

Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority

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FIVE PRACTICAL STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MODERATE DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES FROM DEMOCRACY CORPS' IMPORTANT NEW STUDY.

BY
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A recent Washington Post commentary pointed out a significant mistake that many observers believe moderate Democrats made in the last election:

[in 2020] more than a dozen moderate House members were washed out of Congress under a barrage of [dishonest GOP] attacks. Many of the advertisements that were aired against them claimed falsely that they supported the Green New Deal, open borders, banning fracking, defunding the police and Medicare-for-all.

"I'm not certain there was a broad and deep recognition of the danger of these messages," adds Kendra Horn, who lost her seat in Oklahoma.... In 2020, "the charges were so absurd, they were not taken seriously enough until it was too late," says Third Way President Jon Cowan.

A new super PAC...hopes to raise \$26 million to pour into early ads aimed at preempting GOP attacks on moderate House Democrats...The ads will primarily be positive, focused on making sure voters are acquainted with the actual records of endangered Democratic incumbents.¹

The idea behind this strategy is, of course, that a sufficient number of fact-based ads ought to be able to successfully refute GOP lies but a recent report from Democracy Corps suggests that this approach may not be very effective.

The Democracy Corps research provides the first detailed picture of Republican voters' attitudes in the aftermath of Biden's victory. The research, which includes both polling and extensive focus group data, is quite unique because many Republican voters—especially Trump supporters—are now extremely suspicious of interviewers and often refuse to participate in studies. Stan Greenberg and his colleagues expended a great deal of effort recruiting subjects for zoom focus groups and then winning their trust so that they would participate freely and honestly. The study "*What will Trump loyalists' sensed powerlessness mean for politics*" provides a uniquely in depth picture that includes a large number of direct quotes from the participants. It suggests the range and subtleties of GOP voters' current feelings.²

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¹<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/30/can-house-democrats-beat-midterm-curse/>

²<https://democracycorps.com/republican-party-project/what-will-trump-loyalists-sensed-powerlessness-mean-for-politics/>

Greenberg and his co-authors began by updating Democracy Corp's detailed typology of GOP voters, a **long term** project that was started in the early Obama years. At first it divided the Party into distinct "Tea Party," "Evangelical Conservative," "Secular Conservative" and "Moderate" factions. In the Trump era, these categories were refined and now are divided as follows:

58% - "Trump loyalists" (Republicans who strongly approve of Trump).

12% - "Trump aligned" (Republicans who somewhat approve of Trump and are ideologically very conservative, or somewhat approve of Trump and are conservative Evangelical).

13% - Moderate Republicans (they do not strongly approve of Trump and are ideologically moderate or liberal, as well as those who are religiously secular or mainline Protestant)

17% - Non-Trump Conservatives (they do not strongly approve of Trump and are somewhat conservative or are very conservative and firmly disapprove of Trump).

This combination of opinion poll data on Trump's approval and also the respondents' political ideology represents a subtle but innovative way to tease out the distinct strands of Trumpism and Anti-Trumpism within the GOP.

The first important point that becomes clear from the focus group data is that many Trump loyalists are not just completely committed to a Fox News' right-wing political perspective but to an extreme alternative ideology that requires the denial of even patently evident facts. When Trump offered absurd, self-evidently false arguments, his utterances were generally dismissed as either blatant and deliberate lies or as genuine self-delusion but over the last 4 years many GOP voters have completely and sincerely accepted a similarly warped extremist vision of reality as their world view.

The Democracy Corp research provides a number of different examples of this ideology but perhaps the most dramatic is the way in which many Trump Loyalists reinterpret the January 6th invasion of the Capitol. Some insist that it was actually a planned disruption by Antifa infiltrators designed to discredit Trump while others insist that it was really a peaceful protest that was distorted by the media. When confronted by the concrete video evidence that it was both violent and completely illegal, some assert the wildly unrealistic idea that it was Antifa that committed all the violent acts that were filmed while everyone else who stormed into the Capitol were actually "peacefully protesting."

Note: This extreme form of reality denial is well documented in other areas of psychology. In cases of child molestation, for example, spouses or relatives will in some cases deny things that they literally see with their own eyes. Typically, they will rationalize their denial by saying to themselves "He couldn't possibly have actually been doing what I thought I saw him doing. I must have imagined it." Conversely, in accusations of "satanic rituals," accusers will sincerely convince themselves that they personally witnessed events that could not possibly have occurred.

The existence of this large, deeply delusional group has an important political implication – that a campaign strategy based on advertisements or speeches that present "the facts" about moderate Democrats will have a limited effect on the very large sector of Trump loyalists who

will simply refuse to accept them regardless of how completely documented they are. The Democracy Corps research suggests instead alternative strategies that moderate Democrats can employ.

