



Streich, G. (2004). Review of *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters*. *Workplace*, 11, 231-237.

GREGORY W. STREICH

REVIEW OF *AMERICA'S FORGOTTEN MAJORITY: WHY THE WHITE WORKING CLASS STILL MATTERS*

By Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers  
Basic Books, 2000

Conventional wisdom about American politics would lead us to believe that Soccer Moms, Wired Workers, and other segments of independent-minded, economically upscale voters are the most important voting blocs in contemporary elections. In *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters*, Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers take this conventional wisdom, scratch beneath the surface, and find that it is misleading, incomplete, and often plain wrong. Instead, they find that the white working class has been—and will continue to be—the most important voting bloc in American national elections. *America's Forgotten Majority* is an insightful, accessible, and witty examination of American politics over the past thirty years. Moreover, the book is as timely now (as we move closer to the election of 2004) as it was when it was originally written and published with an afterword about the election of 2000.

**Why the White Working Class?**

2.1 Before they begin their analysis, Teixeira and Rogers answer some questions many readers might ask themselves upon reading the title. Why focus on white working class voters? Aren't we moving toward a more racially diverse population, rendering such an analysis obsolete? Even worse, are Teixeira and Rogers reactionary and racist?

2.2 Their answers to these questions result from a close reading of the socio-demographic makeup of the American electorate. Teixeira and Rogers are neither reactionary nor racist in intent—they merely argue that black and Latino voters combined lack sufficient numbers to elect a party dedicated to a universal, material-based agenda (e.g. guaranteed access to health care; stronger commitment to public education and making college more affordable; economic security; and retirement security). The authors do support such an activist agenda, but argue that it will only be realized when black, Latino, and white working class voters mobilize together on the basis of trans-racial economic issues. Further, while demographically the U.S. is indeed becoming more diverse, the electorate is and will remain mostly white for the foreseeable future. Because voter registration and turnout rates for Latinos still lag behind those for white voters, Teixeira and Rogers point out that the "country is still mostly white (a term that describes almost three-

quarters of adults and more than four-fifths of voters) " (x). And finally, despite polls showing that most Americans consider themselves middle-class, Teixeira and Rogers point out that "over three-quarters of American adults do not have a four-year college degree, that over seven-tenths do not have a professional or managerial job, and that the median—typical—income of American households was actually quite modest (in 1998, about \$39,000)" (x). These figures lead Teixeira and Rogers to argue that the white working class, since it comprises 55% of the American electorate, is and will continue to be the most important voting bloc for most of the twenty-first century.

### **A New Kind of Working Class**

3.1 In describing where the new white working class—i.e. the "forgotten majority"—came from, Chapter 1 presents an excellent overview of the U.S. economy over the past 50 years. Teixeira and Rogers highlight how the working class in the 1950s-1960s enjoyed consistent growth in real wages and family incomes, but from 1973 to the present, that same group has seen their earnings stagnate. Their analysis also illustrates that only the upper 20% of families have reaped higher incomes in this same post-1973 era. Further, the level of educational achievement is directly correlated to these income and wage trends. Indeed, Teixeira and Rogers argue that the difference between those with college degrees and those without constitutes the "Great Divide" of American politics (13). They observe that on "one side of the Great Divide, lacking a four-year college degree are the vast majority—three quarters—of whites who have not fared well over the last quarter-century. On the other side are the quarter of white adults who have a four year degree or more and for whom the last twenty-five years have been a time of substantial economic progress" (15).

3.2 The "working class" typically conjures up images of blue-collar employees such as steel- or autoworkers. These categories of labor remain important, but they have been shrinking as a percentage of all jobs in the U.S., while service sector employment has increased (29). It is here, among service workers and professional staff positions held by workers with some college or an A.A. degree, that the "new" working class is located. This forgotten majority may work at service sector jobs very different from the factory jobs of the Reagan Democrats in the 1980s, but "*in economic terms, they are not so different from the white working class of previous generations*" (15, italics in original). Indeed, Teixeira and Rogers demonstrate that the majority of suburban voters are *not* the upscale Volvo-driving Soccer Moms we hear so much about, but Cavalier-driving working moms who are busy trying to make ends meet. The forgotten majority consists of "two-earner families of low to moderate education and income, generally working in low-level white-collar, service, and skilled blue-collar jobs. In sum, the white working class remains numerically dominant, even if its form has changed" (18).

