



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

A NEW APPROACH FOR DEMOCRATS

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"BIG TENT," WHAT IF THE PARTY
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BY

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By ANDREW LEVISON

The energetic debate among Democrats today is invariably framed as a bitter conflict between "centrists" and "leftists." It is, according to a certain media groupthink, a "battle for the soul of the party." Just look at recent headlines in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other national publications:

House Democrats explode in recriminations as liberals lash out at moderates.

Bernie Sanders- Style politics are Defining 2020 Race, Unnerving Moderates

Centrist Democrats push back against party's liberal surge

The fight for the soul of the Democratic Party has begun

This way of visualizing the Democratic Party's problems is so pervasive that most Democrats automatically assume it is the only way to think about Democratic political strategy. But there is an alternative. While Democrats frequently pay lip service to the idea that their party is a "big tent" or a "broad coalition," they do not seriously grapple with the implications of that view. If you accept the notion that, to win majorities, the Democratic Party must be a "big tent," then the fundamental challenge facing the party is not one side or another winning a "battle for the soul of the party." It's overcoming the obstacles to creating and maintaining the broadest possible Democratic coalition.

As E.J. Dionne has [argued](#):

The core political challenges facing Democrats are not the rise of those who proudly call themselves democratic socialists and the danger that Republicans will succeed in red-baiting the entire party. Instead, Democrats face formidable coalition-management problems because they now provide a home to millions of voters (and scores of elected officials) who in earlier times might well have been liberal Republicans.¹

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¹https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-bigger-challenge-to-democrats-than-socialists-their-liberal-republicans/2019/03/03/31d78192-3c89-11e9-a2cd-307b06d0257b_story.html?utm_term=.211dec2c5871&noredirect=on

In other words, the problem the Democratic Party faces is not a conflict between two warring tribes in which one must win and the other must lose. The problem is creating the infrastructure to manage an intellectually and ideologically diverse party that cannot risk being fractured if it is to unseat Donald Trump in 2020.

The 2018 elections demonstrated that the Democrats' diversity is not, by its nature, a political liability. In congressional and state legislative elections, Democratic voters supported the Democrats in their districts despite the ideological fights within the party nationally. Moderate candidates like Conor Lamb and Abigail Spanberger won in Republican-leaning districts while progressives like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez won in solidly blue districts. In none of these cases did voters reject the Democratic candidates because of the views of other candidates elsewhere across the country.

But coalition building becomes steadily more difficult in state-wide races for governorships and the Senate, in which a Democrat must assemble an even broader network of support. In the battle for president, the Democratic candidate must appeal to the widest possible cross-section of the country.

So how can Democrats make progress toward meeting this challenge?

Consider how coalition management problems tend to be handled in parliamentary systems. Since World War II, there have been a variety of left-of-center coalitions in Europe and Scandinavia. These were composed of several distinct political parties rather than a single "umbrella" or "big tent" organization. Each party had its own distinct identity, including a formal, detailed platform and agenda, as well as a robust and structured system of internal debate and discussion. These distinct parties offered the larger coalition several advantages over an American style "big-tent" approach.

Parliamentary parties offer voters a clear ideological identity that can generate a greater degree of enthusiasm and commitment than a larger, more amorphous organization like the Democratic Party. What's more, the parliamentary election process can provide a more coherent mechanism for electoral choice. In the first round of voting (similar to American political primaries), all parties, large and small, energetically campaign. During the second round of voting, the parties that were part of a larger coalition generally agree to support the candidate who had garnered the largest number of votes. But the smaller party or parties explicitly define their support as "critical support" to emphatically indicate that their endorsement does not represent any abandonment of their unique platform and agenda. This distinction reassures their supporters that their concerns and priorities are not being betrayed or minimized.

Finally, if a coalition's candidate for major office is successful, he or she will negotiate with the smaller parties to create a "common platform" that incorporates their views in rough proportion to their share of the total vote. This gives all of those who voted for the coalition the sense that their votes and their opinions still have a measurable influence.

Of course, parliamentary systems have their own distinct and often profound drawbacks and dysfunctions. But this thumbnail sketch—albeit oversimplified and a tad idealized—does reflect key aspects how a range of left-of-center coalitions in Western Europe and Scandinavia have operated at various times since World War II.

You're probably wondering how this is relevant for America. What these key features of many parliamentary systems suggest, I'd argue, is that the default American conception of how to seek greater political unity is wrong.

Typically, Democrats seek unity by blurring distinctions and disagreements between the progressive and moderate wings of the Democratic coalition, seeking instead a kind of lowest common denominator. But, as the outline above paradoxically suggests, the way to enhance unity between the moderate and progressive wings of the Democratic Party might be to sharpen the distinctions between the party's two wings rather than obscuring them.

