

## Elites can't keep writing off the adrift Americans who voted for Trump

Michael Gecan

After the 2016 election, my view was that the voters had rejected not just Hillary Clinton, but also the modern Democratic Party – a party top-heavy with celebrity candidates and dominated by Wall Streeters, Silicon Valley stars and academic and professional elites.

Now on Tuesday, in Virginia, New Jersey, Washington State and Maine, voters rejected not only Donald Trump, but also the chaotic and unproductive political culture that he embodies and promotes – a culture top-heavy with family members, Wall Streeters, business titans and generals.

Some on the left already are touting the results of Tuesday's elections as evidence of the impact of "the resistance" and running as far and fast as they can from the lessons of 2016. Those on the right, meanwhile, are unsettled, but biding their time, knowing that the East and West coasts are not their bread and butter and hoping that the Democrats repeat the mistakes of the past.

The biggest mistake Democrats could make is to ignore the half of America that lives in the vast middle of the country – the states described by journalist Richard C. Longworth a decade ago in his book, [Caught in the Middle](#). I'm from one of those states, Illinois, have worked extensively in Wisconsin, and during the past year made several trips to southern Ohio.

I went to Portsmouth, Ironton, Chillicothe and other Ohio towns, meeting leaders and residents and trying to figure out whether the kind of non-partisan political organizing that my colleagues and I do in mostly metropolitan areas and frequently in African American and Hispanic communities would work there.

One Sunday morning, at a coffee hour after an Episcopal Church service, an elderly parishioner approached me and said, with skepticism, "When I heard someone was going to visit from *New York*, I said, 'Oh, boy, here comes another liberal who's going to tell us what to think and do.'" She paused. "But you don't talk like a liberal."

"No, ma'am, I grew up in Cook County," I said. "So I have no regard for either party."

"Then you might do alright down here," she decided

On my next trip, I visited an IT professional who had lost his son to heroin and who now led a church made up of nearly 200 recovering addicts. He asked me this question: "You are a busy man, aren't you?" I answered that I guessed so, but why was he asking.

“Well, then you are not coming back here,” he said. “Because this is nowhere. And busy people don’t come back to nowhere.”

Forty years of job and population loss, along with 20 years of opioid and heroin plagues, have taken all kinds of terrible tolls, including on the spirit of the people who have seen their communities crumble.

What has struck me, at least so far, is that people are *not* deeply Republican or intensely tied to Trump. They even say so. But they also know that the Democrats have written them off. A longtime Ohio-born Democratic operative told me that he and his associates had written off that part of the state decades ago. The Dems could win statewide offices by concentrating on metropolitan Cleveland and a few other areas in the north, so why bother?

What this means to me is that there is an opportunity to reconnect and re-engage with these Americans – not just for the Democrats, but for moderate Republicans, for some new party, for non-partisan organizers like me.

Reconnecting starts with listening to people, no matter how different their views on certain matters may seem, not selling a package of programs or positions. Consider the victory by a transgender candidate in suburban Virginia who, while fully public and proud of who she is, ran a campaign almost entirely focused on *traffic congestion*, which is what the local voters cared the most about. It wasn’t about her. It was about *them*.

Re-engaging begins with pragmatic responses to the issues and concerns those residents raise.

What I have heard, so far, is an intense desire to address the ongoing opioid plague. That means reinforcement of quality recovery programs and the regulation of fly-by-night operations, a relentless crackdown on the pill peddlers and heroin traffickers, and a regional approach to the public health and law enforcement issues that affect Ohio and Kentucky and West Virginia. A second issue is the need for a new generation of meaningful living wage work. That would mean rapidly accelerating the reconstruction of the scores of locks and dams along the Ohio River, still a major and less expensive transportation alternative for commodities of all kinds.

The party or faction that focuses on these kinds of questions in these kinds of communities and respects the people who live there can break the cycle of cynical celebrity politics and begin to build a majority that will last a generation. In the process, it will start to reknit a social fabric that today is terribly frayed and reunite the citizens in the middle with the citizens on the coasts.

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