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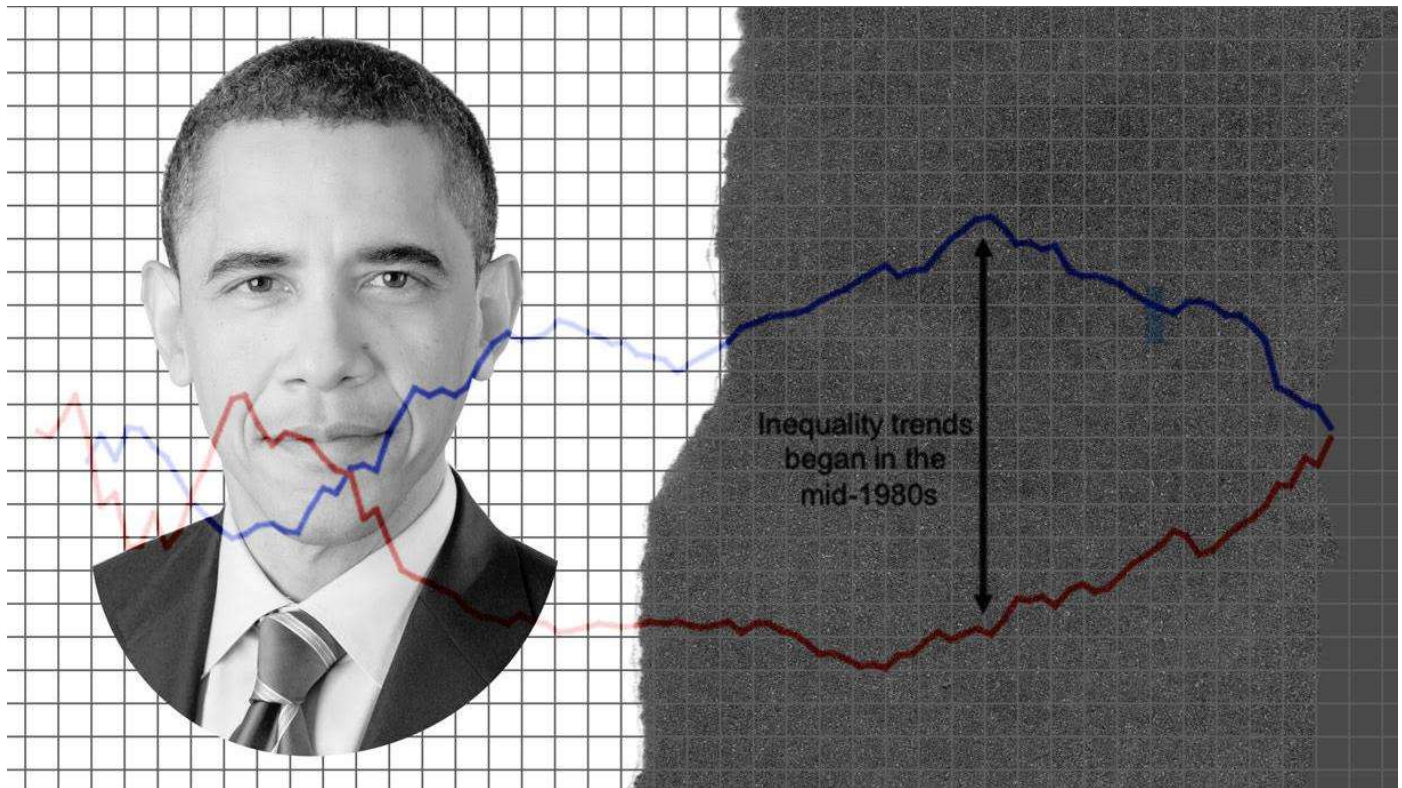
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(Illustration by Jandos Rothstein)

Democrats, Speak to Working-Class Discontent

It's the one way to mobilize Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, not just white workers.

