

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE STEP PROGRESSIVES AND DEMOCRATS CAN TAKE TO REGAIN SUPPORT AMONG WHITE WORKING CLASS AMERICANS?**

*By JOEL ROGERS*

I don't think Democratic Party elites are interested in activating even progressive portions of the white working class, or that progressives currently have the focus and power to get that done. Some of these folks flatly oppose the class-based but socially inclusive political project you're proposing. Many others still don't accept your premise that the "new American electorate" will not be enough, at least for decades, to forge the sort of broad majoritarian support needed for lasting progressive change. Maybe their goals aren't ambitious enough to see that as necessary.

But, helping myself to the assumption that there's a will and some way here, I don't think this question is so difficult to answer.

Most members of the white working class correctly think that their economic, social, and political interests and values are neither advanced nor particularly respected by most Democrats and progressives. Progressives (let's leave aside those DP elites for the moment) need to persuade them that that need not be so, and that life would be exciting again were it not, but that a condition of it not being so is their support and co-creation of a political project of real significance. So, let's start the party.

That begins with a conversation with them, admitting both our and their confusion, failures, hopes, and dreams, but emphatically affirming our common devotion to the core values of this wild, diverse, once radical, still beautiful, rock 'n' roll nation we all belong to — that in this place dedicated to a proposition, birth doesn't determine fate, and everybody gets a say in making that miracle a reality.

This conversation can be had anywhere and anyhow... in bars, bowling alleys, churches, supermarkets, union halls (they still exist!); through televised town halls, focus groups galore, or deliberation days; in football stadia, on door steps, in living rooms, or even bed. Some of it is already going on. What is going on should be better targeted and massively scaled up and made effectively permanent as an inviting feature of our everyday lives, everywhere. Of course, we should always be looking for ways to improve that conversation's quality, and use any and all technology to widen and deepen it. But first, it just needs to happen, much more than it is now. And it must be serious, effectively about first principles. Consistent with our values, what should we be doing together as a nation, or most of one? Is there any other political question worth asking?

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Of course, recommending a conversation assumes some ability to have one, or a willingness to learn how to. To talk with white working class members — not just at them. To be willing to listen — not just wait to make a point. To show some respect for their values — without hiding yours. This will sometimes be difficult. But it'll be infinitely easier if we don't assume they're idiots who care only about themselves, or blankly irrational and unwilling to consider evidence, or at least not as devoted to achieving this country as we are.

And of course too, more than talk is needed. We'll need some sort of program, and some candidates willing to run on it, and their support and discipline by a much better organized and coordinated movement willing to replace some Democrats, not just keep electing incumbents (more crazy assumptions, I know, but you started it). But assuming enough power to make the discussion not completely abstract, I'm not too concerned about the difficulty of putting together such a program. I'd suggest that it focus on changes in the basic rules by which we govern ourselves, not more kludges and 3,000-page bills, and that ordinary citizens and their organizations be recruited to monitor and enforce the new ones.

What might this program include? Well, we might get some accountability on the job by extending our legal definition of employer and giving jail time and penalties for criminal ones, and restore some semblance of a social contract by tying wages to gains in productivity. We might save the planet by putting a price on the nature we're now destroying, and incenting its more efficient and restorative use. We might begin to repair our democracy by — automatically registering everyone over 18 and giving them a photo ID, changing lobbying laws to jam revolving doors, securing a path to citizenship for immigrants, trying out better voting rules to make every vote count, and of course declare and demonstrate, with public funding matches to small donors, that democracy's not for sale. We might even decide, in foreign affairs, to lead more by the force of our example than more examples of our force, dedicating ourselves to making tangible contributions to peace and development rather than unending war.

I'm not worried that we've closed the patent house on good ideas, and am confident there'll be better ones than these. But I do think a fairly fundamental reform of the way we now do the people's business is needed, that that will indeed require the enthusiastic support and help of a durable majority of citizens, both active and informed. I don't doubt that many of this new majority will and must come from the white working class. But you've got to talk with them first.