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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.

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A  
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST  
STRATEGY MEMO

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YEAR GRAND STRATEGY WORKED

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**A TDS STRATEGY MEMO:  
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Many [accounts](#)<sup>1</sup> of Barack Obama's 2012 campaign strategy begin with his [speech in Osawatimie, Kansas](#)<sup>2</sup>, in December of 2011. Then, it is said, after nearly three years of projecting a unilateral commitment to bipartisanship, the president finally went after the Republican Party and its policies with hammer and tong, and began the process of reinvigorating a dispirited Democratic "base," rebutting GOP efforts to evade responsibility for its extremism and obstructionism, and presenting a clear choice to persuadable voters.

In other words, Obama's campaign strategy repudiated his political strategy as president—and perhaps the strategy he has resumed in dealing with Republicans now that the election is over, some progressives fear.

That's an understandable judgment. But from what we know of the internal thinking of the White House, it was long-planned and represented a scheduled "pivot" in messaging rather than any sort of reversal. To put it simply, whatever it meant in terms of his legislative agenda, Obama's long-suffering "bipartisanship" rhetoric set the stage for his increasingly edgy partisan differentiation later in the cycle by consistently depicting him as a reasonable leader dealing with a Republican Party that refused ever to reciprocate. Given the strong tendency of persuadable (and often "low-information") voters, reinforced by the false equivalency habits of the mainstream media, to treat both parties in Washington as equally right and wrong in the various conflicts of Obama's first term, his ever-patient efforts to "reach out" to an unreachable GOP may well have been more effective than direct partisan differentiation in keeping his personal favorability (a key asset moving into 2012, and consistently exceeding his job approval ratings) higher than his opponents,' including the Republican presidential candidate filed.

Soon after Obama's "pivot," as a fractious Republican primary season unfolded, the White House focused on keeping him "presidential," creating an implicit contrast with the squabbling and pandering GOPers. Once Mitt Romney emerged as the nominee, the Obama campaign skillfully deployed a two-phased attack on his claims to represent a moderate technocrat perfectly equipped to "fix" the economy without association with his party's past incompetence or present extremism. The first phase constantly reminded voters of Romney's personal background—at Bain Capital particularly—and many statements (sometimes gaffes) reflecting an exclusive identification with financial elites and the very wealthy generally. And the second phase focused on Romney's policies as reflecting the same skewed orientation and the same extremist reduplication of the worst of Republican mistakes of the recent past.

The election-year strategy, which also relied on a general improvement in economic conditions and a relatively stable international environment, served the more fundamental missions of convincing swing voters the election was a choice of two very different directions for the

<sup>1</sup><http://www.thenation.com/blog/164996/osawatimie-obama-embraces-new-populist-moment#>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/07/full-text-barack-obama-speech>

country (the constant theme of Obama’s messaging during the stretch run), and convincing “base” voters they could enthusiastically support the President while avoiding the despoilation of cherished progressive priorities by the GOP. It succeed on all counts. It is an open question as to whether “accelerating” the process of sharp partisan differentiation earlier into Obama’s presidency would have worked as well, since it would have become part of the despised Washington background noise long before ballots were cast.

Romney, obviously, had a more restricted landscape on which to deploy his own grand strategy. By the time the general election campaign was fully underway he had spent most of the previous five years trying to establish his conservative bona fides, in ever more glaring contrast to his past record as a candidate and governor in Massachusetts. In the 2012 cycle, his own health care plan as governor became not only a primary-season albatross, but undercut many of his options in the general election. Thus, when he began his “pivot” to the general election, the aspects of his record he couldn’t talk about and the GOP agenda items he had more recently embraced that polled poorly left him with little to tout other than his business experience. And that, of course, left him open to exactly the Obama campaign attack on him that pulled down his favorable ratings and set up the latter assault on his and his party’s policy agenda.

