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A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO

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BY
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By JAMES VEGA

Mobilizing the youth vote will be a critically important challenge in 2014 and there are two ideas floating around right now that would seem to be of central importance for the design of Democratic strategy.

- First, that young people 18-30 are substantially more progressive than older Americans on a wide range of issues and policies.
- Second, that as things now stand, younger voters will not turn out to vote in 2014 in anything like the numbers needed to prevent avoidable Democratic losses.

Both of these generalizations are basically accurate and for progressive Democrats there is a fiercely powerful, indeed almost irresistible temptation to combine them into a single coherent narrative—one that can be stitched together just by grabbing the headline clichés from the major commentators. Young voters are “*deeply disillusioned*” with Obama and the Democrats because of the president and the party’s inadequate progressivism. They suffer from an “*enthusiasm gap*” or “*passion gap*.” As a result there will be a substantial “*drop-off*” from the support for Democrats they displayed in 2008 or 2012. If Democrats want to combat this trend, they must “*inspire youth*” by providing them with a more robust progressive agenda and more progressive Democratic Party.

This certainly seems plausible and most Democrats can easily imagine specific individuals who seem perfect examples of this sector of the young—the passionate young supporters of the Occupy movement, the anti-war activists and civil liberties defenders who are furious with various of Obama’s policies, the popular young left and progressive authors whose critiques of the Democratic Party fill the columns of blogs like FireDogLake and the pages of the leading progressive magazines.

But there is one problem. The majority of the young voters who supported Obama in 2008 but then “dropped-off” in later elections really don’t fit this description very well. Rather, they fit something like the following profile:

- They are deeply cynical about the utility and value of voting in general and only made an exception in 2008 because of the unique “youth bandwagon” nature of Obama’s initial campaign.
- They see politics as something remote from their daily life and think that the results of off-year elections “*don’t really affect me at all.*”

- They do not follow politics closely on a day-to-day basis and have literally no idea of how profound the damage will be if the GOP gains the Senate in 2014.

As a result, instead of visualizing most “disillusioned millennials” as angry Occupy protesters wearing Guy Fawkes masks or earnest civil liberties activists shouting about the NSA at congressional town hall meetings, Democratic strategists should imagine instead the kinds of young urbanites who carry around skateboards even though they are in their early to mid 20’s or the guys who zip around on expensive racing bikes and treat fitness as a secular religion or those who drag around DJ mixing decks and speaker systems from gig to gig and sincerely believe that “*music is the only thing that matters.*” Some of these disillusioned millennial guys wear Big Lebowski “*The Dude Abides*” teashirts, others have weird tattoos and still others dress in Urban Outfitters/Banana Republic” hip styles or pricy high fashion because they are spending every waking moment desperately trying to get a job in the entertainment industry or mobile device game programming.

There are an equally wide range of styles and sensibilities among millennial women—from nose-ring, pink hair and torn jean jacket punk-trashy to Cache and Babe stylish; from dead-end-dishwashing job cynical to career-track ambitious.

But the one fundamental thing that deeply unites all of these various categories of millennials is the fact that they haven’t the faintest idea who the devil anyone named Larry Summers, Edward Snowden, Elizabeth Warren or John Boehner might happen to be. It’s not just that they don’t read the *Times* or watch MSNBC; they don’t even read the front page of *USA Today* or regularly watch Jon Stewart on the comedy channel. They hit the mute button every time any news comes on and think politics is complete bullshit and voting basically a waste of time. Some will vote in interesting presidential years but very few will ordinarily pay any attention to off-year elections. Their social and political views are indeed more progressive than older Americans’. But this does not translate into participation in elections particularly when a charismatic candidate is not on the ballot.

It would be an interesting exercise to try and estimate the relative sizes of these two groups—the left-wing millennials who will refuse to vote in 2014 as a deliberate protest against the Dems inadequate progressivism and the larger group who voted for Obama in 2008 but have now fallen back in the “*politics is bullshit, voting is a waste of time*” category and who will just not care enough to find the motivation to vote on election day.

But a precise calculation of this kind is really not necessary. The vast academic literature on the extent of “low information voting” does clearly suggest that the basically cynical and largely apolitical group of millennials is substantially larger than the set of politically engaged left-wing millennials who will actually choose not to vote for Democrats as a protest. But regardless of the exact size of the two groups, the critical fact is that mobilizing the larger cynical and apolitical group requires a completely different approach than does a Democratic appeal for the votes of the militant progressive millennials.

