

The diploma divide in American politics (UPDATED 02/08/2024)

HOW THE FAR RIGHT WEAPONIZES RACISM, WITH COUNTERSTRATEGIES

Reading time: 6 minutes

“I think that racial division is something that is pushed by those in power. It’s a way to keep us arguing. It’s a way to oppress people, keep them uneducated”

- White focus group member in [Ohio](#)¹

The far right seeks to convince working-class whites with the racial-fear message that their fortunes have fallen due to discrimination against them because they are *white people*. In fact, their fortunes have fallen not because they’re *white* but because they’re *working class*.

Recognizing this requires a language of class. Unions aid that, as do messages that focus on shared class interests, when the horizon expands to discuss both class and racism together. This approach builds working-class power while decreasing [racism](#)—and the power of the far right.²

DO’S AND DON’TS FOR BRIDGING THE DIPLOMA DIVIDE

DO’S

1. **Far-right racism is not an illusion; know whom you’re targeting.** It’s important to be precise about who can be recruited to join a multiracial coalition. As of 2017, 20% of Trump voters polled as “American Preservationists,” voters for whom being white and Christian is front and center, with cold feelings towards people of color; Democrats and mainstream Republicans cannot appeal to these voters, nor should they try to. But 19% of Trump voters were “anti-elites,” who hold progressive economic views and feelings towards people of color as warm as those of non-Trump [voters](#).³ If even a small percentage of anti-elites abandoned the far right, we would be living in a very different country.

2. **Understand the long history of the far right’s “wages-of-whiteness” strategy.** The far-right’s racial-fear message that working-class whites’ fortunes have fallen because they’re white is a variant of the “wages-of-whiteness” strategy that has been used by conservative elites in the US since the 17th century. It pits working-class whites [against](#) working-class people of color, with the goal and effect of heading off an interracial working-class coalition capable of challenging elite power.⁴ [Steve Bannon](#)’s version of this strategy, which has roots in the 1970s, is ambitious: its ultimate goal is to break people’s confidence in effective government, and even in democracy itself.⁵ When working-class people see government and their neighbors as the enemy, elites find it far easier to gut regulations that protect workers, public health, and the environment, and to erode support for redistributive programs.

3. **An effective counter to the wages-of-whiteness strategy is to focus attention on shared class interests and the con of divide-and-conquer racial strategies.** Critical race theory highlights “[interest convergence](#)”:⁶ the painful reality that Black people achieve victories only when their interests converge with those of whites, for example around shared class interests.

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Different types of evidence show how to operationalize what Heather McGee calls “[the solidarity dividend](#)”:⁷

- Political polling shows that a message focused on rejecting racial division in order to increase economic opportunity for all groups diminishes support for “[dog whistle](#)” racial-fear messaging.⁸
- Survey data show that union membership (which focuses attention on class and stresses cross-racial solidarity) lowers racial resentment and increases support for policies that benefit [African-Americans](#).⁹
- A social psychology experiment found that providing non-college whites with information on rising income inequality led to an increased understanding that people of color and other lower-status groups have a harder time getting ahead.¹⁰

Why does a focus on shared class interests decrease racism? People tend to favor their in-groups. When shared class identity is salient, people of one’s class are one’s in-group; when white identity is salient, white people are the in-group – so it’s easier to trigger racism against nonwhite out-groups.¹¹

4. **Use the race-class narrative.** Critical race theorist Ian Haney López found that the best antidote to the wages-of-whiteness strategy is his “race-class narrative,” which has greater appeal to Black, Latinx and white voters alike – and by similar margins – than either [racial-fear](#) messaging or [race-silent](#) economic populist messaging.¹² The [race-class narrative](#) has [three elements](#):¹³

#1

invite people who work hard for a living to join together across racial lines

#2

call out power elites for intentionally stoking racial divisions so they can distract people from growing inequality

#3

demand government that provides economic opportunity and stability for all instead of further enriching the rich

Many examples of race-class messaging poll well. For a helpful guide, [click here](#). Some examples:

(from Rural Organizing) *“In small towns and rural communities we believe in looking out for each other, whether we’re white, Black or brown, 10th generation or newcomer....Instead of delivering for working people, politicians hand kickbacks to their donors who send jobs overseas.*

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*Then they turn around and blame immigrants or people of color, to divide and distract us from the real source of our [problems](#).*¹⁴

(from [Race-Class Narrative Project](#)) *“No matter where we come from or what our color, most of us work hard for our families. But today, certain politicians and their greedy lobbyists hurt everyone by handing kickbacks to the rich, defunding our schools, and threatening our seniors with cuts to Medicare and Social Security. Then they turn around and point the finger for our hard times at poor families, Black people, and new immigrants. We need to join together with people from all walks of life to fight for our future, just like we won better wages, safer workplaces, and civil rights in our past.”*¹⁵

