wage is a good first step for moving the poor to the working-class, only unions can help move the working-class to the middle.

What can be done to help workers unionize? While many have given up hope on the American labor movement, looking abroad, it is clear that labor's decimation at home is not the inevitable result of economic globalization. Other countries, also subject to competitive global pressures, have much stronger labor movements in part because the laws in those nations are much more supportive of union organizing, as Freedom House has documented.<sup>4</sup> In the U.S., weak labor laws allow employers to discriminate against workers who try to organize a union. Employers routinely fire or demote ringleaders in organizing drives, and pay small penalties for breaking the law.

My colleague Moshe Marvit and I have called<sup>5</sup> for making labor organizing a civil right, allowing workers of all races access to strong civil rights penalties when employers discriminate against employees for exercising their rights to unionize. Two Congressmen—Rep. Keith Ellison and civil rights giant John Lewis—have introduced legislation<sup>6</sup> to make labor organizing a civil right. Similar initiatives could be passed at the state and local level. (Unions could also take steps to better harness the power of technology to promote organizing.)

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<sup>3</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/15/books/review/frank-barney-franks-memoir.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/15/books/review/frank-barney-franks-memoir.html?_r=0)

<sup>4</sup>[https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline\\_images/WorkerRightsFULLBooklet-FINAL.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/WorkerRightsFULLBooklet-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>5</sup><http://tcf.org/bookstore/detail/why-labor-organizing-should-be-a-civil-right>

<sup>6</sup><http://thehill.com/opinion/op-ed/213870-making-workers-rights-a-civil-right>

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Making labor organizing a civil right is one important way to giving white working-class voters a direct stake in a civil rights movement for workers and to underline their common cause with black and Latino workers. Americans are rightly proud of the significant advances we have made for civil rights for African Americans, Latinos, women, and gays. It's now time to complement that progress with a civil rights movement for workers—including working-class whites—to bring them back to their natural home in the Democratic Party.

## IS THERE A VIABLE PROGRESSIVE STRATEGY TO INCREASE WHITE WORKING CLASS SUPPORT IN THE “CONSERVATIVE HEARTLAND”?

By ANDREW LEVISON

The central argument that Stan presents in his *Washington Monthly* article is the idea that white working class people may express support for populist policies and programs on opinion surveys but that this will simply not translate into political support for Democratic candidates so long as these voters perceive government as overwhelmingly corrupt and controlled by special interests.

As Stan says

These voters, we shall see, are open to an expansive Democratic economic agenda...yet they are only ready to listen when they think Democrats understand their deeply held belief that politics has been corrupted and government has failed. *Championing reform is the price of admission with these voters.* These white working class and downscale voters are acutely conscious of the growing role of big money in politics and of a government that works for the 1 percent, not them.

Stan has been vocal in insisting on this point for over a decade and has developed a substantial body of survey evidence to support this conclusion. Here are some of the key surveys that his organization, Democracy Corps, has conducted in the last several years regarding attitudes toward government corruption and government reform:

2012 – [In Congressional Battleground Voters Intensely Concerned about Money in Politics](#)<sup>1</sup>

2013 – [Revolt Against Washington and Corrupted Politics](#)<sup>2</sup>

2014 – [Voters Ready to Act against Big Money in Politics Lessons from the 2014 Midterm Election](#)<sup>3</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/910/dcor.pcaf.memo.093012.v4.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/960/Money%20in%20Politics%20Memo.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/994/EveryVoice\\_PostElect\\_111014\\_Memo.pdf](http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/994/EveryVoice_PostElect_111014_Memo.pdf)

As Stan notes, however, within this broad national trend there are actually two very distinct challenges:

The hurdles to reaching the white working class look so daunting because of the success of Republicans in building up huge margins with those voters in the South, plains and Rocky Mountain regions. Obama won only 25 percent of white non-college voters in the South and 33 percent in the Mountain West...Voter attitudes do indeed put most of these voters out of reach.

It is important to remember, however, that three-fourths of American voters live outside this GOP Conservative Heartland. In the rest of the country, the battle for the swing white working class and downscale voters is very much alive...On Election Day 2012, Obama won 40 percent of the white non-college voters outside the Republicans' regional base. That number still poses a problem, but it would not take major gains with these voters to change the Democrats fortunes in these areas.

For many Democratic political strategists the immediate reaction to this basic reality has been to conclude that Dems should basically write off the difficult regions and concentrate their resources on areas where Democratic candidates are within striking distance of victory. There are, however, two substantial arguments against this approach:

First, this approach implies depriving grass roots Democratic activists and supporters in the "conservative heartland" regions of anything beyond the most minimal resources. While every national electoral strategy inevitably involves allocating scarce financial resources, this is a morally and socially distasteful option because it implies literally "giving up" on these regions to a substantial degree and accepting the idea that the GOP has them permanently under its control.