But what kind of political strategy might the Dems employ to reach out to this cynical and apolitical group?

There are three basic ideas that Democratic strategy must try to communicate if it is to convince these voters to go to the polls on Election Day:

- That the results of the election will actually affect them personally
- That voting is indeed worthwhile
- That politics need not be something boring and separate from their daily lives

Let us look at each one of these ideas in turn.

The election will affect millennials personally

In recent elections Democrats have had substantial success in mobilizing female voters with the argument that the GOP policies amount to a “War on Women.” Yet, it is equally plausible to accuse the GOP of also waging a “Republican War on Youth.” Consider these elements of the Republican platform:

1. **Denying the young the right to vote:** There are now legislative bills and other entirely serious Republican efforts to disenfranchise college students across America. At this moment **North Carolina**¹ is in the process of passing the most extreme measures, but Republican state legislatures in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, **Ohio**² and Maine have attempted similar initiatives and every other state with a GOP controlled legislature is quietly examining the potential electoral benefits of taking similar actions.
2. **Illegalizing sexual expression and contraception:** Since the 2008 elections, religious and social conservatives in the GOP have become increasingly open about their larger goals beyond simply illegalizing all abortion. Limiting access to contraception in order to prevent sexual expression among the young has become an avowed objective and has been advocated in the most extraordinarily antiquated and misogynistic ways, from snickering suggestions that women should “hold a pill between their knees” to prevent pregnancy or describing sexually active women as “sluts.” At the same time, while public attitudes toward GLBT individuals have in general become markedly more tolerant, within the GOP many candidates and officeholders still view these Americans as criminals and degenerates and advocate laws to harass and punish them.
3. **Opposing measures to assist the young on economic issues:** The GOP has opposed measures to reduce the burden of student debt on young Americans, opposed measures to reduce the very high rate of youth unemployment and is now even attempting to convince healthy young people to gamble on going without health insurance in order to sabotage the introduction of Health Care Reform.
4. **Opposing measures to prepare for the future:** From the denial of climate change and the refusal to take steps to moderate it to opposition to public investment in education, scientific research and physical infrastructure, the GOP has prioritized short term debt and deficit reduction over virtually every category of investment in the future.

¹<http://www.thenation.com/blog/175837/north-carolina-republicans-escalate-attack-student-voting#axzz2dmym7RrN>

²<http://tpmdc.talkingpointsmemo.com/2013/05/ohio-republicans-push-law-to-penalize-colleges-for-helping-students-vote.php>

Taken as a whole, this Republican “War on Youth” fits the general paradigm of a deep division between “the old versus the young” that emerged in the 2008 elections. For many young people at that time, Obama and the Democrats seemed to embody the aspirations of the young while the GOP appeared as a party of “angry old white men.” This paradigm remains relevant and potentially powerful today.

Voting is worthwhile

The conventional view of voting presented in American civics textbook invariably describes its only purpose as being to allow voters to choose between specific candidates. When seen in this light the cynicism of many millennials is entirely reasonable since both Republicans and Democrats are locked in the same system of big money campaign contributions, lobbyists and back room deals that insures that the wealthy and powerful dominate the system. Youth can hardly be criticized if they feel that in all too many cases no matter which of the two candidates they vote for, little will change.

But in other countries and other circumstances voting has had profoundly different political purposes and meanings for the people who go to the polls. There are many instances of, for example:

- Voting as the expression and defense of one’s ideals
- Voting as the assertion of identity and pride
- Voting as a protest against injustice
- Voting as part of participation in a broader movement for social change.

History provides a variety of examples:

American blue collar workers after World War II: The reliably Democratic “straight ticket” voting blue collar workers of the 1950’s and 1960’s were in most cases not voting the straight ticket because they evaluated and preferred the specific platforms of all the individual Democratic candidates on the ballot. They were expressing broad class-based support for the Democrats as the party of Roosevelt, the New Deal and post-war legislation like the G.I. Bill. Their votes were also expressing a sense of social identity with Democrats as the party of “the common man” and a rejection of the GOP as the defender of the chamber of commerce businessmen who belonged to exclusive country clubs and lived in affluent, far-off suburbs.

