

Realism of the Mind – Optimism of the Will
How do progressives win governing power?

Richard Kirsch

*A Warning to Readers: This is not a short blog post. It's not really a blog post. This is a **long**, magazine type article that asks the reader to join me in an exploration of what progressives need to do to win governing power nationally.*

Abstract: The 2024 election elevated again the oversized political impact that white non-college voters have on national elections, a long-term problem that accelerated in the Trump era. Given the high proportion of white non-college voters in swing states, it will be extraordinarily difficult for Democrats to ever have a majority in the U.S. Senate, and it will continue to be challenging to win presidential elections. In this piece, I assess what share of white non-college voters would need to switch their party allegiance for Democrats. I examine the evidence for the dominant argument on the left that to do that, Democrats need only to be more aggressively economically populist. And I wrestle with whether that will be sufficient without changes in how Democrats approach cultural issues.

Introduction: Readers who are familiar with the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's famous [lesson](#) for those who would plot social change will say I've got the quote in the headline wrong. Gramsci said, "*Pessimism of the mind, optimism of the will.*" But Gramsci was half-wrong.

Pessimism, focusing on all the obstacles and problems and likely bad outcomes is not only immobilizing, it makes one blind to the positive elements that provide hope and crucially, contain the seeds of progress. A strategy based on *realism* of the mind points the way to optimism of the will that is based on more than just hope.

In the wake of the 2024 election, I turned to my revision of Gramsci not just to lift me from despair, but to help me understand what happened without my psyche being weighed down by doom

and gloom, nor misled by rose-colored glasses. I invite you to join me on an exploration of reality, grounded in recognizing the positive and not shying away from the negative. I don't promise myself or the reader more than a beginning of answers as to what we do next. But I'll take a beginning.

Part 1: It's not all dark; all is not lost; there's actually a lot of good reality.

In the deep dismay over Trump's election there's a natural tendency to exaggerate its size. But his margin of 1.6 points in the popular vote was one of the [lowest](#) since the nineteenth century. If Harris had improved her performance by one or two points in the three Blue Wall states, we would be celebrating her presidency.

It was so close not because Trump is such a strong candidate but because he is so weak. As Mathew Yglesias [pointed out](#) in the *New York Times* before the election, if it were not for Trump's baggage and underwater approval rating, he (or any other Republican candidate) would likely have had a comfortable lead. Why? Because of the impact of post-pandemic inflation on incumbents here and around the world.

The core reason that Kamala Harris lost was the huge post-pandemic hike in prices, the same phenomenon that defeated or dragged down incumbents all over the globe. If the economic recovery from COVID had happened without the huge spike in prices, she would have almost certainly won. We saw that not just by looking around the globe but in every [poll](#), which found that economics was the top issue in the election. Americans were [very down on the economy](#), with Trump winning heavily among voters for whom the economy was their top issues. In focus groups, swing voters identified high prices as their biggest concern and looked back at Trump as businessman who had a better economy.

And with reason. Despite today's positive macroeconomic indicators, as [The Atlantic reported](#), "real median household income fell relative to its [pre-COVID peak](#). The poverty rate [ticked up](#), as did the [jobless rate](#). The number of Americans spending more than 30 percent of their income on rent [climbed](#). The delinquency rate on credit cards [surged](#), as did the share of families struggling to afford enough [nutritious food](#), as did the rate of [homelessness](#)."

For the relatively small portion of voters who are not tethered to one of the two political parties, making the rent outweighs a concept like democracy. "I'm paying much more for groceries and rent than four years ago. I guess I'll sit home (mostly what happened) or give another chance to that businessman who was President when things were better."

The New York Times chief pollster, Nate Cohn, [pointed out](#) that the 2024 results closely mirror the 2022 midterms, which were shaped by the rampant price hikes; he concludes that those underlying elements were the transcendent factors in Trump's victory.

Looked at another way, most observers believe Trump would have been reelected in 2020 if not for his bungled response to COVID; as it was he barely lost. And Harris would be planning her transition if not for the global pandemic triggered by COVID. Cataclysmic explanations for her loss ignore larger trends outside her control.

As to all the myriad Monday-morning quarter backing and critiques of the Harris campaign, remember that there was only really a campaign in the seven battleground states, where she did much better than in the rest of the nation. Here is how the *Wall Street Journal* [summarized](#) the story:

Nationwide turnout notched down slightly compared with 2020. But among counties that President Biden won in 2020, the declines on Election Day this year were especially sharp—and voters moved away from the Democrats. While Harris's organizational and

advertising efforts successfully moved voters to the polls in the battleground states, the overall voter pool shifted toward Trump, compared to 2020. Across the rest of the country, Democratic turnout plummeted.

Then there's the question of how much Harris being a woman, and on top of that a Black woman, dragged down her vote. There's no way of knowing that, although common sense and evidence I'll discuss below lay out the case. But without pandemic inflation, with swing voters experiencing rising wages and low unemployment, my bet is she would have won. I'll also bet that even if a white man had been the Democratic candidate, he still would have lost. But given Trump's negatives, maybe not.

For a broader perspective, let's take a look at elections and popular sentiment over the past several election cycles. Until 2024, Democrats had won the popular vote for President in all but one of the six presidential ballots since 2000. More people voted for Democrats in the Senate and House than Republicans, even as the deep flaws in the structure of our democracy haven't consistently reflected those majorities.

Even with the lower turnout for Harris, Democrats held their own. They held on to Senate seats in four of the five battleground states that swung to Trump, with all but one of their losses coming in heavily Republican states. And even as Republicans hold onto their slim majority in the House, they did not end up with the big gain you would see in an election characterized by a huge switch in party preference.

On issues, rather than candidates, the public continues to vote for progressive issues, even in states that Trump and Republicans dominate at the ballot. Missouri voters returned MAGA senator Josh Hawley to the Senate while approving paid-family leave, a \$15 per hour minimum wage and abortion access. Other Republican states approved paid sick leave and minimum wage hikes. The huge gap between voters acting like Democrats on issues while choosing Republicans to represent them is an enormous problem, but it must hold the seeds of a solution.

It's not just voters who hold progressive positions. States where Democratic governors and legislators hold power have enacted a slew of progressive laws over the past decade, protecting working people and consumers, taking on the climate disaster, expanding freedoms for women, LGBTQ people and more. In 2021 and 2022, Democrats in Congress, despite razor thin majorities, enacted the most progressive economic program in the country since the 1960s.

Finally, before we look at the other side of the balance sheet, let's look at what we know about voters. While we bemoan that younger voters "moved" towards Trump, they start from a more Democratic position than all of their elders. Young women have a much bigger pro-Democratic voting margin than any other generation. White young men still lean Republican, but again, less so than men older than them. If I'm plotting a strategy for the future, I'd rather have younger voters on my side than older.