(My suggestion) *We need a platform that’s pro-business and pro-worker to bring people together to recapture the American dream, where hard work pays off in a stable middle-class life. That’s what all Americans want regardless of where they were born, what they look like, or where they live. The fat cats intentionally stoke racial divisions to distract us from our need to work together so we can harness the powerhouse of American industry to return Americans to the prosperity they rightly expect in one of the richest countries in the world.*

4. Why does the race-class narrative work?

#1 It focuses on our shared values across race and immigration status, including the core value of working hard to provide for our families (See Building Cross Class Support for Economic Justice).

#2 It exposes the divide-and-conquer strategies some business and political elites use to sow division while padding their bank accounts.

#3 It signals to people of color the intention to include them in the American dream.

#4 At the same time, it focuses white working-class attention on shared class interests with people of color. The race-class narrative contributed to Democratic victories in Minnesota and [increased](#) support for immigrants in North Carolina.¹⁶

5. Has the race-class narrative been disproven? No. Recent research finds that not all messages that reference both race and class interests are equally effective. Simply mashing together language that reflects a classic class frame with language that reflects a classic race frame [does not](#) have the same results as race-class messages that simultaneously call out racial division and highlight shared interests.¹⁷

6. An interracial alliance for economic justice is not inconsistent with insistent condemnation of racism. This is what Martin Luther King Jr. sought to do in the [Poor People’s Campaign](#).¹⁸

DON'TS

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1. **Don't paint with too broad a brush.** Writing off all Trump voters as racist just plays into the far right's hands.
2. **Don't downplay the role of racism.** [Racial resentment](#), [animosity](#), [white identity politics](#), and [opposition to antiracism](#) are highly predictive of Trump voting. But that's not why he won: he won because he [also attracted a much larger group of voters with only moderate](#) levels of racial resentment.
3. **Don't assume a dichotomy between mobilizing people of color and attracting more votes from non-college whites.** Trump won *both* [because](#) working-class whites in the Rust Belt swerved toward him *and* because African-Americans' turnout fell.¹⁹ The New Georgia Project showed how vital it is to persuade Black voters to come out and vote. It is also vital to make inroads in that ocean of red.
4. **Don't deny white privilege but also recognize class privilege.** Whites were [first hired/last fired](#) from well-paid blue-collar jobs and got FHA housing often [not available](#) to African-Americans.²⁰ But their white privilege vis-à-vis same-class African-Americans does not erase their class disadvantage with respect to privileged whites. The idea that people can be simultaneously advantaged on one axis of social identity, and disadvantaged on another is a [tenet of intersectionality](#).²¹ Racism infects American politics in many ways; the reflexive assumption that taking class seriously means discounting the importance of racism is one of them. This is especially dangerous because racism is a primary weapon used in the class war the rich have been winning.
5. **Don't assume that the answer is "an end to identity politics."** A well-meaning insistence to "abandon identity politics" will be heard by people of color and women to stop focusing on racism and sexism, despite the fact that both groups lag far behind white men in terms of both [economic justice and social respect](#).²² Research shows that all politics is about [identity](#).²³ Indeed, it's precisely the identity politics of the right—and the lack of a clear strategy for defeating it—that has fueled MAGA support.
6. **Don't focus solely on a colorblind economic justice frame.** López found that a colorblind economic justice frame performs less well with persuadable voters than the race-class [narrative](#).²⁴ The far-right talks about race and racism all the time; saying nothing about race leaves its interpretation uncontested. We need to contest Bannon's wages-of-whiteness interpretation and offer an alternative, aspirational view of cross-racial shared interests.
7. **Don't focus exclusively on a white racism frame.** Though discussions of race and racism are no longer political liabilities among working-class voters, a frame that exclusively emphasizes white racism [is](#).²⁵ A convergence of evidence documents this:

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- López found that white racism narratives perform less well with persuadable voters than the race-class narrative – even among [progressives](#) and even among people of [color](#).²⁶
- If you say, “X has had the following terrible effect, predominantly affecting people of color,” this [corrodes support](#) for progressive populism.²⁷ This formulation depressed support among blue-collar voters in swing states by [11 percentage points](#).²⁸
- Among working-class Democrats, a progressive candidate with a focus on jobs won by [63%](#), while a candidate with a “racial justice for people of color” message garnered only 49% support.²⁹
- Raising the minimum wage is significantly less popular when presented as a means to address racial [inequality](#).³⁰

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