

How and Why Progressives Should Talk About the Economy in Ways that Appeal to Black, Brown, and White Voters

(In this piece we weave together the poll-tested messaging that is coming from the Race/Class Narrative and the Winning Jobs Narrative, while adapting it for Pennsylvania context. We can provide polling data to support each theme we highlight here.)

1. Progressives are unlikely to be able to win the 2022 election simply by appealing to upper-middle-class voters with college degrees. No doubt, the Republican candidate for governor scares them because of his connection to Trump, his attacks on democracy, his racism, his flirting with anti-Semitism, and his extremism on the abortion issue. Progressives should tie their opponents to these issues and to Mastriano. But a deep gender gap in the upper middle class reduces the impact of these issues—with men more conservative on cultural and economic issues than women. More importantly, most voters in the state are working class and small-business owning voters, who do not have a college degree.
2. Working-class and small-business owning voters are divided. Black and Latino non-college-educated voters are overwhelmingly progressive. Our side has to turn out enough of them to secure a huge majority in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. And that means we need to talk about economic issues to give them a reason to vote for progressives. White, non-college-educated voters are increasingly voting for conservatives. If they come out as strongly in 2022 as they did in 2016 and 2020, conservatives will do well statewide and in too many legislative districts. So our side's task is to reduce the animosity toward progressives among white, non-college-educated voters.
3. Polls shows that both white and Black working-class voters care more about economic issues than cultural ones (as do many upper-middle-class voters). Progressives simply cannot avoid talking about economic issues out of fear that it will remind voters about the difficult state of the economy. Ignoring the economy won't stop conservatives from focusing on it. We need a message in response.
4. We need to understand how economic issues have become intertwined with cultural issues in a way that makes our usual economic approach less effective. We need to talk about the economy in ways that undermine the Right's effort to connect economic issues to cultural / racial / gender issues.
5. Non-college-educated white men and women—especially married women—believe that their ideals and their status is disrespected by progressives, who they associate with “elitist” intellectuals, professionals, and managers. They believe that these elites seek to create more jobs for themselves, and win more votes, by expanding government to give undeserved benefits to Black and brown people, single women, and sexual/gender minorities. These upside-down beliefs are powered by two things. (1) The deep-seated racism and patriarchy embedded in the US way of life for most of the country's history. White supremacist thinking has led people to believe that racial and gender inequality is the result of the failure of Black and brown people and women to live up to the American ethic of working hard. So, any effort to address racism or sexism is seen as giving Black people and women benefits they don't deserve. Especially in our state, this theme is reinforced (2) by the steep decline in economic well-being among white working-class people and those who have small businesses in much of rural Pennsylvania. Voters there are angry that progressives have not protected them and are thus inclined to believe conservatives who tell them that they're suffering because liberal economic policies take from them to give benefits to underserving Black and brown people, women, and foreigners living in our cities.
6. Many of these voters are no longer reachable. But some of them—likely enough to assure victory—can be reached by making it clear that progressives share their ideals. Progressive campaigns can't hedge on helping Black and brown people and women or immigrants. Doing so would not only mean abandoning our ideals but would rightly cost us crucial votes and depress turnout in our cities. We cannot go back to the days when Democrats ignore the claims of voters who aren't white men. But our campaigns can and must show that

progressives stand with non-college-educated white voters in a way that also appeals to Black, Latino, and immigrant voters by focusing on five key themes.