Did Black men move to Trump?
According to the CNN exit polls (which

are just approximations), Biden won 79% of Black men while Harris won 77%, which is not a significant drop given the polling errors. The exit polls show that 92% of Black women voted for Harris.

Yes, Latinos appear to be moving in the wrong direction by around 6 points compared with 2020, with the greatest drop among Latino men. Still an [exit poll](#) focused on more accurately measuring the Latino vote found that Harris won Latino men by 13 points and Latino women by 34 points.

So, no we are not a MAGA nation. No, Trump's election does not mean that Americans don't care about democracy or that we are doomed to be a Republican nation for years to come. The impact of COVID inflation does not overnight erase all the positive reality out there. Without COVID inflation we might be dancing in the streets, but that too would be a mistake.

Part 2: Yes, we have big, deeply ingrained problems.

Since 1980, my career has been helping to building organizations that organize and communicate with people on issues key to their economic and financial wellbeing. The goal has been to build a multi-racial majority of everyday Americans around shared economic status, to unite people on economic issues in order to bridge divides on race or culture. The work I've participated in and helped lead has resulted in winning progressive issue campaigns, blocking some of the worst of neoliberal policies and increasing electoral support for candidates who support progressive

economic issues. But I'm no longer willing to look away from the reality that what we have done, and many on the left continue to argue for as the only solution, hasn't worked. We're in a much deeper hole than before with white working-class voters. And with a growing share of Black and Latino working-class voters as well.

In the following I examine the challenge before us, why I think that the strategy has failed and some of what we know about the impact of both economics and culture on politics. In the last section, "Optimism of the Mind," I'll lay out some tentative recommendations on what we might do going forward.

As has been widely observed after this past election, Democrats have a working-class problem, and in particular a white working-class problem. Because of the structural flaws in our constitution, amplified by the geographic concentration of Republican voters in more rural states, Democrats have no choice but to effectively diminish Republican's current advantage among white working-class people, who make up around 40% of the electorate. Failure to do that will make it extraordinarily challenging to have governing power in the U.S. Senate and will continue to make presidential elections a toss-up.

With losses in West Virginia, Montana and Ohio, there are no more Democratic senators in red states. Only one blue state, Maine, has a Democratic senator. Democrats are already doing better than might be expected in swing states: of the 14 U.S. Senate seats in the seven swing states (and it's still not clear that North Carolina is really swing), Democrats will hold 10 seats when the

Senate convenes in January. Which means that for Democrats to get to 51 senators, they'll need to win Maine, keep all their swing state seats and pick-up three of the four Republican Senate seats in the swing states.

Put simply, while it is possible for Democratic candidates for president to win enough swing states with some regularity, it a huge challenge for Democrats to win enough swing states to be a majority in the Senate. Democrats need to do better both in swing states and in some red states if they are to exercise political power. And doing that without voters is nigh impossible. *[Read next column...]*

Why? Look at the numbers. In 2024, the four-out-of-ten (39%) voters nationally who are white and don't have a four-year college degree (the standard definition of working -class) voted for Trump by 36 points according to *New York Times data* (34 points in the CNN exit poll in the table data below.) The problem is not just Trump: in 2012; about 46% of the electorate who were white working class voted for Romney over Obama by 24 points. Bill Clinton is [the last Democratic presidential candidate](#) to win a majority of white non-college voters.

White Non-College Degree Voters Made up the Decisive Share of Trump's Victory Margin in Every Swing State

	% electorate	% Trump	% Harris	Trump share of vote	Harris share of vote	Difference	Trump victory margin
USA	39%	66%	32%	26%	12%	13%	2%
AZ	34%	65%	35%	22%	12%	10%	6%
GA	34%	82%	18%	28%	6%	22%	2%
MI	46%	62%	36%	29%	17%	12%	1%
NV	38%	61%	37%	23%	14%	9%	3%
NC	38%	74%	25%	28%	10%	19%	3%
PA	47%	65%	34%	31%	16%	15%	2%
WI	50%	60%	39%	30%	20%	11%	1%

The good news is that as a share of the eligible electorate, white working-class voters has been [decreasing steadily](#) for decades; in 1980 it was around 65%. The bad news is that the Republican share of these voters is at the highest level since at least 1980. On top of that, they turned out in high numbers in the three elections on which Trump was on the ballot, making up for their decreasing share of the electorate.

The conventional explanation by Democrats on the left for why white working-class voters abandoned the Democratic Party is that, as Bernie Sanders [claimed](#) after this election, “Democrats have abandoned the working class.” The story is that rather than fighting trickle-down policies, or telling a story about how the economy grows and prospers based on working people, Democratic presidents championed neoliberal policies and rhetoric.

Bill Clinton led the fight for NAFTA and deregulation of financial markets, while bragging about balancing the budget. Barack Obama bailed out banks but not the people whose homes the banks stole, while seeking grand compromises with Republicans on budget cuts. And even when Democrats resisted the worst neoliberal policies, or enacted some policies to boost working people, it was not nearly enough to stop the global rise of neoliberal capitalism, which suppressed real wages, turned middle-class comfort to middle-class financial instability and astronomically ballooned wealth and income inequality.

The problem with this analysis is that it only looks at what Democrats did or didn't do in the 42 years between the

elections of Jimmy Carter and Donald Trump. Democrats held the presidency in 20 of those years; Republicans for 22. Ronald Reagan enacted, well, Reaganomics. Republicans championed free trade agreements, tax cuts for the rich, destroying labor unions, opposing minimum wage hikes, privatizing Social Security and much more. And still they ended up with working class white voters moving in huge proportions to vote for them?

What explains the rightward movement among the white working class is that Republicans, particularly under Trump (but going back well before him), embraced right-wing populism. They blamed immigrants, made racist appeals and harkened back to traditional, patriarchic and religious culture. We see this not just in the U.S., but around the globe.

It's hard to overstate how the financial status of the majority of Americans has been crushed over the past forty plus years. [Real weekly earnings](#) of all Americans was lower in 2019 than in 1979; it has been even worse for men with only a high-school degree. The share of upwardly mobile Americans fell by over 40 percentage points over four decades.

Right-wing populism found particularly fertile ground when politicians of all parties oversaw governments that either facilitated or did little to impede trickle-down economics. The polling that shows the [collapse of faith](#) in government – and in institutions more widely – reflects a deep sense that politicians are only out for themselves or their deep-pocketed donors.

Enter Trump, as the brash outsider who gave the finger to the establishment while attacking immigrants, moving from dog-whistle to overt racism and positioning himself – irony be damned – as the defender of traditional values and opposing abortion. At the same time, he rhetorically (if not in practice when he governed) promised to defend Social Security and Medicare and close tax loopholes for people like him. He tied himself to the Christian nationalism of the evangelical movement, in order to attract another conservative base unavailable to Democrats.

What many people miss about Trump is that he powerfully communicated being a champion of white Americans who feel trampled by the elites who run the country. He was the billionaire businessman who understood the system and would overturn it on behalf of the real Americans left behind. And in 2016 he swept away the defenders of Republican Party orthodoxy.