Second, this approach effectively insures the perpetuation of **very weak state and local party organizations**<sup>4</sup> in these regions, a result that inherently guarantees a vicious cycle of continually low Democratic support on Election Day. This approach to allocating resources was deeply debated during and after the 2002 and 2004 elections when Howard Dean proposed the "50 State Strategy" as an alternative to the narrow targeting of only carefully selected states and precincts and the arguments that advocates of the 50 state strategy presented at that time remain as significant today as they were then. Focusing all resources on only a subset of targeted states and precincts leaves little or no margin for error on Election Day and does nothing to systematically build a progressive political infrastructure that will eventually become vital in many areas where **demographic change is gradually creating more competitive political environments**<sup>5</sup> for Democratic candidates.

It is important to note that the results of the 2010 and 2014 elections very substantially strengthened the case for continuing to invest more than token effort and resources in currently low support areas because they made it clear that Democrats must eventually

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<sup>4</sup><http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/campaign/238846-rural-democrats-not-happy-with-party-committees>

<sup>5</sup><http://politics.blog.ajc.com/2015/04/14/a-deeper-look-at-georgias-fast-changing-electorate/>

attempt to regain control of many of the state legislatures and congressional districts that they have lost in recent years or face a permanent inability to enact their agenda, even if they can consistently win the White House.

But what political strategy can possibly make any significant difference in these heartland areas where the level of support for the Democratic Party is currently so dramatically low?

To analyze this question, Democratic strategists need to begin by focusing on one key fact: that even in these conservative heartland communities many “liberal” policies advocated by Democrats are significantly more popular than the Democratic Party itself.

As Lilliana Mason, a political scientist at Rutgers University noted in a recent [Washington Post op-ed](#):<sup>6</sup>

Alaska elected a Republican senator and passed a recreational marijuana initiative, along with an increase in the minimum wage. North Dakota elected a Republican congressman and rejected a Personhood amendment. Arkansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota elected a Republican senator and governor, and passed a minimum wage increase. This led Zachary Goldfarb to write in the *Washington Post* that: “Americans will vote for Republicans even though they disagree with them on everything...on the biggest issues facing Congress, [voters] still agree with Democrats. That includes issues like raising the minimum wage, making the rich pay more in taxes, letting illegal immigrants stay in the United States, taking action to stem global warming, legalizing same sex marriage and fixing the Affordable Care Act rather than repealing it.”

[My research](#)<sup>7</sup> suggests a key reason why this happened: our partisan identities motivate us far more powerfully than our views about issues. Although voters may insist in the importance of their values and ideologies, they actually care less about policy and more that their team wins.

This “team spirit” is increasingly powerful because our party identities line up with other powerful identities, such as religion and race. Over the last few decades, Republicans have generally grown increasingly white and churchgoing, while Democrats have become more non-white and secular. This sorting of identities makes us care even more about winning, and less about what our government actually gets done.

This helps explain why all of the five states noted above voted for liberal policies even though they have substantial proportions of white churchgoing Republicans. Indeed, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota have some of the highest percentages of white churchgoing Republicans of any state.

When social and partisan identities align, we begin to detach our votes for candidates from our policy interests. The most important thing is to stick with the team. It doesn't matter if the team you voted for opposes the very policy you voted to enact.

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/11/21/why-people-vote-republican-but-support-liberal-policies/>

<sup>7</sup>[https://www.academia.edu/9409076/Smells\\_Like\\_Team\\_Spirit\\_How\\_Partisan\\_Sorting\\_and\\_Identity\\_Polarize\\_Political\\_Behavior](https://www.academia.edu/9409076/Smells_Like_Team_Spirit_How_Partisan_Sorting_and_Identity_Polarize_Political_Behavior)

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This disjunction between the level of support for liberal or progressive policies on the one hand and for the Democratic Party on the other can be seen in every region of the country but the discrepancy is dramatically more apparent in the “conservative heartland” than in non-heartland areas.

It is easy to say that the heartland areas are “uniquely conservative” because of a volatile mix of historic white racial attitudes in the South and religious fundamentalism and anti-government conservatism throughout the heartland areas as a whole, and in one sense this is self-evidently true. But, considered more carefully, this really does not explain a great deal. In fact, in a certain respect the explanation is tautological—the three factors noted above do not “explain” the increased conservatism of the heartland regions so much as they define it.

