



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

DEMOCRATS:
WE NEED TO GET SERIOUS ABOUT
POLITICAL STRATEGY FOR 2020—

AND THAT MEANS PUTTING ASIDE
THE SIMPLISTIC DEBATES THAT NOW
DOMINATE THE DISCUSSION

BY

ANDREW LEVISON

TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

DEMOCRATS: WE NEED TO GET SERIOUS ABOUT POLITICAL STRATEGY FOR 2020—

AND THAT MEANS PUTTING ASIDE THE SIMPLISTIC DEBATES THAT NOW DOMINATE THE DISCUSSION

By ANDREW LEVISON

In the brief period since the 2018 election the main thrust of political commentary has quickly evolved from discussions about which voting groups deserve the credit for the Democratic victories (e.g. the suburbs, educated women, minority turnout and so on) to debates about potential Democratic candidates for 2020

At a slightly higher level there have also been the latest rounds in the perennial Democratic debates between a set of simple “either- or” polarities—base mobilization versus outreach, turnout versus persuasion, the “New Coalition” of minorities, women, youth and liberals versus the Republican coalition of seniors, rural and small town voters and the white working class.

Political commentators who write for print and online publications have the excuse of 1000-2000 word limits on their commentaries and the tremendous pressure they face to maximize the number of clicks their writing receives as the reason why they discuss the challenges facing Democrats in such oversimplified terms. But Democratic candidates and grass-roots activists need to forcefully resist the temptation to think in this way because it profoundly distorts the important, genuinely strategic kind of planning that candidates and campaigns urgently need to do in order to build effective organizations in specific states and congressional districts for 2020

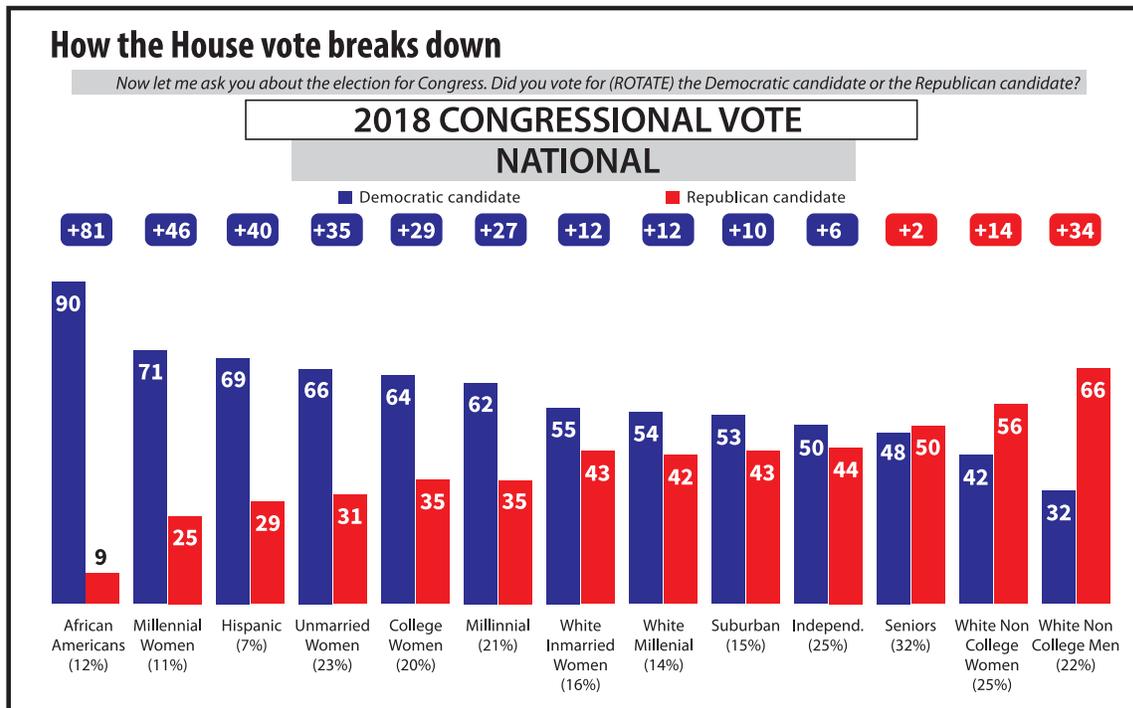
There are three important notions that Democrats should put aside in order to begin serious strategic planning for 2020.