But the power of cultural issues to define the politics of white working-class voters goes back well before Donald Trump. Racism, hostility to immigrants, defending the traditional (patriarchal) family are dominant threads throughout U.S. history. In 1969, just before the ascent of neoliberal politics, Richard Nixon appealed to the “the silent majority,” the substantial share of Americans who were turned off by the civil rights movement, the rise of feminism, the opposition to the Vietnam War, all wrapped up in the counterculture of the 1960s.

Race and culture can be more powerful tools to understand political inclinations than economics. Mike Podhorzer has

done a [brilliant job](#) looking at data that uncovers some of the complexities here. In particular, Mike has lifted up some of the ways that cultural attitudes complicate the simplistic reduction to race and education level.

One finding is that what the sociologists call “racial resentment” (a polite way of saying how racist the person is) is a better predictor of how people vote than their level of education. A white working-class person with low racial resentment is more likely to be a Democrat than a white college-educated person with high racial resentment. White non-college voters who are the least racially resentful vote Democratic, while white college-educated voters with high levels of racial resentment vote Republican.

Political geography is another factor that is much more explanatory than education level alone. Podhorzer [notes](#) that in 2020, Biden broke even with white non-college voters in Blue states, but lost them by 40 points in Red states. Biden won white college voters in Blue states by 19 points, but lost them by 9 points if they were in Red states, a 28 point regional gap.

Obviously, geography and racial resentment have a big overlap, as our country’s politics remain characterized by the original sin of enslavement.

Andrew Levison, a sociologist who has thought deeply about the politics and culture of white working-class Americans, traces the World War II gradual evolution of white non-college educated voters to Republicans. Levison [describes](#) how the working-class consciousness coming out of WWII was based on working in large

factories, living in communities near those factories and being grounded in local institutions like churches and union halls. But as neoliberal policies took hold, with jobs shipped or moved to the non-union south, industrial labor gave way to small businesses and the growth of “grey collar” technical service jobs. Along with these new “grey collar” workers, and skilled construction and other craft workers, many other former factory workers opened small independent businesses and struggled to make a living. This, in his telling, led to an embedding of small business values and outlook into a great many workers. The culture of small town and rural institutions, including churches, 4-F clubs, VFWs etc., country music, became more dominant in factory towns.

With the economic being and status of people in these communities crumbling, this distinct culture was proudly held up against what was seen as the elite and prospering culture: “This new elite was not attacked as a new financial ruling class but rather as a well-off, condescending and sanctimonious group that dominated and controlled the culture – what working people would see on TV and in the movies, what was taught in colleges and universities, what was written in editorial page commentaries and what was produced and sold in the fashion and music industries.”

Levison describes how people in culturally traditional communities and those in college educated, urban communities almost never interact with each other. Neither community, he points out, see many people from the other and so the views of most people in

each are shaped by popular culture and the caricatures that propel news and politics. For many on the left, the people at Trump rallies personify the entire white working class, just as the Squad represents the entire left to those on the right.

One thing Levison’s analysis leaves out is that a big part of the evolving working class did not move to the right at all or as dramatically. The service sector became dominated by under large employers, particularly in health care, education, franchise fast food and retail. These service workers remain more Democratic and are also more likely to be Black or Latino.

In 2023, two progressive activists [challenged](#) a widespread assertion by many progressive activists that “deliverism” of better economic outcomes would reverse the rightwing tide. Their analysis is pretty muddled, reflecting the difficulty of separating economics from race and culture. They say that the failure of Biden’s progressive policies to move voters is an example of the failure of deliverism. But of course, those policies were in place for a very short time and did not change economic conditions for most people; they did little to erase the huge post-pandemic price hikes nor reverse in any noticeable way mitigate the impact of five decades of accelerating neoliberal inequalities.

Still, they are correct in claiming that the story is never as simple as economics. They point out that while the wages of non-college educated (all races) decreased 30% relative to other workers, Black non-college workers happiness did not decrease. Black working they stayed in the workforce

while “relatively privileged” white men left. The authors say that this is evidence that it’s about “loss of dominant social position not economics.... This finding points to the way economic realities are mediated by identity, and it is suggestive of the power of people’s sense of social status to shape their economic and political decisions.”

The 2024 election also heightened alarm bells among **non-white** working-class voters, with higher proportions voting for Trump than in earlier years. While large majorities of Black voters and most Latino voters cast their ballots for Harris, the trend is problematic, particularly among men. Poorer performance among non-college educated Hispanics is a big factor in Trump’s 2024 wins in Arizona and Nevada.

Here again, values plays a role. In a post-election column, the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Edsall [discussed](#) values-measures that predate pandemic inflation. For example, Edsall cites studies that show: 1) most non-white voters hold a basket of positions that are in the ideological middle, as opposed to most white college voters who are polarized in their views, both left (mostly) and right; 2) the one-third of Latino voters and one-quarter of Asian American voters who don’t believe that white people have advantages or that racial problems are common, were the most likely to move to Trump between 2016 and 2020. Among Latinos, a 2023 [study](#) found that white racial identity and racial resentment predict more support for Republicans.

the world at large. A strategy that relies just on Democrats promoting and

Among Hispanics, there was by 2020 a clear divide by education. Biden won among college educated Hispanics by 39 points, but only by 14 points by Hispanics who do not have a college degree. Levison points to the importance of values too often seen as Republican among Latino voters: men as providers; self-reliance; Trump’s appeal as a businessman and as a strongman.

And of course, Kamala Harris being a Black woman compounded the difficulty of her election. A not-insignificant number of voters, including many women, cannot imagine voting for a woman as President, in particular when it comes to standing up to foreign leaders. If you think back to their one debate, you’ll recall that Harris made this a big issue, belittling Trump for being flattered and manipulated by Putin and others. It was clear to me that the Harris campaign had unearthed an important obstacle to address. Reporting in the *Times* and *Washington Post* told the same story.

Harris also was weighed down by women being viewed as more likely to care for the poor and immigrants as opposed to working- and middle-class Americans; even more so a Black woman.

The core point of all the research above is that both culture and economics are powerful ways that people see themselves and their relationship to their communities, government, politics and

enacting more progressive economic policies is unlikely to be successful in

moving enough white working-class voters.

dominance of right-wing media and the challenging media habits of swing voters. I'll describe those challenges and possible solutions below.

Before getting to the next section, "Optimism of the Will," I'll note here that another major problem we face is the media environment, including the

Part 3: Optimism of the Will - Where do we go from here

It's the economy stupid but remember that people are much more than their pocketbooks.

How many white working-class voters do we need to move?

To win elections so as to be able to have the political power to make changes nationally, we need to increase support among working-class voters, and particularly among white working-class voters. Without doing that, there is very little chance that Democrats will ever again have a majority in the U.S. Senate and both control of the House and elections for President will remain closely contested.

