Sarah Palin and John McCain are beginning to remind me of an old, and dumb joke, that I remember from my childhood which goes something like "What does Smokey the Bear and Alexander the Great have in common?" The answer is, of course, their middle names. It seems like everybody in Sarah Palin's world has the same middle name. On the one hand, it is easy to laugh at the vice-presidential nominee's ability to take the politics of George Wallace and put it in the language of Richard Scarry, but the Republican focus on the Joe the Plumbers of America would not help that party win this election, even if they were running a better campaign.

As pollster Craig Charney demonstrates in a recent insightful piece in the New York Daily News, there are fewer Joe the Plumbers than there were a generation ago or more. In 1968 when Richard Nixon discovered the political benefits of exploiting the concerns and resentments of working class, defined as non-college educated, white voters, these voters represented well over half the overall population of the United States. As late as the Reagan years, these voters constituted a majority of the American electorate. Today, according to Charney, they represent no more than 40% of the electorate, and are more likely to be female than male. This group certainly remains a key voting bloc, but not a growing one.

I don't want to sound like Sarah Palin but, now that so many more people have college degrees than a generation ago, the views of people like John the teacher, Heidi the social worker, Joe the NGO executive, Allison the artist, Craig the pollster, Amy the therapist and, yes, Lincoln the professor are more important than ever. It is not about income as these are not always well paying professions as many in these fields earn less than many blue collar workers. These professions, however, require a college degree and often an openness to the world that is not compatible with the ideology being peddled by John the senator and Sarah the crackpot.

As we all know, members of this not so new, but more numerous than ever, middle class share many of the same economic concerns as their more blue collar cohorts, but they are far less susceptible to the politics of division and fear that characterized the successful appeals Nixon, Reagan and their imitators in during the 1960s-1980s.

These middle class knowledge workers, especially the more liberal among them, were a key part of Obama's base from the beginning. Obama spoke their language and reflected their values including faith in the value of education, similarly to how Sarah Palin has resonated with some of the Joe the plumbers and Tito the builders. If, as seems likely, Obama wins on Tuesday he will have put together a broad coalition, but at the heart of it will be African Americans and these educated middle class white liberals. He may get elected president without ever really connecting or winning the support of the blue collar white vote, but no Democrat in a very long time has done that.
In the face of defeat, the Republican Party may begin to question a strategy of going back to an ever diminishing well of voters such as Joe the plumber. If they do question this, their challenge will be to put together a smart, conservative, and excuse the seeming oxymoron, future oriented conservatism. Tito the builder's younger brother may become Enrique the scientist who may balk at the surreal anti-science views of the current Republican platform. Joe the plumber's cousin may become Beth the computer game designer who was exposed to different ideas in college and now believes in equality for everybody and is angered by the anti-gay statements of some Republicans.

Blue collar white voters remain split between the two parties with, in presidential politics, a slight preference for the Republican Party. To be clear the Democrats cannot and should not walk away from these voters. That would not be the right thing to do either politically or ethically. However, their diminishing numbers indicates that appealing to the anger and frustration of these voters can no longer be the foundation for Republican victory.