

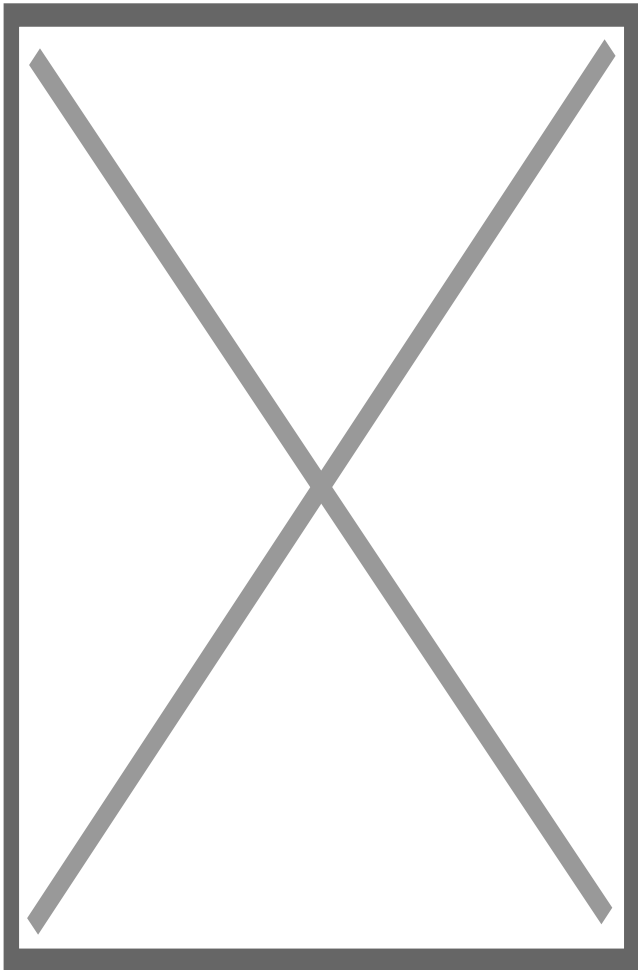
How can the Democrats catch up to Trump?

Joan Williams correctly diagnoses the party's failures. I am less sure about her prescriptions.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [February 2026](#) issue

Published on January 21, 2026

In Review



Outclassed

How the Left Lost the Working Class and How to Win Them Back

By Joan C. Williams

St. Martin's Press

[Buy from Bookshop.org >](#)

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Once upon a time, there was a peaceable kingdom called the “postwar economy.” This economy provided broad prosperity through unionized manufacturing jobs. Dad went to work at the factory while Mom stayed home with the kids. You could buy a house, car, and modern appliances on Dad’s wages. Inequality was low. But this Eden was poisoned by racial division, mismanaged policy, foreign entanglements, and cultural conflict between the intelligentsia and the working class. A demagogic politician stormed to prominence by stoking the fears and resentments of hardworking Americans who were tired of being called uneducated bigots by condescending elites. Those elites looked on in horror and disbelief as their fellow citizens flocked to this authoritarian reactionary.

The politician, of course, was George Wallace, and the year was 1968. And it was Pat Buchanan, 24 years later. Or, if you prefer, it was Donald Trump, another 24 years after that. The first two failed, being marginalized first in their respective parties and then from the political system. But Trump’s version of nostalgia—the rhetoric of Wallace and Buchanan, updated with more vulgarities and a campier affect—came to dominate first the Republican Party and now the country as a whole. Our debates now hinge on the best plan to “bring back” the kinds of jobs our fathers and grandfathers supposedly had. Despite every misstep, overreach, and blunder, and despite nagging baseline unpopularity, Trump still sets the agenda across the spectrum of American politics. Democrats and leftists are stuck in the lagging eastern end of the baggage train back to Eden.

America’s liberal intelligentsia has been struggling to articulate both why they have ended up in this position and how to regain the political and policy initiative. In *Outclassed*, Joan Williams joins this busy conversation with a case for how Democrats can, in effect, catch up to where Trump and the global far right have tried to lead. Williams—who directs the Equality Action Center at UC Law San Francisco and a project on educational polarization called Diploma Divide—wants progressives to understand the roots of discontent among a demographic she interchangeably calls “routine workers,” “working-class people,” “noncollege voters,” “non-elites,” and “missing middle” Americans. This group forms the base of Trump’s support, and within it he made inroads with voters of all races in 2020 and 2024. The rhetorical and cultural habits of college-educated progressives turn these voters off, Williams explains. Then she sets out to fit left-wing economic populism into rhetorical frames that these voters will supposedly find more appealing.

Williams’s goal is nothing less than to “*fix the broken relationship between noncollege voters and the Brahmin left*,” Williams’s term for highly educated, highly engaged liberal activists, administrators, and pundits. Her diagnosis of liberal failures, while probably difficult for some liberals to hear, is largely correct. Her prescriptions are less successful—mostly, but not uniquely, because they depend on Trump’s own narrative of a postwar Eden that was betrayed by neoliberalism.

The structuring thesis of *Outclassed*, which Williams repeats with variations in every section and chapter, is that a “diploma divide” defines political polarization in the United States and leaves progressive forces unable to appeal to noncollege voters in terms that those voters recognize and affirm. At the highest level of abstraction, college-graduate voters are likelier to value things like novelty, personal autonomy, self-actualization, and sophistication, while non-elite and noncollege voters are likelier to value stability, morality, self-regulation, and “straight talk.”

