

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

TALKING ACROSS CLASS LINES

Reading time: 5 minutes

“Anybody gone into Whole Foods Lately? See what they charge for arugula?”
– Barack Obama in [Iowa](#), 2008¹

The far right benefits when politicians send unintended class messages by the way they talk. This includes a long series of Democratic food gaffes: Howard Dean was decried as a “latte-drinking” elitist; Dukakis got into trouble with Belgian endive. Understanding the different talk traditions in elite and non-elite circles would eliminate a lot of unforced errors, but it would also require elites to learn – and respect – the talk traditions of non-elites.

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

DON’TS

A.

“The people closest to pain should be the people closest to power. In Washington, the wealthy and the privileged make the rules, but if you're poor, or an immigrant, or a person of color in America, then you know how hard it is just to survive in this country. We need courageous leaders who will protect the most vulnerable, fight for justice, and make transformative change.”

B.

“This country belongs to all of us, not just the superrich. But for years, politicians in Washington have turned their backs on people who work for a living. We need tough leaders who won't give in to millionaires and the lobbyists, but will fight for good jobs, good wages, and guaranteed healthcare for every American.”

1. **Messaging that reflects white-collar “[feeling rules](#)” squanders support for progressive policies.**² (Feeling rules are class specific conventions about who deserves empathy.) Blue-collar voters in swing states were 11 percentage points more likely to support [B than A](#).³ This makes sense: Message A expresses empathy for three disenfranchised groups but neglects to mention people disadvantaged by [social class](#).⁴ Leaving out the vector of structural inequality that affects working-class whites will reinforce their resistance to thinking structurally about inequality (which in turn will disadvantage the poor, immigrants, and people of color). Working-class people who preferred Message A were [not turned off](#) by Message B, so there is no downside to using it.⁵

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2. Also avoid messaging that taps white- but not blue-collar moral frameworks. Message B taps blue-collar moral frameworks that valorize “people who work for a living” who need good jobs that yield a stable, middle-class life. Message A does not:⁶ instead, it taps white-collar progressive frameworks that valorize fairness and transformative [change](#).⁷ In swing states, working-class Catholics and people in rural/small towns had the strongest [preference](#) for Message B.⁸

3. Ceding predictable masculinities to the other side strengthens them and weakens us.

White-collar masculinity valorizes the courage and empathy of the “good man”; blue-collar masculinity valorizes the toughness of the “[real man](#).”⁹ Think of the difference between John Stewart and Rush Limbaugh. Fox News connects emotionally with the “NASCAR audience” by using a blue-collar confrontative style and masculinist personalities like Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity and [Tucker Carlson](#).¹⁰ When men’s identity is threatened, even white-collar men are [more likely](#) to express support for war, homophobic attitudes, and interest in buying an SUV – and current economic conditions are threatening to many in the fragile and failing middle-class.¹¹ Endorsement of hegemonic masculinity [predicts](#) votes for Trump in both men and women.¹² I’m not a fan of hegemonic masculinity, but neither am I have ceding it to the other side when adopting progressive positions entails toughness and protecting the basic values of our community. Men of all classes see themselves as protectors; I don’t love it, but there it is.¹³ (See [How Masculine Anxieties Feel Support for the Far Right](#))

DO’S

1. Recognize that white-collar traditions of talk are just that – traditions that reflect privilege.

Rachel Maddow epitomizes a professional class social world and cosmopolitan “taste culture” that link authority with intellectualism and domain-specific expertise, flattering her listeners that they are members of a “[fact-based community](#).”¹⁴ Politicians on the left typically seek to establish their authority by having “a policy for that” complete with wonky details. This inadvertently signals that their intended audience is [college-educated](#).¹⁵ It also ignores the fact that social identity has a greater influence on political choices than ideology; the cosmopolitan taste culture often reflected in political messaging embeds class scripts in ways Democrats and moderate Republicans are often unaware of.¹⁶

2. Don’t condescend to people; they hate it. Non-elites often find the Rachel-Maddow attitude arrogant and condescending, especially when it’s combined with the assumption that elites’ preferences reflect informed decision-making while non-elites’ preferences reflect emotions. High-status people commonly caricature lower-status people as “too emotional” and enshrine their own parochial viewpoint as Enlightened Truth. This is unseemly.

3. Avoid upper-middle-class cultural references. Politicians often use upper-middle-class cultural references, assuming they are universal – but they aren’t. These include references to upper-middle-class institutions like Whole Foods (Obama), upper-middle-class foods like Belgian endive (Dukakis), and upper-middle-class leisure activities like [windsurfing](#) (Kerry) – not

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to mention George H. W. Bush's admission he had never before seen a supermarket [scanner](#). Kerry's intention was to signal youthfulness and vigor; instead he signaled class privilege.¹⁷

4. Respect and tap non-elites' talk traditions. Blue-collar Americans decry "middle-class gameplaying [bullshit](#)," which is how they see elite claims of domain-specific expertise.¹⁸ They pride themselves on authenticity and unadorned straight talk. Fox News connects with the "NASCAR audience" using vernacular speech patterns and regional [slang](#).¹⁹ "Look, stop the B.S!," said Bill O'Reilly of Fox News, using a class blue-collar trope.²⁰ Don't cede this to the far right; Democrat John Fetterman won the Pennsylvania Senate primary using "unfussy and plainspoken" [language](#).²¹

5. Recognize the importance of the messenger. Working-class voters care more about the class background than the gender or race of a candidate.²² In swing states, progressive populist candidates who were teachers or construction workers are preferred by nearly two-thirds of working-class voters, notably higher than any other message/occupation grouping (including veterans).²³ Many Trump voters Trump's self-construction as a businessman, given that the life dream of many non-elite voters is to own their own small business: it's the dream of an order-taker to be an order-giver.

6. Recognize that elites' failure to stop the demise of the American dream has led to a skepticism about American institutions. "The American people have a right to be angry," to quote Bill O'Reilly. [Rural](#) and rustbelt communities who have seen their communities and their futures wither are lamentably but predictably less emotionally attached to the institutions that have failed them: typically this [drives](#) white people to the far right and people of color to the far left.²⁴ The January 6 investigation is an important defense of fundamental American institutions, but understand that it may seem an inside-the-Beltway sideshow to red-ocean Americans. [Teaching civics](#) would help a lot.²⁵

7. To counter the appeal of "Stop-the-Steal," you need to understand the underlying appeal. "Supporters take Trump seriously but not literally; opponents take him literally but not [seriously](#)."²⁶ Trump and other far-right figures connect emotionally with many voters' sense of being screwed economically and dissed culturally; "Stop-the-Steal" is a stand-in for all the ways they feel ripped off. Deriding people for being gullible just reinforces Trump's theme that their dignity has been stolen. Instead, connect with people's sense of having been ripped off but offer them a different explanation for *who* ripped them off: business elites who have pocketed workers' fair share of productivity, foreclosed on their [homes](#), shipped their jobs [abroad](#), and offered them only jobs as Uber drivers who earn so little they sleep in their cars.²⁷

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