7. The first is the ***value of hard work and individual effort as the key to individual and collective success***. At the core of the distaste for progressives held by many white non-college-educated people is the belief that our party no longer values hard work and thinks that economic rewards should be determined by government bureaucrats. Many of us on the Left believe, with much justification, that our country puts too much emphasis on hard work and not enough on expanding leisure time, which is critical to physical and mental health and builds community. And we worry that the value of hard work is too closely tied to racist and sexist distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor. But modifying the ideal of hard work is a long-term task and one that we can't let interfere with the imperative of winning elections in the short term. It is critical that progressives focus on the value of work and the importance of encouraging and rewarding it, especially since *the vast majority of Black and Latino people, native-born, and immigrants, as well as white people*, embrace it. Progressive candidates must embrace this ideal in their rhetoric. And they should show voters that all Pennsylvanians, no matter where they live or what they look like people in Pennsylvania, do so as well by standing with native and immigrant, Black, Latino, Asian, and white working people, who tell their own story of working hard to support their families.
8. The second theme is that ***government plays a critical role in providing freedom and opportunity for hardworking people to succeed***. Voters on the center-right are distrustful of Democrats because they think we want to help people do well regardless of whether they work hard or not. To implicitly refute that claim, we have to *focus the role of government on providing opportunity for individuals*. Doing so *links our stands on cultural or social issues with economic issues by drawing these connections*. (a) *We oppose discrimination* on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, and gender because it undermines the opportunities for hardworking people to choose their own path in life and get ahead. (b) *We support the right to abortion* because it allows women and their families to choose when and whether to have children, a fundamental choice that has serious economic consequences. And we support *the safety net and education programs* for the same reason—as providing an opportunity for people to work hard and succeed, as well as to help those who cannot work through no fault of their own. *Working people who are white, Black, and brown; who live in cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas; and who are native-born or immigrants have much in common*. They are heavily burdened by the cost of health care, child care, food, housing, and gas. They all worry about whether schools are giving their kids a decent education. We have to defend education spending at all levels—including worker training—as creating the opportunities that our working kids need to succeed in life, take care of their families, and contribute to their communities. So we have to defend the government's role in helping people afford health care, child care and senior care; food; housing; and gas *because it makes it possible for people to work*. If people can't take care of young kids or elderly parents, or pay for gas, they can't work. If they can't afford housing where jobs are, they can't work. Progressives should emphasize that government doesn't replace the hard work individuals do to succeed—*it makes hard work possible* while also protecting those who for no fault of their own can't work. And the best way to ensure that people don't feel that these programs are taking from one group to give to another, is to make them be universal as much as is possible.
9. The third theme is ***to fix an economy that has been rigged to benefit wealthy corporations at the expense of workers and small businesses***. Progressives should not attack all businesses, let alone call out capitalism. But they should say, repeatedly, that politically connected, wealthy corporations get hand-outs from government, pay way less taxes than they should, keep wages low, and charge too much for the goods they sell to small businesses. Poll after poll shows that everyone, including a majority of Republicans, believes that corporations use their wealth to tilt the economy unfairly in their direction. Focusing on the corporate-rigged economy provides the enemy that all political campaigns need—and by uniting all of us against a common enemy—it replaces the Republican attempt to divide us by pitting Black against white people and men against women.
10. The fourth theme is to ***call out the Right for dividing us***. The right-wing strategy of dividing us works when there is no alternative enemy and when it is allowed to act unchallenged. But, fundamentally, the majority of Pennsylvanians, like people everywhere, would rather live in a world in which we're united behind some common goals. Each of the three previous themes are designed to show that Pennsylvanians have much in

common. Conservatives like Trump and Mastriano seek to divide us and then serve large corporations once they are in power.

11. Finally the fifth theme is that *we must protect our democracy so we the people can come together, as we have done before, to create the opportunities that are so important to all of us.* While we suggest that progressives start by talking about opportunity for hardworking individuals, we ultimately have to remind people that opportunity comes from our common efforts to create a political world that recognizes the dignity of everyone by giving them the same opportunities. A government that doesn't make it easy to vote denies a fundamental right and equal respect to everyone, and it tilts the political field towards the corporations that rig the economy in their favor. And a government that undermines the personal autonomy of women denies them the equal respect they deserve.
12. Progressive campaigns need some broad-stroke public policies that exemplify these themes. But even more—it needs *stories*. Democrats need to share real-life stories that *exemplify what we all have in common—white and Black, and people working hard on the job or in school. Urban and rural Pennsylvanians have the same concerns about schools, gas prices, paying for child care, and where their aging parents will live and receive care.* The key in overcoming the distaste among Trump supporters for Democrats is not in presenting policy proposals. It is in showing which side we're on. Showing that Democrats are on the side of working people in every part of the state will help turn out Black and Latino voters in the cities and cut into white support for Mastriano in rural areas.
13. There are some fairly straightforward policies that address these themes. We don't need to spell these policies out in great detail but will say enough to exemplify the four themes.
 - a. Creating a tax system that rewards work, not wealth. This is the central idea of We The People—PA's "fair share tax," which lowers tax rates on wages but not dividends and capital gains.
 - b. Raising the minimum wage so that workers are paid for their efforts.
 - c. Asking multi-national corporations that pay nothing in Pennsylvania to pay what they owe. (This is not inconsistent with cutting corporate taxes on PA-based businesses.) And demanding the frackers pay the same severance tax they pay in every other state.
 - d. Ensuring that every kid goes to a school that is funded well enough to provide an education that prepares them for the future.
 - e. Making post-secondary education affordable for all, including worker training programs and community colleges as well as four-year colleges.
 - f. Focusing all economic development on workers, not businesses. Democrats should promise that no business will get a dime of state money if it doesn't create good jobs—and that the state will take back funds if jobs are not created.
 - g. Promising help to every family in the state to afford food, housing, gas, child care, and senior care.
 - h. Protecting the right to vote, ensuring voting is as easy as possible, and ensuring that all legitimate votes are counted.
14. The thread that runs through all these issues is creating *a government that respects and works for all of us. Like the ideals of democracy and the right to abortion, an economy that creates opportunity for everyone is one that serves all Pennsylvanians, no matter where they live or what they look like.*