

# MERGE LEFT

## *Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*

By Ian Haney López

**“With great clarity and thoughtfulness, Ian F. Haney López shows why the path to a truly just society lies in a multi-racial coalition of poor, working and middle-class Americans. . . . Powerful, urgent, and timely.”**  
—Robert B. Reich

From presidential hopefuls to engaged voters to journalists to activists, people across the country are grappling with how to think and talk about racism in American politics. Ian Haney López, a distinguished UC Berkeley professor and the acclaimed author of *Dog Whistle Politics*, offers clear insights and a way forward in his highly anticipated new book. Endorsed by Robert Reich, Van Jones, Jane Fonda, and the leaders of the AFL-CIO, SEIU, Voto Latino, Color of Change, Equal Justice Society, ROC United, and more, **MERGE LEFT: *Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*** (October 1, 2019; \$26.99) offers a powerful, truly original, and even hopeful new strategy for defeating the Right’s racial fearmongering and achieving bold progressive goals.

In 2014, Haney López in *Dog Whistle Politics* named and explained the coded racial appeals exploited by right-wing politicians over the last half century—and thereby anticipated the 2016 presidential election. Now, the country is heading into one of the most consequential elections ever, with the Right gearing up to again exploit racial fearmongering to divide and distract. Meanwhile, the Left is splintered. Some want to confront the Right’s racism head-on; others insist that a race-silent emphasis on class avoids alienating white voters. Can either approach—challenging white racism or going colorblind—build the progressive supermajorities necessary to break political gridlock and fundamentally change the country’s direction?

After the 2016 election, Haney López co-founded the Race-Class Narrative Research Project. With the Right utilizing focus groups, polling, and careful message testing to hone their dog whistles, Haney López and his collaborators—including union activists, racial justice leaders, pollsters, and communications specialists—set out to use the same tools against them. Based on conversations, interviews, and surveys with thousands of people all over the country, the team found a way forward. By reframing racism as a weapon of the rich, the race-class approach shifts people’s conception regarding whom

to view as their allies and enemies—and thereby builds greater enthusiasm for racial justice, economic populism, and the cross-racial solidarity needed to win elections. Here's what their research brought to light:

- **Most white people hold contradictory views about race**  
*Against the prevalent assumptions of many progressives, they found that most whites hold egalitarian views on race—although they also swing back and forth to deeply internalized racist beliefs.* This is relatively good news, Haney López says, because it means that the Left does not need to tear down a mountain of white racism. Instead, the task is to help the majority of whites connect their economic self-interest to the antiracist values most already hold.
- **Voters of color also accept messages about “undeserving” people**  
*Again contra the conventional wisdom, the majority of Black and Latinx voters find large parts of the Right’s coded rhetoric convincing—the use of terms like “criminals” and “welfare cheats” resonates powerfully within communities of color.* This means that neutralizing the Right’s narratives of racial fear and resentment is key when addressing white voters *and* communities of color.
- **The political “middle” toggles between progressive and reactionary**  
The Left’s base, roughly one-fifth of all voters, embrace racial equality, believe circumstances more than individual effort explain wealth inequalities, and want government to regulate the market. Opposite them and just slightly fewer in number, the Right’s core supporters resent people of color, credit hard work for economic success, and want government out of the way. *That leaves three-fifths of Americans—including a majority of people of color—in between. They agree with and bounce between both progressive and reactionary views, largely without noticing the tensions between them.*
- **The persuadable majority gives more credence to messages of racial fear than to color-blind language or to challenges to white racism**  
The persuadable middle finds messages promoting economic populism that ignore racial issues less convincing than the Right’s racial fear message. And the other main progressive response—calling for racial justice in ways that implicitly condemn white racism—is even less popular, including with people of color. In other words: *With the crucial persuadable middle, neither of the Left’s two principal responses defeats Trump’s racial fearmongering.*
- **Retelling the story of America in terms of class war waged through racial division is more convincing than racial fear messages**  
The good news is that the Right’s racial fear message loses decisively to a narrative condemning fearmongering by greedy elites and calling for cross-racial unity. *Explicitly urging voters to distrust economic elites sowing racial division and to join together across racial lines to demand that government promote racial and economic justice beats dog whistling.* This race-class message consistently proved more convincing—to whites as well as people of color—than the Right’s racial fear story.

## HOW THE RACE-CLASS STRATEGY WORKS

### **The GOP shifts attention from economic to racial concerns**

As early as 1963, Republicans recognized they could win votes by fashioning a new identity for themselves as the defenders of white America. There would be no open references to maintaining white dominance. They would use dog whistles. But even so, the GOP's basic strategy would be to shift attention from class to race by encouraging voters to focus their social and economic resentments on nonwhite groups rather than on concentrated wealth. This con, writes Haney López, "fits Trump to a fake-gold T."

