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HOW TO CONNECT WITH WORKING-CLASS VALUES

A TOOLKIT FOR CANDIDATES

This toolkit explains how Democratic candidates can connect with working-class voters in messaging around affordability, defense of democracy, and climate and culture issues.

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The long-idle Colorado Fuel and Iron steel mill, founded 1881, in Pueblo, Colorado, 2015. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Everyday language

Anti-elitism

Affordability

Democracy & corruption

Working-class values

Pivoting

Immigration

Public safety

LGBTQ rights

Climate change

Abortion rights

Gun safety

This toolkit explains how Democratic candidates can connect with working-class voters in messaging around affordability, defense of democracy, and climate and culture issues.

Another toolkit with a simple 6-part formula candidates can use that can sharply increase working-class support, will be posted [here](#) after Labor Day. Unless otherwise noted, messaging that increases working-class support doesn't decrease support among liberal college grads, and sometimes increases it.

Note. This is based on Williams and Abbott's, *The Left's Coalition Crisis: Understanding the Massive Divide Between Working Class and College Educated Voters and How to Bridge It*, and Etelson and Abbott's *Kitchen Table Messaging for the Populist Era*.

Use everyday language, not technical policy terms or activist jargon—and connect with people’s fears and dreams.

Working-class voters respond best to plain language descriptions that clearly explain how a policy will improve their daily lives: for example, “universal childcare” garnered only 55% working-class support while “affordable childcare so parents can keep jobs they need to support their families” garnered 83%. Sell the brownie, not the recipe.



A concrete crew at work in Crystal City, Virginia, 2019. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

Use anti-elitist language to channel resentments against a rigged economy.

Too often Democratic candidates focus on a list of specific policies. Instead, promise to stand up to elites who are gaming the system so we can return to an economy where hard work pays off in a stable, middle-class life. If the left doesn’t channel anti-elitist resentment, we know who will.

This message polls well:

TRY THIS

“Most people just want to work hard, get ahead, and give their kids a better shot – and they should be able to. But the cost of rent, groceries, and health care keeps going up faster than working families can keep up, and paychecks just aren’t stretching the way they used to. I’m going to bring those costs down for working people, make sure the biggest corporations pay their fair share, and crack down on corruption and the people who game the system for themselves. Hard work should pay off again – that’s the American way.”

74%
WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

VALUES TAPPED

hard work

anti-elitism

prices

good jobs



Shoppers at the Old Town farmers' market in Alexandria, Virginia, 2016. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

Affordability is top priority for working-class voters—talk about wages and jobs, not just prices.

- 1 10 out of 12 of the top working-class priorities are economic.** That's why economics needs to be at the center of your campaign. Remember: focus on people's sense the economy is rigged, not just a list of policy tweaks.
- 2 Working-class voters care about wages, good jobs and economic opportunity, not just prices.** High prices are high-priority for both the working class and Democratic-leaning college grads, but top working-class priorities also include raising wages, creating jobs, and economic growth (which is also top-priority for Black liberal college grads). Top working-class economic priorities are:
 - Affordable basics (groceries, housing, utilities)
 - Protect Social Security and Medicare, health insurance subsidies
 - Lower housing costs, drug prices
 - Raise wages, create jobs, boost economic growth
- 3 Here are economic policies popular with both liberal college grads and the working class.** Past polling shows the following command over 75% support from both liberal college grads and the working class.
 - Lower prescription drug prices
 - Protect Social Security, expand Medicaid and negotiate Medicaid prices
 - Spend more on education
 - Spend \$150 billion/year on infrastructure
 - Raise the minimum wage
- 4 Don't forget about childcare as an economic issue.** Childcare is the 6th highest priority for liberal college grads and the 11th highest priority for the working class. (Note that paid leave is low priority for both groups.) Try this message:

TRY THIS

"We need to ensure that all children have access to affordable, high-quality childcare so parents don't need to quit jobs they need to support their families."

83%
WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

VALUES TAPPED

hard work

family comes first



The Gonzales County courthouse, Gonzales, Texas, 2014. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

Don't talk about resisting authoritarianism—defend democracy by talking about corruption instead.

Resisting authoritarianism is the #2 priority of liberal college grads but only 19th for the working class, nor is it in the top 10 priorities of Black liberal college grads.