1. That elections are in essence contests between “good guys” (i.e. progressive demographic groups) and “bad guys” (i.e. conservative demographic groups).
2. That increasing turnout is a “magic bullet” for winning elections
3. That campaigns should always heavily prioritize investing money and resources in “the Democratic base”—not only because those groups “deserve” it but also because they produce the most votes for the money

Andrew Levison is the author of *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*. Along with Ed Kilgore, he is coordinator of *The White Working Class Roundtable*.

I. Beyond “Good Guys” and “Bad Guys”

In order to understand the limitations of the superficial “good guys” versus “bad guys” conception, look at the figure below, which is based on post 2018 election polling by Democracy Corps:¹



You don’t usually see a chart like this, one that places the voting behavior of a whole range of different demographic groups side by side. Instead, most commentaries present a comparison between just two of these groups in order to highlight the difference between them. This, of course, strongly encourages the perception that one group is “Democratic” while the other is “Republican.”

But when one looks at the wide range of Democratic and Republican support levels between different groups when they are arrayed from left to right with gradually decreasing Democratic margins, it suggests a profoundly different perspective.

Most fundamentally, it forces one to recognize that the Democratic re-conquest of the House of Representatives in 2018 was not entirely due to pro-Democratic groups of “good guys” like people of color or unmarried women outvoting GOP “bad guys” like seniors or white non-college voters. On the contrary, the Democratic success 2018 was the result of the balance of support and rejection within each one of these various groups. The 90% level of support given to Democratic candidates by African Americans obviously played a vitally important role in many congressional districts but then again, so did the 42% level of Democratic support provided by white non-college women.

In fact since, as the chart shows, white non college women represented 25% of the electorate in contrast to African Americans who only represented 12%, the actual number of white non-college women who voted for Democrats was actually substantially greater than the simple comparison of the respective margins of Democratic support between the two groups would suggest.

¹http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/1103/Dcorps_PE%20Phone_WV_Extended%20Deck_11.27.18_for%20release.pdf

What the chart dramatically illustrates, therefore, is that Democratic success depends on maximizing the level of support within each of the important demographic groups in a state or district and not by focusing all efforts just on the groups that are part of the Democratic base.

In 2020 every state and congressional district will present a different balance between the various demographic groups within it. In some urban areas or college towns, pro-Democratic voters will actually represent the solid majority of the voters in a particular congressional district but in most cases a Democratic campaign must plan on developing an even more detailed chart than the one above and then designing specific strategies to maximize support from each significant demographic group.²

This year, one of the best journalistic examples of how this kind of analysis should be conducted can be seen in political demographer Ruy Teixeira's November 13th Washington Post column which discussed strategic planning for the 2020 presidential race from both geographic and demographic perspectives. It focuses specifically on how candidates should attempt to balance their outreach and appeal to three important demographic groups—nonwhites, college educated whites and white non-college educated voters.

As Teixeira says:³

Start with the Upper Midwest. In the three states that are Exhibit A in how Trump won the 2016 election—Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, all of which he carried by excruciatingly narrow margins—the Democrats came roaring back, winning Senate and gubernatorial races in all three...

Where Democrats succeeded, how did they succeed? And where they failed, how did they fail? The formula for success in the Upper Midwest seems clear: Carry white college graduates, strongly mobilize nonwhite voters, particularly blacks, and hold deficits among white non-college-educated voters in the range of 10 to 15 points. Unlike Hillary Clinton in 2016 (she was obliterated among white non-college-educated voters in state after state), Democrats in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota got all three parts of the formula right in the 2018 midterms...

