

# Technopolitics is Not Beyond Left and Right After All

Attitudes towards science and technology are closely aligning with Culture War attitudes towards secularism, sexuality, gender, civil liberties, race and nationalism



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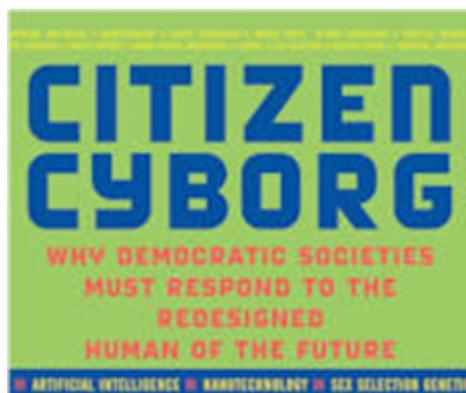
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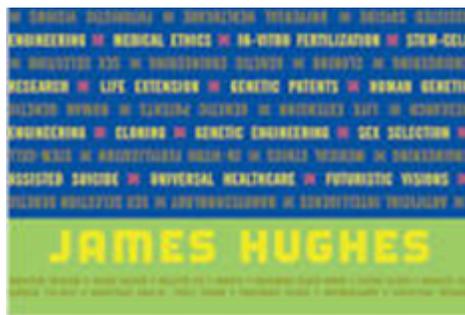




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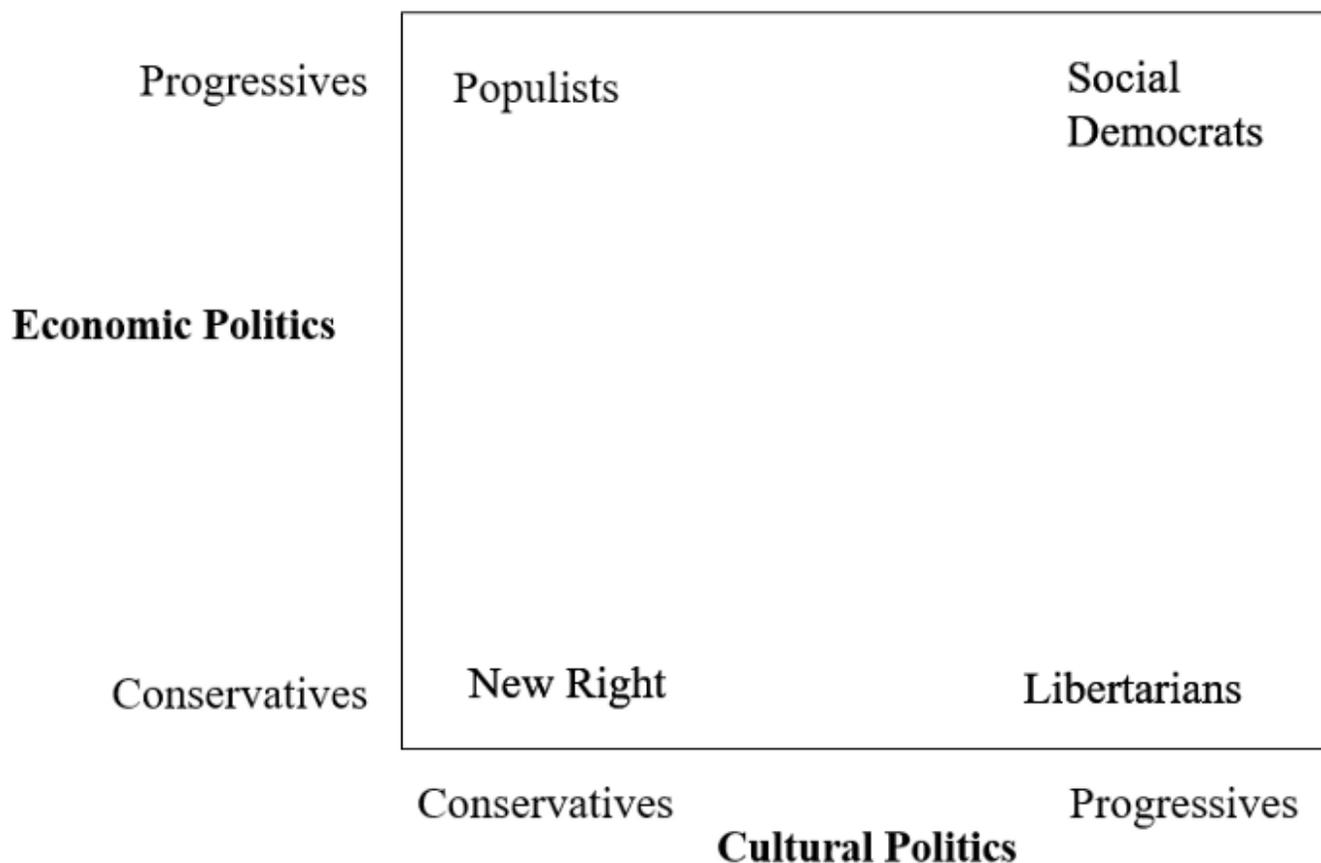
In *Citizen Cyborg* I argued that the political landscape around technopolitics would soon reflect the complicated intellectual landscape of Bush-era bioethics. In the 2000s there were right-wingers and left-wingers who were (and still are) on both the pro and anti sides of myriad technology debates. I argued then that while 20th century politics in the West had been shaped by the struggle for the Enlightenment in the cultural sphere, and by struggles between different Enlightenment values in economics, these two axes would soon be joined by a third technopolitical axis. This would have supported the ideas of futurists like FM-2030 who predicted that future “upwing” politics would be beyond left and right.





