Obama and Charges of Elitism - Again

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President Obama's most enduring political weakness has been his relative difficulty connecting with working class, white Americans. He won the Democratic nomination in 2008 by building a coalition based around African Americans and white liberals. The economic collapse and the widespread anger at President Bush pushed a lot of working class white voters towards Obama in November of 2008, but this was a brief alliance rather than a strong gesture of support.

It is, therefore, to be expected that the charge of elitism continues to dog President Obama and will likely to do so throughout his presidency. Apparently, Obama's education, belief in the import of education, his understated and often intellectual verbal style, his comfort in academic settings and his fluency on issues ranging from alternate energy to healthier eating make him suspect in the eyes of some. People like Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin, Rush Limbaugh and others who are seeking to build a party based on resentment and frustration are wise to exploit Obama's style and to suggest that it indicates he does not care about real Americans. This is an unavoidable part of politics and is certainly not a new Republican approach.

There is, however, something strangely appealing about this argument, even for people who should know better. The temptation to attribute Obama's, and the Democratic Party's, failings to this elitism and lack of concern for working class, white voters is strong, even among some progressives. Hillary Clinton's ill conceived effort to reposition herself as the voice of these voters late in the 2008 primary season was just one example of this, but there are others as well. The problem with this view is not that white working class voters should not be represented, particularly by a Democratic president. They should. It is that too often characteristics are attributed to these voters that are condescending and insulting.

Creating policies that meet the needs of white, working class voters who are being hit very hard by the economic crisis, struggling to keep or find jobs, and are concerned about health care and how to pay for the children's education should be a top priority of any president, and are among the issues upon which Obama has focused on most during his presidency. Creating policies, or political appeals, that assume these voters are intolerant, angry and will quickly abandon the Democratic Party if it supports gay marriage or talks too much about alternate energy or the need to use more fuel efficient cars not only is counter-productive for the party, but supports ugly stereotypes about working class, white voters as angry and intolerant. There certainly are voters in this group that fit this description, but as the last several decades of American history has shown us, they aren't voting Democratic. There are also white, working class voters that are gay or lesbian, or have gay or lesbian friends and family, who see the environmental damage around them and who are worried about the future and who otherwise share the same concerns and priorities of many more educated or affluent Americans. Talking down to white, working class voters and indulging their anger and, at times, intolerance is not the way forward for President Obama or the Democratic Party.
There is also an implied racism in this argument because it often makes assertions about all working class people, or even union members, which ignore the views of non-white workers, thus implying that the American working class is all white. This is obviously false as the American working class and the union movement are racially diverse. African American union members, for example, seem to have no problem relating to President Obama, so if an assertion is made that Obama is not doing well among union members, the qualifier "white" is assumed, as if the speaker is suggesting that white union members somehow matter more.

Supporters of Obama, and progressives more broadly, should push back against this critique for two main reasons. First, educated liberals played a central role in the election of President Obama so it should be okay for him to make policy with those voters in mind. Ironically, appearances and style aside, Obama has not done much for this constituency. The Afghanistan policy, the foot dragging on gay marriage and the constant attempts at bipartisanship are examples of where Obama's educated liberal base has not gotten what it wants. Second, many of Obama's biggest legislative priorities, such as the stimulus package and the health care reform, seek to address the needs of working class voters very directly. Similarly, his failures to, for example, influence the economy enough to generate needed jobs hits Obama's base, African American voters, at least as hard as the white working class.

The right wing will continue to call Obama elitist and seek to drive a wedge between him and angry voters of all demographic groups until the day he leaves office, and probably beyond that. The elitist card is very powerful, but ultimately reveals more about how the right wing elite (there's that word again) feels about a politician than anything about that politician.