### **Why Is the Forgotten Majority the "Real" Swing Voting Bloc?**

4.1 Before presenting their argument as to why the forgotten majority is the real swing voting bloc, Teixeira and Rogers first address this question: Did the white working class abandon the Democrats in the 1980s (when "Reagan Democrats" entered our political vocabulary) or did the Democrats abandon the white working class? One prominent theory suggests that the white working class abandoned the Democrats, with the help of successful campaign appeals by the Republicans. In short, the Republicans were able to peel off white working class votes from the Democrats (particularly in the South) by appealing to their social conservatism (e.g. anti-communism as well as opposition to busing, affirmative action, abortion rights, welfare, and gun control, just to name a few issues commonly associated with the term). Beginning with Richard Nixon's 1968 "southern strategy"—which appealed to southern whites on the basis of law and order—and continuing with Ronald Reagan's specious anecdotes about "welfare queens," this strategy played to the supposed social conservatism of white working class voters, while labeling the Democrats as soft on crime, beholden to "special interests," and wedded to tax-and-spend programs that do not reward hard work and effort. These themes had both overt and covert racial subtexts (Reagan's "welfare queen" was a black woman, even though at the time more white women were welfare

recipients). Such appeals helped to mobilize white working class resentment against "big government" and programs such as affirmative action and welfare that appeared to tap into racial backlash and violate the working class's sense of fair play. Thus, despite their economic interests, white working class men were splintered off from the Democratic Party; and this strategy both vaulted Reagan into the White House and helped consign the New Deal Coalition to the dustbin of history. Regarding this theory, Teixeira and Rogers acknowledge that conventional wisdom holds there is an increasing social conservatism in the U.S. However, they point to surveys that highlight what they suggest is a long-term trend toward liberalism on "core values" such as fair play, racial tolerance, and equality before the law (35-37). This leads them to reject the notion that the white working class, due to increasing social conservatism or racial backlash, has abandoned the Democrats.

4.2 A second, and related, theory is that the white working class rejected the Democrats in the 1980s because they embraced the Republican Party's attack on "big government," which signified an underlying ideological shift towards a philosophical conservatism of limited government. If the American electorate has indeed increasingly shifted to an ideology of limited government and free markets, then this reading of history would have us believe the Democrats lost ground because they were seen as defenders of old and outdated policies of economic regulation and income redistribution. Regarding this theory, Teixeira and Rogers concede that while some surveys show an increasing mistrust of government (45-46), others illustrate that strong majorities of Americans agree government should do more to ensure economic security, a clean environment, and access to health care (50-51). Thus, any suggestion that the working class has shifted to an ideological conservatism of limited governments is inaccurate. Instead, Teixeira and Rogers argue that working class voters "*expect* a lot out of government, so they are disappointed when they don't get it" (48, italics in original). Ironically, the white working class is liberal in their high expectations of a proactive government that helps average Americans secure good jobs, good homes, good schools, and good health care, but pragmatically conservative in that they are increasingly cynical about government's ability to deliver these goods. The gap between these high expectations and government's poor performance in the eyes of the forgotten majority is not a sign of philosophical conservatism (which, according to Ronald Reagan's rhetoric, labels government as "the problem"), but is a sign of pragmatic conservatism (that the forgotten majority is critical of poor governmental performance, but not critical of government in principle).

