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A DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

**DEMS: A SUCCESSFUL POPULIST
STRATEGY WILL REQUIRE MORE THAN
JUST PROGRESSIVE ECONOMICS.
IT MUST ALSO INCLUDE A POPULIST
APPROACH TO OVERCOMING THE
WIDESPREAD DISTRUST AND
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BY
ANDREW LEVISON

DEMS: A SUCCESSFUL POPULIST STRATEGY WILL REQUIRE MORE THAN JUST PROGRESSIVE ECONOMICS. IT MUST ALSO INCLUDE A POPULIST APPROACH TO OVERCOMING THE WIDESPREAD DISTRUST AND HOSTILITY TOWARD GOVERNMENT

By ANDREW LEVISON

The growing populist consensus that has emerged within the Democratic Party in recent months provides a compelling and powerful framework for a Democratic resurgence in the next presidential elections in 2016.

After all, opinion polls consistently show strong majority support for virtually all the major planks of a populist appeal. As political scientist Alan Abramowitz has noted¹, “On many important issues, including raising the minimum wage, extending unemployment benefits, raising taxes on upper income Americans as part of a deficit reduction deal, and increasing spending on education and infrastructure, substantial majorities of voters, including large numbers of Republicans, support the Democratic agenda.”

And in fact, in broader perspective, when one looks at the data on the central populist goals of reducing unemployment and preserving the basic New Deal and Great Society social safety net, particularly Social Security and Medicare, the levels of public support are simply overwhelming and include majorities from demographic groups such as seniors who otherwise tend to lean Republican.

As a result, there is a widespread optimism among many Democrats that, almost by itself, a robust populist agenda could provide an adequate foundation for a successful Democratic offensive against the GOP in 2016. Deep within the Democratic DNA there is a powerful belief that campaigns fought on a robust populist basis are inherently more popular than any possible conservative alternative. As a result, there is a profound emotional desire among many Dems to conduct the electoral battle entirely on this favorable terrain.

The advantages of a populist agenda are indeed undeniable but the experience with the Health Care Reform bill and the fate of the subsequent legislation should suggest the need to carefully consider the way such a strategy is executed. One critical lesson from the initial planning of Obamacare was that simply averaging the results of specific poll questions regarding a set of policies does not necessarily predict how the complete package will ultimately “play” politically. It must be remembered that the key Individual elements in the legislation Obama proposed—items such as guaranteed coverage regardless of preexisting conditions, extending the age at which children could be carried on their parents policies

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¹<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2014/01/06/how-polarized-is-the-american-electorate/?hpid=z3>

and the removal of a cap on lifetime benefits—all polled extremely well with voters, as did support for the general goal of insuring access to health care for all Americans. This led progressives and the Obama administration to quite confidently expect that the proposed reform would be far more popular than it ultimately turned out to be.

The fundamental problem that the bill's supporters failed to consider was the possibility that conservatives and the GOP might be able to create a radically different narrative—one that successfully reframed the debate as essentially about “socialism” or “big government” rather than about the specifics of health care reform. The opposition to the bill that emerged during 2009-2010 was not based on directly challenging the specific, very popular ideas like coverage for pre-existing conditions and other features of the legislation; it was based on creating a completely different political narrative and storyline.

This same basic conservative strategy is absolutely certain to be used against a populist economic agenda in 2016. The counterattack will not be made directly against the specific populist proposals that poll very well. Instead, at the most general, rhetorical level the pushback will argue the following:

1. Conservatives and the GOP will argue that the initiatives represent “class warfare” and the fomenting of “class hatred.” It will be said that populists want to divide Americans rather than unite them. One can already predict the utterly vacuous and misleading but rhetorically effective sound-bite: *“The Democrats say we are divided into two Americas. Well, we Republicans don’t accept that. We believe in one America, not two Americas.”*
2. Conservatives and the GOP will argue that the proposals express an elitist contempt and indeed a deep-seated loathing for small business and businessmen and a desire to undermine small business and individual initiative. Increasing the minimum wage will be described as a deliberate plan to penalize small firms and weaken the private sector. The dishonest misquotation “you didn’t build that” will be trotted out again and again to prove populist’s deep ulterior contempt and hatred for the small businessman and his sacrifices in building and running a local neighborhood enterprise.
3. Conservatives and the GOP will argue that populist proposals are part of a “statist” agenda designed to further enhance the role of big government and lay the groundwork for a larger socialist transformation. The health care reform act will be cited as the first stage of this assault on free enterprise and the populist agenda defined as the second phase of the same campaign.