Net Shift in White Non-College Voters for Harris to Have Won in Swing States

	% electorate WNC	Actual			Desired Harris victory margin	Required		
		% WNC Trump	% WNC Harris	Trump victory margin		% WNC Trump	% WNC Harris	Net WNC shift required
USA	39%	66%	32%	2%	1%	64%	36%	7%
AZ	34%	65%	35%	6%	1%	55%	45%	21%
GA	34%	82%	18%	2%	1%	78%	22%	9%
MI	46%	62%	36%	1%	1%	61%	39%	4%
NV	38%	61%	37%	3%	1%	57%	43%	11%
NC	38%	74%	25%	3%	1%	69%	31%	11%
PA	47%	65%	34%	2%	1%	62%	38%	6%
WI	50%	60%	39%	1%	1%	59%	42%	4%
OH Brown	49%	61%	35%	4%	1%	58%	42%	10%

What percentage of white non-college voters would be needed to have shifted from Trump to Harris for her to have won? In all the swing states other than Arizona, for Harris to have won by 1%, between 4% and 11% of white working-class voters would have had to switch from Trump to Harris. Which is to say from about one-in-twenty-five to about one-in-ten.

What would it take to make some red states into purple? We only have the relevant exit poll data in one red state, Ohio. Sherod Brown would have won by 1 point if 10% of white non-college voters switched from the Republican candidate to Brown. Although it would have taken a much higher percentage of white non-college voters, around one-in-four, to have had Harris win Ohio.

Is the goal of moving say 10% of these voters possible? In 2012, Obama nationally lost these voters by 24 points, which is 10 points better than Harris did; that is the equivalent of moving six percentage points of white working-class voters.

Andrew Levison [believes](#) that there are as many as 20% of Trump supporters who are “culturally traditional but not right wing.” He asserts that these people have two distinguishing views from the MAGA base: 1) they are more tolerant, have more empathy, tied to a Jimmy Carter Christian tradition; 2) “a firm ‘class conscious’ belief in the need for greater fairness in economic affairs and anger at injustice in areas ranging from the unfairness of the tax system that lets the wealthy pay less than the average worker to the systemic corruption in the way that big business manipulates and corrupts the political system. There is a deep

sense among this sector of the working-class voters that it is not just ‘liberals’ or Democrats who ignore working class needs but ‘the system’ as a whole that is unfair to the ‘little guy’. There is a deep sense that ordinary people always get screwed.”

In an extensive [study](#) of working class voters, the Working Family Party’s analysis identified seven clusters of voters. Two of the clusters, composing 27% of the working class, are firmly Democratic and 13% is “core MAGA.” Three of the clusters, totaling 44%, lean towards Republican (based on the 2020 presidential vote) by between 8 to 10 points and one cluster, making up 16% was split evenly between Biden and Trump in 2020. In three of these clusters economic insecurity is high and in two of those, there is strong support for progressive economic proposals. In all of them, but to varying degrees, conservative attitudes towards some cultural issues – crime, immigration, gender, racial resentment – are at play.

The most promising cluster is labeled “tuned-out persuadables,” who were evenly split on presidential choice (Biden +1), although a relatively high percentage, 24%, don’t report voting, compared with 17% of all working-class voters. They are mostly white women, of all ages, who are very economically insecure. They strongly support progressive populist proposals and have mixed cultural views: will tend to see government support programs as hand-outs and have somewhat higher levels of racial resentment (these two are almost certainly linked) but are slightly more progressive on immigration, abortion and sexuality.

The other sector that strongly supports progressive economic issues, and is highly concerned about their economic security, is labeled “anti-woke traditionalists.” As a group, they chose Trump over Biden by 10 points. The group is heavily male and more Black (20%) than working class voters overall (16%). They are much more conservative culturally, as their name indicates, with beliefs in traditional family, strongly anti-abortion. The opening to this group is on economics but the barrier is traditional cultural values.

We see in both Levison’s and the WFP’s analysis a large enough portion of potentially persuadable voters who are in tune with progressive populist economics while, to varying degrees, tied to traditional cultural values.

Is an aggressive, progressive economic strategy alone enough to move them?

Would it be enough then for Democrats to counter with a full-throated left economic narrative and policies that put the blame unflinchingly on big corporations and the wealthy and to squarely blame politicians who do their bidding?

The answer is complicated. What I’m going to explore here are those complications and then make some tentative recommendations on the implication for moving forward. In doing so, I’m firmly focused on the swing voters who are not firmly wed to one of the two political parties, most of whom are working-class. For those voters, the fundamental question they ask in

Four years ago, we took a wrong turn and lost our purpose. We

deciding who to vote for is: which candidate is on their side? Does the candidate understand what they are going through and will they fight for them? Voters don’t have high expectations that politicians will deliver but they do want elected leaders to champion them, not powerful forces or uppity elites.

Personal economic issues -- can they make the rent or mortgage, afford to put food on the table and gas in their car, pay for their prescriptions and a visit to the doctor or dentist -- dominate how these voters answer that question. How are they doing now compared to when the last guy was in office? Does the candidate really understand their struggles? But peoples’ sense of their own identity, their cultural and community identity and their social attitudes also come into play in deciding which candidates are on their side. And when people feel economically insecure, they are more vulnerable to having their fears and prejudices triggered.

Trump’s campaign ads demonstrate how he navigated these two measures, economic and cultural, as he leaned into the “who’s side are you on” question. One of his [ads](#) focuses on Harris’ positions in support of funding transgender transitions but then concludes with the announcer saying “Kamala is for they/them; President Trump is for you.” On the screen are a quote from a newspaper article, “Trump tax cuts benefited middle, working-class.”

Here is the transcript of the Trump campaign’s [final ad](#) (emphasis added):
lost the strength that makes Americans who we are. If we

dared to speak the truth, it was called hate speech. And our values were labeled shameful. That's when everything we care about fell apart. **We surrendered our borders, our paychecks and our courage, our patriotism was called toxic, men could beat up women and win medals, but there was no prize for the guy who got up every day to do his job.** Now we're being asked to settle for the way things are and we're wondering if America can make a comeback. We can because we've done it before. When we get knocked down, we don't stay down. We get up again. We fight, we fight.

Do Democrats need to moderate their positions on cultural issues to compete for enough swing voters? Or is it enough to champion economic issues more aggressively?

Democrats have an advantage when it comes to the question of which political party cares more about people's economic struggles. Substantial majorities of Americans, including many Republicans, support Democratic positions on multiple issues: lowering prescription drug prices, taxing the wealthy and big corporations; protecting workers who want to organize a union; raising the minimum wage, paid family and medical leave, and more.

Clearly, being better on issues hasn't been enough. Swing voters are the least connected to politics and the most unlikely to be aware of candidates' or elected officials positions or records.

More fundamentally, Democrats holding those issue positions haven't translated into people feeling more economically secure.