Citizen Cyborg

The virtue of this two axis framework is that it captures most of the ideological complexity, and strongly correlates with socioeconomic, racial and gender dynamics. On the cultural dimension, while there are examples of religious feminists or anti-racist militarists, in general if you adopt a conservative position on matters of race, gender, sexuality, secularism, nationalism or individual liberty, then you are probably conservative in those other domains, and vice versa. On the economics side, attitudes towards progressive taxation, social welfare, unions, and corporate regulation tend to be correlated. Economic progressives are in the tradition of the French Enlightenment, prioritizing egalitarianism and social solidarity over the market. Economic conservatives preference the market, and oppose taxes, regulation and redistribution.

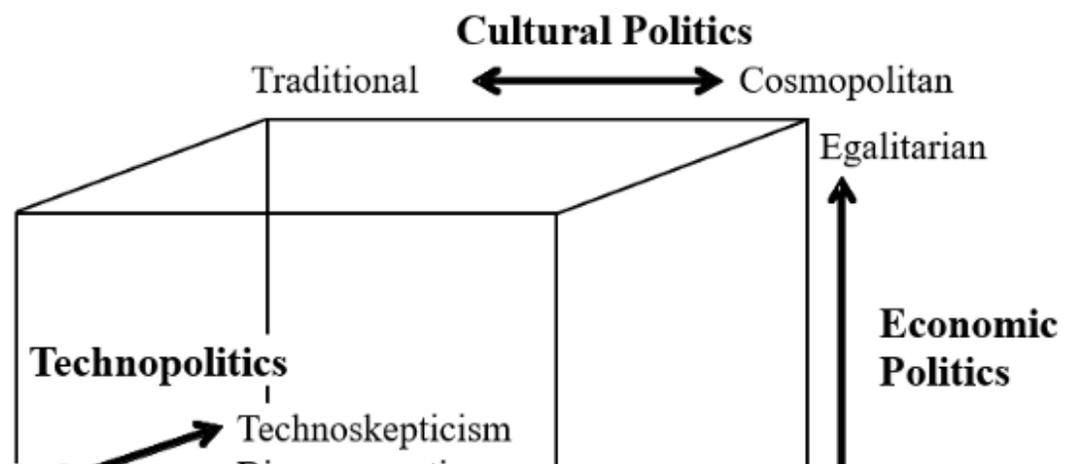


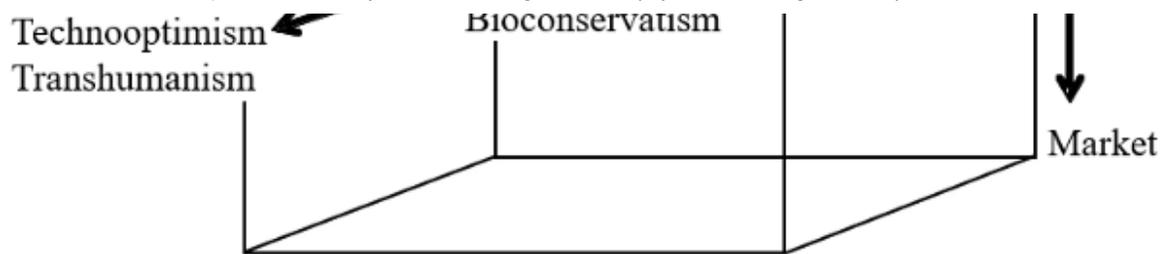
## 20th century Western political landscape (Hughes, 2004)

In European parliaments you will find parties that stake out each of these ideological spaces. European liberals, while not as extreme as American libertarians, are in the lower right. Right-wing populists stake out an anti-immigrant, white Christian, socially conservative space, while often (at least rhetorically) distinguishing themselves from hardline market fundamentalism, as with Trump's trade wars. Since education is the principal driver and correlate of cultural progressivism, and wealth is the principal driver of economic conservatism, the socioeconomic landscape is in tension between populist-leaning blue collar workers, and culturally progressive white collar workers with less commitment to redistribution and social welfare.

In the United States, because we have barriers to entry for third parties and no proportional representation, we have a two party system staking out the social democratic and "new right" corners. In order for these parties to achieve electoral majorities they appeal to blue and white collar workers with class-specific appeals. The conservative parties reach out to blue collar workers on "culture war" issues and to white collar workers (and small business owners and the rich) on opposition to taxes and regulation. Social democrats appeal to white collar workers' cultural liberalism, and to blue collar workers on the basis on economic interests.