To understand the distinct characteristics of these heartland regions that makes their pro-Democratic tilt so much lower not only than the levels of support that exist in other areas but also than the level of support for various liberal reforms, we must begin by distinguishing between two very distinct concepts: cultural traditionalism and conservatism.

In both heartland and non-heartland areas of the U.S., white working class Americans are overwhelmingly cultural traditionalists. Their political opinions are deeply shaped by four basic value systems rooted in the major social institutions of working class life—the church, the military, small business and the school system. These institutions systematically inculcate the values they represent—patriotism, religious piety, free enterprise and the “American system of government,” creating an interlocking set of value systems that define right and wrong, true and false and good and bad.

In non-heartland areas, such as the formerly industrial regions of the East and Midwest, however, there were also countervailing value systems in working class life as well. Trade unions, precinct level Democratic clubs and liberal catholic churches provided support for an alternative value system that supported New Deal liberalism.

In the conservative heartland regions these countervailing institutions did not exist and, as a result, the four traditional value systems seemed entirely hegemonic. They were not and are not visualized as “conservative” or even particularly “political” ideas by working people in these communities but rather as obvious, self-evident truths that ought to be completely apparent to anyone with even a modicum of “simple common sense”.

But within the framework of the essentially universal respect for traditional social institutions and culture in white working class life, there nonetheless exists a profound division between conservative and progressive outlooks—a split that is expressed as the difference between basically tolerant and intolerant views on social issues and between basically conservative and somewhat more populist economic views. This profound division is generally not understood or even perceived by many educated liberals and progressives because both points of view are expressed entirely within the language and cultural framework of working class cultural traditionalism.

During Wednesday night prayer meetings at roadside Evangelical churches, for example, some individuals will support a path to citizenship for undocumented aliens because that is “what Jesus would want us to do.” Some white working class plumbers and carpenters who

revile “government” in general will nonetheless firmly support “populist” policies like expanding Social Security benefits, protecting Medicare from privatization or even guaranteeing access to health insurance despite preexisting conditions because they interpret these social policies as benefits that hard working people have “earned” with years of labor and therefore fully deserve. Some white working class military veterans will oppose future involvement in far-away wars not on pacifist grounds but on the basis of their own personal experience in warfare. It is because of individuals like these that opinion polls consistently detect a variety of “progressive” attitudes among white working class voters at significantly higher levels than their partisan leanings.

(Note, however, that these poll results should not be misinterpreted as demonstrating the existence of a coherent group of consistently “liberal” or “progressive” white working class men and women who would seem likely to be easily won to the Democratic cause. Rather, in most cases, different white workers have different specific and individual issues on which they depart from the conservative consensus while retaining conservative views on others. An avid hunter or outdoorsman, for example, may support wilderness protection and other environmental measures while disliking illegal aliens. A Texas rancher whose family has worked with Mexican cowhands for generations will support a path to citizenship but simultaneously dismiss welfare as a handout. Families with gay members will support same-sex marriage but oppose all abortions).

When it comes to political parties and candidates, however, the situation is far less ambiguous. The inescapable fact is that in the heartland areas over the last 40 years the GOP has powerfully identified itself as the champion of core traditional cultural values and successfully branded Democrats as the representatives of alien groups and philosophies. As a result, in these regions the GOP appears to white working class voters as the embodiment of “common sense” and the “real America” while Democrats are viewed as the representatives of city-based minorities, university-educated elites and limousine liberals.

This demonizing of the Democrats is, as a matter of fact, a much more powerful force in the conservative heartland than is the positive appeal of the GOP itself as a political party. **As Jonathan Chait recently noted:**<sup>8</sup>

[political scientists Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster] introduce a phenomenon they call *negative partisanship*. That is to say, voters form strong loyalties based more on loathing for the opposing party than on the old kind of tribal loyalty (“My daddy was a Democrat, his daddy was a Democrat ...”) that used to prevail. The party system has split along racial, cultural, and religious lines, creating a kind of tribal system where each party’s supporters regard the other side with incomprehension and loathing.

This analysis is echoed by other political scientists as well. **As Dana Milbank notes:**<sup>9</sup>

It has long been agreed that race is the deepest divide in American society. But that is no longer true, say [political scientists] Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood... Americans now discriminate more on the basis of party than on race, gender or

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<sup>8</sup><http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2015/04/negative-partisanship-has-transformed-politics.html>

<sup>9</sup>[http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americas-new-tribal-cycle-of-hatred/2015/04/17/67794040-e50a-11e4-905f-cc896d379a32\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americas-new-tribal-cycle-of-hatred/2015/04/17/67794040-e50a-11e4-905f-cc896d379a32_story.html)

any of the other divides we typically think of—and that discrimination extends beyond politics into personal relationships and non-political behaviors. Americans increasingly live in neighborhoods with like-minded partisans, marry fellow partisans and disapprove of their children marrying mates from the other party, and they are more likely to choose partners based on partisanship than physical or personality attributes.

