

COMEBACK RETREAT

In early February 2025, Third Way gathered a group of highly experienced and passionate political professionals over 1.5 days to begin to chart the Democratic comeback. As part of this retreat, attendees participated in breakout sessions to deliberate on why Democrats are struggling with working-class voters around cultural issues, the nature of the economic trust gap with this critical group, and ideas for how to address both problems.

Below are the takeaways summarizing what was discussed. While not every insight is earth shattering to those who work in politics, they do point the way forward on some fundamental issues.

NOTE: The statements below are not necessarily endorsed by all those attending the Comeback Retreat and, as agreed to, are not attributed to any individual who participated.

Takeaways on Why Democrats Have a Cultural Disconnect with the Working Class

1. Overemphasis on Identity Politics

Many working-class voters feel Democrats prioritize niche identity-based groups with overbroad, unifying messages, making them feel excluded rather than included.

2. The “Faculty Lounge” Problem

Democrats are often viewed as judgmental, out-of-touch, and dismissive of those without elite education or progressive views. This makes the party seem disconnected from everyday people.

3. Failure to Prioritize Economic Concerns

While voters struggle with jobs, wages, and inflation, Democrats are seen as more focused on cultural and social issues than on economic progress and opportunity.

4. Weak Messaging & Communication

The party’s language is often vague, politically correct, or overly intellectual, making it hard for working-class voters to connect with Democratic policies.

5. Fear of Dissent Within the Party

Democrats are perceived as intolerant of internal debate, where questioning progressive orthodoxy results in backlash rather than open discussion. Candidates and operatives need to feel more comfortable just saying NO to activist groups and unpalatable far-left ideas.

6. Attachment to Unpopular Institutions

Democrats are seen as defending elite institutions (academia, media, government bureaucracy) while being critical of institutions working-class people value (churches, small businesses, police).

7. Allowing the Far Left to Define the Party

Activist groups and progressive staffers push unpopular cultural positions, making it seem like Democrats are more extreme than they actually are. Operatives and campaigns must remember that activist groups exist to promote their single issue and raise money around it, not to make Democrats electable.

8. Reactionary Rather Than Proactive

Democrats often let Republicans set the terms of cultural debates (e.g., crime, immigration) instead of clearly defining their own positions in a way that resonates with voters.

9. Overreliance on Buzzwords & Political Correctness

Terms like "pregnant people" and "Latinx" alienate working-class voters who see them as out of touch with real-world terms and vocabulary.

10. Lack of a Positive National Identity Message

Democrats focus too much on America's flaws (racism, sexism, inequality) without acknowledging the country's progress and potential, making them seem pessimistic and unpatriotic.

Takeaways on Why Democrats Are Not Trusted by the Working Class on the Economy

1. Vilification of Wealth

Democrats are seen as hostile to success, indifferent to people's desire to attain wealth, while reflexively attacking wealthy business leaders instead of promoting economic mobility and aspiration.

2. Disconnected Messaging

Democrats focus on broad economic indicators instead of acknowledging real struggles like high prices and stagnant wages, making voters feel dismissed and unheard.

3. No Clear Economic Vision

Democrats lack a cohesive, inspiring economic agenda and often present a laundry list of policies rather than a unifying vision.

4. Over-Prioritization of Social Issues

Economic policy is often framed through the lens of identity politics rather than broad-based prosperity, making working-class voters feel overlooked.

5. Perceived Government Overreach

Voters see Democrats as favoring excessive regulations, inefficient spending, and programs that don't directly benefit them.

6. Failure to Own Mistakes

Democrats defend flawed policies and institutions instead of acknowledging failures and committing to reforms that would improve economic trust.

7. Republicans as the "Aspirational" Party

GOP messaging suggests they want voters to be rich, while Democrats are seen as focusing on redistribution rather than wealth creation.

8. Climate Policy Viewed as Anti-Growth

The emphasis on climate change is seen as harming job opportunities and economic growth, especially in working-class communities.

9. The Break Room vs. the Board Room

Democratic economic messages often come from elites, celebrities, and politicians rather than working-class voices that voters can relate to.

10. Failure to Address Economic Anxiety

Voters believe Democrats care more about the very poor than the struggling middle class and fail to provide a clear path to economic security. Voters often believe they are wealthier than the people Democrats talk about.

Takeaways on How Democrats Can Reconnect Culturally with the Working Class

1. Move Away from Identity Politics

- Stop addressing voters as identity blocs and instead focus on shared American values.
- Use plain language and avoid jargon or abbreviations that can alienate voters.
- Acknowledge that people have multiple identities (e.g., Black and a veteran) rather than reducing them to one label.