### **Typical Democratic and progressive messages fail**

With racial conflict as the core threat narrative promoted by the GOP and right-wing media, the two dominant progressive responses struggle. One, a race-silent emphasis on class, leaves messages of racial fear and fundamental racial division operating without challenge. The other, attacking Trump as a racist, actually helps him—it deepens the panic that the country is splintering into racial sides.

### **Fusing race to class shifts voters' sense of the source of danger in their lives**

The race-class approach transforms voters' sense of the root conflict in society. Dog whistling implies the fundamental conflict pits whites against nonwhites. The race-class narrative says it those sowing division against the rest of us, whether we are Black, brown, or white, native or newcomer. The race-class approach shifts the conflict from whites versus nonwhites to a racially-divisive 1 percent against a race-conscious 99 percent. It specifically names whites as beneficiaries of cross-racial solidarity.

### **Economic inequality threatens everyone, but racial division is the key**

The race-class strategy is not a "class more than race" frame. Yes, it says that class war threatens almost every family. But it insists that racial division is the principal weapon and must be directly addressed rather than pushed to the back burner. The race-class approach is not colorblind but instead race-forward.

### **Ending state violence against people of color requires cross-racial solidarity**

The single greatest driver of state violence against nonwhite communities is dog whistle politics. When politicians campaign by demonizing "thugs," "illegals," and "terrorists," they govern through mass incarceration, mass deportation, and mass surveillance. This makes cross-racial coalitions to defeat dog whistle politics an indispensable step toward racial justice.

### **Connecting race and class in our narratives and politics is a must**

Many progressives understand that racial as well as class injustices should be addressed. The race-class approach makes clear that in fact "should" is "must." The race-class strategy starts by recognizing that race and class in the United States are welded together by history as well as current politics. Haney López argues that the Left can prevail only by turning this fusion to progressive advantage. He maintains that the Left must not only pursue racial and economic justice simultaneously, but must *consistently link the two in voters' minds* in order to make big gains on either front.

## **THE RACE-CLASS STRATEGY AND TODAY'S POLITICS**

**MERGE LEFT** places the findings of the race-class narrative project in a larger political and racial context, offering practical insights into the most troubling dilemmas and explosive elements of today's politics, such as:

### **The evolution of dog whistling**

- Attacks against Latinx and Muslim communities accelerated during the Obama era to become today's most pervasive forms of racial fearmongering.
- Trump won through dog whistling and has NOT shifted to a bullhorn of white supremacy, at least as far as the vast majority of his supporters are concerned.
- Racial fearmongering has destroyed moderation within the Republican Party but they cannot walk away from it. Every GOP candidate knows that in the primaries the most racially reactionary candidate will have a leg up.

### **Flaws in the Democratic response to dog whistling**

- Democratic party leaders for five decades and counting distance themselves from racial justice arguments, hoping dog whistling will fade on its own.
- The Clintons' responded to dog whistling by imitating it in the 1990s, and it came back to bite Hillary in the 2016 election, even though she adopted strong racial justice positions in that campaign.
- Economic populists like Bernie Sanders and Robert Reich rely on impoverished accounts of race when they take a "class first" approach.

### **Centering and mobilizing communities of color**

- Dog whistling is at the root of most state violence against communities of color.
- Among activists, there's a strong demand that racism be directly challenged—but in the larger community many people struggle with concepts like pervasive white supremacy and structural racism.
- A narrative of strategic racism resonates within communities of color: divide-and-conquer is easier to understand than structural accounts, and also raises the prospect that whites have their own interests in fighting racial division.

### **Dangerous trends among whites**

- Trump draws on and also accelerates dangerous new trends in white identity.
- The Left already competes effectively among white voters who are not evangelical Christians, coming close with the working class and winning big among women.
- The Left must promote racial solidarity even among whites in the Democratic base, because white liberals remain susceptible to racial fear.
- Moral suasion, while it can be genuine and galvanizing, by itself will not move most white voters to actively support racial justice. They must also see that their own interests are served by it.
- Explicitly naming whites as beneficiaries of cross-racial solidarity significantly boosts support among both whites *and* people of color.

## EVERY PROGRESSIVE GOAL REQUIRES CROSS-RACIAL SOLIDARITY

Today, Haney López maintains, every bold progressive vision depends on building cross-racial solidarity first. This is obviously important to assembling broad support for racial justice initiatives like abolishing mass incarceration and creating a humane immigration system. But it is also pivotal to enacting progressive legislation seemingly distant from racial issues, such as publicly funded child and elder care, affordable and excellent healthcare, or a Green New Deal. Only a sense of linked fate across color lines will foster the supermajorities necessary to sweep away the politicians who dog whistle on behalf of rule by the rich. The best response to divide-and-conquer, Haney López says, is unite-and-build.

“Our fates have always been bound together,” Haney López writes. “For centuries, our greatest heroes—radicals like W. E. B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and César Chávez—have insisted that American salvation requires cross-racial alliances. Repeatedly, this insight has been suppressed, forgotten, and abandoned. Today, some of the wealthiest, most powerful forces in this country bend their will and money toward driving us apart so they can tighten their grip on government and the economy. Yet the very wreckage they have created—and the president they helped elect—open up another opportunity to build a broad cross-racial movement with the will and the political power to promote racial reform and shared economic prosperity. This book explains the good evidence that cross-racial solidarity for racial and economic justice is possible, today.”

