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Democrats Dare Not "Abandon" the White Working Class

By **David Paul Kuhn** - December 5, 2011



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It's an enduring myth of modern American politics that the white working class is what stands between Democrats and a majority. Even before the character of Archie Bunker became a liberal scapegoat on television, the demise of the FDR coalition was reduced to bubba blowback.

In a sense, "All in the Family" captures decades of Democratic deliberation. The debate between old Archie (Joe Sixpack) and the young, college-educated Michael Stivic (hippie) defined the 1970s sitcom. The Democratic establishment decided that it had to choose between the two archetypes. It bet on Michael. And the Nixon-Reagan coalition dominated American politics for more than four decades.

A recent Democratic study has reignited this old debate. In effect, the report argues we are finally living in Michael the hippie's America. Democrats, it implies, should invest their future in a coalition of college-educated Michaels, his wife Gloria, his friends of color, basically anyone not an Archie or an Edith.

Last week, veteran political writer Tom Edsall added fuel to that debate with a [smart overview](#) of this budding Democratic consensus. He led his New York Times story with this provocative tease: "Democratic operatives for the 2012 election make it clear for the first time that the party will explicitly abandon the white working class."

In effect, this "adios, Archie" mindset has been Democrats' *de facto* strategy since 1984. But those voting blocs -- minorities, youth, the emerging tide of educated white women -- were always considered carrots to supplement, not supplant traditional, working-class Democrats. Bill Clinton's 1996 campaign strategists placed these voters, particularly "soccer moms," in a preferred bracket they termed "swing one," augmented by white men and working-class whites, or the "swing two" bracket. But now, demographic shifts have led Democrats to conclude that they no longer need the latter.

It worked for Clinton. But he had a booming economy at his back, a middling Republican opponent, and a third-party candidate who siphoned more votes from the right than the left. Yet Clinton still failed to win a majority of the vote or a majority of white women.

Since then, however, America has grown browner, more educated, less married and more secular. Democrats are depending upon these changes to fortify Obama's presidency. A weak Republican

nominee (see Gingrich, Newt) would certainly help Obama's cause.

It is those demographic shifts that led influential progressive analysts Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin to write a report titled "[The Path to 270](#)." The detailed study essentially argues that Obama cannot afford to completely lose working-class whites but he can, and should, salvage re-election by seeking supporters elsewhere. Teixeira first argued this strategy in a book he co-authored in 2002, "The Emerging Democratic Majority." A decade later, Democrats are still waiting.

Misunderstanding of Democrats' "White Problem"

The "Emerging Democratic Majority" was a formative text for a generation of liberal thinkers. Yet its premise was fatally flawed. It argued that when whites become more educated they become more liberal, and thus more likely to vote for Democrats. This has proven true of white women, but not of white men - a trend that helps explain the persistence of Democrats' white-male gap.

Consider Obama's current job approval rating in the Gallup Poll. Only 35 percent of white, college-educated men approve of him, compared to 46 percent of white, college-educated women. This latter group has a view of Obama more similar to Hispanics' than their white, male, upscale counterparts. This trend has defined voting behavior for decades. [Share](#)

Obama has a white, working-class problem. But a doctor cannot cure, or easily assuage, an illness that is not accurately diagnosed. Electoral issues are no different.

The data tell the tale. It's not all Archie's fault. (And poor Edith deserves none of the blame.) As I detailed in my 2007 book, "[The Neglected Voter](#)," Democrats lost more white voters over the past half-century in the middle-income bracket than the lower-third income bracket. Between 1948 and 2004, Democrats' share of the white, working-class vote fell among men by a quarter but it did not fall among women. In the middle-income bracket, white men left the Democrats at twice the rate of white women.

Clinton won the largest share of blue-collar whites in the past quarter-century. And yet he still only won 44 percent that year, 1996. That statistic is especially striking if you step outside the United States. America is the only Western nation where the liberal party consistently loses the workingman (and woman). No comparable European democracy has seen the conservative party unflinchingly win the Archies and Ediths for more than three decades. Now Democrats seem to be on the verge of resigning themselves to this trend.

There are myriad macro reasons for this exceptional fact of American politics: a center-right nation, the two-party system, the modern contest for identity blocs, the unusual eminence of cultural issues in American politics on both the right and the left. But it's also valuable to consider the micro picture -- the voters themselves.

Blue-collar whites are more likely than their upscale white counterparts to live in rural or exurban areas, to hunt, to attend church, experience more familial upheaval in their lives (higher divorce and teen pregnancy rates), suffer the hemorrhaging of blue-collar industrial jobs, and compete with illegal immigrants for low-wage employment.

The Great Recession brought new, and rare, emphasis to the economic side of this world. Blue-collar *workers* account for seven of every 10 jobs lost in this recession, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Blue-collar *men* -- black, Hispanic, white -- account for six in every 10 job losses. White, working-class males account for about four of every 10. This helps explain why only three in 10 working-class

whites approve of Obama today.

The Great Recession provided Democrats a chance to reconnect with working and middle-class whites. But this chance **was squandered** by the end of 2009. Obama focused his first year on the Democratic issue of the age (universal health care) instead of the issue of the time (the dire economy). That mistake, like progressives' over-reading of Obama's 2008 victory, continues to distort Democrats' understanding of the daunting electoral terrain before them.

