



The State of Working-Class Voters: The Danger and the Opportunity for Democrats in 2024

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The 2024 election is complicated as hell, but ultimately, the voting decisions of working families in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ohio will be one of the cornerstones in whether Democrats win or lose this year. In this challenging year of eroding base votes and third-party candidates, we will need more working-class voters than we got in 2020 – and way more than in 2016 – the numbers don’t add up otherwise. The bad news is that we are behind where we need to be with those voters, and the challenges of winning enough of them are significant. The good news is that, based on two new polls of working-class voters we have done, there are proven tactics to win their votes and a clear strategy for gaining considerable ground. You can find detailed information on those polls at the end of this report.

Contrary to the belief that the electorate is too polarized for swing voters, this volatile election year presents a unique opportunity. Among working-class voters, significant numbers of undecided, third-party leaners, and those who previously voted Democratic are prime targets for the Democratic Party, and we must focus our efforts on winning them over.

Winning them over, though, requires more than just good advertising and last-minute outreach. We have to start right away in our organizing and outreach and build trusted communities of sources favorable to us. Unions are a huge asset in this work, but we can’t just take the attitude that unions should shoulder all the burden of winning over working-class voters. Democrats and progressive organizations need to do door-knocking, texting, and mail with these voters; and we need to aggressively build localized online communities that become trusted sources on the issues.

If the labor movement, the Democratic Party and campaigns, and the broader progressive movement work together on genuine organizing in working-class communities and counties, we can make enough of a difference to win the 2024 election. We aren’t going to transform the landscape and reverse all the problematic trends in six months in terms of working-class voters; but right now, this is a game of inches. Given how close battleground elections will be, inches are the difference between winning and losing.

In Union and American Family Voices, through its Factory Towns project, have studied working-class voting patterns for years and developed and implemented strategies to reach these voters. We have each done multiple rounds of polling and focus groups, deep analysis of the voter files and other data sets, Randomized Controlled Trial message testing, and various other kinds of research. This joint report reflects AFV's [latest polling](#), a data set on union household voters, recent focus groups from In Union, and a review of our successful organizing strategies. We will make the case for the centrality of working-class voters in the industrial heartland and then lay out our strategy for winning enough of those voters to win the election.

I. The centrality of working-class swing voters in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and other Heartland battlegrounds

Democrats have some significant things going for them in the 2024 election: abortion is a compelling issue, saving democracy is seen as an urgent imperative by large numbers of voters, a majority of Americans dislike Donald Trump, and President Biden has an extraordinary record of accomplishments and a vision for where he wants to lead the country.

However, our challenges are significant, especially with the working-class voters who comprise most of the electorate in most battleground US House districts, the competitive Senate races, and the presidential battleground states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Why are those three states so important? **If Biden wins these states, Trump cannot win 270 electoral votes.** And they all have competitive Senate races and multiple competitive congressional races.

The memo/ outlines a comprehensive strategy for winning over working-class voters in the 2024 election, emphasizing the necessity of actively organizing and conducting outreach efforts. It stresses the limitations of relying solely on advertising and last-minute appeals, underlining the importance of actively building trusted communities of sources favorable to Democratic and progressive causes. To achieve this, we advocate for a multifaceted approach, including conducting door knocking, texting, and mail campaigns specifically targeting working-class voters. Additionally, it urges for the aggressive establishment of localized online communities dedicated to discussing key issues, with the aim of cultivating trust and credibility among this demographic.

Furthermore, the report highlights the critical importance of collaboration between the labor movement, the Democratic Party, campaigns, and broader progressive movements. It emphasizes the need for genuine organizing efforts in working-class communities and counties, recognizing that success in the 2024 election depends on the collective efforts of these stakeholders. While acknowledging that transforming the political landscape and reversing

problematic trends will take time, making incremental progress is significant, especially in tightly contested battleground elections where even small gains can make a crucial difference.

A. The traditional Democratic base vote, which includes a high percentage of working-class voters, is in grave danger of being eroded by multiple factors.

There is a clear and present danger of [base vote erosion](#) compared to 2020. Much of this erosion is due to working class people of color and young people. Between visible third-party candidacies, President Biden's slipping support due to the war in Gaza, and inflation disproportionately hitting lower-income base voters, Democrats will have trouble attaining 2020 levels of support and turnout. We will need to make those votes up from somewhere, and pro-union, economically populist working families are a great place to look. A significant component of Biden's victory in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin in 2020 was winning a more substantial percentage of working-class and union household voters than Secretary Clinton in her losing effort in 2016.