The notion that populist proposals are deliberately aimed at attacking and weakening small business will be a particularly critical element of this conservative counter-attack. The claim will allow the billionaires who now basically fund the conservative movement to enthusiastically assert that they are proudly standing side by side as comrades in arms with small worker-contractors in construction and the owners of local neighborhood stores as the victims of a vicious populist assault rather than representing a fabulously wealthy minority defending the plutocratic privileges of their tiny elite. As Paul Krugman and others have noted, the current generation of billionaires sincerely feel incredibly put-upon and unappreciated. They genuinely believe that they deserve not only basic respect and admiration but a kind of awe-struck, absolutely uncritical deference and even god-like veneration from “the little people” for their Promethean role in job creation. They will therefore passionately support any

narrative that casts them as the victims of left-wing prejudice and oppression, victims who are suffering equally if not more so under the populist assault than salt of the earth workingmen and other ordinary Americans.

This line of attack will help the GOP to mend the partial rift that has emerged between the business community and the tea party—one that threatens to cause division in the Republican coalition. Much as the business community may be exasperated with certain tea party positions, big business and the wealthy will find it simply impossible to not enthusiastically support every tea party candidate who glorifies them as heroes and attacks their populist foes.

It is reasonable to anticipate that this GOP strategy will successfully accomplish two objectives: it will consolidate the support of most or all of the GOP base electorate that voted for Mitt Romney in 2012 and it will create a general impression in the easily manipulated mainstream media that the Democrat's populist approach represents a narrow partisan agenda and not one that is widely supported by the American people. This alone will insure that the substantial majority support for a populist agenda that the opinion polls now show will be significantly reduced, creating a 2016 electorate once again split between Democratic and Republican base partisans, each representing perhaps 45-47% of the electorate, and a narrow, not very politically involved group of swing voter "persuadables".

Although many progressives and Democrats will grant that this scenario may indeed be likely, many will nevertheless argue that a sufficiently passionate and energetic advocacy of populist ideas can carry a Democratic candidate to victory. The experience of the last several years, including Obama's victory in 2012 on an anti-elitist platform and the rise of well-liked populist politicians like Elizabeth Warren and Bill deBlasio will be offered as proof that this approach can indeed be successful.

But it is vital for Democrats and progressives to face the reality that Republicans will not be so utterly stupid as to blindly and willingly walk into precisely the same trap as the one that doomed the Romney campaign. While Progressives may dream of seeing an epic clash between someone like Elizabeth Warren and Congressman Paul Ryan in 2016 during which Ryan proudly proclaims his sneering Ayn Randian contempt for ordinary people and his semi-secret plan to gut Social Security and Medicare, that is simply not how the political debate will actually unfold. Paul Ryan is already making the obligatory and predictable media tour of soup kitchens and homeless shelters and is loudly developing an "anti-poverty plan" that he will wave over his head as a *"conservative solution to poverty and unemployment."* The other likely GOP candidates like Scott Walker, Ted Cruz and Rand Paul are similarly engaged in what might be called "Republican poverty tourism" and the GOP leadership is already circulating "compassionate" talking points about poverty and unemployment for candidates to memorize and employ. Regardless of who the GOP candidate will eventually be, it is certain that he will use the three-pronged strategy described in the paragraphs above along with a document full of brightly illustrated charts that is called a "Republican Plan to Solve Poverty and Unemployment." This along with continual simpering protestations of agonized concern for the suffering of "the little people" will be employed to muddy the waters and avoid a direct debate over the real Republican economic agenda.