In *Citizen Cyborg* I argued that human enhancement issues were an especially sensitive barometer for the new technopolitical axis I thought was emerging. If this axis was truly orthogonal to, or semi-independent of, the other two axes, as intellectual debates at the time suggested they were, then we would soon be in a three dimensional ideological terrain, as these issues became more politically salient.





Three Dimensional Politics with Technopolitical Axis

While this framework still works to position intellectuals debating myriad topics, from bioethics to GMOs and nuclear power, the 2008 recession reasserted the centrality of inequality and austerity in politics. Social democrats, having for two decades increasingly oriented towards socially liberal but less redistributive white collar voters, were bleeding culturally conservative blue collar voters to the populist right. Social democrats had given up class struggle and transformative social welfare programs for being the responsible technocratic managers of capitalism. Conservatives told blue collar workers that to liberal elites they were nothing but a “basket of deplorables,” and that right populism was the new working class politics.

Meanwhile scientific and technological debates continued to percolate and fall like Pachinko balls into place in the ideological space. The Left had long championed science over faith in education, as in the debate over teaching evolution, and this continued in debates over the efficacy of sex education and the role of higher education in society. The Left broadly accepted the reality and urgency of mitigating climate change, while the Right adopted (corporate lobbyists’) climate denialism. The Left championed embryonic stem cell research, while the Right condemned it.

The new technopolitics came into clearer focus with the rise of right wing populism and neofascism in 2016. The Right became more hostile to the educated elites and the regulatory state that they supported and staffed. They turned harder against higher education, empiricism and expertise, and championed conspiracy theories and emotivist its-true-because-it-feels-true epistemology. In the 2016 Presidential debates Hillary Clinton declaimed “I believe in science,” and then Trump waged war on the federal science bureaucracy which he saw as part of the nefarious “deep state.”

