

ED KILGORE,
MANAGING EDITOR:

The Democratic Strategist has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As The Democratic Strategists' editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

**A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO**

**ED KILGORE:
THE STRATEGIC LESSONS
OF 2013**

A TDS STRATEGY MEMO: ED KILGORE: THE STRATEGIC LESSONS OF 2013

In this season there is an inevitable flood of retrospective commentaries on the major events of the previous year and a torrent of breathless predictions for the future. In the mainstream media, spinmeisters and MSM journalists often use the opportunity to hyperventilate over events and developments of no enduring significance.

For Democrats concerned with political strategy, however, there is a more productive way to use this period of reflection—to consider what practical lessons can be drawn from the events of the previous year and how they can be applied in the future.

Here's my brief take on the four most important strategic conclusions that can be drawn from the events of 2013:

1. *Losing any one particular election does not and will not moderate Republican extremism or induce them to move back to the center. Democrats should not base their political strategy on the hope that this will occur.*
2. *Democratic firmness and unity in the face of Republican obstructionism was absolutely indispensable in 2013. It remains equally vital for the future.*
3. *The state of the economy and the real-life consequences of policy decisions have far more influence on voters' decisions than does the daily news cycle or the constant ups and downs of public opinion. Democrats should therefore not allow transient events and trends to overly influence their thinking.*
4. *Given the current partisan balance in Congress legislative gridlock cannot be overcome in the foreseeable future. Democrats therefore need to prioritize increasing Democratic voter turnout (especially in off-year elections) and expanding the Democratic coalition.*

Let's look at each one of these topics in turn:

1. Losing the 2012 presidential election had zero effect on the behavior of Republicans.

It is true that a majority of congressional Republicans reluctantly agreed to a "fiscal cliff" deal, but this was only because their failure to gain control of the White House and the Senate limited their leverage and because failure to reach agreement would have meant full repeal of the Bush tax cuts. It's also true there was a brief period of official soul-searching by the RNC and some conservative media after the election. But beyond same-sex marriage, where public opinion has been moving rapidly away from the GOP position, most of the "rebranding" talk focused on technology and messaging rather than ideology or even strategy. And even early consternation about negative demographic trends faded in the wake of the widespread conservative embrace of the theory that a falloff in white voting was actually the crucial factor in 2012.

As 2013 proceeded Republican radicalism in Washington and in the states resumed its pre-2012 intensity and direction. Congressional Republicans were systematically obstructionist, demanding complete repeal of Obamacare, fighting Obama's executive-branch and judicial nominations even when the "nuclear option" approached, and preventing any action to stimulate the economy or provide direct assistance to the long-term unemployed. Republicans blocked even supposedly "must-do" legislation like the farm bill over ideological demands to sharply reduce food stamp eligibility.

(While some viewed GOP agreement with the recent budget mini-deal as finally signifying a "lesson learned" from the failure of the government shutdown, it's worth noting that the main internal argument for this shift in fiscal tactics was to keep media attention focused on the problems associated with the implementation of Obamacare).

Republican radicalism also persisted at the state level, with a new push to restrict abortion rights and voting rights, and very few Republican-ruled states agreeing to the Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion despite insanely generous fiscal terms and interest group pressure to go along.

And in looking ahead to 2016, while there was (and in some circles, continues to be) some momentary excitement over the prospect of nominating Chris Christie—a candidate with some appeal beyond the Republican base—the likely field remains heavily tilted to the extremist wing of the GOP. Ted Cruz, Mike Huckabee, Bobby Jindal, Rand Paul, Rick Perry, Paul Ryan, Rick Santorum, and Scott Walker are all actively exploring 2016 candidacies.

***Implication for the future:** Dems must base their plans on the existence of a completely obstructionist GOP. They cannot count on the extremist fever "breaking" in the foreseeable future*

2. Democratic firmness and unity in the face of Republican obstructionism paid significant dividends.

There were a series of important intra-Democratic arguments in 2013: Should Barack Obama continue to offer "entitlement reform" measures in exchange for tax increases as part of a "grand bargain" on the federal budget? Are Democrats sufficiently "populist"? Is Edward Snowden a hero or a rogue? Can or should Elizabeth Warren challenge Hillary Clinton in 2016?

But while all these arguments reflected real differences of opinion among Democrats, they did not significantly affect party unity in Congress. At several crucial junctures—the fiscal cliff negotiations, the "nuclear option" triggering in the Senate, and the autumn government shutdown—Democrats largely stuck together. Not coincidentally, the White House also refused to "triangulate" against congressional Democrats, and the president balanced his reflexive rhetoric of bipartisanship with regular attacks on Republican obstruction. Obama's refusal to negotiate over the debt limit was a turning point in the autumn fiscal standoff, and also may have pre-empted another debt limit crisis early in 2014.

To some extent, Democratic unity reflects the continuing winnowing of Democratic elected officials in hostile territory; there are fewer troublesome "Blue Dogs" in Congress because many of the seats they held until recently were lost to Republicans, particularly in

2010. But the remaining “moderate” Democrats are now also less likely to think strategic defections will save them from serious GOP challenges.

***Implication for the future:** Democrats must maintain unity on key issues; defections by representatives in conservative districts can only be tolerated when they do not undermine necessary party unity on significant issues.*

3. Real life continues to matter most.

All the temporary swings in public opinion during 2013 shouldn't obscure the fact that the real-life consequences of policy decisions continue to matter most in terms of political trends.

The single biggest drag on support-levels for Obama and the Democratic Party remains a sluggish economy to which austerity policies forced by Republican obstruction continue to contribute. Objectively, the economy did improve in 2013, but persistently high long-term unemployment, stagnant wages and the inability or unwillingness of national leaders to do anything to boost the economy have sapped optimism.

It's also clear that the public-private hybrid features of the Affordable Care Act are most responsible for the problems of the landmark law that is hanging fire presently, and are the source of misgivings that reach well into the Democratic voting coalition. If ACA implementation problems abate in 2014, it will have a greater impact on the partisan politics of health care than all the messaging past and present, and Republicans in particular may regret putting so many eggs in that one basket.

***Implication for the future:** Dems should not allow themselves to be overly influenced by transient events or day-to-day shifts in public opinion.*

4. Gridlock will be very difficult to break.

Coming out of the 2012 presidential election, some Democrats felt that the conservative surge that dominated politics from 2009-2012 had been decisively turned back in ways that revived 2008's dreams of an enduring progressive majority. A year later, it's pretty clear the most likely scenario is an extended period of gridlock based on divided partisan control of government and short-term alternation between Republican-dominated midterms and Democratic-dominated presidential cycles. It's hard to foresee in the immediate future either party enjoying the position Democrats had so briefly in 2009-2010, with control of the presidency and Congress and a filibuster-proof (in theory, anyway) Senate majority.

What's also not in the cards is any near-term change in Republican strategy and tactics to make bipartisan law-making more feasible. It will take no more than the occasional GOP victory to convince the party's dominant radically conservative wing that even greater ideological rigor is the key to future victory. And many conservative activists would prefer short-term electoral defeats if they can be said to set the stage for a watershed victory in which the conservative movement's major aims can be achieved.

***Implication for the future:** Democrats must focus their efforts on either finding ways to “break the mold” of recent turnout patterns that make sustained victories so difficult--by, for example, achieving the kind of support levels among white seniors they had as recently as 2006 or by making other inroads into the current Republican coalition.*