Teixeira then turns to the Southwest:

In the Southwest, Democrats consolidated their hold over parts of the region in the midterms, with surprisingly easy victories in Nevada's Senate and gubernatorial races (both Democratic flips), and winning governorships comfortably in New Mexico (a Democratic flip) and Colorado...

²It is important to note that, despite its size, this chart still represents an oversimplification. The category of "unmarried women" for example includes young and old, white and non-white, urban and rural and so on and each of these subgroups can have quite distinct opinions and attitudes.

³https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-midterms-gave-democrats-clear-marching-orders-for-2020/2018/11/13/15e9843c-e6c4-11e8-bbdb-72fdbf9d4fed_story.html?fbclid=IwAR0QQVATAXuCTaNO4Vf6kW03WXxF3rvLVwT2DnzhKAuys8gUrhZLTEIaYaE&utm_term=.d866365ac9a9

The Southwestern success formula: Carry or come close to carrying white college graduates; gain strong turnout and support from nonwhites, particularly Latinos; cap the deficits among white non-college-educated voters in the low 20s. Democrats can get away with higher deficits among white non-college-educated voters because the nonwhite share of voters in these states is much higher than in the Midwest.

In 2018, this formula worked in Nevada, Colorado, New Mexico and in the Arizona Senate race, with notably strong Latino support, but it failed in the Texas Senate race. Why?

O'Rourke also drew strong Latino support, and his performance among white college-educated voters was quite good for a Democrat in Texas. But his deficit among white non-college-educated voters was a disaster: O'Rourke lost these voters by 48 points, according to the exit polls. Democrats in 2020 will need to substantially reduce this deficit in Texas if they hope to compete there, while maintaining their relatively good 2018 performance among white non-college-educated voters in the rest of the Southwest, along with high levels of Latino mobilization.

Finally, the South:

In the South, the trick for Democrats in Georgia and Florida is carrying blacks overwhelmingly in both states, while solidly carrying Latinos in Florida (the state's large, relatively conservative Cuban American population means Democrats can't feasibly generate the 2-to-1 Latino advantage they typically enjoy elsewhere).

Democrats need to be competitive among white college-educated voters in Florida, while avoiding deficits among white non-college-educated voters that reach into the 30s. In Georgia, Democrats must keep their deficit among white college-educated voters under 20 points and stop their white non-college-educated deficit from ballooning out of control.

As the 2018 results show, Democrats in both states came very close to successfully implementing these formulas. The problem was that in Florida, the deficit among white non-college-educated voters was 30 points or a little higher and, in Georgia, the same deficit was a yawning 65 points. Whittle down those deficits, maintain nonwhite-voter mobilization and reasonable competitiveness among white college-educated voters, and Democrats have a path to victory.

This is a coherent approach to political strategy. An actual political campaign will have to extend this kind of analysis to a much wider range of demographic groups, setting additional goals and minimal necessary levels of support from subgroups based on age, gender, geographic area and so on but the article offers a clear model of how a systematic strategic analysis differs from the simplistic "good guys" versus "bad guys" approach.

Discussions that try to shoehorn geographic and demographic complexities into a simple "good guys" versus "bad guys" framework, in contrast, quickly become incoherent. For example, in a relatively short 1,500 word New York Times article about a recent meeting of the Democracy Alliance, the author at various points identified all of the following geographic and demographic groups with a potential "progressive" majority – "the sun belt," "people of color," "the south",

⁴<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/17/us/politics/democratic-donors-2020.html>

"low income people" "the southwest," and "youth." At the same time, "centrist" strategies were identified with all of the following: "the rust belt," "the suburbs," "the white working class," "the East Coast," and "the Midwest."⁴

This is a completely hopeless muddle and no serious political strategy can possibly be designed if it is organized this way. A serious political strategy either analyzes different geographic and demographic variables in a systematic way or it might as well not bother to analyze them at all.

II. Increasing turnout is a "magic bullet" for winning elections

Closely related to the idea of visualizing demographic groups as being either "good guys" or "bad guys" is the notion that simply increasing turnout among Democratic base groups can guarantee victory. Typically, commentaries that make this argument will begin by quoting statistics on the very large number of young people, low income people or other generally pro-Democratic groups who do not vote, especially in non-presidential years. They then proceed to argue—often rather breathlessly and theatrically—that if all these damn people would just get off their lazy butts and vote, Democrats would win every single election.