4.3 A third theory suggests that the Democrats abandoned the white working class rather than vice versa. This theory holds that in order to win back the White House in 1992 and 1996, the Democrats increasingly moved to the middle of the road in an effort to mimic the Republicans' economic and social positions. This shift to the right was seen as necessary to win over independents, Soccer Moms, and other important blocs, and was advocated by the Democratic Leadership Council (an organization of moderate Democrats, of which Bill Clinton was a member). However, this strategy does little to appeal to the bread and butter concerns of the forgotten majority. In short, in order to appeal to independent voters and swing voting blocs like Soccer Moms, the Democrats have adopted a more fiscally responsible, tough-on-crime, family values agenda that points toward a leaner and more limited national government. Thus, the Democrats abandoned their base: the white working class that wanted a more proactive government. Ironically, by absorbing Ross Perot's emphasis on eliminating the budget deficit and joining with the Republicans in the mid-1990s to call for a balanced budget, the Democrats have painted themselves into a corner: they are unable to make bold proposals for government programs the public (and especially the forgotten majority) wants and supports. To promote such spending programs would give the balanced budget issue to the Republicans, and open up the Democrats to being labeled as the same old "tax and spend" liberals. These dynamics, and how the Democrats failed to understand both the trends that created the new white working class and their interests, are nicely analyzed in Chapters 3 and 4, which examine the elections of the 1990s.

4.4 The Republicans, Teixeira and Rogers point out, have also misinterpreted these trends. The Republicans have assumed that white working class voters can be won over by continuing the assault on

New Deal- and Great Society-era programs that remain very popular with forgotten majority voters. The Republicans have not recognized that while the forgotten majority has low levels of trust and high levels of cynicism toward government, this does not mean that the forgotten majority rejects government in principle. In other words, what is taken to be philosophical conservatism is actually pragmatic conservatism. Thus, the anti-Government agenda of the Republicans will not win the white working class over as permanent constituents within the GOP, because the white working class actually has high expectations for a proactive government to address their economic, health care, educational, and retirement interests. Teixeira and Rogers illustrate this very nicely in their account of the rise of the "Republican Revolution" led by Newt Gingrich in 1994—and its subsequent fall as the forgotten majority (in part) swung back to President Clinton for the 1996 election.

### **How to Win the Forgotten Majority**

5.1 For Teixeira and Rogers, white working class voters are the major voting bloc in American national elections, but Democrats and Republicans alike have not recognized this. Whichever party attains a more accurate understanding of who the forgotten majority is, what their interests are, and why they remain the most important voting bloc in American politics will potentially piece together an electoral coalition that could determine the course of American politics for the next generation.

5.2 The Democrats can win this majority by embracing economic populism (which they emphasize does appeal to many of the forgotten majority) and by stressing Medicare, Medicaid, education, and the environment (or what pundits call "M2E2"). Teixeira and Rogers note that the election of 2000 did not entail a choice between a pro-active government and an anti-government stand, but rather a choice about *what kind* of active government to have. If this continues to be the case, they argue that the Democrats have a "built-in advantage in this debate" (183). Furthermore, they propose that the Democrats should move away from race-based affirmative action policies toward class-based policies that have stronger support among the forgotten majority, and thereby eliminate a wedge issue that has hurt the Party.

5.3 While it is clear Teixeira and Rogers would like to see the Democrats embrace economic populism as a strategy that appeals to the forgotten majority, their suggestion that affirmative-action be framed as a class, not a race, issue is problematic. This position has gained some measure of support, and has been recommended (for different reasons) by people ranging from the liberal William Julius Wilson to the conservative Ward Connerly. Critics have responded to this suggestion in a number of ways. First, it risks ignoring racial discrimination as an ongoing issue, and class-based affirmative action won't address it. Second, it ignores how gender has been the category in which the greatest gains have been made due to affirmative action for women. And third, it implicitly accepts the idea that white working class men are mobilized on the basis of anti-affirmative action appeals, so the only way the Democrats can appeal to white working class men is to "de-racialize" their political platform. I think this third issue is crucial for Teixeira and Rogers' argument: by urging the Democrats to abandon race-based affirmative action they may be conceding that social conservatism and racial backlash is indeed more prevalent than they previously argued.

