



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

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THEY DON'T ACT LIKE A COALITION AND THEY SURE AS HELL
DON'T TRY TO ASSEMBLE A MAJORITY LIKE A COALITION.**

BY
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Calling the Democratic Party a “coalition” is a venerable cliché of Democratic political life. But in recent years, it has basically become an empty one. The party’s working-class support has so markedly declined that Democrats largely have stopped describing the party as a “big tent coalition.” However, the notion that the party is nonetheless a coalition remains common.

As the 2024 election approaches, it’s time to stop and face the reality. The Democratic Party doesn’t act like a coalition, it doesn’t think like a coalition, and it sure as heck doesn’t try to assemble a majority like a coalition.

To see why, consider how an actual Democratic coalition would work:

1. During the primaries, the process would be largely like what occurs today. Candidates for Congress and the presidency would compete while major political issue groups would offer support to the candidates who support their particular perspectives and agendas.
2. As the likely winners and their margins of victory become clear, however, all the major candidates and issue groups would begin intense and serious negotiations over the party platform. These negotiations would be taken very seriously by all the participants because it would be understood that the platform will become the “consensus program” or “governing agenda” Democrats will campaign on in the Fall and candidates will promise to support if they are elected. At the presidential level these negotiations will also be the basis for an understanding about the way government positions in the new administrations will be allocated (a distribution generally based on the relative vote share the different primary candidates have received). The major issue groups would continue to uphold their “long term agenda” but would also sincerely agree to support a Democratic administration that bases itself on the coalition platform.

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This article can also be found at The Liberal Patriot under the title, “The Democratic Coalition Isn’t Really a Coalition – And why that’s actually a big problem.”¹

¹<https://www.liberalpatriot.com/p/the-democratic-coalition-isnt-really>

3. At the convention where the Democratic agenda is unveiled, all the major candidates for president and congress would stand on the stage together linking their arms and holding the agenda in their hands in a dramatic visual assertion of unity around their program.
4. The agenda and the image of Democratic unity would then be used as the basis for the billions of dollars inevitably invested in the Fall advertising campaigns and would be explained to the press as the agenda that the Democrats will govern on if elected. This approach will provide a far clearer understanding of the actual Democratic position than the usual “every man for himself” strategy in which each individual Democratic candidate attempts to define his own unique platform and agenda against inevitable Republican attacks.
5. The vast majority of Democratic candidates will support the platform and those that don’t will clearly state their points of departure from its agenda.

A coalition divided against itself cannot stand.

Just describing this process indicates how profoundly far the modern Democratic Party is from being an actual “coalition.” Today, most Democratic candidates try to define their own specific personal platforms and agendas. As a result, the term “Democrat” is reduced to a generic label with vague historical connotations and not the name for a firm political coalition to which they belong.

In many cases today the main effort of many major political issue groups is actually to defeat other Democrats who do not endorse their long-term agenda and perspective rather than on recruiting new voters to a broad Democratic coalition.

As Tom Edsall noted in a *New York Times* column:

I asked Joseph Geevarghese, the executive director of Our Revolution [the political action committee of Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT)], if the organization had flipped any House seats from red to blue. He replied by email: “This was not the goal of Our Revolution. Our Revolution’s goal in the 2022 elections was to push the Democratic Caucus in a progressive direction...” Waleed Shahid, communications director for Justice Democrats, emailed in response to a similar inquiry of mine that his group does not focus on shifting seats from red to blue: “We haven’t really run races in those areas. We’ve been focused on blue seats where the incumbent is corporate-backed and out of touch with their district.”²

In developing a common program, moreover, presidential candidates do not systematically include input from all the major voting blocs in the Democratic Party. In 2020, for instance, Joe Biden engaged in extensive negotiations with the groups who supported Bernie Sanders in the primaries – but not with other major groups in the Democratic coalition.

²<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/21/opinion/democrats-progressives-moderates-midterms.html>

As a CNN report noted at the time:

Presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden’s campaign on Wednesday released a draft of policy recommendations crafted by allies of the former vice president and Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont. The 110-page document is the product of weeks of negotiations between six- and eight-person “Unity Task Forces” appointed by Biden and Sanders, the former vice president’s longest-lasting rival in the Democratic presidential primary. The task forces drafted a joint approach to climate change, criminal justice, the economy, education, health care and immigration.³

No negotiations of comparable scope were conducted with any other elements of the Democratic coalition.

This approach was reflected in the 2020 party platform in a way that represented a fundamental change from the past. To be able to assemble a majority coalition, a party must be willing to accept a range of opinions among the groups that it attempts to unite under its banner. This is, in fact, precisely what distinguishes a party seeking to create a broad political coalition from a political party that requires all its supporters to back a clear and specific program and ideology.

The Democratic Party traditionally recognized and accepted the need to accommodate a substantial range of views within its coalition. This was most clear on the issue of abortion, where many Democratic candidates—particularly Catholic Democrats—maintained their personal moral and religious objections to abortion but also accepted that they did not have the right to demand that all other Democrats accept their personal views.