Working class voters in Europe after World War II: Among working class British voters who supported the Labor Party there was a an even deeper sense of voting as an act of class defiance and assertion of pride and identity than in the United States. Far more than in America, upper class conservatives in Post War Britain viewed ordinary working people with a startling sense of condescension and contempt They would openly describe working class people as “lazy” and “stupid” inferiors who, they told their children, literally “smelled bad.”³ In fact, their attitude was very much like that of today’s Ayn Rand quoting plutocrats who describe poor and working class

³http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-04-08/opinions/38369164_1_coal-strike-middle-class-class-system

people as “takers,” “leeches” and “parasites.” British workers responded by voting for Labor as matter of asserting their own dignity and identity. Failing to get out and vote was seen as saying “*Go right ahead and screw me. I really am every bit as worthless as you say I am.*” The actual platform of the post-war British Labor party, largely unchanged until 1990’s, was for many working class voters less a concrete agenda than a symbol of “in-your-face” defiance and resistance to the contempt they faced from the wealthy elite.

In continental European countries with parliamentary systems and broad left-of-center coalitions, there was a similar kind of class-based identity politics in the post-war years. This resulted in “strategic voting”—voting for the party of one’s choice in the first round of balloting (which usually did not produce a winner with a clear majority) and then supporting whichever candidate in the larger center-left coalition had garnered the most votes in the first round. In these cases, individual voters cast their ballot not for the specific candidate but for the broad left-of-center coalition that the candidate represented as a whole.

African-Americans: The most well-known and dramatic U.S. example of identity and social protest-based voting is, of course, the political stance of African-Americans. In the South, the bitter struggle for the right to vote was an integral part of the larger struggle for equality, integration and personal dignity. Having literally risked their lives in many cases, newly enfranchised Black voters exercised their right to vote with the vision that it was a vital part of the broader struggle for justice. This perspective on voting was reinforced in both the South and the North by the fact that many of the candidates for office in the 1970’s were well-known veterans of the civil rights movement, underlining the deep connection African-Americans felt between voting and the struggle for social change.

In short, the act of voting need not necessarily be visualized as a simply a method for making a mundane choice between two candidates neither of whom will be capable of making any significant change. Quite the contrary, given the unprecedented extremism that has taken hold of the GOP, for young people the purpose of voting in 2014 takes on a dramatically different character.

In the current political environment voting is indispensable, but primarily as the defensive prong of a two pronged strategy—the other prong of which is active participation in campaigns to fight against the conservative “War on Youth.” Thus, voting becomes an act that is performed to defend existing rights, assert basic values and assert social identity, rather than as a vehicle for directly achieving change. Failure to vote, in contrast, guarantees massive and appalling social regression.

This provides an alternative basis for Democratic political organizing, one that does not focus on specific candidates and races but on the broader struggle between two visions of society, between an agenda for the future and a “war on the young.” Democrats who closely follow politics recognize the incredibly precarious thread by which the current political stalemate hangs. In living memory there has never been such a huge ideological gap between the two parties as there is today and this makes voting for *“the coalition and the vision and not the*

man” more important than it has been at any time in most American’s lives. It is certainly true that Millennials are completely unaccustomed to thinking about voting in this way, but it is the inescapable reality of 2014.

“Politics” can be an organic part of community, culture and identity

Given the general cynicism or simple indifference to “politics” among many young people today, it will require more than clever slogans or effective GOTV (get out the vote) efforts to change this deeply engrained mindset. A change in attitudes toward the act of voting will only occur in the context of a much wider cultural shift such as that which briefly occurred during Obama’s 2008 campaign.

The Obama moment and movement, however, was remarkably short. To visualize more enduring attitude changes it is necessary to think back to earlier episodes of nationwide youth protest and social activism. In the early 1960’s, for example, the young whites who supported the civil rights movement expressed their outlook in a broad cultural “protest” movement that embraced the Bob Dylan-Joan Baez folk music style and ethos, an insistence on wearing blue jeans rather than “proper” clothing, and a general attitude of rebellion and rejection of the conservative conformity of the 1950’s. Folk music festivals, street protests, sit-in’s, demands for a larger voice by college students and a host of other initiatives defined “the protest generation” of the early 1960’s

In similar fashion, the environmental movement of the 1970’s and 1980’s, largely comprised of the young, was not narrowly “political” and focused on voting. In fact, after a few significant bills were passed in the early 1970’s, it largely became a movement focused on changing lifestyles and attitudes. Environmental activists saw raising public awareness and consciousness of the issues, protesting the actions of specific firms and industries and building bottom-up grass roots change in environmental behavior as more likely to produce genuine progress than traditional political campaigning. From “Earth Day” to “Save the Whales”, the movement’s broad agenda was rarely embodied in specific bills or political candidates.