- 1 Talk about corruption, using specific examples.** The best way to attract working-class voters is to call out this administration's corruption, which is a top-6 priority for every racial group of working-class voters. Use specific examples—see Senator Jon Ossoff quote below. Note how he ties corruption directly to funding cuts that threaten the stability of working-class lives.

You've got the American government — controlled by Donald Trump — backing a Trump family tungsten mine in Kazakhstan with a billion plus dollars of federal commitments at the very same time that they are cutting health care, defunding hospitals and nursing homes, and doubling health insurance premiums for more than a million Georgians.

— SEN. JON OSSOFF

- 2 Anti-Trump messaging isn't effective with working-class voters.** Even in its strongest form—which explicitly links critiques of Trump to pocketbook issues—anti-Trump messaging appeals to over 90% of liberal college grads but only about half of the working class. And [it ranked #11 out of 13 Democratic messages shown to working-class respondents](#) in a June-July poll. Remember: in many races, Democrats need to attract some people who voted for Trump to win.

- 3 If you need to call out Trump, try this:**

TRY THIS

"When Donald Trump ignores the rules, prices rise, jobs get less secure, and it gets harder for working families to keep up."

58%

WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

VALUES TAPPED

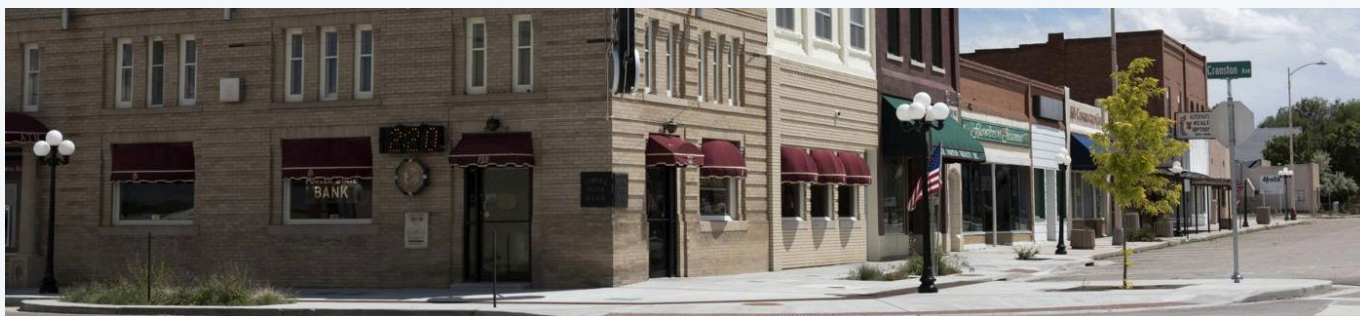
respect for the rules

high prices

good jobs

4 **Calling out the right-wing's divide-and-conquer playbook isn't as effective as many believe it to be.**

Working-class voters ranked kitchen table populist messages significantly higher than “race-class” messaging that explains how right-wing messaging tries to dupe them into blaming the wrong people for their problems. In a head-to-head test of thirteen Democratic messages, the “American Way” message quoted earlier led the field among working-class voters at +47 net “would-vote support” (the share it made more likely to vote for the candidate, minus the share less likely), while the three race-class narrative messages finished at the bottom, at +21, +13 and +13. These messages may come off as condescending and as missing the working-class’s main concerns—financial and personal security.



Main Street in Fowler, Colorado, 2015. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

On every issue, but especially cultural and climate, connect with key working-class values.

The logic of life is very different in different social contexts—our values reflect our lives, and our lives differ a lot by class. Here are key working-class values politicians should strive to connect with:

- **Personal security** tends to be taken for granted by elites but very highly prioritized by non-elites.
- **Respect for hard work and following the rules.** While college grads are proud of their “merit,” working-class and rural people pride themselves on their hard work and personal responsibility. While college grads are proud to be freethinkers who aren’t rule bound, working-class parents raise their kids to respect the rules. (This makes sense: working-class people who don’t often get fired.) Linking progressive positions to hard work can increase working-class support by up to 30 points.
- **Patriotism and place loyalty.** Less educated Americans are proud of being Americans while elites are proud of being global citizens.
- **Traditionalism.** Religion, the military and traditional family and gender roles all offer social honor and stability for people whose jobs often don’t.
- **“Family comes first.”** In the scrum for social honor, working-class Americans often fault elites for being work-obsessed, in contrast to their own “family comes first” ethic. Family is cherished as a realm of autonomy for those who often lack autonomy on the job.
- **Anti-elite sentiment.** Working-class Americans have a good deal of anger against college-educated bureaucrats and bosses, who exercise a lot of control over their lives and, they feel, often condescend to them. That sentiment is even stronger among working-class rural Americans who feel scorned and ridiculed by elite culturemakers.