B. The swing between the 2016 Clinton performance and the 2020 Biden performance among working-class voters, measured in multiple ways, significantly influenced the difference between winning and losing those states based on these [exit poll sources](#).

1. ***Biden improved over Clinton among White non-college voters and non-college voters overall.*** White voters without a college degree were critical to Trump's victory in 2016 when he won this group by 66% to 29%. In 2020, Biden improved Clinton's performance by capturing 32% of these voters. When you look at non-college voters overall, Clinton lost 44% to 51%, while Biden got 48% of them.

According to the most recent New York Times [poll](#), Biden's support among White non-college voters is at 30% (down 2 points from 2020) and his support from non-college voters overall is sitting at 39% (down 9 points from 2020). In Michigan, Biden scored 8 points better than Clinton among White non-college voters (Clinton lost 31%- 62%, and Biden lost 39%- 60%). Recent [polls](#) have shown that Biden is down 3 points there, to 36%. In Wisconsin, he improved 9 points among White non-college men (Clinton lost them 26%- 69% vs. Biden, who lost them 35% to 63%).

2. ***Biden made gains with rural voters.*** Rural voters supported Trump by a whopping 27 points in the 2016 election (34%-61%), but Biden narrowed Trump's win over this group in the 2020 election to a margin of 15 points (42% to 57%). In Michigan, this trend continued by closing Trump's margin with this group from 18 points in 2016 (38% to 56%) to 9 points in 2020 (45% to 54%). Recent [polls](#) have shown that Biden is doing worse with

rural voters, with only 39% supporting him (down 3 points) and down 3 points among rural voters in Michigan.

C. Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin are not going to be won only through appeals to big city and college educated suburban voters.

These states are still mainly blue-collar states. More than 65% don't have a college degree. About 50% of the population lives outside big cities or suburbs, in small to medium-sized counties, with a higher percentage of manufacturing workers than the national average. Many of these folks have voted Democratic in the past, not just in the distant past -- candidates like Fetterman and Whitmer were strong vote-getters among working families in 2022, and Joe Biden won enough of them to win these states in 2020. But it's a challenging environment and will take work, starting now.

D. Significantly, among union household voters, a critical bloc of Democrats' working-class base, as opposed to the broader working-class vote, the number of swing voters between 2016 and 2020 was enough to be a huge factor in determining the election in PA, MI, and WI. According to estimates by Blue Compass Strategies, the union household swing in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin could significantly determine whether President Biden wins or loses these states.

1. ***In Michigan, 104,000 union household votes swung from Clinton to Biden. However, recent polls suggest Biden may lose these voters in 2024.*** In the last presidential election in Michigan, union households made up 21% of the electorate, with President Biden capturing 62% among this demographic. In the 2016 election, Secretary Clinton underperformed Biden, capturing just 53%; in actual numbers, that translates to roughly 104,000 votes that swung from Clinton to Biden in a state where Biden's win margin overall was 154,188. A recent *Fox News* poll showed that President Biden's support among union households is just 53%, pushing the union household vote down to the Clinton level and jeopardizing Michigan this November.
2. ***In Pennsylvania, roughly 137,000 union household votes could determine whether Biden wins or loses the state.*** Union households comprised 18% of the electorate in the last presidential election. President Biden lost union households, capturing only 49% of this demographic. In contrast, union household voters averaged 60% across both of President Obama's elections in the state. While there were no union-household exit polls in the 2016 election, we can estimate that the decrease in support from Obama-era performance to Biden's performance translates to roughly 137,000 votes. In a state where Clinton lost by 44,000 votes, and Biden

carried it by 81,000, any significant decrease in support among union households could shift the outcome in Pennsylvania. Recent [polling](#) has shown that Biden's support among union households has not budged since 2020, at 49%.

3. ***In Wisconsin, roughly 28,000 union household votes swung to President Biden. However, the latest polls hint at a potential reversal, with Biden losing these voters in 2024.*** Union households, accounting for 14% of the electorate in the previous presidential election, were a key demographic. President Biden's victory was bolstered by a strong performance, winning 59% of these households. Clinton's performance was weaker at 53%, resulting in a significant shift of 28,000 union household voters from Clinton to Biden. However, a recent Fox News poll reveals a decline in President Biden's performance among union households in Wisconsin to 52%, potentially putting the union household vote and Wisconsin's outcome this November at risk in a state that Clinton lost by 22,000 votes and Biden won by 20,000.