As a result, increasing turnout among Democratic base groups is therefore argued to be the best possible strategy for Democrats -- the superior alternative to inevitably fruitless attempts to win support from non-base groups. As one particularly melodramatic commentator expressed the view, the alternative of allocating any effort to winning non-base votes is nothing less than *"a complete waste of time, energy, money and breath."*

Now it is entirely true that increasing turnout is indeed vital and that for many years Democrats utterly failed to give the strategy the attention and resources it deserved. In 2018, the profound importance of increasing turnout was dramatically demonstrated by the impressive campaigns in Texas, Georgia, Florida and elsewhere during which turnout levels among Democrats came close to reaching the levels of presidential years.

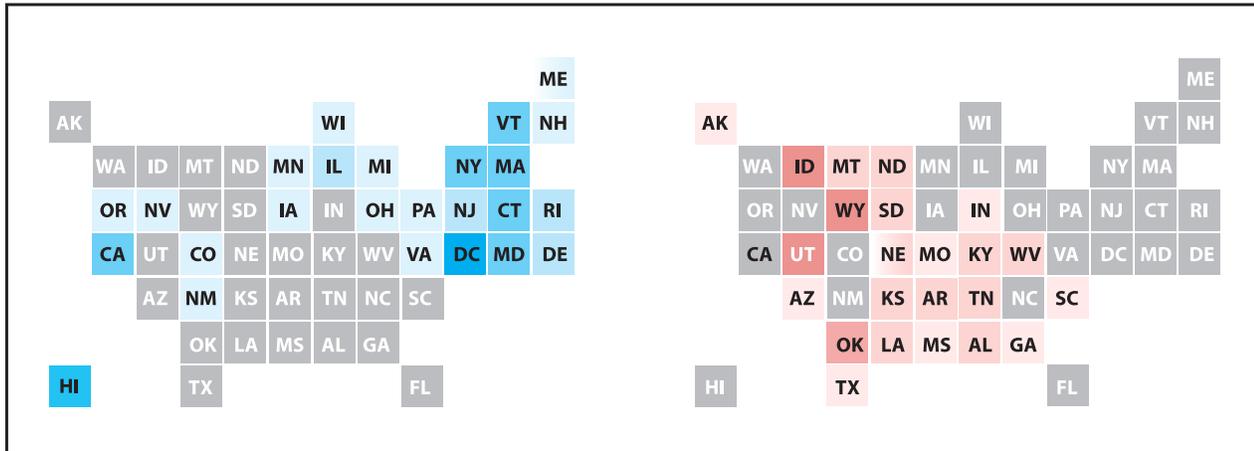
But, as Ruy Teixeira noted above, by itself turnout simply cannot do the entire job. One rather dramatic way to demonstrate this fact is to use an interactive tool called the Red to Blue Calculator that the FiveThirtyEight website developed in 2016. It begins by displaying the data on the levels of turnout and Democratic support that different demographic groups displayed in 2016 and then allows the user to input different values for both variables in order to see how many states flip from Democratic to Republican or Republican to Democratic based on the change.

When one activates the calculator and raises the level of African American and Hispanic turnout to the utterly impossible level of 99.9% while holding other factors steady, it still turns out that 21 states remain in Republican hands.

On the following page is the graphic produced by the 538 interactive tool and a list of the states that remain in Republican hands even if **essentially every single African American and Latino or Latina voter in the United States of America** cast a ballot.⁵

⁵<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-swing-the-election/>

Democratic States (Blue) Republican States (Red)



These are the Republican states shown above:

Alaska, Idaho, Utah, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas, Louisiana, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, West Virginia, Maine and New Hampshire.

In fact, if one also increases the level of white working class turnout by just 10% (assuming that a tidal wave of nonwhite turnout would generate at least some level of counter-mobilization among whites) the result is that half of the states in America remain in the hands of the GOP.