Another argument on the left is that if Democrats had delivered more on the kind of big changes that made lives more affordable, they would have turned more working-class voters to their side at the ballot box. We can't know about an alternative past, but what we can say is that the underlying problem with this view from today's strategy vantage point is that it's academic as Democrats don't have the power to deliver those changes now.

Well, if Democrats can't deliver on the issues, another argument goes, they need to push for big impactful solutions that would deliver economic security and tie those arguments to a left economic populism that is anti-corporate and anti-establishment.

In 2016, Trump wasn't the only national candidate to declare war on the status quo and take advantage of the political opening created by declining economic security and status. Bernie Sanders challenged the Democratic orthodoxy with a campaign of bold progressive populism and policies. While he emerged as the major challenger to the candidate of Democratic Party orthodoxy, Hillary Clinton, he did not prevail. In 2020, Sanders again played that same role, and again fell short against the more centrist candidate, Joe Biden.

What might we learn from Bernie coming up short? His primary campaign was defeated in southern states where Black voters dominate, voters whose positive views of both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama were transferred to Hillary Clinton

and Biden respectively. Black voters, as I reviewed above, also have more mainstream political views than the left base that was most aligned with Sanders. And there's the question of whether a Democratic Party now dominated by college educated, affluent voters is really more attracted to the more "radical" platform of Sanders than the moderately left policies of Clinton and Biden.

Where Bernie did do best was with younger white voters whose economic future looks much bleaker than their parents and working-class men who share his anger at corporate power. But is there any reason to believe that the share of swing voters who would be attracted to a platform that is put forth as revolutionary would exceed those who would be easily frightened off radical change? For example, support for Bernie's signature issue, Medicare for All, craters when people learn that Medicare for All means giving up their private insurance for government insurance.

Having said all of that, I'm not saying that addressing people's deep economic insecurity, their inability to reliably afford a good life, is not essential to winning swing, working-class voters. The question becomes is that enough? What can we learn from Democratic candidates who have been successful in purple states and red districts?

In Michigan, Congresswoman-elect Kristen McDonald Rivet, [explained her win](#) this way, in an open-seat held by a Democrat:

But I can tell you, in my district, Donald Trump won with 52% of the vote. And I was able to run nine points ahead of Kamala

Harris in my district. And I think the reason for that was because we talked in plain language about the things that really matter because, you know, let me just say this, if you're making \$50,000 a year and you think about what that means in terms of your take home pay, the possibility of being able to afford housing, prescription drugs, child care, all of these necessary costs, the day-to-day life, that's scary. And it is important that we not only address that and talk directly to people about that, but that we also have a solution to that... What I would say is that as a party and as elected leaders, we need to do more sitting on people's front porches and really listening

New York Lieutenant Governor Anthony Delgado explained his 2018 victory for Congress, along with wins for two New York Democrats in upstate New York in a *New York Times* [opinion column](#):

In 2017, after Mr. Trump won my home district in the Hudson Valley and the Catskills by almost seven points, I [challenged](#) the Republican incumbent. He ran a divisive campaign, attacking my former career as a hip-hop artist and using [racist tropes and stereotypes](#) to cast me as a threat. No person of color had represented upstate New York in Congress, and my district as it was drawn then was one of the most rural in the country and over [80 percent white](#).

In response, I ran a campaign rooted in love, emphasizing how all of us, no matter our party, want to be able to afford homes and groceries, to send our kids to good schools and to leave behind a safer, better world for them than the one our parents left us.

We used that winning playbook in parts of New York this year, including where I live in the Hudson Valley. U.S.

Representative Pat Ryan was able to hold on to the 18th Congressional District comfortably, and Josh Riley flipped the 19th. Mr. Ryan and Mr. Riley centered much of their campaigns on the economic pain felt by their constituents, caused by a political system corrupted by unchecked corporate power.

In a look at messaging by Democrats who won in red or purple districts, *New York Times* analyst David Leonhardt [found](#):

These Democrats ran on strikingly similar themes — part progressive, part moderate, part conservative. Above all, they avoided talking down to voters and telling them they were wrong to be frustrated about the economy, immigration and post-pandemic disorder. “The fundamental mistake people make is condescension,” [Marie] Gluesenkamp Perez [who was reelected in a red district in Washington) told my colleague Annie Karni after the election....

Democrats who won tough races ran to the left on economic issues. They sounded like blue-collar populists, fed up with high prices, slow wage growth, corporate greed and unfair Chinese competition....

They were feisty, populist and patriotic. They distanced themselves from elite cultural liberalism. They largely ignored Trump.

Pointing to Congressman Marcie Kaptur’s reelection in a red district, Leonhardt quotes a Kaptur ad, “They’re ruining our country — the billionaires and corporations who send our jobs overseas. Their religion is greed, and their Bible is corporate profits.”

But Leonhardt also points out where these Democrats, in different ways, signaled their understanding of immigration or signaled their distance from Democratic policies.

He points to a Kaptur’s ad where “she called out ‘the far left’ for ‘ignoring millions illegally crossing the border.’” And an ad by Ruben Gallego, who won a U.S. Senate seat in Arizona, where he said, “Arizonans know — on the border, there is no plan.”

In a nod to concerns about too much federal regulation, U.S. Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin ran an ad in which, “Baldwin bragged about protecting a small Wisconsin cheesemaker against federal regulations.”

Some Democrats in Congress distanced themselves from Democratic issue positions. Maine representatives Jared

Golden, who represents a low-income district Trump won, voted against the \$15 minimum wage and EV mandates. Gluesenkamp Perez, whose blue-collar district has relatively few college grads, touted her votes against student-loan forgiveness.

Before progressives readily dismiss Golden and Gluesenkamp-Perez (none of their votes mattered to the issue outcome in Congress), I'll note votes by Bernie Sanders, who representing rural Vermont early in his days in Congress, [repeatedly voted against the Brady Bill](#), which mandated waiting periods and background checks; [opposed funding for gun violence research](#); and [voted to protect gun manufacturers and retailers from lawsuits](#).

What these votes remind us of is that there's an important distinction between being an advocate and a candidate for office or an elected official, particularly if you represent a district or state that is not solidly Democratic. Would it have mattered to winning strong regulations against gun violence if Bernie had voted for them? Would it have mattered to having a champion for progressive economics in Congress if Bernie had never been elected?

Connecticut U.S. Senator Chris Murphy, who wins easily in a blue state, offers this [advice](#) to Democrats:

First, I just think we need to talk about power more. We are so in love with our solutions that we spend 80 percent of our time talking about the policy solution and only 20 percent of the time identifying with the way that people are getting screwed...

I think the other critique I would have is that people are not terribly inspired by handouts. I'm a supporter of the child tax credit. I didn't mind forgiving people's student loans. I like the elevated Obamacare subsidies, but those three things didn't win as many votes. Because people know that the rules of the economy are rigged. And while they appreciate a little extra money in their pocket, they would much rather the rules get unriggered so that if you wanted to start a bookstore, you wouldn't be run out of business by Amazon within hours of opening your doors....