As Pew notes in their excellent survey research on technopolitics, education and affluence are stronger predictors of techno-optimism about existing technologies than

for attitudes towards future technologies like brain chips and genetic enhancement. For instance, college-educated Americans feel more positive than high school-educated Americans towards “elective cosmetic surgery, laser eye surgery, skin or lip injections, cosmetic dental procedures to improve one’s smile, hair replacement surgery and vasectomy or tubal ligation procedures to prevent pregnancy” (Pew, 2016). But class divides on technooptimism about emerging technologies are also growing as blue collar workers became more pessimistic that automation and genetic engineering will ever improve their lives. For instance, reflecting upon their own jobs in 2016, 53% of Americans with a college degree thought that technology had increased their opportunities to advance, compared to only a third of Americans with no college education (Smith and Anderson 2016). In 2018, 38% of Americans with post-graduate education felt that automation had helped workers in general while only 19% of those without a college degree believed that (Graham 2018). College and postgraduate education, and its correlates science knowledge and religiosity, are strong predictors of support for the use of gene therapies (Pew, 2018) and brain-computer interfaces (Sample et al, 2019).

## **Technopolitics Was Absorbed by the Culture Wars**

Today I think my former model of three dimensional politics has been superceded or overdetermined by the socioeconomic and partisan dynamics of the two dimensions. While in theory political ideology and mobilization could take many different forms, in practice the Enlightenment values of scientific empiricism and technooptimism are closely tied to the cultural dimension of politics, and the underlying educational stratification of society. More affluent and educated workers are more optimistic that they will be beneficiaries of science and technology, and put more trust in empiricism, educators, scientists and the regulatory state.

These dynamics have been on distressing display during this Covid year, especially in the United States. Believing that lockdowns and masking are required is now highly partisan, and people have been attacked and killed for wearing masks. That elections are fair and valid if all the votes have been counted, and everyone from Republican judges and state officials to cybersecurity experts have signed off, is only believed by liberals, while rejected by conservatives.

## **How to Unite the Working Class Across the Diploma Divide**

I will write elsewhere of the accumulating public opinion research supporting the proposition that science and technology are increasingly partisan. But the firm Navigator Research has just released analyses of a poll of Americans that they conducted leading up to the US election, and their analytical approach is more or less the same as I have used. They asked voters about five economic issues and five cultural issues to gauge where they placed on the economic and cultural axis.

## Respondents Took a Position on a Series of Major Debates in Politics – Covering the Economy and Cultural/Social Issues