The substantially increased role of negative partisanship in American politics leads to a profound difference between the way daily political life operates in the conservative heartland and non-heartland areas today. In the non-Heartland areas individual political loyalties are indeed often just as intense as in the heartland areas but within local community and daily neighborhood life politics is nonetheless understood and accepted as *contested*—at little league games and church socials Democratic and Republican white workers are friendly to each other and socialize together comfortably despite their deeply different political views. They accept the idea that some of their neighbors think differently than they do and that some yard signs in their neighborhood will support candidates other than their own.

In the conservative heartland areas, on the other hand, politics is simply not contested. Every single yard sign in many neighborhoods and communities will support candidates of the Republican Party leading to what sociologists call a “spiral of silence”; people with dissenting views decide not to express their opinions in public while advocates of conservative opinions loudly and confidently dominate daily social life. **As Lydia Bean, a perceptive observer of conservative evangelicals recently noted, for example:**<sup>10</sup>

Many outsiders assume that evangelical mobilization is a rather top-down affair: pastors and national elites tell evangelicals to get out and vote for conservatives. But I discovered that a much broader set of volunteer or “lay” religious leaders play a key role in weaving politics into local religious life. The Sunday School teacher who makes off-handed derogatory remarks about “liberals.” The small group host with the portrait of George W. Bush on her fridge. The pro-life friend at church who reminds you to get out and vote this November—and to remember that the Democrats are for abortion, Republicans are for life.

These local opinion leaders translate national conservative messages into the everyday social worlds of evangelical churches. I call them “captains” in the Culture War, because they are embedded in the everyday lives of their followers. By contrast, James Dobson, Glenn Beck, or Mike Huckabee are “generals” in the Culture War over issues like abortion and same-sex marriage. Culture War captains are the people in your life who model what it means to be a good Christian, who help you map your political identity against out-groups like “liberals,” “feminists,” and “gay rights activists.”

When election season rolls around, evangelicals are already primed with a shared narrative about American national identity, which blames the country’s moral decline on activist “liberals” trying to limit the religious freedom of Christians. This narrative is promoted by Christian Right interest groups, but it is also promoted by media sources and organizations that are not perceived as “political” by rank-and-file evangelicals.

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<sup>10</sup><http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/12/19/why-white-evangelicals-rule-the-midterms/>

For example, most evangelicals in my study saw Focus on the Family as a resource for parenting and personal devotion, not as a partisan operation. Likewise, pro-life activists whom I interviewed did not see themselves as “political” leaders. For them, the pro-life movement was a thoroughly religious movement; indeed, most of their activities with pro-life groups involved prayer and Bible study, not protest and advocacy.

So when Republican candidates invoke Culture War narrative in campaigns, their claims resonate with language that is continuously reinforced by ostensibly non-political, spiritual practices. Conservative frames resonate with evangelicals in election years, because they are reinforced in their everyday religious lives by local leaders who model a conservative political identity.

The same social process operates with other social issues. Grass roots advocates of the National Rifle Association provide local opinion leaders who are unchallenged when vocally opposing gun control, anti-Moslem advocates provide local opinion leaders who advocate militaristic foreign policies without challenge and so on across the entire range of national issues.

Faced with this daunting political environment, the difficult question is the following: how can progressives build a progressive infrastructure in regions where direct election-year door-to-door organizing among white working class voters can—at best—only increase the vote for Democrats by a few percentage points before grinding to a halt.

The key to an answer lies in correctly defining the basic cognitive structure of existing white working class attitudes and then seeking strategies to promote change from “within” that framework, so to speak, rather than attempting to transform it from the outside.

The key features of the existing white working class attitudes in the conservative heartland areas are the following:

1. A perception of cultural traditionalism as a set of “hegemonic” values—as a series of common sense realities about which every normal person obviously agrees.
2. A personal and idiosyncratic mixture of tolerant and intolerant or conservative and populist attitudes displayed by different individuals on a range of specific social and economic issues.
3. An overwhelming dismissal of the Democratic Party as representing fundamentally alien social groups and political philosophies.

A major reason why it is so difficult to change these attitudes is that they are mutually reinforcing. A canvasser going door to door in white working class neighborhoods next year to promote the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, for example, will continually encounter counter-arguments that jump directly from one of these three factors to another in what seems to the respondent as a single, seamless and coherent web of objections.