The second important point that emerges from the Democracy Corps research is that the loyal Trumpists have not been galvanized and mobilized to political action by Biden's victory in the way that conservatives were energized and inspired to organize and build the Tea Party movement after Obama's victory in 2009.

On the contrary, most striking fact Greenberg finds is intense despair:

"The Trump Loyalists and Trump-aligned voters were angry to be sure, but more striking was how despondent and powerless they seemed. They felt powerless to reverse these important national political decisions."

This is reflected in the absence of mass protest against Biden's initial proposals similar to those that emerged against Obama's early agenda and that generated fierce and raucous protests at candidate town meetings across the country. There is no question that the GOP will organize protests against Biden's initiatives by this Summer but the Democracy Corps' research suggests that there will be significantly less energy behind them than there was in 2009. In part this reflects the relative popularity of Biden's initial proposals compared to Obama's health care bill but it also demonstrates the lack of current Republican enthusiasm for energetic political action.

The important political implication of this is that a key element of Democratic political strategy for 2022 should be to seek to encourage and reinforce this relative passivity among rank and file Trump supporters. In 2016, Trump profoundly motivated many infrequent GOP voters to vote because he created the hope that a radical reversal of almost all the social advances of recent decades could actually be achieved and in 2020 he similarly motivated many low frequency GOP voters to vote by using hyperbolic images of the chaos and revolution that would result if Democrats were elected. What the Democracy Corps study suggests is that the GOP will find this strategy substantially more difficult to employ today than the past.

One specific reason for this lack of GOP base militancy is that Biden himself is a far less polarizing figure than Obama or Hillary, As Greenberg says:

"Respondents were not suspicious of Biden who was white and, therefore, not a threat. This reaction is a far cry from their reception of Obama, whom they believed personified everything they thought wrong with America...unlike Obama, Joe Biden is not a polarizing figure. Nor is he even someone they discuss very much — unless we ask about him."

It is important to recognize that the difference between the reaction to Biden, on the one hand, and to Obama and Hillary Clinton on the other is deeply rooted in the unique American perception of class. To many white working class and small town Americans, Obama and

Hillary Clinton both seemed to be the representatives of an elite, Ivy League college educated class that had little sympathy, concern or understanding of ordinary people and Obama was also perceived as a racial “outsider” as well. Biden, on the other hand, does not evoke these feelings.

There is an important political implication to this fact. In recent years Democrats have increasingly tended to discuss the choice of a candidate for political office as if it should be treated as basically a reward or an obligation that was due to some Democratic base group. After Obama, for example, there was a substantial sentiment that that it was now a woman’s “turn” to be the Democratic presidential candidate. Equally, in some districts, it is often asserted that strongly pro-Democratic groups like African Americans “deserve” to have a candidate of their own ethnicity as a reward for their powerful Democratic loyalty. There is an emotionally appealing quality to this idea, but it must be recognized that in districts with many white working class or small town people, this kind of logic sounds to them like a clear assertion that they will quite deliberately not be represented. There is a strong case that in such districts candidates should be chosen for their appeal to the voters who are not already Democratic base supporters rather than for those who already do support the Democratic platform and agenda.

A third important fact that emerges from the Democracy Corps study is that many Republicans are genuinely and deeply concerned about the future for their children. As Greenberg says:

“The Trump loyalists are deeply angry with a government, the media, and social media companies that they believe are taking away their freedom and are now trying to cancel Trump supporters themselves. According to them, “cancel culture is destroying our history and the American way of life, making it very hard for white people to have a future.”

While it is almost impossible for many Democrats to seriously imagine that any white Americans could be genuinely afraid of this result, there is no question that it is felt by many white Republicans with complete sincerity. While Democrats envision a progressive future America as being an exciting, culturally and ethnically diverse, multiracial country in which there is general tolerance for diversity, white working class and small town people imagine an elitist society in which they have no place. To understand how this vision can seem entirely plausible, one has only to consider how rarely small town life or manual labor are portrayed positively in TV commercials and other media as part of the golden future that lies ahead. In slick advertisements and magazine spreads “the future” always looks like a world of gleaming office towers, bright young people in bustling urban centers and “country” as a place that people drive to in late model SUVs in order to go rock climbing or mountain biking.