The result is that the 2016 presidential election will actually be substantially harder for a Democratic candidate to win than was the election in 2012. Mitt Romney was an almost comic caricature of a condescending wealthy elitist, his campaign utterly ignored the populist and anti-elitist attacks launched by the Obama campaign and he provided absolutely no credible agenda aimed at responding to the problems of ordinary Americans. The GOP will not make any of these mistakes again two and a half years from now.

The consequence is that relying on a set of progressive economic proposals by itself as an entirely sufficient populist strategy is a dangerous gamble. While economic populism is indeed popular, it is not a guarantee of victory.

But what else could or should be added to a populist appeal? Ideally, it would be an approach that does two things (1) that provides a populist response to the widespread hostility to government that now stands as a major obstacle to all progressive and Democratic electoral success and (2) that drives a wedge between the economic and financial elites and the ordinary Americans who drive a truck or do construction on single family homes.

Such an approach does exist. It is based on the recognition that widespread popular suspicion and hostility to government cannot simply be ignored or outshouted but must be honestly addressed instead. In a 2007 article in *The American Prospect*², pollster Stan Greenberg provided a particularly cogent description of the profound political problem that the decline in trust of government has come to pose for the Democratic coalition:

There is a new reality that Democrats must deal with if they are to be successful going forward. In their breathtaking incompetence and comprehensive failure in government, Republicans have undermined Americans' confidence in the ability of government to play a role in solving America's problems. Democrats will not make sustainable gains unless they are able to restore the public's confidence in its capacity to act through government.

...“the scale of damage done to people's belief in government is enormous...62% in a Pew study said they believe that whenever something is run by the government it is probably inefficient and wasteful. By 57% to 29% Americans willingness to support action on critical issues like health care, education and energy is undercut by their lack of trust in government's capacity to spend money properly. This means that their first priority is to cut wasteful spending and make government more accountable. People are desperate to see accountability from Washington, not just in the spending of tax dollars with no discernible results but also in politicians' behavior... To have any chance of getting heard on their agenda, Democrats need to stand up and take on the government—not its size or scope, but its failure to be accountable—and deliver the results that people expect for the taxes they pay.

Many progressives are very hesitant to discuss the widespread distrust of government because it seems to put them on the defensive and blunts the clarity of a passionate, full-throated populist appeal. What this fails to recognize, however, is that a populist approach

²<http://prospect.org/article/democrats-are-back>

to voters' hostility and distrust of government need not be fundamentally defensive but can rather be a second prong of an aggressive populist strategy.³

The key is to recognize the essentially populist character of much of the anti-Washington attitudes that pervade American politics. [A strategy memo by Greenberg's Democracy Corps](#)⁴ underlined the essentially populist character of the distrust and contempt with which Congress in particular is viewed. As it says:

Voters are disgusted with 'business as usual' in Washington. There is a deep and pervasive belief, particularly among independents, that special interests are running things and Members of Congress listen more to those that fund their campaigns than the voters that they are supposed to be representing. Three quarters believe that special interests hold too much influence over Washington today while fewer than a quarter believe that ordinary citizens can still influence what happens in politics. Similarly, nearly 80 percent say that Members of Congress are controlled by the groups that help fund their political campaigns while fewer than a fifth believe that Members listen more to the voters.

Over the past several years, Greenberg and Democracy Corps have tested a wide variety of proposals and messages to see what ideas about government reform most strongly resonate with average Americans and "persuadable" swing voters. What they have found is that the strongest and most immediate progressive and populist appeal is one that is based on "getting big money out of politics." As [a December, 2013 Democracy Corps strategy memo](#)⁵ noted:

This survey, conducted in the 49 most competitive Republican districts and 31 most competitive Democratic districts, finds that voters from both parties and all demographic groups are angered by the influence of big money that puts even greater distance between their members and people at home—and are willing to change it.