BY STANLEY B. GREENBERG FEBRUARY 14, 2022





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America is at a perilous moment when a Trump-led Republican Party is steaming ahead to knock down every guardrail protecting free elections. Over 80 percent of Republicans, according to a recent national survey by the University of Virginia Center for Politics and Project Home Fire, believe “our country needs a powerful leader in order to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in society today.” A third now believe violence is justified to “save our country,” according to a national survey by the Public Religion Research Institute.

The Republican threat to America’s constitutional experiment has led me to ask: What is our plan to save it? Here’s mine.

I am a pollster and political strategist with long experience advising Democratic candidates. Now, more than ever, Democratic victories are necessary to prevent Republicans from locking up the system. My plan is to focus on working-class voters—white, Black, Hispanic, Asian—and figure out every legal and ethical way possible for Democratic candidates to regain even a few extra points of support from them.

More from Stanley B. Greenberg

Thirty years ago, as a Yale academic and pollster, I first did research on the workers of Macomb County, Michigan, and labeled the defecting, unionized, ethnic Catholic suburban voters among them as “Reagan Democrats.” (That work appeared in one of *The American Prospect’s* first issues and caught the attention of the governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton.) Macomb County voters had given John F. Kennedy his biggest suburban margin of victory in 1960, but they later felt betrayed by



Democrats and voted for Ronald Reagan in 1984. Since then, presidential aspirants have visited Macomb to show they could win the trust of discontented white factory workers across America's Rust Belt.

Today, the Democrats' working-class problem isn't limited to white workers. The party is also losing support from working-class Blacks and Hispanics—a daunting 12 points off their margin since 2016, according to Ruy Teixeira.

Even before last November's election, commentators and analysts were pointing to the erosion of Democrats' working-class support. Then Democrats lost Virginia's gubernatorial race, where Republican Glenn Youngkin won three-quarters of white voters without a four-year degree and two-thirds of those in rural and small-town Virginia. His campaign generated such high voter turnout in Trump country that it increased the white vote share from two-thirds in 2018 and 2020 to three-quarters. If Republicans continue winning working-class votes at the rate they did in Virginia, Democrats have little chance.

After studying working-class voters for nearly four decades, I believe the trajectory can be shifted or reversed. But there is no room for error. There is no room for fools. There is no time for strategists who look down on or rule out voters who fail a purist civics test. There is also no room for sensibilities that keep us from clearly understanding our options.

Working with a multiracial and multigenerational team of pollsters—Democracy Corps, Equis Research, and HIT Strategies, made possible by the support of the American Federation of Teachers and Center for Voter Information—I see the same pattern today among racially diverse workers without a four-year degree that I saw among white workers in Macomb County three



decades ago. The voters who have defected to Republicans are still open to voting for Democrats. They resent big corporations writing the rules at work and in politics. But when they hear Democrats are offering bold economic and political changes, they are surprised.

During the 1990s, leading Democrats recognized they had a working-class problem, and although many people may no longer remember it, both Bill Clinton and Al Gore had working class–oriented campaigns. In 1992, Clinton sought to win the support of both white and Black working families, pointing to their shared economic struggles and sense of grievance that hardworking people like themselves were not getting heard by government. He told them that “we need fundamental change, not more of the same,” and promised to raise taxes on CEOs while reassuring working-class voters of all races on crime and welfare. In his 2000 campaign, Gore was emphatic about checking the power of Big Tobacco and the pharmaceutical and health insurance companies. After the Democratic convention, he insisted his public events be plastered with signs saying, “THE PEOPLE, NOT THE POWERFUL!”

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In 1992, Clinton sought to win the support of both white and Black working families, pointing to their shared economic struggles.

Frankly, I was skeptical. I said, “Could this be more inauthentic?” But I polled it, and Gore was right to hammer that theme—and he did win the popular vote (including Macomb County) and probably would have been president, but for the intervention of the Supreme



Court in stopping the Florida recount.

The emergence of Barack Obama signaled a shift in Democratic appeals. During the 2008 primary, Obama became the “change candidate” because of his early opposition to the Iraq War, not because he spoke to working-class discontent. At the Democratic Convention four years earlier, Obama had told a unifying story as an African American who saw only one United States of America, not separate Americas divided by race and partisanship. In focus groups before the 2008 convention, I was surprised by how many white workers were open to what would be the first African American president. Many of them would have scored high on any “racial resentment” scale, but they were not blaming Blacks for their current condition. They were blaming high-paid CEOs for outsourcing American jobs, and they were blaming NAFTA. Many decided Obama was different from other Black leaders and might govern for the whole country, not just work for “his own people.”

