
THE WIN-O-METER TOOLKIT • SEPTEMBER 2026

HOW TO TALK TO WORKING-CLASS VOTERS

A SIX-PART FORMULA

You can increase your support among working-class voters by 10.9 points—while increasing support among Democrats' college-grad base by 7.8 points.

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The railroad yards in Laramie, Wyoming, 2015. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

THE SIX-PART FORMULA

1. Make economics your top priority
2. Embrace resonant culture and climate initiatives
3. Pair resonant policies with a values statement
4. Say you'll listen to working-class people
5. Use populist rhetoric, choose the right enemy
6. Point to a non-elite background

You can increase your support among working-class voters by 10.9 points—while increasing support among Democrats' college-grad base by 7.8 points.

The Coalition Crisis Toolkit explains how Democratic candidates can connect with working-class values in a wide range of issue areas. This Toolkit provides a simple 6-part formula that can increase support from both the working class and Democrats' college-educated base. It moves the needle most among key groups: working-class independents (+13.7), 2024 non-voters (+13.2) and 2024 Trump voters (+10.6).

Note. This data is based on one of the largest survey experiments of its kind. We put more than 40,000 Americans in a virtual voting booth. Here's what they told us.

Step 1: connecting with working-class economic priorities can increase your working-class support nearly 3 points

1 + 2.8 POINTS WITH WORKING-CLASS VOTERS Make economics your top priority.

Leading on working-class economics (instead of defense of democracy or culture-and-climate issues) increases working-class support 2.8 points. It pays off most with the swing voters Democrats most need back—working-class independents (+4) and 2024 Trump voters (+3.3)—while also increasing support from Democrats’ college-educated base +2.3 points.

Which economic policies attract working-class voters?

POLICY	POINTS
Make community college tuition-free	+3.1
Remove medical debt from credit reports	+2.7
Guarantee the right to organize a union (penalize employer interference)	+2.2
Cap insulin and essential drug costs at \$35	+2.1
Maintain food-assistance access	+1.8
Create skilled-trades apprenticeships via employer tax incentives	+1.7
Maintain existing aid for low- and moderate-income students	+1.7
Maintain unemployment benefits tied to a job-training requirement	+1.7
Fund 500,000 new skilled-trades apprenticeships each year	+1.6
Protect Social Security from any cuts	+1.3

Increase in working-class Democratic support when a candidate runs on that policy, relative to the average economic policy tested. Read it as a ranking of the strongest-testing policies, and especially of the areas that rise to the top (affordability, defending popular existing programs, and worker power), rather than as a decisive margin for any one row. Source: *The Working-Class Win-O-Meter*, p. 5.

Our data show you can go bold on economics without losing votes—indeed, you’ll gain votes among some key groups. Across a range of policies where we tested an ambitious version against a more cautious one, the ambitious version either beat or matched the cautious one.

- The highest minimum wage we tested, \$17 an hour, was the most popular, running two points ahead of \$15 and three points ahead of \$12. It attracts lower-income working-class voters most (+3.3).
- Funding 500,000 new skilled-trades apprenticeships a year did just as well as merely offering employers a tax break to create them.
- Creating one million public jobs rebuilding roads, bridges and public buildings came in a statistical tie with the timid alternative of funding job-training programs.
- So did investing \$150 billion a year in American manufacturing and infrastructure, as compared with a timid tax credit.

Standing up to offshoring and mass layoffs also attracts working-class whites (+2.9 points).

BEWARE Policies *not* popular with working-class voters are new tax-and-transfer programs not tied to work or work history, abstract market rules (e.g. antitrust) and business taxes.



Daigle's Grocery in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans, 2021. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

Steps 2–6: connecting with working-class values can increase working-class support 8 points

2

+2.9 POINTS WITH WORKING-CLASS VOTERS

Embrace culture and climate initiatives that resonate with working-class values (which is not the same as “move to the center”).

“Moving to the center” does not necessarily win more working-class votes. The supposed advantage of moderation actually reflects the influence of a few progressive positions that cost working-class votes: allowing transgender girls to play on girls’ teams costs 8.1 points, reducing police funding costs 2.2, and banning military-style assault rifles costs 1.5, as compared to staying silent.

On other issues, notably climate and immigration, staying silent actually decreases working-class support when compared to connecting with working-class values: requiring energy companies to shift to cleaner power while helping workers who lose their jobs beats silence by 2.2 points, and a path to citizenship for immigrants who have held jobs, paid taxes and stayed out of trouble beats it by 1.7.

The Coalition Crisis Toolkit shows how to connect with working-class values on climate, police misconduct, immigration, LGBTQ rights, abortion rights, guns and childcare, while remaining loyal to traditional Democratic constituencies. Here's an example: while "Abolish ICE" has [43% working-class support](#), this formulation below has 70%.

AVOID "Abolish ICE" conflicts with the central working-class value of prioritizing personal security (43% working-class support).

TRY THIS

"I support a path to citizenship for immigrants who have held jobs, paid taxes, and stayed out of trouble."

Resonates with the working-class values of ensuring that people are rewarded when they work hard and play by the rules.