Control the narrative by being ready to pivot.

Why are vulnerable trans kids at the center of national politics? Because conservatives did extensive research after the Supreme Court's gay marriage decision and found this was an issue where public opinion was against LGBTQ rights. A [2024 poll of factory town voters](#) in six mid-western states found that 59% of them perceived Democrats as "obsessed with LGBT transgender issues instead of focusing on kitchen table economic issues."

Given the cultural gap between liberal college grads and the working class, it's in Republicans' interest to have Democratic candidates talking non-stop about cultural issues. Candidates already know how to pivot if they're being dragged into no-win territory: the basic formulation is "My opponent talks a lot about X, but I'm more concerned about Y." Y will usually be kitchen-table issues (for example, whether you can pay your bills at the end of the month). Candidates who sincerely embrace unpopular views have a tough needle to thread: keep in mind straight talk is a key working-class value, so you don't want to appear evasive. State your opinion, briefly explain why you hold it, and don't disparage those who disagree.

Here are examples from successful candidates:

[My opponent] is more focused on dividing people than solving problems... I am focused on strengthening our Commonwealth, growing our economy, and bringing down costs for their families.

— GOV. ABIGAIL SPANBERGER

I spend 80% of my time on things that matter to 100% of the people of Kentucky... That's jobs. That's your access to a doctor in your own community. So roads and bridges you drive, the school you drop your kids off at, and whether you feel safe in your community. I try to just communicate like a normal human being.

— GOV. ANDY BESHEAR

Immigration.

Border security showed one of the largest class priority gaps we found on any issue, though thankfully it's not a top-12 priority for any working-class racial group. 56% of working-class respondents thought that Trump has "gone too far"—but they still preferred Trump's immigration policies to Biden's by 2:1.

AVOID **1** Avoid "Abolish ICE," which can be seen as setting up a zero-sum between security and immigrants' rights.

2 Here's an alternative:

TRY THIS

"Immigrants who have held jobs, paid taxes, contributed to their communities, and stayed out of trouble for years should be allowed to stay."

70%
WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

VALUES TAPPED

honoring hard work

community loyalty

respecting the rules

personal security

3 If you feel called to call out ICE, try this – it garnered 59% working-class support.

TRY THIS

"We should rein in and restructure federal immigration enforcement to put an end to masked government agents killing civilians and arresting hardworking immigrants who hold jobs, pay taxes and contribute to their communities."

59%
WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

VALUES TAPPED

honoring hard work

community loyalty

following the rules

personal security

PIVOT

"My opponent talks a lot about immigrants, who are mostly hardworking people who pay taxes and stay out of trouble. What concerns me more is..."

Public safety.

Lowering the crime rate is the only non-economic issue in the top 10 working-class priorities—but it ranks dead last (30 out of 30) for liberal college grads. All three of the largest priority gaps between the working class and college-educated liberals concern personal security: border security, lower the crime rate, and add more police.

This does **not** mean that Democrats need to abandon anti-racism: two-thirds of the working class believes that racism is a problem in policing.

- 1 Here's what it *does* mean:** avoid slogans that set up a zero-sum trade-off between personal security and desirable progressive goals, e.g. Defund the Police. These only serve to help your opponents.
- 2 The formula that connects with working-class voters is: more cops where needed + more accountability.** Some examples:

TRY THIS

"More well-trained officers in high-crime areas while enforcing strict rules so bad cops face consequences."

82%
WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

TRY THIS

"Send well-trained specialists instead of police to respond to nonviolent calls."

67%
WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

TRY THIS

"Focus police on the small group causing most shootings and fund programs that keep local kids out of trouble."

66%
WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

VALUES TAPPED

personal security

following the rules

LGBTQ rights.