This is an absolutely critical reality that must be considered when one attempts to analyze different political strategies for one day winning a solid and commanding Democratic majority in the Senate. It is simply not realistic to believe that increasing turnout alone can ever possibly achieve this goal. Democrats cannot completely abandon persuasion and rely entirely on increasing turnout if they wish to insure a progressive future.

III. Campaigns should always heavily prioritize investing money and resources in “the Democratic base”—not only because those groups “deserve” it but also because they produce the most votes for the money.

The final notion promoted by some commentators, one which follows from the preceding two, is that campaigns should always and in every situation prioritize investing money and resources in “the most loyal Democrats” – i.e. the Democratic base.

To the extent that Democratic campaigns and state and national party organizations have in the past failed to invest sufficient money and resources in building grass roots organizations in order to increase Democratic base turnout this argument represents an entirely valid, necessary and important corrective. For many years a very large number of Democratic political campaigns relied excessively on expensive TV advertising, leaving local level party building and ongoing

“Get Out The Vote” (GOTV) campaigns underfunded and treated as an afterthought. Correcting this disastrous error finally began in this campaign year but it remains a vitally important challenge and priority.

But, correcting the underinvestment of the past does not validate the more expansive argument that future campaigns should always follow a rigid rule requiring them to allocate the lion’s share of their funds and resources to mobilizing the Democratic base.

The main, superficially plausible argument for this approach is based on the idea that Democratic base voters will always be easier to mobilize and get to the polls than more ambivalent and uncommitted voters will be. As a result, the investment of additional resources in mobilizing base voters should always produce more votes than investment in any other groups.

In fact, many of these commentaries will argue that allocating money and resources to base voters will always produce *“the best return on a campaign’s investment”*—the use of the business school financial language suggesting that the strategy is based on hard-headed business logic and not just a vague notion that base groups “deserve” more financial support in recognition of their loyalty.

But, in fact, a genuinely serious “business” perspective on where Democratic money and resources should best be allocated does not support the use of any simple and inflexible rule. Rather it is based on the economic concept of diminishing returns. The first outreach efforts and investments by Democratic groups and campaigns in a particular neighborhood or demographic group will inevitably first capture the most easily motivated nonvoters. Subsequent efforts, however, will require more and more effort and still eventually begin to produce declining results once the more easily convinced non-voters are recruited. At a certain point investing additional resources elsewhere will produce more votes than any additional efforts in the initial location. There is, after all, a limit to the amount of money and effort any particular area or group of voters can usefully absorb. As common sense suggests, opening six offices in one neighborhood and none in another is not likely to be an optimal investment strategy.

This is not an abstract concern. As many outside progressive groups funneled money and resources into some of the special elections in 2017 such as Conor Lamb’s congressional campaign in Pennsylvania, the number of phone calls, door to door canvass visits, e-mails and other voter contacts that many residents received reached and surpassed the saturation point and actually became a source of annoyance rather than motivation .