If you govern for the whole country, you know that two-thirds of all registered voters never graduated from a four-year college. Well before the financial crash in 2008, they were angry. Employment in manufacturing had plummeted after 2000 from almost 18 million to 14 million jobs. Innovations in technology and structural changes in the economy were raising worker productivity, but the top 1 percent and then the top .01 percent were seizing all the gains in income.

During the 2008 campaign, James Carville and I, as heads of Democracy Corps, and John Podesta, the director of the Center for American Progress, convened a monthly meeting at my house in Washington to help fashion a Democratic strategy. Among the attendees was David Axelrod, Obama’s campaign chief. We created an “economy project” whose polling showed what should



have been obvious. The Democrats' most powerful message called for an end to trickle-down economics and a focus on creating American jobs and a government that worked for the middle class again.

But despite a deepening economic crisis, Obama didn't talk much about the economy in his 2008 campaign. Under the banner "Change We Can Believe In," he promised to get beyond "the bitterness" that "consumed Washington" to make health care affordable, cut middle-class taxes, and "bring our troops home." On the night of his election victory, before the hundreds of thousands gathered in Grant Park and millions watching around the world, he began with the message that his own victory represented hope: "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer."

Like so many others, I was inspired by Obama himself and by what his election seemed to say about America. In critically important ways, he did fulfill the hopes invested in him. He led the country through one of its darkest moments, providing calm and honest leadership in spite of an ugly racist backlash and Republicans' determination to make him fail. Surely, he deserved some credit for the economic recovery that took place during his administration.

But working people were in so much trouble that they weren't giving anybody credit. In my surveys, 60 percent said the biggest economic problem was "jobs that don't pay enough to live on," and in my focus groups, workers continued to be angry about upper-class greed and corporations "selling out our jobs." They believed Obama's principal policy to rescue the economy was the bailout of the Wall Street banks that had "played with our money." The Obama administration's failure to



prosecute the banks' CEOs just confirmed the nexus between Wall Street and Washington.

Obama embodied the forces making America a multiracial nation, and many Democrats—and Republicans—came to assume that those trends would ultimately make the Democrats politically and culturally ascendant. But it didn't turn out that way, and it may not.

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The economic crash and bailout, the continuing economic struggles of working families, and the first Black president proved a toxic combination. In 2009, the racially inflected reaction against Obama triggered the Tea Party movement that formed to stop his economic recovery plan and the Affordable Care Act. Racial resentment helped turn the Republican Party into a vehicle for the restoration of white America—indeed, the level of racial resentment in polls hit highs not seen since 1968 when George Wallace and Richard Nixon ran their overtly racist campaigns.

Many analysts believe racism explains almost everything, and Obama himself mused after 2016, “Maybe people just want to fall back into their tribe.” But that misses how the Obama administration's economic policy failed all working people. It took seven years from the 2008 crash for them to get back to their pre-crisis income level—that is, to where they were during Bush's Gilded Age.

White working-class voters turned against the



Democrats in 2010 and again in 2014, though in 2012 some were persuaded to vote for Obama against Mitt Romney, the very embodiment of corporate America. But Democrats didn't just have a white working-class problem, they had a working-class problem. Democrats faced a pullback from their predominantly working-class base of Black, Hispanics, millennials, and unmarried women—the bloc I labeled the “Rising American Electorate” in my analysis of shifts in public opinion.

In 2010 and 2014—together with my wife, Rep. Rosa DeLauro—I watched President Obama make final campaign appeals, the first time at a rally in a Black neighborhood, the second time at a Hispanic one, both in Bridgeport, Connecticut. In one of those speeches, Obama invited laughter, not anger, about the state of the economy. He seemed bemused as he told the crowd that after driving the car into “a very steep ditch,” Republicans “walked away from the scene of the accident” before Democrats got the car up on level ground. “Finally,” he said, “we have this car pointing in the right direction” and now Republicans wanted the keys back.