The Crash and the Fraught Road Around Bunkers

Today's liberal wonks continue to **pin the loss** of Obama's mandate on the economy but ignore how the economy created that mandate. Three years ago, with Obama's election, the authors of "The Emerging Democratic Majority" argued that their majority had indeed emerged. Teixeira soon doubled-down with a detailed 2009 report titled "New Progressive America." The next year, Republicans won the largest midterm victory in post-World War II America. Why this chasm between liberal seers and reality?

Progressive analysts habitually omit the keystone fact of the 2008 election: The bulk of Obama's significant electoral gains came after the mid-September stock market crash. It seems impossible to right this wrongheaded conventional wisdom. (**I know, I've tried.**) The reports by Teixeira, alone, total over 100 pages; yet the stock market crash is ignored throughout. That oversight leads analysts to wrongly use Obama's electoral gains in 2008 as a base line when they seem more likely to constitute an outlier.

Yet the "Path to 270" study also carries an intriguing proposition. It argues that the current shift in demographics means that Obama could win the popular vote even if he merely wins the same share of whites as John Kerry in 2004, providing all else remains constant. But all else would likely not remain constant in that event. After all, as Obama's white support has declined, so has his Latino support. Half of Hispanics approve of Obama today; three in four once did. [Share](#)

The Latino population is also growing at a far greater pace than its share of the electorate. This is another reason the "Emerging Democratic Majority" never did actually emerge. In 2008, Hispanics were about 15 percent of the population but, at most, 9 percent of the 2008 electorate. For some perspective, consider that working-class whites were 39 percent of the 2008 electorate. Even in 2035, according to projections by the Pew Hispanic Center, Latinos will account for 24 percent of the population but only 14 percent of the electorate. And it's a fool's errand to imagine the appeal of parties in that distant future. This helps explain why the "Democratic Majority" theory, as imagined, fails. It applies a future too distant to inform the present.

Obama's "White Problem": More Mondale Than Kerry

In the coming year, if only because of the immigration issue, Obama will recover significant ground with Hispanics. Whites will prove more difficult. This is why Obama might still lose even if he recovered with minorities. As from the present vantage point, Obama will struggle to match even Kerry's performance with whites.

Obama's gains with whites in 2008 were limited to men. Obama performed as well with white women as Al Gore did in 2000. He even won the same share of college-educated white women as Gore. Obama did surpass Kerry's performance with these so-called "soccer moms" by a couple points, but he negated those gains by underperforming among the so-called "waitress moms." And that was with historic winds at his back.

Critically, Obama's gains with downscale and upscale white men occurred after the market crashed. Today, Obama's approval rating with white men (31 percent) resembles his standing before Lehman Brothers brought Wall Street down and the American economy with it.

This means that Obama is not on track to emulate Kerry's performance with whites. Obama is, instead, heading in the direction of Walter Mondale. And there's no route to re-election if he even modestly outperforms Mondale with whites, partly due to the disproportionate influence of rural states in the Electoral College.

Why Dems Can't "Abandon" Archie and Edith

Outside events could intervene on Obama's behalf. We still don't know who will be the Republican nominee. It would be exceedingly difficult for Gingrich or Rick Perry to tamp down Democrats' performance with upscale white women, for example. Nor do we know what political events may transpire over the coming year. Partisans traditionally retrench as Election Day nears. But the degree of that retrenchment remains unknown. The most likely scenario has long been that 2012 will be a conventionally **close race**.

Obama is uniquely suited to the neo-Democratic coalition. He's black and white. He's professorial and hails from liberal bastions of America. One of the under-considered facts of the 2008 Democratic primary is that Obama was the first Democratic candidate to win both blacks and liberal whites.

But Obama cannot afford to be merely the upscale liberal candidate, even with his uniquely strong support among blacks. His base still depends on millions of Archies and Ediths. Nearly four in 10 liberals are blue-collar whites, according to Pew Research Center data.

Obama would limit himself, at best, to a narrow victory if he turned his party away from these voters. He cannot allow a narrative to form that he "abandoned" working-class whites. These Americans already feel forgotten. There is nothing to be gained by affirming that emotion. Political oppositions thrive off of antagonists.

It's worth also noting that Republicans already have a sharp arrow in their quiver. They'll surely remind America of Obama's "bitter" comments about small-town whites in 2008. And this time, Obama will not have a sudden economic crash to blanket his mistakes.

More substantially, Obama does not need to resign himself to these divisions. The president has a case to make. The working class suffered most from his choice to invest his political capital in health care reform instead of a new New Deal. Yet, in the long term, blue-collar whites will benefit from that reform -- **should it survive**. Thus, even on this most unpopular policy, Obama **has an argument -- however modest**. Blue-collar whites constitute about 40 percent of the roughly 38 million Americans without health insurance.

Even if the president ekes out a victory, the neo-Democratic strategy resigns him to a modest fate. He will lack the mandate to overcome Washington gridlock. The man who was once framed as a prophetic uniter will have divided in order to conquer. It could work. But it leaves very little margin for error. At best, humble strategies win humble goals. And at worst, well, ask Kerry or Mondale.

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