ECONOMIC DEBATES		CULTURAL/SOCIAL DEBATES	
Progressive position	Conservative position	Progressive position	Conservative position
We need to undo the massive tax breaks for wealthy individuals and big corporations so we can invest in the middle class and working families hit hardest by the pandemic	The last thing we want to do with businesses and families struggling during the pandemic is raise taxes – taxes should remain low so that businesses continue to invest and create jobs	Recent events have shown policing and the criminal justice system in America need major reforms to prevent the mistreatment of communities of color	Despite some isolated incidents of misconduct, our criminal justice system usually works well, and making radical changes will make it harder for the police and law enforcement to keep people safe
We should keep and build upon the Affordable Care Act to ensure that preexisting conditions remain protected and everyone gets health care	We should repeal the Affordable Care Act which has hurt American families with skyrocketing health insurance costs by creating unnecessary government regulations	Anti-immigrant policies like separating children from their parents at the border and deporting people who have been in America their whole lives, are cruel, inhumane and out of step with American values	Radical policies like open borders and sanctuary cities allow dangerous criminals to come here and put the safety of our communities at risk – that's why we need strong borders and to crack down on illegal immigration
It is wrong to cut Social Security and Medicare and, if anything, benefits should be expanded to help those who paid into the programs their whole lives	The hard reality is Social Security and Medicare are not sustainable in their current forms, and leaders need to come together around solutions that reduce entitlement costs over the long term	The Black Lives Matter movement is changing the country for the better by bringing attention to the deeply-rooted systemic racism that makes it harder for Black Americans to access the American Dream	Everyone's life should matter, no matter their race, and right now the Black Lives Matter movement is only creating more violence, disorder, and racial division across the country
The federal government has given too much of the coronavirus relief to major corporations and the wealthy and not enough to regular people, many of whom are still struggling	The federal government is right to help companies large and small because they employ millions of Americans and we need to get the economy going again	The bigger concern today is states trying to ban abortions and get in the way of decisions that should be made between women and their doctors	The bigger concern today is many states make it far too easy to get an abortion and allow it far too late in pregnancy
Raising the minimum wage would raise many families out of poverty and boost the economy by giving low-wage families more money to spend	Raising the minimum wage would hurt small businesses, and could make it more difficult for low-skill workers to get work as it would be more expensive for businesses to hire	We have not done enough to close loopholes in the law to keep guns out of dangerous hands, reduce gun violence in our schools, and keep families and children safe	Infringing on Second Amendment rights does not make people safer and punishes law abiding gun owners instead of the criminals

**navigator.**

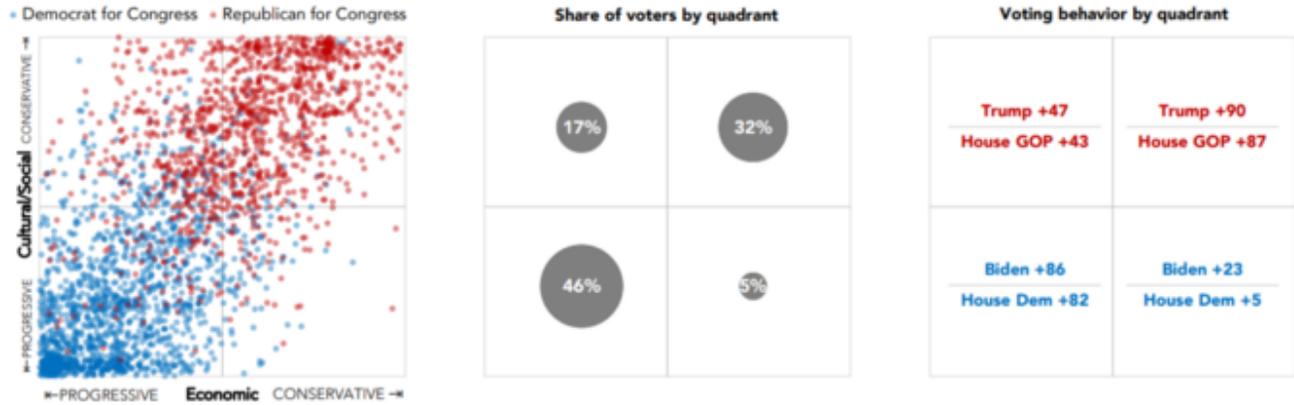
(Global Strategy Group 2020)

Then Navigator divided the electorate into four quadrants and examined the partisan leanings of each quadrant. (The axes here are flipped from the ones I use above.) The progressives in the lower left here are the plurality of the US electorate (46%). These younger, better educated, more diverse and anti-racist, more redistributive voters were key to Joe Biden's win. Conservatives on the other hand, while united by conservative cultural orientations, are divided on economics. A third of these culturally conservative voters, broadly the less affluent ones, are closer to the Democrats on issues like the defense of Social Security and Medicare, and hostility to the influence of corporations and elites in politics.

## Plurality of Consistent Progressives Key to Democratic Wins, But Opportunities Remain on Ideological Margins

### ... Opportunities Remain on Ideological Margins

Almost half of 2020 voters fell on the culturally and economically progressive sides of our scale, and a third fell on the conservative sides of each. However, more than one in five hold a mix of progressive and conservative views.