On those and other occasions, Obama did not give voice to the hurt and anger that working-class voters were feeling. He asked them to turn out so that Democrats could keep the economy pointed in the “right direction.” In Bridgeport, I thought that the crowd listening to him must have asked themselves, what planet is he on? People in my research thought they were still deep in the ditch dug by George Bush, made even deeper by the Great Recession. Obama called out the Republicans for not helping and made no mention of the greedy corporate interests that angered so many working people.



Working people did not interpret rising employment the way Obama did. When a moderator at my focus groups read the monthly jobs numbers, the participants demanded: “What was the average salary of those jobs?” “Where are those jobs?” “What type of jobs? Are they part-time? Yeah, fast-food jobs?” “Are these jobs people can live on?”

In recent elections, Democratic campaigns have used Obama as the closer, speaking at major rallies on pre-election weekends and election eve. This is an experiment, repeated over and over, with the same result. His rallies helped motivate Republican voters to vote but had disappointing results for Democrats.

The Obama years were the critical juncture when Democratic leaders stopped seeing the working class and feeling its despair and anger. They stopped advocating for workers against corporate excess and stopped challenging the exceptional corruption that allowed billionaires and Wall Street to dominate politics. The result is that the Democratic Party has lost touch with all working people, including its own base. When Obama himself was re-elected in 2012, he confirmed for Democrats that he was a successful president. But he wasn't a success in building a long-term majority. In every election while he was president, Democrats took losses. Republicans gained control over half of America's states, and Donald Trump, not Hillary Clinton, succeeded him in office.

Obama was one of the few presidents in our history to win re-election with a reduced margin. He lost white millennials after winning them in 2008, but he had the good fortune to have Romney as his opponent. To Hispanic voters, Romney was the Republican who asked them to “self-deport.” And Romney's time at Bain Capital gave Obama a rare chance to slam Wall Street and the indifference of the rich to ordinary working



people. In post-election polls, a majority said the biggest reason to vote against Romney was that he was for the rich.

But the 2012 election didn't change the political trends. Democrats suffered major losses in the 2014 midterms, even though Republicans weren't responding to working-class discontent either. They supported all of Obama's trade deals hurting their own working-class base. Republican voters were only slightly less disengaged than Democrats.

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Donald Trump's candidacy changed all that. When he announced for president, Trump made clear he was different from other Republicans. He did not mention abortion or cutting government spending or taxes—the usual Republican litany—and instead let loose a roar of resentment against immigrants, foreign political leaders, and the political and business establishment in this country who sold out America's workers. Mexico was sending rapists, criminals, and drug dealers; America had “become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems.” And “how stupid are these politicians to allow this to happen?” He asked, “When was the last time anybody saw us beating” China or Japan? Unlike other candidates, he would “bring back our manufacturing” and rebuild the nation: “I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created.”

Trump's evangelical style, rallies, TV persona, and



reputation as a business genius—however phony—inspired many rural and white working-class voters who had scorned other politicians. Millions of new voters showed up at rallies, caucuses, and primaries to allow Trump to move quickly into the lead in the polls and win the nomination. And tens of millions of new voters allowed him to win in 2016.

As his opponent that year, Hillary Clinton saw a different country. She had her own serious analysis of the economic problems facing the country and offered bolder policies than Obama had, including “the biggest investment in good paying jobs since World War Two,” “infrastructure jobs that can’t be outsourced, advanced manufacturing that pays high wages, stronger unions, a higher minimum wage, and equal pay for women.” Although I agreed with a lot of Clinton’s proposals, I would have had her press for greater economic and political change. As Clinton herself recalls in her memoir, “Stan also thought my campaign was too upbeat on the economy, too liberal on immigration, and not vocal enough about trade.” On the last, she offered only the most modulated critique of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the trade agreement whose congressional ratification Obama had fought for.