5.4 The Republicans, though, might win this majority by toning down their harsh anti-government rhetoric. Teixeira and Rogers note that George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism" tapped into the forgotten majority's desire for a leaner, more efficient, but still active government. In addition, Teixeira and Rogers recommend that the Republicans continue to tap into the social conservatism of the forgotten majority. Their analysis of the 2000 campaign illustrates that while Gore did well with voters when he stressed economic populism and the defense of popular government programs, Bush was able to blur policy differences just enough that many voters did not see significant differences between the two candidates (recall that in one debate in 2000, Gore supported affirmative action while Bush supported a vaguely defined policy of "affirmative access" which he could not clearly differentiate from affirmative

action). Since Bush was able to *appear* more moderate than he has turned out to be, many of these voters chose Bush on the basis of "trustworthiness, cultural values or general feelings about government" (182). The forgotten majority—especially forgotten majority men—went resoundingly for Bush (63% of white men without a four-year college degree voted for Bush, and Bush also won white voters with incomes under \$75,000 by 13% over Gore [177]) even though voters preferred Gore's positions on health and economic policy matters (as illustrated in exit polls [178-179]). Again, it seems that although voters agreed with Gore's position on key economic issues, it was the more intangible issues such as likeability and trustworthiness that hurt Gore and helped Bush.

### Three Lingering Concerns

6.1 Teixeira and Rogers' analyses of mobilizing the forgotten majority (Chapter 6) and the 2000 election (the afterword) include very insightful and important recommendations that a smart Presidential candidate ought to follow. Indeed, I would highly recommend this book as a must-read for any serious Democratic contender who hopes to have a shot at defeating Bush in 2004. Specifically, they present an eight-point program that could be the basis of a Party platform (see 155-156). In short, Teixeira and Rogers suggest that economic populism and a national government that is proactive and helps the forgotten majority resolve their ongoing concerns about health care, job security, educational opportunity, and retirement savings, are all themes that appeal to American values of hard work, fair play, opportunity, and social commitment. Such appeals would help pull together a victorious electoral coalition, of which the forgotten majority would be an important component. However, their analysis and recommendations in the later chapters also raise a few questions about claims made in earlier ones. Let me briefly discuss three lingering concerns.

6.2 By suggesting the Democrats shy away from race-based affirmative action and admitting that Republicans appeal to the cultural values of the forgotten majority, Teixeira and Rogers seem to implicitly admit that one theory they had rejected might carry more weight than they acknowledged. As discussed above, while they reject the idea that the forgotten majority has become more socially conservative and motivated by racial backlash, their recommendations seem to implicitly accept that this is indeed partially true. Indeed, their language does not clarify the issue: early in the book they suggest that the forgotten majority is not more "socially conservative," but in the afterword they suggest that George W. Bush was able to appeal to the "cultural values" of forgotten majority men. I would like to see Teixeira and Rogers clarify the difference between these two terms, since my impression is that many of the cultural values that Bush tapped into were actually quite socially conservative.

6.3 A second concern is whether the forgotten majority is pragmatically conservative, or whether it is perhaps ideologically conservative after all. Indeed, Teixeira and Rogers note that in 1996 three-fifths of white working class men agreed with the sentiment "the less government the better" (111). My understanding of this phrase is that it reflects a philosophical disposition that prefers a limited, passive, government. Indeed, this phrase is quite close to the notion that the "government that governs best, governs least" which is associated with the classical liberalism of restrained government and free trade advocated by John Locke, James Madison, and Adam Smith. (It should be noted that Henry David Thoreau also supported this notion of a limited government, but one that respected the equal rights and dignity of its citizens.) In addition, Teixeira and Rogers' own analysis shows that white working class women support the Democrats at higher rates than white working class men (particularly non-union white working class men). To me, this all adds up to the possibility that forgotten majority men have shifted from a pragmatic conservatism to a philosophical and cultural conservatism that will continue to turn them into solid Republican constituents, or at least play into a Republican strategy of appealing to angry white men.

6.4 A third concern that flows out of the first two is the differences between forgotten majority men and forgotten majority women. Teixeira and Rogers highlight some eye-opening gaps between men and

women when it comes to examining the swings of support for Democrats in recent election results. Their examination of Congressional and Presidential elections illustrate that forgotten majority men are the group where the Democrats have lost the most appeal, while forgotten majority women are the group where the Democrats have gained the most appeal. This gender gap is even more pronounced when comparing non-unionized men and women. For example, in 1996, 46% of non-union forgotten majority women voted for Clinton, while only 33% of non-union forgotten majority men did so (131). This raises the possibility that while the Democrats might appeal to the Cavalier-driving working Mom, they still have a tougher time winning the votes of forgotten majority men.