But while it is extremely difficult to attack this entire complex cluster of attitudes directly, individual elements of it can be weakened and destabilized by forms of progressive organizing that do not require winning immediate support for Democratic candidates but rather promote intermediate ideas that weaken the grip of the dominant conservative ideology without requiring a wholesale transformation of attitudes.

There are two general approaches that can be employed:

The first is single-issue organizing, generally on specific economic issues. Spontaneous grass-roots protest groups have emerged in a wide variety of working class communities on issues like toxic dumping, fracking, and other immediate community problems. Working on a broader, multi-issue basis, the largest and most sophisticated organization following this strategy in white working class communities is Working America which builds grass roots organizations around whatever local issues residents see as most pressing. Using this approach, Working America has built significant local organizations in a wide range of white working class neighborhoods across the country. Although relatively little known, the full extent of Working America's organizing outreach is remarkable as Working America's Executive Director Karen Nussbaum explains in her contribution to this roundtable (another description of Working America's activities is given [HERE](#)<sup>11</sup> and [HERE](#)<sup>12</sup>).

It is important to note that while organizing around specific local issues is not initially partisan in character, the issues that are raised almost invariably lead to a focus on corruption and indifference to white working class communities by various levels of government and from there suggest the need for various kinds of government reform. In the conservative heartland, the relevant state and local governments are invariably run by the GOP, thus inherently imparting a partisan element into grass-roots mobilization of white workers around local issues. As a result, initially nonpartisan organizing efforts by Working America have often led to increased political participation and pro-Democratic mobilization.

Second, single-issue organizing can also provide a foundation for political campaigns by independent political candidates. There is an unoccupied and available political "niche" in conservative heartland districts for genuine grass-roots white working class candidates who depart in some respects from the GOP's rigid free-market economic orthodoxy and bitter social intolerance while still exhibiting authentic "real American" cultural traditionalism. In the 2014 elections, for example, an eclectic group of independent candidates in Kansas, Alaska and North Dakota significantly weakened the political stranglehold the Republican Party ordinarily held in these areas by advocating a variety of mixtures of conservative and centrist positions.

On one level suggesting even passive support for independent candidates would seem to be in conflict with the larger goal of maximizing Democratic voting. But when one takes into account that at the current time many white working class voters in conservative heartland areas will simply and categorically refuse to vote for a Democrat, the role of independent candidates takes on a different and potentially more productive character.

Independent candidates have the potential to increase the divisions and conflicts between the extremists and the moderates within the GOP, an outcome which would be profoundly healthy for the future of America. In some cases it may be possible for Democrats to throw their support to independent candidates with whom they judge they can work with in the legislature on some issues as an alternative to splitting the vote three ways on election day and insuring a GOP victory. In other cases, the threat posed by independent candidates may allow moderates within the GOP to break the control the extremists now hold over

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<sup>11</sup><http://www.thenation.com/blog/173875/afl-cios-non-union-worker-group-headed-workplaces-fifty-states#>

<sup>12</sup>[http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/\\_memos/tds\\_SM\\_Levison\\_Working\\_America.pdf](http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Levison_Working_America.pdf)

the primary process. Right now, the extremists who participate disproportionately in GOP primaries can force all candidates to embrace their agenda because the candidates know that, regardless of how much they have to grovel and pander to the extremists in order to get the nomination, they can then be confident of winning the general elections in their heavily Republican states or districts. With the threat of third party independent candidates potentially depriving them of a majority in the general election if the primary process forces them to move too far to the right, more moderate GOP candidates will be forced to fight for control of the local parties once again.

In the long-run, of course, the goal for Democrats must always be to win popular support for Democratic candidates and the Democratic Party itself. But in the short term, in conservative heartland districts competing in three way contests with Republican, Democratic and also independent candidates, or supporting independent candidates for office can be more advantageous to Dems than participating in two way contests that the GOP is essentially guaranteed to win. Anything that weakens GOP unity and undermines its currently hegemonic position in conservative heartland districts has the potential to benefit Democrats in the long run.

It is true that demographic change is gradually eroding the foundations of GOP dominance in many heartland districts but, **as the most recent projections show**<sup>13</sup> in most cases Democratic majorities are not in the cards in the near to medium term future. Under these circumstances, seeking to weaken the GOP's currently unchallenged hold over the loyalty of white working class voters in heartland areas by supporting single issue organizing and certain independent candidates is a sensible interim strategy.

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<sup>13</sup><https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/report/2015/02/24/107261/states-of-change/>

## WWC, THE PRECARIAT, AND THE SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

By JOHN RUSSO

The traditionally-defined white working-class and “downscale” voters described by Stan Greenberg have a well-founded disbelief in the Democratic Party. This disbelief has even expanded to include the black working class, which has benefited little from the first African-American Presidency.