What this suggests is that any attempt to mobilize youth for 2014 cannot be visualized as a narrowly “political” organizing effort but rather as one that treats politics and voting as one aspect of a broader social and cultural movement of resistance to conservative reaction and demand for progressive change.

This need to move beyond a narrow conception of “politics” as a separate sphere of life is reinforced by the experience of political parties in other democratic countries. **In many, the parties routinely support a wide range of grass-roots community activities that are not explicitly “political” but which play a significant role in maintaining their political support.**⁴ They sponsor local soccer teams, hold street fairs, run youth clubs, manage pool halls, arrange holiday trips and organize hobby groups. Small businesses that support the parties put permanent banners in their windows and build their customer base around a sense of community and cultural loyalty to the political party.

⁴http://www.amazon.com/Affluence-French-Worker-Fourth-Republic/dp/0691093008/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1378171632&sr=1-2&keywords=affluence+and+the+french+worker

During 2008, the Obama campaign began to evolve in this direction. The “Yes We Can” campaign took on characteristics of a social movement rather than just a traditional political campaign. The explosion of creativity expressed in music, art, videos and other media were inspired by Obama but reflected a great deal more than simply a campaign to elect an individual candidate. There was a clear feeling that Obama represented a cultural movement of the young rather than the old, of the urban, hip and educated rather than the small town and traditional. The Obama campaign became a broad social movement united by a common outlook, sensibility and identity. The Republicans were the past and the Democrats were the future.

In order to stimulate a return to this kind of perspective and to a movement rooted in community and culturally based social activism rather than more narrowly targeted political organizing some key steps would include attempting to rebuild the rapport that developed in 2008 with rock bands and DJ’s, sponsoring free rock concerts and art shows, setting up special film screenings, book signings, poetry readings and neighborhood street fairs, engaging with the major social networks through art and music and sponsoring sports teams and events in sports like urban marathons, bicycle races, skateboarding, rock climbing and roller skating. There are also wide opportunities for holding events and creating a sense of community at many businesses that serve young, largely progressive markets. Such businesses include coffee houses, bicycle shops, environmentally friendly products stores, health clubs, independent bookstores, yoga studios, musical instrument and old record stores, “hip” clothing stores and a host of others.

It is activities and venues like these that can provide the community and cultural underpinnings for a broad movement of social protest against the key initiatives of the “GOP war on youth”. This broader approach then can become the basis for a more specifically focused outreach aimed at convincing young voters that participating in elections is not pointless or unconnected with their daily lives.

One specific strategy that can be rapidly initiated would be the formation of a loose coalition of politically committed figures from music, film and culture organized around the notion of opposing the “GOP’s war on youth”. Following the models of the “Live Aid”, “Farm Aid” and “We are the World” campaigns, unique music concerts with major participants can be used to jump-start a broader campaign. In all of these cases a few well-known and passionately committed individuals took the lead in organizing their peers around a social issue campaign and stitched together an informal steering committee structure to make decisions.

This is largely what happened in 2008 among young people inspired by Obama, and by focusing on the broad issues facing youth today rather than narrow appeals for participation in the 2014 elections it is possible that some of that same kind of energy and enthusiasm can be reignited. It is an alternative strategy to simply relying on the traditional voter registration and GOTV operations that seek to bring young voters to the polls.

It can reasonably be objected that this approach is far too ambitious to be practical and it is indeed undeniably a major undertaking. It is, however, necessary at times for Democratic strategists to step back and visualize the larger context and opportunities of a potential political strategy before it is possible to focus down on how to accomplish each component step. Future TDS campaign strategy memos will take closer looks at some of the more detailed steps that will be necessary to convert broad visions such as this into practical reality.