Clinton’s general approach on the economy was to say she would “build on the progress” Obama had made, which said to voters she was not going to change much. My polling suggested she would have done better with a more aggressive message focused on “leveling the playing field” for ordinary people and attacking corporate corruption. Yet Clinton felt blocked in addressing that corruption after Bernie Sanders attacked her corporate fundraising as “obscene,” and she continued to depend on Wall Street for campaign funds. During the general election, she did not campaign aggressively in working-class communities or in rural



areas. Her description of some Trump supporters as “deplorables” just baked in the perception that she did not respect working people.

The 2016 election did not set a record for turnout, in part because some Sanders supporters stayed home and Black turnout fell from 2012. What was historic was how poorly Clinton and Democrats did in suburban counties in the Rust Belt. She lost Macomb County by about 50,000—a margin well in excess of Trump’s 10,000 statewide margin in Michigan. New white working-class voters and rural voters rallied to Trump’s messianic, racist vision in breathtaking numbers. That juiced-up energy among the disaffected kept the proportion of voters without a four-year college degree nearly unchanged from four years earlier, despite their decline in the overall population.

In 2020, Trump ran a full-year campaign for re-election rubbing every racial sore he could find. The police murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests nationwide allowed him to run on law and order. He blasted the Democrats for attacks on the police and the spiking crime rate in cities, and he minimized COVID, denounced the mask mandates, and promised to reopen the economy. In the election, he defied the demographic trends by pushing up white working-class turnout by another six points. In some battleground states, 20 percent were first-time voters, and Trump loyalists voted straight Republican and punished Democrats in House and Senate races.

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Democrats still have the opportunity to become the one best hope of America’s working families.



Joe Biden won the Electoral College by taking back Wisconsin by about 20,000 votes, Michigan by 150,000, and Pennsylvania by 80,000, as well as by picking up Georgia and Arizona. Except for Georgia, those states were a lot closer than anyone expected. Biden won by getting a higher turnout with millennials and young voters and winning with a bigger margin among suburban and college-educated women. He also pushed up his vote a few points with persuadable white working-class voters.

These states were close in part because turnout was down in the Black inner cities in Milwaukee, Detroit, and Philadelphia, though nationally Black turnout kept up with the overall increase. Trump grew his vote with Black men to 12 percent. He got 38 percent of the Hispanic vote nationally, ten points more than he did against Clinton in 2016, and grew his margin by even more in Florida and among Cubans.

Democrats can't count on following the Obama playbook. To be sure, Obama is America's most esteemed political leader nationally and in countries around the world. But by calling in Obama in every election, Democrats are telling voters they prioritize his political project. Presenting themselves as the party of Obama implies not only that Democrats represent a diverse, multicultural America—which is true—but also that they represent the voters who are doing well and want to help those who are still struggling. It says Democrats are not angry about the deepening inequality and corruption that has allowed big corporations and the top 1 percent to write the rules for all of us. It says Democrats are out of touch with working people.

Despite Trump, Republicans are the same old low-tax, anti-government party that works for the biggest corporations and billionaires. So Democrats still have



the opportunity to become the one best hope of America's working families. It's not rocket science.

The research team of Democracy Corps, Equis Research, and HIT Strategies conducted three waves of focus groups and surveys nationally, in battleground states and districts, eight states with large Hispanic populations, and in Orange County with Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. The final combined national survey conducted in late October took place at a dark moment for Democrats. They trailed Republicans and Trump by four points on the economy and only reached parity with them on handling crime and jobs and wages.

But voters who heard Democrats were not OK with the status quo had a more positive view of the party. In our survey, respondents read the transformative policies in the American Rescue Plan, the bipartisan infrastructure legislation, and Build Back Better. They heard Democrats concerned about public safety, crime, and funding and reforming the police, not defunding them. And they heard Democrats embracing a blue-collar message and taxing big corporations. This was the message:

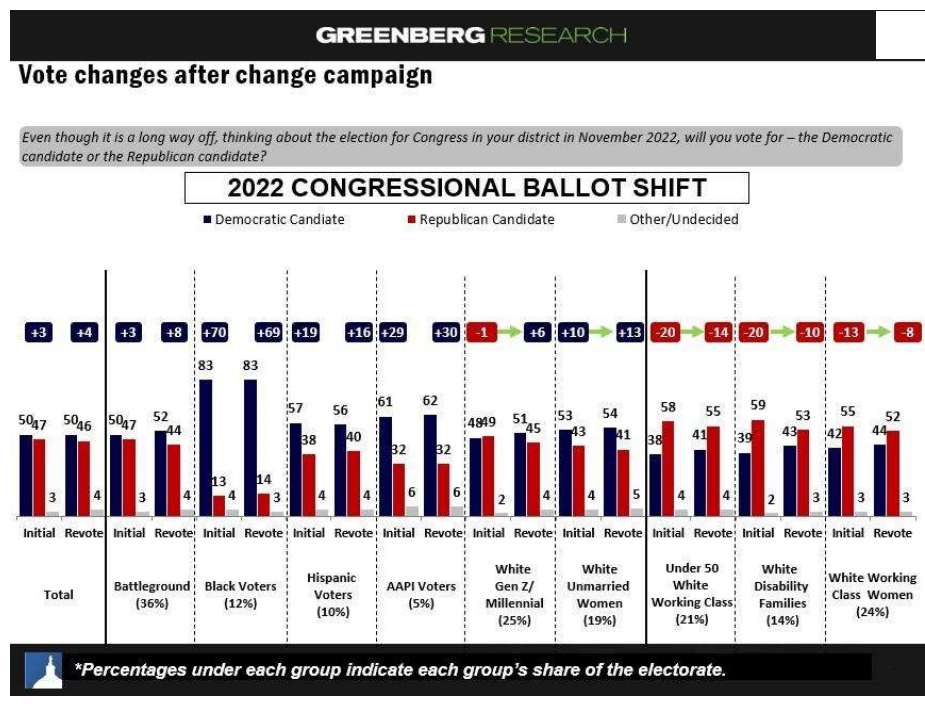
The Democrat says, people are living paycheck to paycheck and struggling to pay their bills and taxes. They need a government that looks out for the middle class, working families, small businesses, and the vulnerable who work hard. They don't need a government that jumps whenever the biggest corporations send money and lobbyists. My approach is blue collar. We should bend over backwards for those who work hard so we create jobs in America and grow the middle class again.

At the end of the survey, respondents raised their support for Democrats from a three-point to an eight-point edge in 2022 battleground states and districts.



That higher margin for Democrats was made possible by an impressive consolidation of support from Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian Americans, even though 24 percent of Blacks and 46 percent of Hispanics continued to choose Trump’s “America First” message over what we called the Democrats’ “American Dream” message. In the simulated campaign, Republicans still got only 14 percent of the Black vote. The Democrats’ Hispanic vote held and the Republican vote ended up where it stood in 2020—with no further erosion. Asian American and Pacific Islanders voted Democratic by 2-to-1 after hearing the Democrats’ offer.

Hearing Democrats want big change captured the attention of white Gen Z and millennial voters. In our simulated campaign, Democrats began trailing by a point among those groups but ended up leading by six. Democrats also grew their impressive margin among white unmarried women.



Hearing Democrats talk about big economic and political change also got the attention of white working-class voters under age 50 despite their attraction to



Trump. In the simulated campaign, the Democrats cut the Republican margin by six points. Democrats also made gains with whites who have a disabled member of their family, a group who are disproportionately represented in the working class and respond very favorably to the Democrats' health care policies.

In our message tests, voters are surprised to hear that Democrats are dissatisfied with an economy where many of the voters themselves live paycheck to paycheck. They are surprised that Democrats prioritize big changes in the economy and who holds power. They are surprised Democrats worry about community safety and crime and want to fund and reform police.

If Democrats are to stop hemorrhaging their working-class support and achieve the kinds of gains that they did in 2018, they have to embrace a message of change. It's not just their electoral fortunes that hang in the balance. American democracy itself does.



STANLEY B. GREENBERG

Stanley B. Greenberg, a founding partner of Greenberg Research and Prospect board member, is author of 'RIP GOP: How the New America Is

Dooming the Republicans.'



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