II. A realistic strategy for winning the working-class voters we need: messaging and building trust

A. Message strategy: How to build trust, cut through noise, and deliver votes

Democrats need to understand that these working-class Heartland voters have been through a lot of tough times over the last few decades. They are cynical, alienated, and unhappy, necessitating intense communication from trusted sources starting early. Democrats need to communicate early in a way that connects with their real-life experience to counter digital misinformation and social pressure, and we need to build trusted networks of people who can get them information on issues and candidates.

Significant numbers of people in our surveys, in some cases more than half, report that they, their family members, or close friends experienced some combination of job loss, retirement income loss, substance abuse problems, other mental or physical disability issues, home foreclosure, or rental eviction. Roughly two-thirds of these voters, their family members, or close friends have had to take on primary caregiving responsibilities and work multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Not surprisingly, they are bitter and cynical about politicians and political parties that they think have forgotten and failed them. They are highly skeptical of political ads. They

strongly distrust the mainstream news industry, which they refer to derisively as “corporate media.” While they don’t necessarily believe the news is “fake,” they think it is biased.

We will discuss this more below, but these voters are responsive to a focused populist message on the economy, health care, and retirement security. However, we need to significantly increase communications from trusted sources to move them. That could be friends; it could be organizations they have grown to like and trust, like labor unions, which they regard highly. This communication needs to start now and be repeated again and again.

B. The message that works: populist economics and retirement security

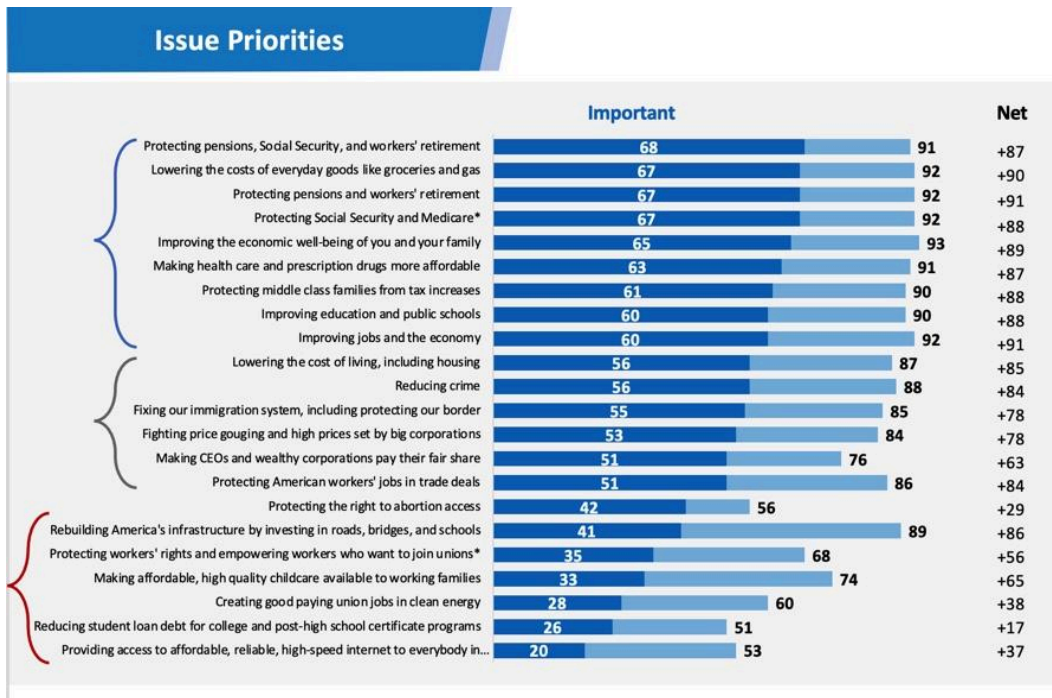
These folks have been hit hard by rising prices and are still shocked by the cost of groceries every time they go to the store or the price of gasoline every time they go to the pump. Everyday items cost too much, the housing market is a mess, and pay is increasing, but not enough. The good news is that they are very inclined to believe Democrats who tell a story about price gouging and outrageous corporate profits. They are angry that wealthy corporate CEOs and billionaires aren’t paying what they should in taxes and that the top 1% (yes, they still use that phrase) are gaming the system.