I worry that we have become a party with a dozen litmus tests.... So I think we've got to put ourselves in rooms with conservative people and talk to them about why gay kids and trans kids are no threat to them. But also invite them to come into a conversation with us over our mutual agreement on populist economics. And then once we are in that conversation, I've just got a much better chance of convincing them that biological girls playing in boys' sports is not the existential threat to America that the right makes you think it is. But you got to be talking to people to confirm. And we've lived in this world in which we just think shaming people who disagree with us is eventually going to win the argument.

Each of these candidates prevailed despite a Democratic national brand that is highly suspect among white non-college voters, who see Democrats as out-of-touch elites. It's worth noting that when he ran for President, Obama signaled that he understood some of the cultural signifiers that alienate those voters. He supported civil unions rather than gay marriage, until the Supreme Court made those marriages the law of the land. As David Leonhardt [wrote](#), "He went on MTV and complained about people who wore their pants too low. ('Some people might not want to see your underwear — I'm one of them,' Obama said.) He took a middle ground on immigration, criticizing both family separations and companies that undercut "American wages by hiring illegal workers."

So what should we do?

My goal, our goal, is an America with broad-based prosperity and the freedom to live one's life as one chooses, as long as that does not mean harming others. In our firmly entrenched two-party system, the Democratic Party is the only possible political vehicle for candidates who share those values and generally support policies to realize them. Which is why throughout this analysis I've used support for Democrats as a measure of both the positive and the deep challenges we face.

But that does not mean that the changes we need to make should only happen through the Democratic Party or through elections. In fact, individuals and organizations who share those values have a crucial part to play in moving the public and the Democratic Party to make

the needed changes and to do so not just in electoral politics.

I remain convinced that progressive, economic populism is the most powerful way to demonstrate that we are on people's side, that we understand the financial pressures that make their lives deeply insecure and too often a day-to-day struggle. But what writing this piece has convinced me of is without understanding and engaging with the culture of white working-class Americans, we will not be able to move enough of them to have the political power to win policies that provide broad-based prosperity in our country.

Let me be clear: I am not about to recommend that candidates or organizations take racist positions or abandon our core values. The goal I've laid out before is both modest and monumental; move one-out-of-ten (swing state goal) to one-out-of-five (some red states), which over time seems reasonable to me.

While the focus of this analysis is moving white non-college voters, we need to also stop the erosion among Black men and Latino working-class voters. Interestingly, progressives have long had a better understanding of the importance of culturally based communications among Black voters, where the church has been a principal way of reaching them. Progressives have been slower to reach Latino voters through a community focus, but there has at least been an understanding of the importance of doing that. But when it comes to White non-college voters, our political communication strategies and messages have almost all been on economic

messages delivered through conventional political means.

The recommendations below are meant to change that, to incorporate cultural communications, along with economic, to white working-class voters in three categories: narrative; organizing to build cultural connections; media.

Narrative recommendations: A populist economic story that is grounded in American community and values.

I start with narrative, because political narratives are how people understand their relationship to politics, government, the community and society more broadly. Changing narrative is a necessity to changing politics. Narrative change is not just about the words we say. Powerful movements are the greatest forces for changing narratives; every powerful movement is driving a powerful narrative through actions, organizing and words. The narrative I've drafted below needs to be delivered through the other two strategies: organizing and media. And by leaders, including candidates and elected leaders.

The narrative below, focused primarily on economics, is infused with two values: family and community. The *quest* (this is after all a [narrative](#)) is people being able to have economic security in thriving communities. The *threat* is the financial pressures on families and their communities. The villains who created the problem are big corporations and billionaires and the politicians who do their bidding. The *heroes* are the everyday Americans who are the engines of prosperity and thriving communities.

A word about that last sentence, the crucial importance of reinforcing a story that most Americans believe when they hear it: everyday Americans, not big corporations and the rich, are who drive economic growth, broad-based prosperity and strong communities. The great neo-liberal lie is that enriching CEOs and billionaires will trickle-down to working and middle class families. Progressives across the board for years failed to tell the real truth about what drives broad-based economic prosperity: *A thriving middle-class is not the consequence of economic growth, it is the source of economic growth and broad-based prosperity. The more people we fully include in our economy, the better we all do and the better our country does.*

Instead, progressives have talked about economics in terms of fairness. But when people are asked to choose between making the economy more fair and growing the economy, a big majority choose growing the economy. Moreover, the public believes that Democrats are about fairness while Republicans are about growth.

Progressives have a huge advantage here, if they use it: the policies that promote fairness are the same ones that drive economic growth. Every policy that raises incomes or lowers costs for everyday Americans will drive more economic growth and broader prosperity.

President Biden was the first president in decades to consistently tell the story of the middle class driving economic growth. And Biden delivered an historic policy agenda driven by that absolutely correct understanding of the economy. But Biden's not a great communicator and the

positive economic impact of his agenda has only just begun. It is essential that Democrats and their allies continue to tell the story of how everyday Americans are the engines of economic growth and that the same policies that increase fairness drive economic growth and long-term prosperity.

A narrative: Here's a draft of the core elements of the narrative we need for working class people and communities

Quest: A vision of economic security and thriving communities.

- We seek an America that works for all of us, not just billionaires and CEOs. Where our families and communities can thrive, regardless of the circumstances we were born into.
 - That means good jobs so we can care for and support our families and afford the basics of life – good food and housing, quality education for our children, good health care and a secure retirement.
 - Living in communities where we look out for our neighbors and they look out for us. Where we respect and honor the rich traditions and freedoms that make America a special place to live.

Threat: Acknowledge the depth of economic struggle and insecurity today.

- The cost of living is way too high – we are living paycheck to paycheck, struggling under the cost of basics like groceries, gas, health care, paying the mortgage or rent. We're sandwiched

between childcare costs and caring for our parents as they get older. Taking a vacation with the family means piling more debt on our credit cards. Even when we get a raise, it's not enough to keep up. We don't see how we can afford to retire.

- We see our neighbors and our communities struggling too. Many big employers abandoned us years ago. Small businesses can barely keep the doors open. Our kids don't see much of a future here. We care for our neighbors but the problems we have sometimes feel overwhelming. Too often, drugs seem the only way to kill the pain.

The Villains: Make it clear who's to blame.

- What happened? To start with, big corporations shipped our jobs overseas. The companies that kept jobs here pushed down wages and cut benefits to pad their profits. They proved that when it came to making their CEOs and shareholders richer, all their proclamations about caring about our communities and their employees were a load of BS.
- Health insurers and oil companies, banks and credit card companies, food companies and supermarkets used the pandemic as an excuse to send prices through the roof to jack up their profits. Big companies merged and merged so that they could raise prices without any competition and undercut the small businesses that help our communities thrive.
- The billionaires and CEOs rig the system at our expense. They use campaign cash and lobbyists to get the politicians to give them huge tax breaks so that CEO's pay a lower tax

rate than their secretaries and big profitable corporations pay little or no taxes, while small business owners pay what they are supposed to.