The disbelief is based on a history of betrayals of campaign promises and “Republican-lite” economic and social legislation that have undermined working-class support in both the white and black communities. Democrat reforms in the 1990s<sup>1</sup>, such as the Violent Crime and Enforcement Act (VCEA, 1994), the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWOA, 1996), and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, 1994), resulted in policies that had an immediate and devastating impact on people of color, the white working class, and organized labor. Particularly in regions like the Rustbelt, white working-class support for Democrats has shifted increasingly to Republicans. Michael Lind puts this in an historical context, suggesting that Democrats are now largely “anti-New Deal.”<sup>2</sup>

So we should not be surprised that Greenberg found that predominantly white working-class and downscale voters have been leaving the Democratic Party. But Greenberg also found that the disenchantment with Democrats has increased within other segments of the Party’s core constituency. People are not necessarily voting Republican. More likely, they are not voting at all. For example, in 2014, Ohio had second smallest voter turnout<sup>3</sup> in recent history, with Republican voters over 50 overrepresented. In Democrat strongholds in Northeast Ohio, the turnout was below 40%, and in working-class Youngstown, only 12,000 people voted.

Low turnout is a problem, but I think the Democratic Party has a much bigger problem than Greenberg and other pollsters suggest: the party is losing the support of millennials, a core constituency that doesn’t fit easily into the standard pollster definition of working class. Because such definitions emphasize education, they leave out millennials, many of whom belong to the growing precariat. Some have high school degrees, so polls identify them as working class, but many have bachelors’ and advanced degrees, so in polls they count as middle class—even though their earnings and working conditions would put them in the working or poverty class. As more people complete college, while polls continue to identify class by education, it can seem like the working class is shrinking. Some pundits have even argued that Democrats can forget the working class.

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<sup>1</sup><https://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/2015/05/04/guilt-by-association-hillary-and-the-working-class/>

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.salon.com/2014/12/09/democrats\\_vs\\_the\\_new\\_deal\\_who\\_really\\_runs\\_the\\_party\\_and\\_why\\_it\\_might\\_surprise\\_you/](http://www.salon.com/2014/12/09/democrats_vs_the_new_deal_who_really_runs_the_party_and_why_it_might_surprise_you/)

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.cleveland.com/open/index.ssf/2014/11/ohio\\_2014\\_election\\_turnout\\_cou.html](http://www.cleveland.com/open/index.ssf/2014/11/ohio_2014_election_turnout_cou.html)

In many ways, downscale millennials have a different mistrust problem than do older working-class voters. Millennials probably don't have either a clear memory of or a strong sense of resistance to the policy betrayals of the older working class. Rather, they have learned from their own experience, especially in the workplace, that government is likely to be of little help, regardless of the political party.

While Greenberg doesn't provide a clear definition of what he means by "downscale voters," a recent National Employment Law Report may offer some insight. Currently, 42% of the American workforce makes less than \$15/hour. This includes retail and service workers, as well as those in manufacturing where, for example, 50% of autoworkers now make less than \$15/hour. In the future, while more people will have college degrees, only one out of four jobs will require a college degree. Of the remaining 75% of the workforce, most will work in the lower wage and benefit sectors of the economy. Perhaps this is why a recent [Gallup poll](#)<sup>4</sup> showed that fewer people see themselves as middle class and a growing number of Americans self identify as working and lower class. Guy Standing has identified these workers as part of the precariat, and his research shows that their numbers are growing.

These downscale precariat millennials may not share all of the working class's same ideas about work and cultural values, they do share many economic security issues. But they deal with those issues differently. In Youngstown, [researchers](#)<sup>5</sup> have found that millennials have internalized their insecurity, and they justify their precarious work situations as offering more freedom. Many willingly cobble together multiple contingent jobs, pursue avocations over vocations, lack confidence in institutions, and view their personal relationships as contingent and episodic, like their work relations. This leaves them without a sense of agency, and that in turn has led to a growing depoliticization and lack of hope. As the playwright David Mamet has suggested, freedom is what you believe in when you believe in nothing else. If they want to motivate millennials to vote, Democrats must provide something to believe in.

No doubt, as the formal economy increasingly looks like the informal economy, the precariat millennial constituency will only grow and become an increasingly important part of the electorate. That will require political pundits to rethink definitions of "working class" and the questions they use in polls to identify working-class voters. If Democrats recognized the precariat millennials as potential voters, they might develop political programs that could better engage them.

