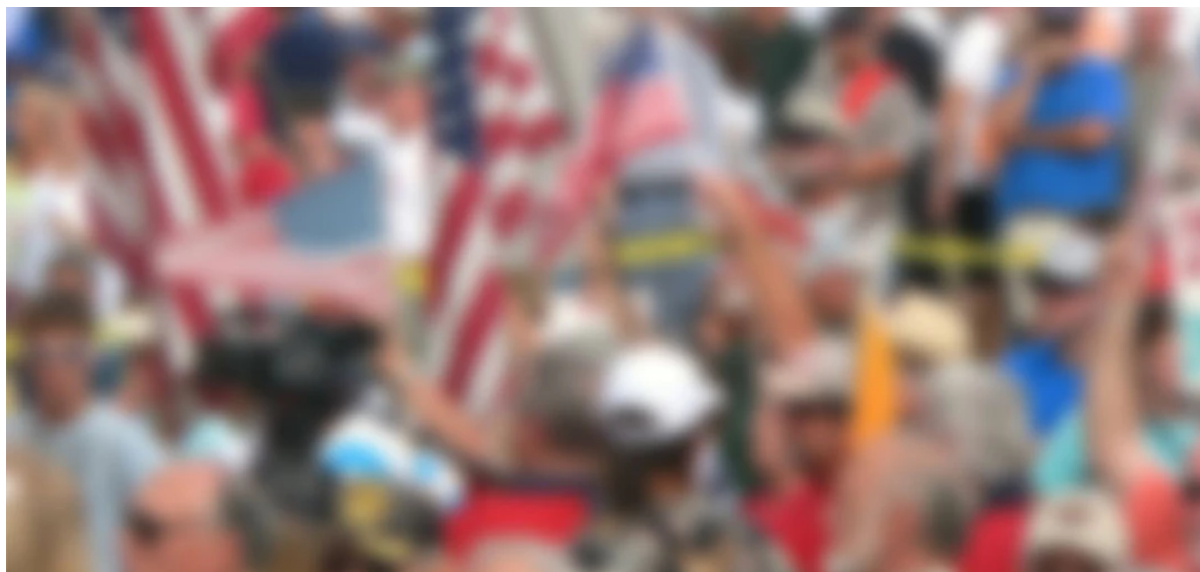


A New Approach to the Middle Class



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Despite enjoying two terms in the White House, the Democratic Party has suffered major down-ballot losses since 2009, and Democrats have not held fewer House, Senate, or state legislative seats since 1928. To better understand why Democrats are struggling to achieve sustained majorities below the Presidential level, we embarked on a year-long public opinion research project.¹ It revealed a troubling finding: while Democrats consider themselves “the party of the middle class,” middle class voters feel that neither the Democratic story about the problems we face in our country nor the solutions Democrats offer will alleviate their own economic anxiety. And rather than seeing themselves as victims of economic malfeasance, the middle class views themselves as self-determined actors struggling to thrive in a changing economy—a problem with which they feel neither party is helping.²

Middle class support for Democrats is skin-deep.

In each of the last three election cycles, Democrats—the self-styled party of the middle-class—have lost the middle class by an average of seven points. And while when asked which is

the party of the middle class, middle class voters pick Democrats over Republicans (48% to 24%, with 27% picking neither party), that support falls significantly when you scratch under the surface. When asked who is better at creating good jobs, middle class voters point equally to Democrats and Republicans, with almost as many saying “neither.” When it comes to growing the economy, Republicans have a six point advantage, with one-quarter picking neither party. Democrats have a slim three point advantage on creating more opportunity, but here, too, one-quarter says none of the above. Three-quarters of middle class voters say that the government ignores them, focusing instead on “bail-outs for the top and hand-outs for the bottom.” And the middle class doesn’t believe the “fairness” policies touted by those who focus on income inequality would help them personally. In fact, breaking up Wall Street banks and raising the minimum wage to \$15 ranked at the bottom of the list when middle class voters were asked what would help them and their families. As a result of these mixed feelings, middle class political loyalties are divided—40% call themselves political Independents, and on the generic Congressional ballot, Democrats hold a three point edge (with 2 in 10 saying they are undecided).

Middle class voters see themselves as actors in a changing world.

While the middle class does believe America is divided into economic “haves” and “have nots,” seven in ten place themselves personally in the “have” category. They do feel economic anxiety, but their worries are focused on what’s to come, with 56% saying their kids will have a worse standard of living than themselves when they are older and only 18% anticipating things will be better for the next generation. At the heart of this problem is that the middle class thinks “the economy has changed in recent years and government policies haven’t adjusted to match.” More than three-quarters of middle class voters agreed with this sentiment and, in focus groups, voters were even blunter: “Things are different and changed and so should be the mindsets of

individuals, companies and government. We need to find solutions that adapt to this new economy and not live in the past.”

There is an untapped opportunity to reach middle class voters.

Middle class voters are looking for guidance in navigating the changing world. Nearly half (47%) feel the best way to improve the economy is to help Americans get the tools they need to get ahead, with only 38% preferring to shrink government and roll back regulations on business and 12% to strengthening the safety net for those who fall on hard times. Similarly, 40% prefer “better preparing Americans to get ahead in the twenty-first century economy” to “reducing regulations and taxes on businesses” (29%) or “reducing the gap between rich and poor” (28%).

But the middle class isn’t sure which party is up to this fundamental challenge. Only a third of middle class voters say Democrats are doing a better job at helping Americans navigate the new economy; 29% felt the same about Republicans. A plurality felt that neither party was addressing their major economic anxiety.

Democratic messages about inequality and the 1% may strike a nerve, but they don’t respond to this deep concern about navigating the changing economy. When given the choice of a Democrat saying “our economy has changed and we need to focus on helping Americans get ahead with more skills, more jobs, more wealth” or one saying “the deck is stacked against every day Americans and we need to focus on breaking up Wall Street banks and raising taxes on the wealthy,” middle class voters overwhelmingly chose the former, 66% to 23%. And this new economy message was also the clear winner among self-described Democrats (67% change to 29% stacked deck), Independents (65% to 19%), and the Rising American Electorate of single women, nonwhites, Hispanics, and Millennials (65% to 23%). Similarly lopsided numbers found “a Democrat who wants to focus on increasing economic opportunity” more appealing than “a Democrat

who wants to focus on reducing income inequality” (67%/20% with the middle class, 68%/27% with Democrats, 66%/18% with Independents, 67%/21% with the Rising American Electorate).

The largest group of middle class voters is those making \$50k-100,000, and Democrats have lost those voters to Republicans in the last three electoral cycles. The path back to a majority is through the heart of the middle class. And whichever party can guide them through these changing times with an aspirational vision and a forward-thinking platform that will arm Americans with the tools they need to thrive will win their support.

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END NOTES

- 1.** Third Way conducted 5 rounds of research in 2015, including fifteen focus groups and a poll of 2000 registered voters (fielded December 10–16, 2015 by Anzalone Liszt Grove). Available at: <http://www.thirdway.org/polling/december-2015-national-poll-of-registered-voters>.
- 2.** For the purposes of this analysis, “middle class” is defined as a household earning between \$30,000 and \$100,000 annually.