Imagine what might happen if the Democratic Party abandoned its identity as an amorphous "big tent," and instead became a more formal political coalition between two groups.

One group, for example, would comprise *Progressive Democrats*. That would include the supporters of Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the current Congressional Progressive Caucus. The other group would comprise *Heartland Democrats*. Those would be the more moderate Democrats, including members of the New Democrat Coalition, a Congressional member organization made up of centrist, capitalist Democrats.

Both of these groups would have an institutional infrastructure. They would be able to develop and nationally promote their distinct platforms as a vivid expression of their basic political perspectives. These platforms would clearly distinguish the bold and visionary proposals of the first group from the more cautious reformist agenda of the second and could sharply define and clarify the differences between the two camps. (Progressives tend to think it's the moderates who stand in the way of all the big policies they believe will win popular support, while moderates think progressives are the ones who aren't practical enough to take back power.)

There are various ways these two groups might be organized within the Democratic Party's coalition, but it would likely not be administered by the party "establishment" itself. One way to start would be to enhance the functions of the existing Congressional Progressive Caucus and New Democratic Coalition. Alternatively, leaders could create entirely new structures, based on existing grassroots progressive and moderate organizations, and codify this arrangement into some kind of systematized framework.

The existence of two formal groups within the party would allow both to more clearly distinguish and promote their distinct perspectives. And, once established in the minds of voters, these groups would force the GOP to attack them separately. A Progressive or Heartland Democrat could convincingly rebuff false GOP attempts to associate him or herself with proposals to which he or she did not agree by pointing to the national platform of his or her chosen group.

With two distinct wings operating within the Democratic coalition, it would also be possible to develop American versions of the concept of “critical support”—leading to more formal negotiated compromises at key meetings, such as the Democratic National Convention every four years. This would incentivize voters and candidates who lost in the primaries to more energetically support the candidate who won.

The current mindset of a single all-encompassing struggle for “the soul of the party” has stifled the Democrats’ creative thinking. But a great many exciting possibilities come to mind when we liberate ourselves from the constraints of that mindset and begin to think about the task of managing a broad coalition instead.

Paul Star of *The American Prospect* recently [proposed](#)² that the two major caucuses among congressional Democrats—the Congressional Progressive Caucus and the New Democrat Coalition—could sponsor their own debates among a limited group of candidates whom they could invite. Such debates, he argues, could help winnow down the presidential field in a constructive way.

This highlights a more general challenge. Many of the important intra-Democratic debates are now hopelessly muddled by the gulf between the most conservative and most progressive Democratic proposals—and the sheer number of different ideas that are all competing for attention. These debates, however, would become far more tractable if they were first evaluated separately by the progressive and moderate wings. The differences between the two wings would still remain, but the debate itself would be organized in a way that facilitated a more substantive and productive process of negotiation and compromise. This will become all the more important when the Democrats eventually take back power and try to unite around particular reforms or policy ideas.

The most intense partisans of both the Democratic left and center may reflexively suspect that any change of this kind would somehow benefit the “other side.” But it is clear that this would **not** be the case. Both sides now firmly believe that a clear debate between the two wings would win voters approval of their particular political agenda—and that the current jumbled and confused Democratic debate benefits neither of them.

Coalition management becomes even more appealing when you get to the real core of the matter. Most media coverage of the debate between the progressive and moderate wings has made the debate profoundly dysfunctional. It ends up emphasizing opinions that are more extreme than the actual range of opinions that exist within the party.

In the absence of two coherent and recognized organizations that reflect the diversity of viewpoints within the two major factions, any self-proclaimed spokesperson can write an op-ed in the *New York Times* or *VOX* or any other major publication and assert that they speak for the entire progressive-left or moderate center.

²<https://prospect.org/article/progressive-caucus-and-new-democrat-coalition-could-help-consolidate-party%E2%80%99s-presidential>

Because most publications favor opinion pieces that have clear and dramatic narratives, they tend to feature writers whose views are more simplistic than the actual array of complicated viewpoints among the major progressive or moderate groups or organizations.

A more formal role and status for both wings within the Democratic coalition would sharply limit this tendency and produce more serious and substantive mainstream media discussion about Democratic goals and priorities.

This is a new and unfamiliar way of imagining the Democratic coalition. Those who encourage Democratic unity have long favored the image and metaphor of a single, undifferentiated “big tent” that encompasses a vast and inconsistent range of views and ideas. But formalizing the existence of two distinct perspectives within the party might be just the way to unify it.