Unfortunately, Greenberg's strategy is too, well, conservative. Rather than advocating for significant reforms, he and other Dems have focused on modest measures, such as incremental changes in the minimum wage and preserving social security and Medicare. While such policies help to address inequality and have some populist appeal, they won't either make significant change in the economic reality or engage millennial voters. To give the precariat a reason for civic engagement, Democrats must offer a broader economic and social platform. This will require some serious rethinking of policy reform.

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.gallup.com/poll/182918/fewer-americans-identify-middle-class-recent-years.aspx?utm\\_source=Economy&utm\\_medium=newsfeed&utm\\_campaign=tiles](http://www.gallup.com/poll/182918/fewer-americans-identify-middle-class-recent-years.aspx?utm_source=Economy&utm_medium=newsfeed&utm_campaign=tiles)

<sup>5</sup><https://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/2012/10/23/the-new-precariat-and-electoral-politics/>

Perhaps a good place for Dems to begin is with Standing's book, *The Precariat Charter*.<sup>6</sup> He presents an explicit set of ambitious principles that include, among other ideas, redefining work as productive and reproductive activity, regulating flexible labor, decommodifying education, a universal basic wage, and reviving the commons and deliberative democracy. Using these principles, progressive policies could be crafted that better address issues of fairness, justice, changes in work, and the reestablishment of participatory democracy and citizenship that are central to regaining working-class and millennial support now and in the future. Such a program would also be morally, ethically, and politically responsible. It would give disaffected downscale voters something to believe in.

Unfortunately, some Democratic Party leaders would rather stick with a formula that appeals to an eroding and ill-defined middle class while continuing its conservative trajectory. No wonder the *New York Times*<sup>7</sup> already reports that Republicans have tried to exploit the inconsistencies that are the basis of the disbelief among more liberal Democrats, the working class, and the growing precariat.

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/09/precariat-charter-denizens-citizens-review>

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/us/politics/the-right-aims-at-democrats-on-social-media-to-hit-clinton.html?emc=edit\\_th\\_20150517&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=8779144&\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/us/politics/the-right-aims-at-democrats-on-social-media-to-hit-clinton.html?emc=edit_th_20150517&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=8779144&_r=2)

## **JOBS AND WAGES + TAXES: A POLITICAL ECONOMIC NARRATIVE**

By JACK METZGAR

Stan Greenberg is right to focus on “white working-class and downscale voters” as key to a dominant Democratic majority and to advocate a bold progressive economic narrative as a way to attract a larger portion of these voters. But his sketch of such a program is too narrowly focused on the most popular reforms and fails to match the scale of the crisis facing American workers.

The programs Greenberg put “at the heart of” the “middle-class economic narrative” he tested with voters—“assistance with making college and child care affordable and ensuring equal pay for working women,” “tax credits for low-wage workers and the middle class and a promise to protect Medicare and Social Security”—are all both worthwhile and politically attractive. But they are “little helper” programs that promise some relief from economic stagnation and decline, but no fundamental change in direction in economic prospects. The economic narrative they suggest—a version of President Obama’s aim to “help people struggling to get into the middle class”—is thin. Neither “creating jobs” nor “raising wages” make it into the heart of Greenberg’s test program, probably because he thinks that job growth is now “robust.”

Neither job growth nor the economy is anything like robust. The long, painfully slow recovery we are still slogging through comes on the back of decades of erosion and decline in working-class wages, living standards and working conditions. A fundamental change in economic direction is needed. That’s what those big “wrong track” numbers should be telling Democrats. Rather than the current rate of job growth of about 200,000 net new jobs a month, we need at least double that and for a sustained period of time. Any credible program that promises that kind of job creation will get the attention of a wide array of voters, including the white working class. Combine that with a **dedicated effort to raise wages**,<sup>1</sup> especially but not only at the low end, and Dems can make large inroads into changing their “white working-class problem.” Anything short of that, I fear, and they will also have difficulty turning out their base voters, large patches of whom are all out of whatever audacity of hope they once had.

Fortunately, a much bolder, more thoroughgoing economic vision and program has been articulated by of all people Larry Summers, who arguably speaks for the Wall Street wing of the Democratic Party. Summers’ “**long-run secular stagnation**”<sup>2</sup> thesis argues that the economy has no chance of becoming genuinely healthy without major boosts from government investment to create jobs and increase wages. In a **recent report**<sup>3</sup> from a

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.aflcio.org/content/download/148381/3779151/file/WAGESSUMMITRoadmap010715.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><http://larrysummers.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/NABE-speech-Lawrence-H.-Summers1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/report/2015/01/15/104266/report-of-the-commission-on-inclusive-prosperity/>

commission organized by the Center for American Progress, Summers advocates a large increase in the federal minimum wage, a large increase in infrastructure spending, and a more fair tax system that produces a large amount of new revenue. The key economic concept here is that our outsized inequality of income has so severely weakened worker spending power as to undermine demand and long-term economic growth. The key word for Democratic politicians, however, is “large.”