Retirement and healthcare security are paramount for them. Balancing the responsibilities of caring for aging family members and worrying about their own retirement, they place great importance on preserving and enhancing Social Security, Medicare, and retirement income. Interestingly, our surveys reveal that these voters trust Democrats more than Republicans on retirement issues, but the margin is not significant -- only 5 points on Social Security and Medicare, and only 2 points on preserving pensions and retirement income. This is an area we need to make real progress on.

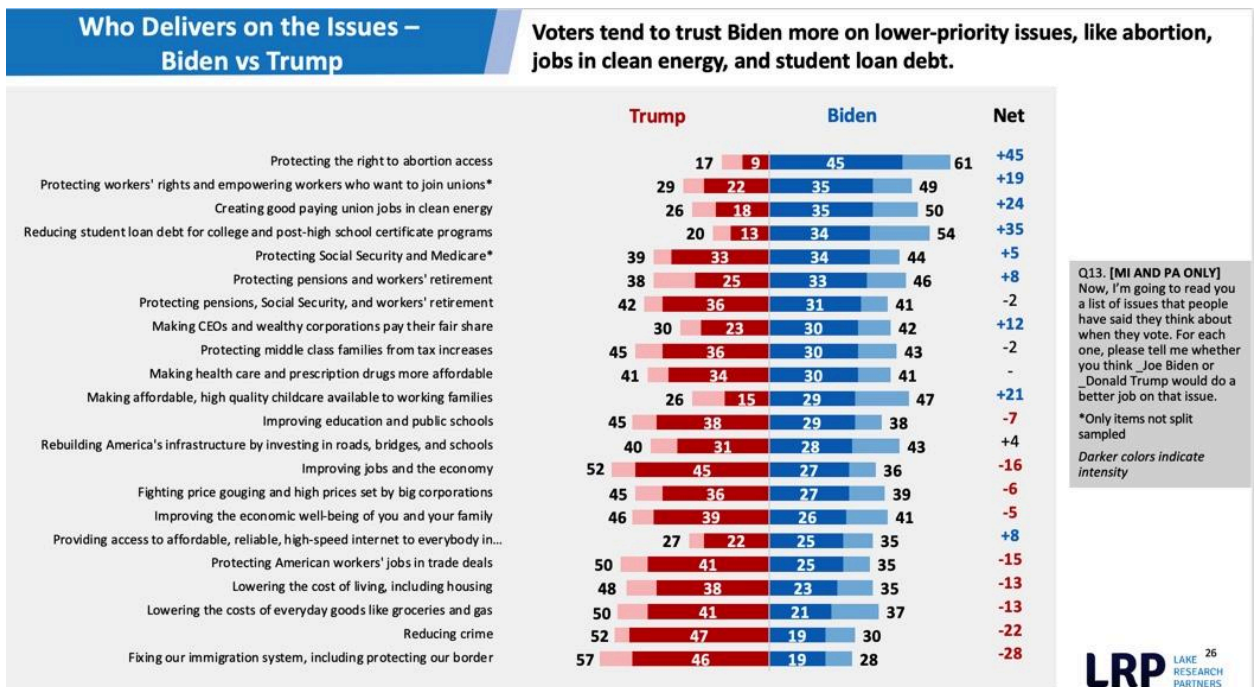
The most effective message to resonate with these voters is a clear combination of economic populism and retirement security. This was evident in the new Factory Towns poll, where the following message garnered the most support:

“To grow the American economy, we need a strong middle class. Because when the middle class does well, everyone does better. For too long, certain politicians have gutted programs we depend on while protecting corporations that rip off families. We need leaders who will grow the economy from the middle out by lowering costs through cracking down on corporate greed, protecting vital programs like Social Security and Medicare, and investing in the American people by bringing back manufacturing and good union jobs to the U.S.”

This kind of message is especially important to focus on because working-class voters don’t think Democrats are good on the economic issues that matter the most to them. Take a look at these charts from the Lake Research report for the In Union poll:



Q12. Now, I'm going to read you a list of issues that people have said they consider when they vote. For each, please tell me how important that issue is to you when you vote on a scale from zero to ten. Zero means that it is not important at all, and ten means it is very important.