Liberal college grads often feel passionately about LGBTQ rights because self-actualization is a central value for them (but not for the working class, which is also more attached to traditional gender roles and self-discipline). The gay marriage campaign was successful because it tapped working-class support for traditional family roles.

1 If you want to pivot away from LGBTQ issues, adapt the general pivot described above:

PIVOT *"My opponent spends a lot of time talking about [girls' sports teams or other LGBTQ issue]; I'm more focused on whether you can [insert economic issue]."*

2 If you want to pivot towards LGBTQ issues with the most working-class support, these are the best issues to focus on:

LEAD ON

LGBTQ Adoption

78%

WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

LEAD ON

Protecting LGBTQ Workers from Job Discrimination

66%

WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

3 If you want to defend trans girls on girls' sports teams:

TRY THIS

"I don't support the government being allowed to overrule the decisions of parents and coaches when they allow a child who was born male but lives as a girl to participate in K-12 sports."

43%

WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

Note that this does not mandate that trans girls be allowed to play on girls' teams – but it avoids an outright ban. The baseline working-class support for trans girls on girls' sports teams (without the working-class resonant-framing used in the language above) is only 20%—that's why Republicans want Democrats talking about this issue nonstop.

Baseline support for trans girls on girls' sports teams among liberal college grads is only 34% and overall support has actually been eroding over the past few years. Don't feel pressured by social media to take an unpopular position on this issue; let your conscience be your guide.



Wind turbines in Shackelford County, Texas, northeast of Abilene, 2014. Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress.

Climate change.

Climate change is a top-10 priority only for white liberal college grads—but not for any working-class group nor for Black and Latino college grads. We are undertaking further research to test how to make climate change a higher working-class priority. One possibility is to point out how climate change has sharply increased insurance premiums on the coasts due to rising oceans, in the West due to wildfires, in the heartland due to violent thunder and hail-storms that can destroy crops and cars in 5 or 10 minutes.

AVOID

1 Beware: calling people “climate deniers” can be read as a class insult. Working-class people are often too preoccupied paying the bills at the end of the month to prioritize the end of the world.

2 The messaging that works best combines a focus on prices, blue-collar jobs, competition with China, pollution, and an inside joke (“build, baby build”).

TRY THIS

“We need to rebuild our energy system to tackle rising energy costs and pollution while growing the economy and creating millions of jobs in construction, manufacturing and energy upgrades instead of sending jobs to China—build, baby, build.”

76%
WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

VALUES TAPPED

good jobs

lower prices

patriotism

anti-pollution (which polls well among the working class)

Abortion rights.

The message that drew more working-class support than more “centrist” messages that proposed limits on abortion after 15 weeks of pregnancy tapped two working-class values:

TRY THIS

“Make abortion safe and legal so women can make the decision that’s right for their families without the government second-guessing them.”

61%
WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

VALUES TAPPED

anger against bureaucrats

an insistence on the family as a sphere of autonomy

Note this does not tie abortion rights to self-actualization, which is a key value for college grads but not a key working-class value.

Gun safety.

There's robust cross-class consensus around measures to ensure that people likely to misuse guns don't get them, but sharp class-based divisions around measures that prohibit specific types of guns or ammunition.

- 1 Cross-class consensus policies** (in descending order of popularity): Universal background checks, preventing mentally ill people from buying guns, red flag laws, secure gun storage requirements, police permits before purchase.
- 2 Cross-class divergence.** Bans on assault rifles and high-capacity magazines receive overwhelming support (over 90%) among liberal college grads but sharply lower working-class support (assault rifles (57%) and magazines (64%).
- 3 This working-class reframing increases both working-class and liberal college grad support for requiring police permits.**

TRY THIS

"We need a law that would require a person to obtain a police permit before they could buy a gun, so criminals and abusers don't get guns but guns remain available for hunters and home safety."

82% liberal college grads

63%

WORKING-
CLASS SUPPORT

VALUES TAPPED

public safety

respect for authority

hunting is a popular working-class leisure activity that also provides food for hard-strapped families

AVOID

- 4 Don't use the term "gun control."** It is likely to trigger working-class resentment against elites trying to control them. Use "gun safety" instead.

The bottom line. Your job is to show voters you're *in their corner on the things that matter most to them* and that you have the courage and commitment to *take on the powerful forces that have rigged our economy against working families*.