The value of Summers’ analysis is that anything that increases wages and creates well-paying jobs increases consumer demand, which is what our slow-growing economy needs above all. Likewise, anything that improves the economy’s public infrastructure and human capital improves productivity and U.S. economic competitiveness in the long run. This is a growth narrative that can demolish the Republicans’ empty tropes about “job killers” and “job creators.”

The 10-year infrastructure program that Summers advocates would create **1.1 million jobs a year**,<sup>4</sup> heavily tilted toward construction jobs that do not require bachelor’s degrees. That would cost the government about \$100 billion a year in increased spending—four times the Obama infrastructure proposal recently rejected by Congressional Republicans. Summers also advocates a residential housing program that would make both rental and owned housing more affordable, while creating additional construction jobs and further stimulating the economy. Likewise, early childhood education and free community college would not only be good for children and young people and improve the economy’s human capital, it would create more jobs, aid in tightening labor markets, and thereby increase wages—all of which would further stimulate our stagnant economy by increasing worker spending power.

So let’s say that to do all these things would cost about \$300 billion a year, creating some 2.4 million additional jobs a year—that is, tripling the current average of about 200,000 new jobs a month. How would we pay for such a large increase in government investment spending? It would actually be more stimulative and would create substantially more jobs if the government simply borrowed the money. But besides giving the GOP a “fiscal responsibility” whip to reinitiate the debt-and-deficit debate, borrowing the money would miss the opportunity to right some wrongs in the U.S. tax code.

Summers, like President Obama, attacks some of the most egregious corporate and individual giveaways, but even the ones that are not small are very complicated to explain—like eliminating the “step-up in basis” rule for inherited assets and reforming “earnings stripping” by corporations. These are great things to do “in committee” when you own both the executive and legislative branches. But they are a waste of the precious little explanatory time candidates have to talk taxes during an election campaign.

Where Dems can most clearly differentiate themselves from Republicans is in the economic rationale for using tax hikes on the highest-earning individuals in order to pay for a large government investment in creating jobs. But Dems need to be willing to substantively engage in “class warfare” and to “redistribute” large amounts of money, even if they might understandably want to avoid using those terms.

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.epi.org/publication/impact-of-infrastructure-investments/>

Both the individual and corporate tax codes are loaded with narrowly targeted and often relatively small special-interest giveaways, but more importantly, the basic structure of the code redistributes money from workers/consumers to investors. In my experience teaching working-class adults, most people do not know that and are incensed when they find out. Here are a few innocent questions I would love to see Democrats asking in 2016: Why do people who work for a living pay higher marginal tax rates than people who gain income from investing? Why do families pay sales tax on meals at McDonald's, but investors don't pay sales tax when they buy stocks and bonds? Why do state and local governments tax wealth when it is in the form of real estate, but nobody taxes wealth when it is in the form of financial assets like stocks and bonds?

There are semi-defensible answers to these questions, but they all involve a trickle-down presumption that investors are more important in driving the economy than workers and consumers—a presumption that once may have had a reasonable rationale, but that was long ago when workers had a much larger share of total income than they have now. Such a public discussion about what truly drives the economy and about the classism embedded in the way we tax ourselves would be good for the American soul. But in addition, correcting just the unearned income inequity would produce \$160 billion in new revenue annually, and imposing a very small sales tax on the purchase of stocks and bonds would produce another \$150 billion every year—more than enough to finance not only a 21st century infrastructure (and the millions of jobs it would take to build it), but early childhood education, free community college, and a lot of other highly popular programs Democrats are associated with. But equally, and possibly more, important is the broad economic principles Dems would have to articulate. Rather than “tax fairness” being one in a list of discrete programs, with “infrastructure investment” another discrete item, the two would be linked to a broader economic narrative of “inclusive prosperity” that would raise wages and living standards for almost everybody.

I can understand why Democratic strategists may be wise to focus on financing their popular spending programs by eliminating or reforming more narrow (and complicated) tax giveaways. They have to raise money for campaigns, after all, and for that they have to go where the money is—the investor class. But if Greenberg is right that “reform of government and the political process is the price of admission with [disenchanted] voters,” then it will be hard to avoid risking a large part of their Wall Street constituency if Dems are to gain a stronger presence among the white working class, let alone give working-class blacks and Latinos a reason to vote despite the obstacles Republicans are putting in their way. In any case, little helper programs won't do it. Democrats need to think big about jobs and wages—and taxes too.

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