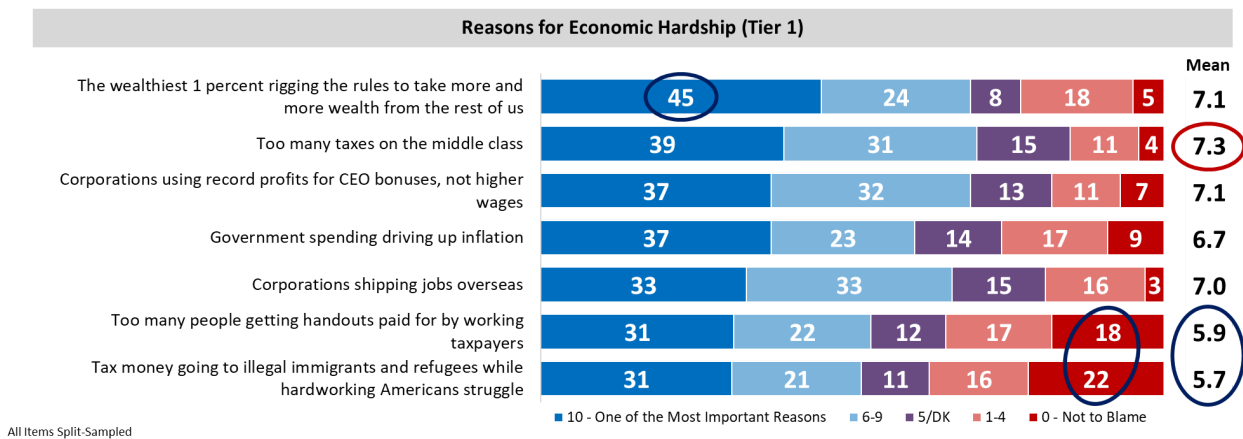
Q13. [MI AND PA ONLY] Now, I'm going to read you a list of issues that people have said they think about when they vote. For each one, please tell me whether you think Joe Biden or Donald Trump would do a better job on that issue.



Note that most of the issues that matter the most to these voters are ones they rate Trump higher on than Democrats. We can turn this around by giving them a populist economic message that includes retirement issues.

C. Which is the ultimate villain? The battle between corporate greed and government spending

Working-class swing voters are torn between two explanations for the economic pain they have experienced over the last decade-plus: more government spending (and all the “lazy” people taking advantage of it) and worries about high taxes versus corporate greed and the top 1% gaming the system. The top 1% gaming the system is the leading explanation in our poll, which is great news, but this narrative fight is going to continue to be seriously engaged by the right. The following chart shows that both explanations rate highly among Factory Town voters.



Whether the right-wing, Republican-friendly narrative wins out or the progressive populist Democratic-friendly narrative does will majorly influence where the swing voters in this demographic land. Republicans generally have been better storytellers than Democrats and have a more advanced online and traditional media machine than ours. Still, we must more substantively compete with them on storytelling in the six months ahead. We need to move a populist message every day in our communications very consciously.

D. An economic message can counter the Republican culture war message.

The last time the Factory Towns project conducted polling, in early 2023, Republican culture war messaging fell flat for the most part. Still, the previous year, the relentless right-wing, Republican media echo chamber messaging had an effect. It’s not so much that voters are moving to the right on this set of issues, but they have become more convinced that Democrats are “obsessed” with these issues and care about them far more than they care about the economic well-being of working families. The good news is that a focused Democratic message on economic issues is very competitive with working-class voters compared to the Republican culture war message. Developing

effective framing on trans issues and a solid economic message will allow us to do what we must with these voters. Still, it is an area we must pay attention to in the coming months.

- E. **Democrats can be very comfortable talking about abortion rights, child care, and student loans with working-class voters. These are good issues for us; there is no reason to be nervous about them with working families, even those from smaller towns.** However, the hardships these folks have suffered economically and the decline of their communities are at the top of their minds, so leading with economic issues is essential in reaching them. These voters believe Democrats care about everyone else but them and every other issue but the economic issues making their lives harder. They need to hear loudly and clearly that our candidates and our party are working to improve their lives economically, **including on wages, health care, and retirement.**

III. Organizing to build trust

Giving these voters the validation they need to vote Democratic

The voters in our surveys are convinced that their friends and neighbors are mostly voting Republican and for Trump, and that feeling influences how people vote. In the In Union survey, by a 3-1 margin respondents said their neighbors were mostly Republican over Democrat. One of the key strategic elements to moving these voters is tapping into trusted sources to communicate with them. Simply airing a bunch of TV ads and knocking on doors late in the campaign is not going to break through with these voters—they are too convinced that most people like them are voting Republican and too cynical about politics as it is commonly practiced to be moved much by traditional ads and campaign tactics right before Election Day. Fortunately, we can reach these voters with voices they trust.

