When commentators talk about white working class conservatism it is the result of a misunderstanding: the critical difference between conservatism and cultural traditionalism.

Imagine you overheard this conversation in a Starbucks in Cambridge: “We have to do something about the Mexicans who live here in the U.S. Most of them are decent, hardworking people who are just trying to make a life for themselves. It’s just morally wrong to treat them like criminals.”

Is this a progressive – yes. But what if you heard this – as I did – in a ramshackle roadside evangelical church in Clarksville Ga. Defended with “Good Samaritan” and “the least of these”

Is this person a progressive? Well, kinda.

When white working class people are described as being basically “conservative” it is usually the intolerant, “true believers” who are being visualized. But this confuses two very distinct concepts – conservatism and cultural traditionalism.
White working class Americans are overwhelmingly cultural traditionalists. There is virtually universal support for the four dominant “mom and apple pie” American social institutions – the church, the military, small business and the “American system of government.” But within the framework of this essentially universal respect for “traditional” social institutions and culture, there is a profound division between conservative and progressive outlooks – a split that is expressed as the difference between basically tolerant and intolerant views.

This profound division is generally not understood or even perceived by many liberals and progressives because both points of view are expressed entirely within the language and cultural framework of working class cultural traditionalism.

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Most people with agree with this in the abstract but it gets lost in political discussion of the white working class.
The reason is that all political discussions of polls assume a model of how brain works of how white working class Americans think about social and political issues.

There are two main models - the “cubbyhole” or “bin” model and the “media framing” model. Both offer extremely limited pictures of how working people make political decisions.

The cubbyhole model assumes people store individual opinions in distinct memory locations and retrieve them when required. Some people do, e.g. politicians. But leads mistakes – “kitchen table issues more important than values issues” i.e. can list and compare. Hasn’t worked.

Media framing: assumes people absorb complete packages. May hold both in memory and flip back and forth between them but always one or the other as a unit – no pick and choose. Leads to idea that “shout louder” – win battle to invoke your frame with media saturation or passion.

A more sociologically grounded approach begins by noting that, as I said, working Americans political
opinions are deeply shaped by four basic value systems rooted in the major social institutions of working class life – the church, the military, small business and the school system. These institutions systematically inculcate the values they represent – patriotism, religious piety, free enterprise and the “American system of government,” creating an interlocking set of value systems that define right and wrong, true and false and good and bad. For many these value systems are hegemonic, people cannot imagine alternatives to them.

Individual life experiences and broad social trends, however, profoundly modulate and shape the way these value systems are internalized and understood. They form a distinct mental filter through which the value systems learned in childhood influence political attitudes.

As a result there are two characteristic kinds of groups that regularly form in white working class political life: (1) people whose personal life experience is completely compatible with the basic value systems. This makes those value systems seem absolutely “right” to them and leads this group to become the “true believers” and “conservative base”; (2) those whose personal
experience has led them to have some doubt or to reach conclusions that differ from those of the basic value systems.

In most cases these people do not reject the basic social values but rather balance them with other considerations to reach a personal conclusion.

White working class people generally refer to this balancing process as using “common sense,” being “open-minded,” or applying “my personal philosophy”

As a result, the typical political stereotype of the “average white worker as a conservative” fails to capture the most important fact about white working class Americans – that most are not “average.” On the contrary white working class Americans are profoundly split into three distinct group: (1) liberal or progressive white workers whose views are generally rooted in the ethos and traditions of the trade union movement (2) Fox News and talk radio conservatives and (3) white working class moderates who are not fully convinced by either the conservative or progressive narratives. They are ambivalent or “open-minded” and describe
themselves as having “not completely made up their minds,” or “seeing some truth on both sides.”

Conventional opinion poll questions with their rigid agree/disagree format generally fail to properly recognize and understand these moderate working class voters. Certain unique polling data from Pew Research with a very large sample size, however, makes it possible to study such opinions across a dramatically wide range of issues – from morality, immigration, the military and international affairs to Wall Street and big business, poverty, the environment and the role of government. When this data is examined in detail, three overall conclusions are inescapable.

1. The majority of white working people are not strong conservatives. Those who express “strong agreement” with conservative propositions are distinctly less than 50%.

2. The ambivalent or open-minded are the key swing group in working class America. They represent a minimum of 20% of white working class respondents across wide range of survey questions.
3. The genuinely consistent white working class conservatives—the “Fox News/Talk Radio” hard-line ideologues—represent only about one fourth of the white working class total.

Rubber meets the road with real world application.

The community affiliate of the AFL-CIO called Working America has more face-to-face, in-depth contact with and a deeper understanding of moderate and conservative working class voters than does any other progressive group in the U.S. Here is the basic approach they take to these workers:

“Working America engages not the fixed 30-35% or so at each end of the political spectrum (including the firm conservatives who are not and never will be with us on the issues) but rather than 30-40% in the middle – working class moderates whose personal ambivalences make them swing voices in the public policy debates.”

This division suggests the outline of a strategy for building an expanded Democratic coalition: if the white working class currently represents 36 percent of the electorate, now split 62-36 between Republicans and
Democrats (as per the 2012 exit poll), Republican-voting white workers represent 22 percent of voters. If just 10 percent of the group that currently votes Republican is persuadable, a successful appeal for their votes would produce a 2 percentage point pro-Democratic shift in the electorate. This would have meant a 53 percent Democratic presidential tally in 2012, not 51 percent. This could be the critical margin of safety in presidential elections in 2016 and 2020.

Moreover it is not simply a matter of raw votes on Election Day. A 10 percent partisan shift among white workers would reduce the ideological hegemony that Republicans have in many white working class communities. Even in “Red State” areas of the country like the South, where Obama likely received around 24% of the white working class vote (full data on the white working class vote by state have not yet been released), a 10 percent shift could expand the limits of “acceptable” debate and subtly pressure candidates in now entirely conservative districts to shift slightly toward the center. In areas like the rust belt states of the Midwest, where Obama was likely more in the 42% range, it could provide critical margins for Democratic victory.