70%

WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT



The coal-fired Dave Johnston Power Plant outside Glenrock, Wyoming, 2015. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

3

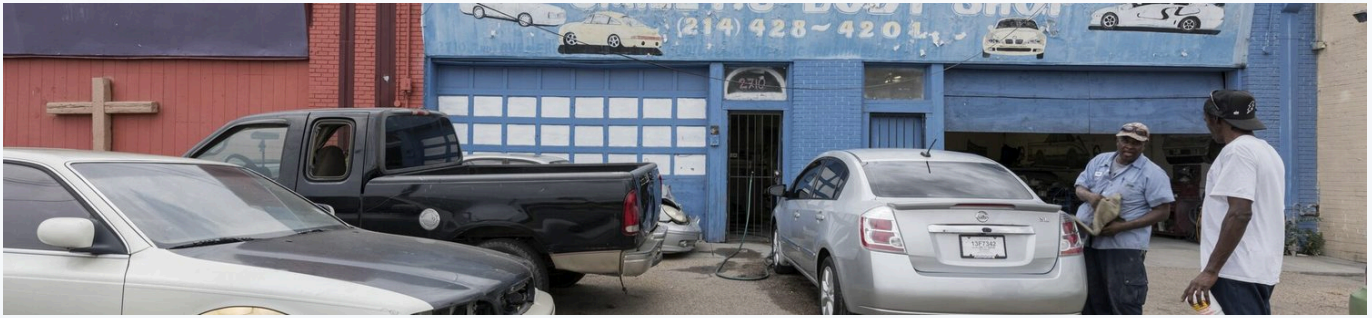
+1.6 POINTS WITH WORKING-CLASS VOTERS

Combine working-class-resonant culture and climate policies with an explicit statement you'll stand up for working-class values.

Here's what we mean by "policies" and "values":

TRY THIS

"We should take care of our own communities and country first" **VALUES** AND "require energy companies to gradually shift to cleaner power sources, and helping workers whose jobs are lost in the process find new ones" **POLICY**



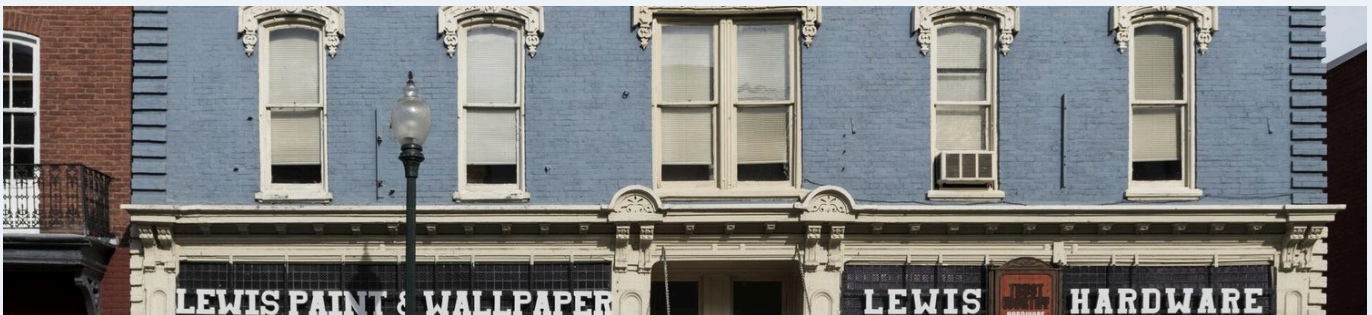
Smiley's Body Shop, an auto-repair shop in Dallas, Texas, 2014. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

4 +1.9 POINTS WITH WORKING-CLASS VOTERS **Say candidates should listen more to working-class people or “people from all walks of life.”**

This is more effective at attracting working-class votes than centering “blue-collar workers” or the “middle class.” This appeals most to 2024 nonvoters (+4).

5 +1.7 POINTS WITH WORKING-CLASS VOTERS **Use populist rhetoric and choose the right enemy.**

Standing up for the people works better than urging reliance on experts. Criticizing elites does not attract more working-class voters but helps with other groups. Criticizing political elites appeals chiefly to middle- and upper-class moderates (+3.7) and middle- and upper-class independents (+2.5). Calling out corporate elites helped 1.2 points with Democrats’ base (but not with working-class voters) and the effect was only marginally significant.



Lewis Hardware and paint store in downtown Martinsburg, West Virginia, 2015. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

6 +1 POINT WITH WORKING-CLASS VOTERS **If you come from a non-elite background, point that out (but don’t stress out if you don’t).**

Working-class voters prefer candidates who own a small business or are from a pink-collar, blue-collar or service-worker background. This appeals most to non-white working-class voters (+1.6).

The bottom line? Political science shows what any politician already knows: people vote for people like them—and who like them.

WANT TO SEE OUR FULL REPORTS?

- [*The Left's Coalition Crisis: Understanding the Massive Divides Between Working-Class and College-Educated Voters and How to Bridge Them*](#)
- [*The Working-Class Win-O-Meter: Dialing Up to Victory*](#)

How working-class values differ from those of Democrats' college-educated base

TENSION	LIBERAL COLLEGE GRADS' VALUES	WORKING-CLASS VALUES	POLITICAL BATTLES THIS TENSION FUELS
Globalism vs. place loyalty	Pride in being a "global citizen"; nationwide and global networks	Deep loyalty to community and country; dense local networks	Immigration; patriotism; "America First" appeals; climate change
Pride in hard work and self-discipline vs. pride in "merit" and self-actualization	Pride in elite jobs; self-actualization and personal growth	"Family comes first"; pride in hard work; personal responsibility; stability over freedom	Abortion rights; trans rights; welfare and redistribution; work requirements
"Sophistication" vs. traditionalism	Ironic distance from tradition; sophistication as a taste for the new	Religion, military, and traditional gender roles as sources of honor and stability	Culture wars broadly; role of religion; gun rights
Safety as a given vs. safety as a priority	Live in safe neighborhoods; focused more on justice than safety	See the world as threatening; protecting family and following the rules seen as core duties	"Law and order"; border security; defund the police
Admiring vs. resenting experts	Respect for credentialed expertise; regulation as rational problem-solving	Resentment of professionals; trust in small business; admiration for hard-earned success	Taxation; business regulation; anti-elite populism; "deep state" narratives

Source: Joan C. Williams and Jared Abbott, *The Left's Coalition Crisis*, p. 33.