- Our local governments were left trying to raise enough taxes off hard-hit families to keep basic services like roads and schools. Churches and other places where we worship, and local non-profits, try to fill in but there are only so many donations people can make when they are struggling.

The Heroes: How can our families and communities feel secure and thrive again?

- It's not CEOs or billionaires, and it's definitely not politicians, who drive the prosperity of our families or communities. It's us, everyday Americans. Working families and the middle class are the engines of our economy.
 - When we have good jobs so we can care for and support our families, educate our children, pay for basics like groceries, gas, the mortgage or rent. When we can afford quality health care, shop in our neighborhood small businesses and retire in security, we drive the economy forward and build thriving communities.
 - We know in our hearts that our success depends on the success of those around us. Our communities thrive when everyone thrives. America works best when all of us have the opportunity to contribute fully, to be our best.
- When it comes to politicians, I don't care about political party. I care about

who actually stands up to the CEOs and billionaires and deliver for us.

Government can play its part by giving us the tools and opportunities to raise our wages and lower our costs so we can live a better life.

- If government's going to work for us, not just the rich and powerful, it should focus on some basics. Childcare shouldn't cost more than the paycheck we bring home. We shouldn't have to choose between filling a prescription or putting groceries on the table and pay our utility bills. If a child gets sick, or for that matter if we get sick, or if we have a new baby in the house, we should still get paid. And when our aging parents need care and we get older and need care, we should be able to afford that and live our lives with dignity.
 - We pay for this by getting rid of the tax loopholes and breaks for big profitable corporations and billionaires so that they start paying a fair share of taxes. And we should halt all the mergers that allows big business to hike their prices and squelch small businesses. For that matter, let's just stop the big guys from price gouging.
- And it's not too much to ask that we live in communities where we feel safe, where the police understand their community and can look out for neighbors. Or in a country where we welcome immigrants who follow the rules when they want to come to our country.

Call to Action: It's up to us, together.

- It's up to us, together, to create an America that works for all of us, not just the CEOs and billionaires and politicians who are in their pockets.
- When we say the pledge of allegiance to our flag is it for liberty and justice for the few, for the super-rich? Or for all? Together we can build an America with liberty and justice for all for all of us, where all our families and communities thrive.

Building organizations in working class communities.

A [narrative](#), a powerful values, based story about how the world works, is only as good as its messenger. Changing the narrative in working-class communities will only happen if the messengers are people who understand and are sympathetic with both the economic pressures and the culture of those communities. The best of these messengers will live in those communities and have developed strong social relationships.

As Andrew Levison [points out](#):

The problem in red state districts today is not simply that voters in these areas overwhelmingly vote for Republicans. It is that major elements of GOP and specifically MAGA ideology have become so pervasive and familiar in everyday life that many voters—even if they disagree with certain particular ideas—simply cannot imagine that there is any sensible political alternative to voting for candidates who espouse the GOP and MAGA perspective. For many Republican voters this view

has become synonymous with what they feel all “normal” or “sensible” people should view as acceptable.

This disdain from a big right majority effectively silences the minority in these communities who do not share the dominant worldview. It is both exhausting and threatening to stand out from your neighbors, particularly when it seems to be a hopeless exercise.

But the exercise is not hopeless if it is done through the eyes of a community organizer, whether that person is a local volunteer or a staff member of a local organization. Organizers listen respectfully to their neighbors, look for points of agreement on how to solve community problems within shared values. They build strong relationships by working with neighbors, even when a specific project may not succeed. Just the act of working together makes it easier for people in the minority to come out, to raise their voices, to not feel isolated or disempowered. Organizing to accomplish something almost always exposes who the real opponents are to building a stronger community.

To challenge the dominance of GOP and Maga, Levison [encourages](#) “... nonpartisan groups that tackle local problems in a non-ideological way but which at the same time inherently challenge elements of the GOP/MAGA perspective.”

For example, Levison highlights [Down Home Carolina](#), which began organizing in rural western North Carolina in 2017. Down Home goes door-to-door in rural communities and builds chapters among white and Black residents around the

common problems they face. Most of the issues are local: opening a park; funding school supplies for teachers; opposing a tax hike for a new jail. They also joined a successful statewide campaign to expand Medicaid. After Hurricane Helene devastated a big swath of western North Carolina, Down Home mobilized members with chainsaws and winches to assist people who were stranded and knocked on thousands of doors to find out what people in the community most needed and connect them with resources.

As the organization matured, Down Home's members voted to endorse candidates, first for local and then for state legislative and statewide offices. In 2024, it made its first presidential endorsement deciding that the best way to move voters was to have its canvass focus on Harris' support for abortion rights. Nationally, the counties that Down Home organized in were one of the small minority in the nation in which Harris performed better than Biden.

There are other organizations around the country that have been organizing in towns and rural districts for years, although most have not included election work on their agenda. It's essential that there is more of an investment in local organizations that are immersed in local culture and attract people across party lines.

Mike Lux, a longtime progressive Democratic strategist and organizer, has focused on the challenges Democrats have in "factory towns," which he [defines](#) as "small and midsized towns that have been most impacted by deindustrialization and increased Big Business power in the economy." Lux

points out that Factory Towns voters comprise 48% of the voters in Pennsylvania and the Midwest.

Lux highlights that "Community building needs to be at the heart of our organizing strategy:"

Our recommendation is that both the national Democratic Party and progressive non-profits invest in hiring regional organizers based in targeted Factory Town counties. They should be assigned to build local committees and volunteer structures in the counties. One of the key activities would be to organize fun and helpful events where people can come together to share information, get targeted help, and do that community building thing. Staff should also be assigned to organize local media events that get them on the local news, and to coordinate with all the groups working on economic issues.

Henry Farrell, a professor at John Hopkins, cites the need for Democrats to organize year-round, "work with ordinary members and voters to actually build up a party that makes connections between politicians and the people between elections." He proposes that:

... the Democratic Party, along with other liberal and left-leaning organizations, should fund the creation of community centers in priority voting precincts. These centers would be managed by a combination of local volunteers and paid staff who are hired directly from the surrounding community. ... While the

community centers would be forthright about their general political orientation, *none of these events should have explicitly political ends*. ... all the work at these community centers would serve a very simple goal: establishing a cordial, mutually beneficial relationship between normie voters and America's left-liberal political coalition.

Labor unions can also be a vehicle for encouraging and moving people against the dominant politics of their communities. Historically, unions played a central role in building strong community relationships and an understanding of which politicians are the real champions of working people. Many unions continue to do that today but with deeply diminished membership and the loss of factory jobs their impact is a shadow of what it was. Still, the resurgence of union organizing, including recent successes in the south, is another vehicle for making inroads among working class voters.