In this lively, provocative, and often surprising narrative, **MERGE LEFT** draws on important new research to explain where the Right’s racial strategy came from, how it works, and how it can be beaten in the coming election and beyond.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ian Haney López** is the Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Public Law at University of California, Berkeley, and the author of *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (2014). Since that book, Haney López co-founded the Race-Class Narrative Project and co-chaired the AFL-CIO’s Advisory Council on Racial and Economic Justice. He lives in Richmond, California. More on Haney López is available on [ianhaneylopez.com](http://ianhaneylopez.com)

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## EARLY PRAISE FOR MERGE LEFT

“In *Dog Whistle Politics*, Ian explained how coded racism in politics tears us apart. He shows us how we can come together again in his new book, *Merge Left*.”

—**Van Jones**, host of The Van Jones Show and Redemption Project on CNN

“I’ve been working to change the political system for years. I have believed that what is needed is a movement strong enough to unite both people of color and white working class people. I have scratched my head about how best to frame this. Then *Merge Left* arrived. Finally, we have the how-to manual for dismantling a system of division that hurts everyone.”

—**Jane Fonda**

“Read *Merge Left*. The unity that makes the labor movement unbeatable requires genuine cross-racial solidarity.”

—**Richard Trumka**, president, AFL-CIO

“*Merge Left* explains the tools we need to highlight how racism is used to drive working families apart. Now, we have a frame to take race head-on in politics and in our journey to build power for working people.”

—**Mary Kay Henry**, international president, SEIU

“*Merge Left* makes clear that major progress on racial justice will follow from defeating dog whistle politics once and for all. For all of us seeking to end state violence against communities of color, this book is powerful, timely, trenchant, and practical.”

—**Kimberlé Crenshaw**, faculty director, Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, Columbia University

“Understanding how to counteract the conservative playbook on race . . . is the great challenge of political strategy today. It has also been the determined, prescient and indispensably productive pursuit of Ian Haney López for decades.”

—**Rashad Robinson**, president, Color Of Change

“Cross-racial solidarity is the Holy Grail of progressive politics. *Merge Left* makes the best case yet for how to finally achieve it as the route to racial and economic justice.”

—**Heather McGhee**, distinguished senior fellow, Demos and Demos Action

“*Merge Left* should be read by every person who strives for a sane and humane immigration policy—and a flourishing democracy for all of us.”

—**María Teresa Kumar**, president, Voto Latino

“Racism is a weapon against the working class and cross-racial solidarity is the linchpin to creating an energized and empowered movement for restaurant workers and beyond. *Merge Left* explores a powerful strategy and path forward where working people and families can win—not just in the next election, but into the future.”

—**Saru Jayaraman**, president, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United

“Frankly, this approach connecting race to class and calling for unity is the most important work I’ve been involved with in 20 years of polling.”

—**Celinda Lake**, Democratic pollster and strategist

“Having presented and implemented winning campaigns based on this research, I can’t imagine a clearer or more long overdue playbook for progressives than *Merge Left*. Haney López moves us from diagnosis to cure.”

—**Anat Shenker-Osorio**, research director for the Race-Class Narrative Project

“*Merge Left* is for every activist and progressive committed to building a broad, diverse and dynamic movement that actually delivers on the promise of both racial and economic justice.”

—**Frank Sharry**, executive director, America’s Voice

“We all lose if the only people talking about race are the people trying to divide us against each other. That’s why [*Merge Left*] is so pivotal in our fight for an economy and democracy that works for everyone.”

—**Gerry Hudson**, secretary-treasurer, SEIU

“*Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America* uses research and focus group results to make it clear that transformative solidarity is real and we can make it happen. To all believers, the hopeful and others, please read it now.”

—**Angela Glover-Blackwell**, founder, PolicyLink

“Ian Haney López has established himself as one of the most prescient and insightful voices on how race and racism have shaped and continue to reshape American society. Here he asks the toughest question facing strategists of the left. How do we unite those on the losing end of both the nation’s racial divide and its rampant class inequality? . . . This is an important read for anyone hoping to build a meaningful workers’ coalition on the left.”

—**Gary Segura**, dean, Luskin School of Public Affairs, UCLA

*Merge Left* addresses the longer arc of history in our struggle to build a just society. Professor Haney López’s keen insights are desperately needed as we find our way forward at this perilous time for our democracy.

—**Eva Paterson**, founder and president of the Equal Justice Society

“Solidarity is the crucial ingredient in the fight against the ever-more-dangerous plutocracy. Ian Haney López helps explain where that solidarity might come from, even in our strained and divided society. Epically helpful!”

—**Bill McKibben**, environmentalist and author of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*