2. Emphasize Shared Values and Cultural Alignment

- Frame rights as about "freedom and justice," not just identity-based concerns.
- Highlight similarities between marginalized groups and mainstream American values.
- Embrace patriotism, community, and traditional American imagery (e.g., farms, main streets).

3. Rebalance the Party's Cultural Messaging

- Reject fringe positions that alienate the median voter.
- Avoid overly moralistic or condescending messaging; speak plainly and directly.
- Allow candidates to express personal faith and values without fear of backlash.

4. Reduce Far-Left Influence and Infrastructure

- Build a moderate Democratic infrastructure, including media, talent pipelines, and communications networks.
- Push back against far-left staffers and groups that exert a disproportionate influence on policy and messaging.
- Ban far-left candidate questionnaires and refuse to participate in forums that create ideological purity tests.

5. Engage with the Working Class in Their Spaces

- Get out of elite circles and into real communities (e.g., tailgates, gun shows, local restaurants, churches).
- Own the failures of Democratic governance in large cities and commit to improving local government.
- Show up in unfriendly media spaces and engage with voters outside traditional Democratic strongholds.

6. Improve Democratic Communication & Media Strategy

- Conduct a comprehensive study on media consumption to better understand how to reach voters.
- Develop a stronger, more relatable Democratic media presence (podcasts, social media, sports broadcasting).
- Encourage candidates to be bold, engaging, and authentic in their messaging rather than overly polished.

7. Embrace Moderation, Individualism, and Masculinity

- Reconnect with values like hard work, rugged individualism, and entrepreneurialism.
- Be more accepting of masculinity and male voters who feel alienated from the party.
- Shift focus from progressive "mission creep" to core Democratic issues that resonate broadly.

8. Revise Democratic Fundraising Priorities

- Move away from the dominance of small-dollar donors whose preferences may not align with the broader electorate.
- Give candidates and campaigns more flexibility in how they spend funds without excessive donor constraints.

Takeaways on How Democrats Can Rebuild Economic Trust with Working-Class Voters

1. Acknowledge Struggles & Speak to Real Concerns

- Recognize that while the economy may be improving broadly, many families are still struggling.
- Avoid dismissing economic anxieties—speak directly to the concerns of working-class voters with tangible solutions. As progressives, we all discussed among our friends and family how expensive things were but politically only wanted to talk about how much better things are getting.

2. Shift Messaging Away from 'Handouts'

- Many working-class voters reject policies seen as giveaways (e.g., student loan forgiveness, universal basic income).
- Frame policies around opportunity, empowerment, and work rather than redistribution.
- Small language shifts matter—focus on “better wages” instead of “minimum wage.”

3. Prioritize Simple, Tangible Policies

- Advocate for middle-class tax cuts, support public education, and propose spending cuts where needed.
- Ensure policies are easy to understand and feel relevant to daily life.

4. Integrate & Engage with the Business Community

- Democrats need to stop demonizing wealth and corporations broadly.
- Engage with small businesses, business podcasts, podcasts like “Earn Your Leisure” that reach the aspiring class, and entrepreneurs to discuss economic policies.

5. Be Pro-Aspiration & Pro-Capitalism in a Smart Way

- Recognize that working-class voters value upward mobility and economic success.
- Have a prosperity gospel aimed at the working class.
- Call out corporate abuses individually instead of attacking “corporations” as a whole.

6. Reform Government & Address Inefficiencies

- Take government complaints seriously and commit to improving its efficiency.
- Push for systemic reforms rather than just defending the status quo.

7. Center Every Conversation on the Economy

- Lead with economic messaging in speeches, ads, and policy proposals.
- Avoid leading with cultural issues—focus on jobs, wages, and cost-of-living concerns.

8. Engage Rural & Non-College Voters

- Show up in rural communities and places where Democrats are unpopular.
- Listen to non-college voters without judgment, making their concerns central to policy conversations.

9. Embrace Populism Thoughtfully

- Critique corporate excess and corruption but avoid an anti-capitalist stance.
- Be bold in challenging inefficient institutions while maintaining credibility as pragmatic reformers.

10. Showcase Working-Class Voices & Candidates

- Recruit candidates who come from working-class backgrounds and have relatable life experiences.
- Use messengers that working-class voters trust—business leaders, skilled laborers, and community figures.