6.5 This issue deserves more attention. It is increasingly conventional wisdom that Republicans are courting "NASCAR Dads" as an important voting bloc. These NASCAR Dads, from the description of campaign strategists, are a part of the forgotten majority, and are made up of working class men who are more socially and culturally conservative. Indeed, President Bush recently welcomed a NASCAR champion to the White House for a photo-opportunity, making him the first President to do so. Presidents invite championship teams from baseball, football, and other sports to the White House on a regular basis, and pundits have suggested that Bush's motives cannot be disconnected to Republican efforts to woo white working class men—whether they are called the forgotten majority or NASCAR Dads. I would like to hear Teixeira and Rogers' reaction to this emerging piece of conventional wisdom.

6.6 I agree with Teixeira and Rogers about the origins and importance of the white working class in the American electorate. However, I am less optimistic than they about the Democrats' ability to win them back as a permanent constituency. It seems to me that some of the pragmatic conservatism of the forgotten majority—especially that of forgotten majority men—has evolved into a philosophical and cultural conservatism more at home in the Republican Party. Thus, the same white working class men who "should" vote for the Democrats because of economic reasons will likely vote for Republicans on grounds of social and cultural conservatism.

6.7 It seems both parties understand the importance of the forgotten majority as we get closer to the election of 2004. Witness Bush courting the NASCAR Dad vote. Additionally, Howard Dean's comment about wanting to be the candidate of the Southern white male with a Confederate flag bumper sticker on his truck reflects the reality that Southern white men are a crucial voting bloc that has shifted its loyalty to the Republican Party ever since 1968. Dean's comments were intended to initiate a dialogue about trans-racial economic issues around which a coalition can be built. Due to the clumsiness of his statement, the intent was overshadowed by two types of reactions: one by Southerners such as John Edwards, who suggested that Dean was a bit of a Yankee elite for not recognizing that many Southern whites supported civil rights in the 1960s; and a second by fellow Northerners such as John Kerry, which denounced the Confederate flag as a symbol that insults black and white Americans who embrace racial equality.

6.8 If the Democrats focus on issues of economic populism, they may secure enough of the forgotten majority to win national elections in the future. Given that the current administration has taken the U.S. from a record budget surplus to record budget deficits in less than three years, that President Bush's tax cuts favor the already wealthy and not the forgotten majority, and that the administration is earmarking billions of dollars for reconstructing Iraq (and handing it out in no-bid contracts to loyal party contributors such as Halliburton) while ignoring the need for improving the domestic infrastructure of the U.S. (e.g. roads, schools, etc.), economic populism might be the best hope for the Democrats. Ironically, the Democrats are now the party of fiscal responsibility, and it is the current Republican administration that has spent lavishly on tax cuts and wars while telling Congress to restrain spending. On the other hand, the Republicans have recently signed into law a Medicare reform bill that includes a prescription drug benefit for seniors—along with injecting a degree of privatization into the program, thereby positioning them to take the Medicare issue away from the Democrats in the upcoming election (recall it is part of the M2E2 equation that historically benefits the Democrats).

6.9 Nevertheless, the Republican Party's appeal to social conservatism (witness the outrage over recent Court decisions upholding equal rights for gays and lesbians, which has led many Republicans to discuss amending the Constitution to prohibit gay and lesbian marriage) and patriotism (witness the strategic invocation of the memory of 9/11 by President Bush to justify anything and everything, which allows Republican strategists to turn any criticism of Bush's *policies* into treasonous criticism of the Presidency itself), plus an economy pulling out of a recession (even though very few jobs have yet been created) appear capable of continuing to woo forgotten majority men. This strategy will be tough to beat, especially since Democrats are internally divided between mimicking Republicans and moving to the right or embracing the very economic populism that the forgotten majority may be waiting for them to champion. If the Democrats want to find a way to beat President Bush in 2004, they would be wise to pick up a copy of *America's Forgotten Majority*.