- A. **Unions have the power and reach to move their members.** One of the most trusted sources of information about economic issues and politics is the labor movement, which is the most popular it has been in many decades. With labor unions, Democrats have ready-made organizations and ground-level leaders with real credibility who can speak knowledgeably about the issues and candidates in 2024, and candidates should fully embrace the labor movement. Unions have a vital role in this election and have an excellent program for mobilizing union members. Still, they need their allies in the broader progressive movement to join them in winning over working people in 2024.
- B. **Reaching union households and union adjacent voters with a trusted messenger.** In Union has a proven track record of moving voters and has identified over 3.3 million pro-union swing voters across Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, for whom good

jobs, quality, affordable health care and prescription drugs, retirement security, and workers' rights are top priorities. In Union has built a model of union "lookalikes"—voters who could perform like union members who are middle partisans and worked with several unions to add former union members (people who may have switched jobs or moved) to their database. In Union has been mailing regular newsletters to about 1.2 million targeted households in Michigan and Pennsylvania since October and will increase the numbers and frequency as the season progresses. It also engages targets online by sending email versions of newsletters, texting, and deploying targeted paid advertisements across platforms.

- C. **Building trusted communities online.** The Factory Towns project of American Family Voices has developed a strategy around building community and trust at the local level. The best way to do this right now is by building trusted communities online because people in these towns don't get much news or trust what they see, so they spend a lot of time on social media. Our strategy is to build local and regional online affinity groups and engage people in creating a trusted community. The moderators of these sites are local folks, often people like retired teachers. The approach is intentionally non-partisan, talking about issues, values, and the local community. The moderators will send them news articles letting them know the latest on issues that will move them away from the right-wing economic populist position and towards the progressive populism that we know works without having a heavy partisan footprint.

We have tested this approach in various ways and believe it is a deeply effective strategy for engaging, educating, and moving people toward our goals. In addition, our research has shown us the power of localized messages -- on roads and bridges, airports and ports, new drinking water installations, new businesses and factories opening up in the community, commuting times, and good local news on groceries and gas prices. We are running a distinctive pilot project in Michigan that should yield some insight into how this content engages these audiences. Building long-term communications strategies in these local online communities can help us counter Republican attacks and be a way of staying in touch with both base and swing voters in these counties.

IV. Danger and opportunity: the essential imperative of focusing on working-class swing voters

Consider these data points from the In Union poll:

- In Union target voters are 14% undecided on the presidential or Senate ballots. These voters are much more independent or drawn to other parties, and about two-thirds of

these voters are women. Currently, just 18% of these voters vote for Biden (32% for Trump).

- Fifteen percent of In Union target voters dislike both Biden and Trump. These voters are disproportionately younger voters, voters of color, independents, younger Democrats, and voters in non-union households. Currently, 23% of these voters vote for Biden (nine percent vote for Trump), but 26% vote for Kennedy and 15% are undecided.

The idea popularized by some pundits that “there are no more swing voters, this is too polarized an electorate” is wrong. In this volatile, unpredictable election year, among working-class voters there are considerable numbers of double haters, people thinking of voting for a third party candidate, considering not voting for president or simply undecided voters. Most of them voted Democratic in the recent past. They are prime and winnable Democratic targets, and we should focus a great deal of firepower on winning them over.

Winning them over, though, requires more than just good TV ads and last minute outreach. To reiterate, we have to start right away in our organizing and outreach, and we have to build trusted communities of sources favorable to us. Unions are a huge asset in this work, but we can't just take the attitude that unions should take all the burden of winning over working-class voters. Democrats and progressive organizations need to do door knocking, texting, and mail with these voters; we need to aggressively build localized online communities that become trusted sources on the issues.

If the labor movement, the Democratic Party and campaigns, and the broader progressive movement work together on genuinely organizing in working-class communities and counties, we can make enough of a difference to win the 2024 election. We aren't going to transform the landscape and reverse all the problematic trends in six months in terms of working-class voters, right now this is a game of inches. But given how close battleground elections are going to be, inches are the difference between winning and losing.

The difference between winning and losing in 2024 is monumental. Totalitarian fascism is knocking on the door. Whether women have the freedom to do what they decide with their own bodies and futures, whether the labor movement resurgence grows or is stamped out, whether working families can start making economic progress again, whether climate change is mitigated at all or the planet continues to cook: this election has consequences far beyond any in our lifetimes.

Working-class voters are central to building a winning coalition, so we'd better get on it.