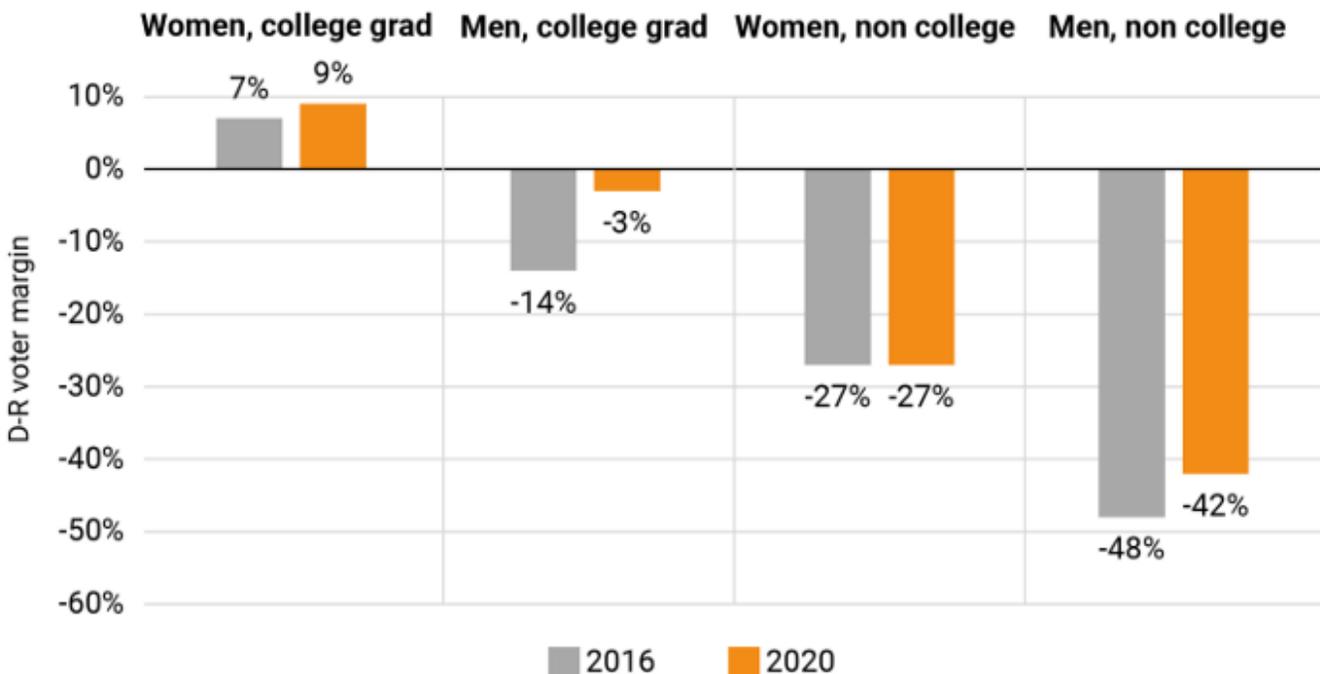
"Democrat for Congress" and "Republican for Congress" are based on self-reported 2020 vote. "Straight ticket voters" supported candidates from the same party for President, U.S. House, and U.S. Senate elections. "Biden-Republicans" supported Biden and a Republican for House or Senate (n=102); "Trump-Democrats" supported Trump and a Democrat for House or Senate (n=93). Nationwide survey of 3,003 self-reported 2020 voters conducted October 30-November 3, 2020. Vote shares for Biden and Trump are adjusted to reflect estimates of the popular vote as of 11/16/2020.



(Global Strategy Group 2020)

Meanwhile the strong impact of college education on partisan preferences became even more pronounced in 2020, with white college-educated men shifting more towards the Democratic partisan leanings of white college-educated women, while non-college-educated whites remained strongly Republican.