In recent years, however, this approach has become increasingly replaced by the concept of “litmus tests” established by political issue groups. These groups outline explicit ideological positions that Democratic candidates must endorse in order to receive a group’s support. Today a wide range of issue organizations, think tanks, and other components of the Democratic political infrastructure—the interlocking network that Ruy Teixeira and John Judis define as the “shadow party” in their recent book, *Where Have all the Democrats Gone?*—demand that candidates endorse specific positions on social issues ranging from the environment and immigration to crime, racial equity and anti-racism, transgender issues, and others.

As a result of this change, a sharply restricted range of views were included in the 2020 Democratic platform.

Crime provides a dramatic example. While police brutality emerged as a major issue after the brutal death of George Floyd, opinion polls also clearly indicated that reducing crime nonetheless remained a central concern for both white and black working-class voters. Yet the 2020 Democratic platform devoted exactly one sentence to reducing crime. It read: “Democrats know we can end the era of mass incarceration and dramatically reduce the number of Americans held in jails and prisons while continuing to reduce crime rates, which have fallen steadily from their peak nearly three decades ago.”

³<https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/08/politics/joe-biden-bernie-sanders-task-force-recommendations/index.html>

On the other hand, the platform presented a sweeping list—seventeen points in all—of firmly progressive programs concerned with the rights and needs of people who were accused of crimes, arrested, or incarcerated. Some of these included:

Develop community-based alternatives to prison and detention centers for youth.

Automatically seal and expunge juvenile records.

Establish strict national standards governing the use of force, including banning the use of chokeholds and carotid holds and permitting deadly force only when necessary and a last resort to prevent an imminent threat to life.

Establish “no-knock warrants” standards.

Ensure transgender and gender non-conforming people receive fair and equitable treatment in the criminal justice system.

Limit the sale and transfer of surplus military weapons to domestic law enforcement agencies.

Reinvigorate pattern-or-practice investigations into police misconduct at the Department of Justice and strengthen them through new subpoena powers and expanded oversight to address systemic misconduct by prosecutors.

Eliminate the use of cash bail.

Repeal federal mandatory minimums [for sentencing].

Support the continued use of the president’s clemency powers to secure the release of those serving unduly long sentences.

End the use of private prisons and private detention centers.

As a result, a Democratic candidate in a working-class district who sought evidence in the platform to refute Republican accusations that Democrats were “soft on crime,” “coddling criminals,” “ignoring the victims,” and, on the contrary, had serious programs, strategies, and policies to reduce crime would find literally nothing at all in the party’s 2020 platform to support this view.

The platform plank regarding immigration displayed precisely the same pattern. Polling and election results clearly showed that while many Americans were sympathetic to immigrants, they were also equally insistent—if not more so—that there had to be serious and effective policies to prevent large masses of migrants from simply ignoring American laws and the immigration system, making their way across the border, and being able to enter the country essentially at will.

The 2020 Democratic platform on immigration, however, did not devote a single sentence to measures to re-establish any effective control of the southern border. Instead, it promised to substantially expand the use of the immigration system's political asylum provisions to make it possible for migrants appearing at the border to gain entry to the United States:

Democrats believe the United States should be a beacon of hope for those who are suffering violence and injustice, which is why we will protect and expand the existing asylum system and other humanitarian protections... Democrats will end Trump administration policies that deny protected entry to asylum seekers, put them at great risk, and destabilize our neighbors and the broader region. And we will end prosecution of asylum seekers at the border and policies that force them to apply from "safe third countries," which are far from safe.

This same perspective was clearly reflected in the positions of the Democratic candidates in the party's 2020 presidential primaries. In a June 2019 debate, nine of ten candidates called for decriminalizing border crossings. Candidates Elizabeth Warren and Kirsten Gillibrand even advocated dismantling the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. And no Democrat candidate, including Joe Biden, proposed any specific plan to re-establish control of the southern border.

This same pattern was repeated in the platform planks on climate change, the environment, and "LGBTQ+" issues. The policies in the platform in these areas reflected the views of key advocacy groups in various areas and were not a representative reflection of the views of the broad Democratic electorate—or even the constituencies these groups purport to represent. This is not the way a political coalition successfully amasses a majority.

"Thrown under the bus" and "stabbed in the back"

Once the election is over, many political issue groups perceive their role as being to fight for their long-term agenda and not to support any common party platform. Every political decision a new administration makes that is contrary to a group's long-term agenda is luridly described as "throwing them under the bus," "stabbing them in the back," and "betraying them."

As a result, if the coalition is unable to enact its agenda both the press and Democrats themselves then describe the resulting bitter sectarian debate as a "circular firing squad" that displays the profound "disarray among Dems." Indeed, many Democrats will argue that this is an entirely rational and necessary approach for achieving long-term progressive or centrist goals and call their behavior a "matter of basic principle."

Once intra-Democratic debate is defined in this way, the behavior of the participants becomes impervious to logical or practical challenge. At the same time, though, it is also quite obviously incompatible with any notion that the Democratic Party is in any real sense an actual, functioning political coalition.

So, let's stop using the word coalition to describe the Democratic Party until we are ready to take that word seriously and make the adjustments that a genuine coalition requires. Calling the Democratic Party a coalition—when it is not—allows Democrats to avoid honestly facing what is necessary to assemble a majority.