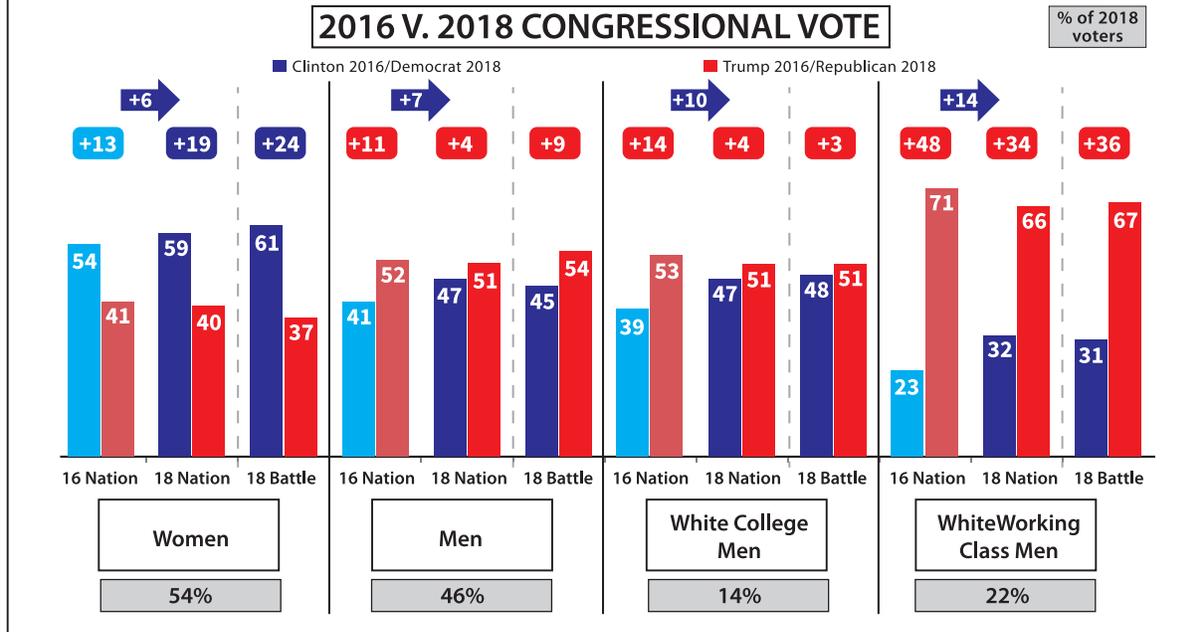
A related misconception is that when there is a general Democratic “wave” in an election year, it will always be the Democratic base that shows the greatest increase in support. But in fact, this is not always the case.

A particularly interesting example occurred in 2018 when many different demographic groups all shifted in a pro-Democratic direction. Look at the chart below, based on polling from Democracy Corps, which shows the change in nationwide Democratic support by several groups from 2016 to 2018.⁶

⁶http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/1103/Dcorps_PE%20Phone_WV_Extended%20Deck_11.27.18_for%20release.pdf

Crash in support with white working class men big part of story

Now let me ask you about the election for Congress. Did you vote for (ROTATE) the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate?



(Note: the columns labeled "18 battle" shows the percentages for a subset of battleground congressional races)

Women, men and white college men all provided substantially higher levels of support for Democrats than did white working class men. But also notice the blue arrows above each column which indicate the percent change in support that occurred between 2016 and 2018.⁷ It was actually white working class men who made the largest pro-Democratic shift of the four groups rather than the women or college educated men who are generally viewed as being much more Democratically inclined.

This may seem surprising but it is actually an understandable result of the fact that many previously Democratic white working class men swung quite dramatically to the GOP in 2016 and therefore were also the most likely to swing back dramatically two years later.

This has significant implications for investment strategy. It shows that in some cases some non-base groups can actually play a larger role than some other base groups in a Democratic resurgence. As a result, campaign investment strategy must be flexible enough to take advantage of opportunities of this kind

Conclusion

The victories of 2018 were in substantial measure achieved by massive grass roots efforts at increasing turnout of Democratic base groups (along with the persuasion of ambivalent voters) and also by campaigns funded by extensive small dollar contributions from ordinary Democrats rather than from a handful of wealthy individuals. These are entirely positive developments that should be valued and extended.

⁷More precisely, the arrows indicate the change in the "spread" between Democratic and Republican support i.e. the difference between the GOP and Dem levels of support.

But, in turning to 2020, Democratic political strategy should avoid relying on notions that, while superficially plausible, do not lead to the optimal Democratic strategy. They are:

1. That elections are in essence contests between “good guys” (i.e. progressive demographic groups) and “bad guys” (i.e. conservative demographic groups).
2. That increasing turnout is a “magic bullet” for winning elections.
3. That campaigns should always heavily prioritize investing money and resources in “the Democratic base”—not only because those groups “deserve” it but also because they produce the most votes for the money.

Let’s face it, in the popular journalistic metaphor that describes some political strategies as either “playing checkers” or “playing chess”, these three notions must be seen as falling in the first category rather than the second.