The political implication of this is that moderate Democrats in Red State districts must very sincerely reassure Republicans that they genuinely value and respect the America of small towns, manual labor and the cultural traditions of that world and do not think it all an obsolete relic that should disappear. Moderate Democrats must make clear that the Democratic vision is for mutual tolerance and respect for different kinds of communities and not the ascendancy of one group or community over another.³

³This will not be easy because there is a significant group within the progressive world that does indeed believe precisely this and promulgates this view within the Democratic coalition. Candidates in moderate districts will have to explicitly reject this view and criticize it as snobbish, elitist, condescending and contrary to the historic Democratic ethos.

A related fact that emerges from the research is that many Republicans are seriously and deeply disturbed by what seems to them a Democratic indifference and even tolerance for social chaos. This extends across a wide range of social problems – from crime to urban decay to homeless vagabonds, illegal immigrants and failing schools. For Republicans, the common thread in all these problems is a Democratic failure to insist that rules should be followed and law and order firmly upheld.

The most powerful issue in 2020 was the specter of urban riots whose importance the GOP vastly exaggerated until many Republicans were sincerely convinced that it was totally out of control.

As Greenberg notes:

“For the Trump loyalists, Black Lives Matter and Antifa remain undifferentiated — and the principal cause of violence in so many cities for a good part of a year, chaos that was just hidden by the mainstream media. They defined both BLM and Antifa as Marxist or communist, “terrorists” that attacked public buildings and most of all, created chaos. To them, the [entire] BLM movement is commensurate with an anti-white crusade, a zero-sum affair, one where they fear losing “their” country.”

“The cancel culture, urban chaos and strife that typically accompanies BLM protests, leave most Republicans worried about what happens to white people in a changing America.”

It is indeed deeply frustrating that the massive, overwhelmingly peaceful and dignified BLM protests of last spring which included huge numbers of whites as well as African-Americans could be so successfully distorted by Republican propaganda but it is a reality that cannot be ignored. The political implication of this is that moderate Democrats must draw a clear line regarding what they view as genuinely unacceptable violations of social order. Among progressives there is tendency to resist endorsing slogans like “law and order” because they can sound like coded appeals to racial prejudice. But carried to an extreme this is profoundly counterproductive. Democratic voters do not actually support rioting of the type in which the Antifa protesters engaged in last year or passively accept street crime and other urban lawlessness. Democrats can be tough on riots and crime and actually win support from African-Americans and Latinos who drifted notably toward the Republicans in significant measure because in 2020 they also fear and reject chaos as much as whites.

Up to now this discussion has focused on the 70% of Republicans who still support Donald Trump but Moderate Democrats will also have the opportunity to make inroads into the 30% who are somewhat or strongly opposed to him.

The Democracy Corps report says the following about this group:

About 30 percent of Republicans are [either] non-Trump conservatives [or] the ideologically and religiously moderate —with the latter forming half of this bloc that vocally opposes Trump.

...they are now much clearer where they differ with Trump and much more willing to express it, even in a room full of Trump loyalists. Trump’s CPAC speech — “that’s what

I hate” says one. They called out the “nut jobs” and conspiracy theorists. They don’t understand their fellow Republican’s opposition to masks and health measures. They don’t think the 2nd Amendment is sacred, oppose the display of weapons in Michigan, and want to regulate guns. When others said they appreciated what the Proud Boys did, they called them out as “not patriots.” They seemed open to a much more expansive role for government.

This is encouraging but it should not lead to misperceiving them as fully in agreement with moderates or liberals:

They do share with other Republicans an aversion to BLM and cancel culture; they too are looking for more law and order and seem uncomfortable with whites being on the defensive. They agreed that the elite media ignored the violence in the cities.

What this clearly indicates is that the same tactics that can reassure or partially neutralize the opposition of the Trump loyalists can also present an attractive alternative for these voters.

Conclusion

At one point during the Clinton Administration in the 1990’s there was a debate over the value of creating “sister soulja” moments – dramatic moments during which a Democratic president or other candidate would flamboyantly attack a notable figure on the left in order to draw a clear distinction between the centrist and progressive wings of the party.

Divisiveness of this kind was wrong at that time and is even less advisable now with the current structure of the Democratic coalition. But moderate Democrats must recognize that they have to pre-empt the inevitable Republican distortions of their views by very clearly drawing certain “lines in the sand” about their firm opposition to rioting, crime, and allowing demands for “political correctness” to essentially require that average Americans completely adopt the language and culture of the university or face censure, contempt and condemnation.

A position of this kind will not only resonate with the 30% of non-Trumpist Republicans but will also “lower the temperature” of the Trumpist Republicans themselves and convince them that the elections of 2022 and 2024 are not apocalyptic battles against evil in which the future itself is literally at stake. To the extent that this can be achieved, it will reduce the turnout of low frequency GOP voters and enhance the likelihood of Democratic victories.