Romney did successfully count on a post-primary consolidation of support from self-identified Republicans, though his choice of Paul Ryan as a running-mate indicated some nervousness about base support. His various efforts to “wedge” Democratic or swing vote constituencies—e.g., the “war on religion” campaign in the late spring, and repeated claims that Obama was insufficiently committed to Israel (which carried the bonus of appealing to conservative evangelical “base” voters)—mostly fell flat or backfired. His audacious stretch-run effort to exploit hazy perceptions of his policy agenda by suddenly posing as a “moderate” were too little and too late, and were obviously undercut by past and present expressions of fidelity to right-wing memes (most famously the “47%” remarks, which did not create but certainly reinforced the Obama campaign’s relentless description of him as an out-of-touch economic royalist).

If there was a distinct moment where the Obama campaign successfully demolished one of the strategic underpinnings of the Romney campaign, it was probably the president’s **unveiling**<sup>3</sup> of a “Dream Act Lite” initiative in June that he promulgated by executive order. This preempted an apparent Romney plan to reverse some of the damage to his standing among Latino voters that his primary-phase rhetoric on immigration inflicted. Marco Rubio was in the process of developing for Romney a GOP version of “Dream Act Lite,” but the negative conservative reaction to Obama’s gambit left Romney high, dry and more unpopular than ever with this crucial demographic—while considerably boosting Latino enthusiasm for the incumbent, which had been lagging dangerously.

But like many aspects of the Obama Grand Strategy in action, this moment reflected a more general belief by Team Obama that the president’s high personal standing among elements of his 2008 coalition, gradually improving economic conditions, and most of all Romney’s

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/political-animal-a/2012\\_06/obama\\_preempts\\_dream\\_lite037979.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/political-animal-a/2012_06/obama_preempts_dream_lite037979.php)

inability to escape the taint of his party's extremism, would bring that coalition back to life. Add in Obama's exceptional GOTV operation, and successful efforts (aided by the courts) to blunt Republican voter-suppression tactics, and you have the ingredients of a smart strategy executed very well.

There has been a lot of talk in both parties about the implications for future elections of the coalition-building strategies of both candidates, mainly revolving around the demographic trends that are likely to make the Obama Vote gradually more dominant in future presidential cycles. But before we get to the next presidential election, there are two difficult passages Democrats must navigate that may require fresh strategic thinking. The first, quite obviously, is the post-election battle over fiscal priorities that could reach a dramatic climax in March. Will Obama's success in depicting Republicans as unreasonable extremists and obstructionists carry through this fight (keeping in mind that Republicans control the House and have a likely veto power in the Senate), or will the game be "reset," requiring a new strategy? And will Republicans abandon the posturing and inflexibility that made life hell for the Romney campaign (not likely at this juncture, if ever)?

Beyond 2013, the **huge strategic challenge for Democrats**<sup>4</sup> is finding a way to win a midterm election where the turnout patterns inherently favor the opposition, thanks to the unusual alignment of the two parties with elements of the electorate that do (older white voters) and don't (younger and minority voters) tend to participate in midterms, for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the issues on the table. **Over-enthusiastic assessments**<sup>5</sup> of the value of the Obama GOTV operation—even assuming it can be deployed by the party as a whole in a midterm—may underestimate the difficulty of a very different landscape, aside from the historical evidence about the exceptional difficulty of "sixth-year" elections for the party holding the White House.

There's little doubt political scientists and historians will long view the Obama 2012 campaign, like its predecessor, as a "new departure" in political strategy, tactics, and mechanics. But it's less clear whether it can immediately carry over into Democratic successes in the years just ahead.

More to the point, any progressive who thinks a magic formula of maximum partisan confrontation and the best GOTV money can buy is a cure-all for the Democratic Party is courting defeat in the very immediate future.

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/political-animal-a/2012\\_11/turnout\\_disparities\\_and\\_the\\_de041105.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/political-animal-a/2012_11/turnout_disparities_and_the_de041105.php)

<sup>5</sup><http://www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2012/11/everything-you-want-know-about-tech-nerds-who-won-obama-has-been-written/59082/>