Figure 2. Democratic minus Republican voter margins for white voters, by education and gender 2016 and 2020 presidential exit polls



Note: Democratic minus Republican (D-R) margin equals the percent voting Democratic minus the percent voting Republican.

Note: Democratic minus Republican (D-R) margin equals the percent voting Democratic minus the percent voting Republican for Clinton (D) vs. Trump (R) in 2016, and Biden (D) vs Trump (R) in 2020.

Source: William H. Frey analysis of National Election Pool media consortium and Edison Research, as reported in CNN Election Center, <https://www.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls> (accessed November 11, 2020)



Since the 1990s, progressive political scientists like [Ruy Teixeira](#) have argued that as the United States became more multicultural, as education spread, and as the more progressive Millennials and Gen Xers displaced previous generations, that demography would enable a new progressive majority. Unfortunately between the structure of the US Senate and Electoral College, which gives disproportionate influence to rural, conservative voters, and Republican dominance of gerrymandered districting, the progressive bloc has to grow to at least 60% of the population in order to effectively govern.

The ongoing conundrum then for the progressive blocs in Western politics in general, and for the US Democrats in particular, is whether and how they can bring the blue collar conservatives back into the fold to secure this governing majority. (How to “unify the working class.”) [This election cast doubt on the optimistic narrative](#) that demographics alone would bring about a Democratic majority. To much surprise, despite being the mostly openly white supremacist President since Andrew Jackson, Trump increased support among non-white men and non-white religious conservatives and small business owners. It turns out toxic masculinity, opposition to immigration, and neofascism can also be “intersectional.”

Compromising on commitments to feminism, anti-racism, immigrant rights and secularism in order to appeal to blue collar conservatives would splinter the progressive bloc. But social democrats are also reluctant to move to the Left economically in attempt to win back alienated blue collars, between their campaign finance dependence on corporate-friendly donors, and concerns that class struggle militancy will alienate affluent liberals. Even when social democratic parties do attempt to move to the Left economically, as with the UK Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn, blue collar conservatives have generally stayed with right-wing populism.

One scenario for a reconciliation between white collar progressives and blue collar conservatives is simply that material conditions become so dire that white collar liberals

feel the pinch and move to the Left economically, while blue collar conservatives give up on the false promises of right-wing economic populism. Teachers, nurses and other white collar professions are already being radicalized by austerity and automation, while blue collar workers are discovering that promises of job growth from protectionism or deregulation were lies. While the Biden White House will be unable to advance a New New Deal, for internal and external reasons, the post-Covid economic crisis in other countries may revive majority support for social democratic parties and policies.

## **Whither Technopolitics?**

As technopolitics is increasingly defined by this partisan landscape, support for emerging technologies will be increasingly central in a post-Covid world. Covid has focused the world's attention on biomedical progress, clinical trial pathways to prove efficacy and safety, and the importance of universal access to therapies. Covid has poured profits into Big Tech companies that enabled workers to work and consume from home, while bringing the power and importance of underpaid, unorganized "essential workers" into focus. Middle class consumers from China to Europe depend even more on online commerce, while blue collar occupations face layoffs, automation and outsourcing.

A technoprogressive framework that links technooptimism to egalitarianism can be part of this new 21st century social democratic renaissance. We need big social projects that can unite the alienated blue collar conservatives with the progressive bloc. Universal healthcare access in general, and access to longevity therapies in particular, is an example of such a demand. While affluent, educated voters can be enthusiastic about anti-aging drugs, certain that they will eventually get them, blue collar workers need to be convinced that these therapies won't just be for the rich. Automation will continue to inspire suspicion and hostility towards robots and artificial intelligence, unless they are combined with plans for redistribution and UBI as Andrew Yang argued this year.

This is a moment for the technoprogressive intervention. Making the case that emerging technologies can complement and advance democracy and equality is essential to the fight against neofascism and to rebuilding a progressive majority.

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