³ The progressive reluctance to discuss popular hostility to government is based on a too-narrow focus on winning TV style debates as a mental model for the broader challenge of winning elections. Progressives observe pugnacious right-wing commentators like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly dominate every argument they have with their guests through a combination of obnoxious belligerence and constant attack and conclude that this is the key to electoral success. The key one-on-one debates between political candidates seem similarly to favor the candidate who is constantly aggressive and on the offensive.

But, this is an excessively narrow mental model of how voters actually make political decisions. In fact, the complete process of voter persuasion is in general more comparable to the struggle of a firm to convince consumers to purchase their particular product rather than that of some other competing firm. A consumer inevitably sees a variety of ads promoting the virtues of alternative products and hears a range of opinions from friends and acquaintances. In this situation both controlled academic studies of consumer choice and virtually every book on successful salesmanship firmly insist that clearly acknowledging, respecting and then figuring out how to overcome potential buyers objections and concerns are a central and essential part of the sales process. The identical logic holds in the case of a candidate seeking to win the support of persuadable voters.

⁴ <http://www.democracycorps.com/Battleground-Surveys/in-congressional-battleground-voters-intensely-concerned-about-money-in-politics/>

⁵ <http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/960/Money%20in%20Politics%20Memo.pdf>

Among all battleground voters, the strongest message says that we need to do something about big money in politics by forcing candidates to raise money in their districts in order to cut the influence of Wall Street and PACs. Almost three quarters (73 percent) say this message makes them more likely to support campaign reform, half (48 percent) much more likely.

The memo then provides the details:

Voters in these districts strongly support bold reforms to reduce the influence of money in politics, an influence which they believe contributes to dysfunction in Washington. And there is no downside for doing so—voters register almost no negative response to reform efforts, even those that would require significant public contributions to political campaigns. In the 49 most vulnerable Republican seats, two thirds of voters support “A plan to overhaul campaign spending by getting rid of big donations to political candidates.” A substantial majority continue to support the proposal even when it includes matching public funds.

The approach is highly effective with key groups of voters:

More than half (55 percent) of those who are undecided support this proposal, a quarter strongly. Among voters who are vulnerable to switching their votes and winnable for the other party, 63 percent support this proposal, 27 percent strongly. And among white seniors, who could cast deciding votes next fall, this proposal has 57 percent support — almost a third (30 percent) support it strongly...

What this data strongly suggests is that adding a “*Clean up Washington, get big money out of politics*” populist appeal can be a vital supplement to a basic populist strategy based on progressive economic proposals. Not only does it demonstrate an awareness and appreciation of many average Americans deep and sincere suspicions of government but it also suggests a meaningful strategy for reform.

An additional advantage of this approach is that has the potential to drive a deep wedge between the plutocratic and white working class wings of the Republican coalition.

For many ordinary Americans, the most compelling part of the GOP message is its hostility to big government and rhetorical support for small business. The likely GOP strategy for 2016 outlined above—a mixture of anti-government rhetoric and verbal support for small business is based on seamlessly appealing to both motives while covertly promoting an agenda that is in reality favorable to the economic and financial elite.

A populist Democratic proposal to get big money out of politics substantially complicates this strategy. Ordinary Americans may be attracted by the GOP’s rhetorical identification with small business and the little guy when they hear it expressed in a presidential debate, but it suddenly rings hollow when the candidate has to turn around in the next breath to defend the rights of billionaires to pour vast sums of money into elections in local communities,

overwhelming any candidate supported by local contributions. The GOP candidate who says “I’m defending the little guy against the mean, nasty big government” is revealed as hypocritical when he then argues that rich people should have the right to simply buy state, city and local elections for their wholly owned pet candidates.

If this “get big money out of politics” approach were in conflict with a populist approach based on progressive economic proposals it would require a difficult weighing of costs and benefits. But the simple fact is that it does not. The two are entirely complementary. It is therefore almost a kind of political malpractice not to include “get big money out of politics” as a vital “second front” in a two pronged populist offensive. Populism must indeed be based on progressive economic proposals, but its chances of success are vastly improved if it includes a populist demand for government reform as well.