Finally, I'll underscore that strong local organizing is the best way to develop strong local leaders to run for political office. Good organizing has long been a powerful way of identifying local leaders and developing their skills and relationships to become candidates. Organizing issue campaigns attracts people who build relationships with others, learn skills of public leadership and an understanding of how to move people into effective collective action. Leaders who are most likely to shift the narrative in working class communities are working class people from those communities.

Media and culture: Competing for attention on social media

There has been a great deal of attention, correctly, to the impact of media on the 2024 election. This is far from a new issue. Rush Limbaugh soared to popularity in the late 1980s. Fox News was launched in 1996, fulfilling a vision that Roger Ailes had as [early as 1970](#), when he was an advisor to President Richard Nixon. Fox's baldly biased coverage was helped by the [elimination of the Fairness Doctrine](#) in 1987 by Reagan's FCC.

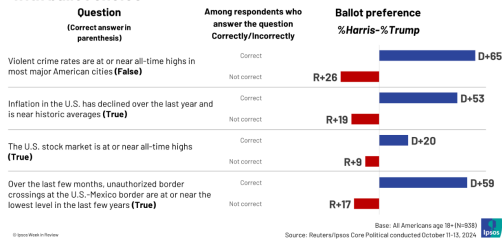
For the purposes of my analysis, I want to highlight a handful of facts:

- There were major differences in media consumption between Harris and Trump voters, with those who don't pay attention to news strongly preferring Trump:
 - Voters who [get their news](#) from newspapers preferred Harris by 49 points; those who get their news from digital websites or national TV by 20 points;
 - Voters who don't follow political news preferred Trump by 26 points. Trump also had an advantage of 16 points among voters for whom YouTube or Google was their main source of news;
 - For those who rely mostly on cable news, Trump had an eight-point lead, almost certainly based on Fox News; among those who turn to social media, just a four point advantage.
- Among swing voters, [Trump won](#) among not just Fox News viewers,

but also among those who pay attention to Facebook, X and podcasts. Only swing voters who turn to CNN had a clear preference for Harris.

- The less you knew about facts, the more likely you were to vote Republican, as this chart from an [IPSOS poll](#) shows:

Misinformed views on immigration, crime, the economy correlated with ballot choice



- Age is the biggest predictor of who gets [news from social media influencers](#). Among all adults, one-in-five turn to influencers as a source. But it is 37% among those under 30, dropping down to 7% for those 65 and older.
 - But there is not a difference by political party; about 20% of both Republicans (21%) and Democrats say (22%) say that they get news from social media influencers.

What should the progressive strategy be to combat the influence of social media and the strong right leanings of people who don't consume news? The advice that makes the most sense to me is to lean much more heavily into social media sources that are not overtly political.

Dan Pfeiffer, former Communications Director for Obama, who wrote a [book](#) titled, *Battling the Big Lie: How Fox, Facebook, and the MAGA Media Are*

Destroying America, wrote in a [post](#) after the election:

If you read the *New York Times* or watch *CNN*, Democrats know how to reach you. The problem is that we already have those voters. It's very clear that most of Democratic communications is a circular conversation with the people who already agree with us on everything. The rest of the electorate can't hear us. They are getting no countervailing information to counter the Right Wing caricature of Democrats. Because of *Fox News* and other Right Wing outlets, Republicans have long had an asymmetric media advantage. **However, in recent years, Right Wing messaging has come to dominate non-political online spaces centered on topics like comedy, gaming, gambling, and wellness.** [Emphasis added].

Ayem Kpenkaan, a progressive social media influencer noted in a *New York Times* [article](#) that, as the *Times* summarized, "Democrats needed liberal versions of media platforms that are culturally right-leaning but not inherently political — like Barstool Sports, the popular sports brand that has become so enmeshed in online culture that it has coined a phrase, Barstool conservatism." The *Times* quotes Kpenkaan, "We have to make entertaining, engaging content that men want to watch and care about. Then, over time, you pepper in more progressive views."

The *Times* also quoted another successful progressive influencer, Bryan Tyler Cohen with 3.4 million YouTube

subscribers, who explained how Trump built his attraction to men: “Republicans have used culture as a gateway to politics.” The *Times* writes that Cohen, “pointed to the high-profile voices who spent years building enormous male followings through entertainment, sports, comedy and a bevy of other topics before veering more explicitly into politics and endorsing Mr. Trump this year, like the podcaster Joe Rogan (more than 14 million followers on Spotify, the most of any podcaster on the platform) and the YouTube pranksters known as the Nelk Boys (8.25 million followers on the platform).”

Mike Lux [extends](#) his emphasis on building local organizations to developing a local media presence:

We need to build a media/ social media infrastructure to get real news to people, and combat the massive waves of disinfo they are getting. In many counties in America, local newspapers have gone out of business, or been bought up by hedge funds which suck them dry and don't care about getting real news into people's hands. Local radio stations are either gone or bought up by huge conglomerates. Local TV stations in these communities are often owned by Sinclair Broadcasting or other rightwing news sources.... Democrats and progressives need to build our own network of locally based social media networks that have local people moderating them, and can get actual news into people's hands, places that provide information, but also

build that sense of community I was talking about above.

Concluding Thoughts: The Moral Roller-Coaster of the Universe is Bumpy But it Rolls Towards Justice

I began this exploration with my rewriting of a famous quote about how to strategize to make change. My other rewrite is to the much more well-known quote, first from abolitionist Theodore Parker, then popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King: “The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice.”

As we face another four years of Trump, I'm reminded that our history is a very tumultuous ride. It's far from a smooth arc, more like a very bumpy, at times frightening ride. But there are also times when the ride is exhilarating, where we make tremendous progress. As I [pointed out](#) after Trump was first elected, throughout our history progressive eras have followed very conservative times.

We saw that in the last four years; Joe Biden and a Democratic Congress [enacted](#) the most significant progressive economic policies of the past fifty years. Few if any expected Biden, who ran as the centrist candidate and hewed to that for his long senate career, to aggressively attack neoliberal economics both rhetorically and in action. As he said many times, “I'm tired of trickle-down economics. I want to build this economy from the bottom up and the middle-out.”

President Biden pulled off an agenda of lowering drug prices, investing hundreds of billions of dollars in clean energy, successfully stopping corporate mergers,

raising taxes on corporations, and installing administrators who raised labor standards and cracked down on corporate price gouging and more.

The scary ride of the Trump administration will provide us a windfall of opportunities to define him and the Republican Party as defenders of the wealthy and powerful who are raising costs and stripping valued protections for everyday Americans. As progressives and Democrats pick up on that windfall, we should do that in ways that promote our long-term goal of moving working class voters away from the appeal of right-wing politics. That will require a strong dose of populist left economics along with a good measure of cultural understanding and relatedness.

For now, as always, our obligation is to be realistic about the challenges we face and build our optimism not out of blind hope, but by using our minds and our wills to pave a path to justice.