In the more concrete terms of contemporary politics, this has led the Brahmin left to embrace false and self-flattering stereotypes about Trump voters. One such stereotype is that Trump voters are motivated by racial resentment. Research suggests that racial resentment does correlate with Trump support, Williams acknowledges, but there aren’t enough racially resentful voters to account for his victories. The key segment has always been “racial moderates” who can be activated in different directions by language choices and issue framing. Elections are fought not over the most dedicated voters in a coalition but over the marginal ones whose preferences and reasoning may be responsive to the nature of political appeals and the image of the people

making them.

What is true of race and racism, Williams explains, is true of other salient points of cultural conflict. Gender traditionalism, the desirability of family formation, the role of experts and expertise, the value of institutions of authority like the military are all perceived differently by noncollege, non-elite voters than they are by highly engaged, highly educated progressives. On issues as mundane as playground design and as immense as climate change, progressives have made choices that have isolated themselves from the moral intuitions, cultural priorities, and even economic interests of the non-college-graduate majority of the country. Having faced this daunting array of facts, the task for progressives is to adapt their messaging to those intuitions, priorities, and interests while reversing the direction of right-wing populism. “The Far Right typically targets cultural and political elites; the Left needs to redirect the anger toward economic elites” without denying that political elites are flawed, too.

Readers who have marinated in 2024 postmortems, as I have, will find much of this material familiar. Progressive readers who haven’t may find it hard going. Williams talks about progressives inhabiting a social “class bubble” that many progressives don’t recognize because they aren’t personally wealthy or powerful and because they have a tendency to think in terms of marginalized and oppressed identities. But this bubble obscures the reasons that, for example, higher-income professionals are more committed to redistributive policies than working-class people are. In what Williams calls “the scrum for social honor,” work, self-sufficiency, and self-improvement are important to working-class people in a way that ideological progressives discount. Williams praises the politicians who have successfully reached outside this bubble, like Pennsylvania senator John Fetterman, Minnesota governor Tim Walz, and Washington congresswoman Marie Gluesenkamp Perez, and she points out that Joe Biden’s administration focused its policy choices doggedly on delivering benefits to noncollege voters and “left behind” parts of the country. This, Williams argues, is the way back.

As helpful as the stern medicine of Williams’s critique may be, the rest of her case falters at this point. She insists that she recommends “messaging but not trade-offs,” but trade-offs are present whether they are recommended or not. John Fetterman probably won some votes with his working-class appearance and affect, but he would not have won if he hadn’t rejected a ban on fracking (which Williams doesn’t). Good messaging is better than bad messaging, but Williams does not raise the possibility that some positions are unpopular enough that reframing won’t help them. Talking about “clean energy jobs” rather than “climate change” is smart politics in a lot of places, but not places where a lot of people work in oil and gas.

In small ways, Williams performs the contradiction at the heart of this project of rhetorical updating. She knocks progressives, rightly, for using obscure or alienating language but at the same time uses progressive shibboleths like “folx” and “gun violence” when people outside of her (and my) class bubble would just say “folks” and “violent crime.” Indeed, to a large degree, as her own examples suggest, Democratic politicians have long done what she wants them to do, talking about jobs, families, the troops, hard work, and so on. While it would help for more of the liberal intelligentsia to get wise about this, there’s clearly more to Democrats’ poor electoral fortunes than using the wrong words.

In fairness, Williams offers an answer: the problem is that Democrats embraced something called “neoliberalism.” This supposed ideology of deregulation, free trade, retreat from unionization, and embrace of mass migration was the stab in the back of that Edenic postwar economy. In this story—one shared by plenty of people in the progressive world—there was never any 1970s oil shock, no conflict between civil rights laws and mostly White trade unions, no global economic development, no internal migration, and no movement by the American economy up the “value chain” to more capital-intensive and knowledge-based manufacturing and services. It was all a dirty deal to, in Williams’s pungent and repeated term, “screw” the working class. And the chief political villains in this story are, oddly enough, not Ronald Reagan but Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

This is, fortunately or not, wrong. The postwar economy is an illusion of retrospect. Union power peaked early after the war and went into decline thanks to legislation passed over the veto of Harry Truman. Most people didn't work in factories, and factory jobs would have changed, ended, and moved around the country because of new technology and wage differences even if no trade deals had ever been signed. What people left and right like to disparage today as neoliberalism was not a coherent policy program but a set of emergent adaptations to the inevitable unwinding of the conditions that prevailed between the end of the Second World War and the 1973 oil crisis. Clinton and Obama didn't create this reality. They just tried—not always wisely or successfully—to manage it. (In one deplorable moment, Williams attributes to Obama a cruel-sounding quote about inequality which was, in fact, uttered by Lawrence Summers.)

“People want, and deserve, family-sustaining jobs near where they grew up,” Williams argues. But consider what it would mean for an economy never to require mobility, or new or more advanced skills. This is the conservatism of stasis and slow decay offered by figures like Wallace and Buchanan, who leveraged the inevitability of social and economic change against people who disliked it. And if you concede that populist conservatives are fundamentally correct about the economic problem, you've already lost. Their solutions are already emotionally optimized for a nostalgic electorate.

Politics runs on mythology, but the left needs its own mythology, not a more disciplined version of the nostalgia offered by the far right. “Gone with the wind,” Williams notes, more than once, about some element of mid-century prosperity now supposedly out of reach. It's a famous expression, rooted in a nostalgic novel and film of the same name. It calls the whole world in only one direction, and that is backward.