

Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority

THE DEMOCRATIC

strategist



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

DEMS—WE'RE ALREADY WINNING
THE "LONG-HAUL" CAMPAIGN
FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

BY

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There's an important mistake that many Democrats make when they think about political campaigns—they visualize them as simply a collection of individual contests each of which can either be won or lost. In this perspective, winning the presidency or majorities in the House or Senate represent "victories" and failing to achieve those objectives "defeats."

This is particularly apparent this year. As framed by the media and political commentators, winning a majority in the House of Representatives will count as a major Democratic victory and winning both the House and Senate will represent a resounding one. In contrast, failure to achieve at least one of these two goals will be treated as a deeply disappointing and demoralizing failure.

But this is a profoundly short-sighted way to think about the contemporary political scene. In focusing exclusively whether Democrats win or lose particular elections, it profoundly undervalues other kinds of fundamental political advances and victories—major achievements that have actually already been won.

To see why this is the case it is only necessary to recall what a wide range of political commentators were saying about the Democrats in the spring of 2015, in the aftermath of the 2014 congressional elections.

At that time, article after article not only noted the significant Republican gains, but pointed to two fundamental Democratic weaknesses that were underlined by the election.

First, the Democratic Party was suffering from a severe lack of young "next generation" leaders. Aside from Barack Obama, the parties best known and most popular figures were all in their 60's and 70's and repeated defeats in congressional and state level elections across the country had prevented the rise of a younger cohort of "up and coming" politicians who could provide their replacements.

Second, in vast areas of the country grass roots Democratic campaign organizations had simply collapsed. Traditional sources of manpower for local campaigns like the trade unions had declined to a shadow of their prior size and importance and many local Democratic Parties had withered to the point that they had virtually no active local supporters or volunteers in their districts and communities.

The consequences were particularly dire in non-presidential election years. In 2008, for example, younger and more diverse voters came out to elect a unique candidate like Barack Obama but then failed to return to the polls in 2010 and 2014. The result was that in non-presidential years, Congress was elected by a disproportionately old and white electorate that favored the GOP.

This insured that even if a Democratic presidential candidate could be elected, he or she would not only be unable to pass any legislation but would also face fierce and active legislative sabotage of every presidential initiative.

For anyone who re-reads the commentaries of 2015 today, what is most striking is the deeply fatalistic tone of much of the discussion. Most commentators saw no evident way that the situation could improve in the foreseeable future.

As a result, to grasp the genuinely extraordinary scope of the advances that Democrats have made in just two years, it is only necessary to look at the situation today.

First, literally hundreds of new, young Democratic candidates have flooded the political system. In every state and at every level of politics—from congress and governors to state legislators and county officials—new candidates are actively challenging GOP politicians, many of whom have not faced a Democratic challenger in years. These new candidates are impressively diverse in race and gender and share a unique idealism and commitment to breaking with “politics as usual.” As a result, it is now the GOP that looks increasingly old, stagnant and out of touch.

Second, a massive and sophisticated network of Democratic grass-roots organizing has emerged across the country. These initiatives are both “bottom-up”—developing out of the local campaigns of Democratic candidates—and “top-down,” supported by a wide range of both new and established progressive organizations. A year ago there were already over twenty significant national initiatives that provided first time Democratic candidates with candidate training, political campaign management and support for door to door canvassing, phone-bank operations and digital outreach and still more have emerged since that time. A similar array of internet based initiatives has also emerged that connect small Democratic donors with political campaigns across the country. The combination has made it possible for new progressive candidates to run for office without needing big money donors or expensive political campaign management firms.

This massive Democratic mobilization is testament to the profound evil that Trump represents but—equally important—to the massive and thrilling political awakening that is occurring this year. *The advances have been so dramatic that in political science textbooks of the future, 2018 may very well be cited as the critical first year of a long-term Democratic resurgence.*

This is, of course, not the dominant storyline today. Many commentators—with their invincible penchant for choosing the most clichéd and simplistic approach—tend to frame the rise of the new candidates and campaigns as reflecting a Democratic “civil war” between left and center and describe it with florid metaphors borrowed from military campaigns and boxing matches. But what the new Democratic resurgence actually reflects is something very different—the emergence of two very positive underlying trends that are not based on political ideology

The first trend is demographic—the new generations of voters who are under 40 are increasingly diverse in race and gender and have grown up attending schools and living in places that makes them comfortable with diversity. To inspire and mobilize them to vote, they need to see candidates that they can recognize as their own and identify with—not simply because of race or gender but because they reflect these younger voters very distinct perspective, life experience and aspirations.

This generational transition necessarily disrupts existing hierarchies and ways of doing business in the Democratic Party and can be uncomfortable for many members of the traditional order. But in order to achieve a broad nationwide Democratic revitalization, winning the support of these voters is not optional but mandatory.

The second trend is political. The new generations of voters who are under 40 have seen nothing but procedural sabotage, cynical dishonesty and bitter extremism from the GOP for their entire adult lives. They have correctly concluded that the older generations' memories of having once been able to achieve "compromise" or "cooperation" with Republicans are today nothing more than a political mirage. As a consequence they are drawn to candidates who reflect this same perspective.

Both of these trends cut across the distinction between moderates and progressives and have little to do with ideology—candidates like Colin Lamb and Amy McGrath are as disgusted with GOP dishonesty and sabotage as are Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ben Jealous. If they are all elected, these candidates will have sharp and vigorous (but ultimately productive) debates among themselves about the best design of social programs but at the same time they will also work together in close and cordial collaboration as part of a broad Democratic congressional coalition.

So what we are seeing is not a "civil war among Democrats" or "Dems in disarray" but rather the natural and healthy reflection of the process of growth and renewal that must occur for a genuine Democratic renaissance to occur.

In fact, there are two quite distinct ways that this process is taking place in the different kinds of districts that exist across the country:

In heavily Democratic districts the entrance of the new generation of candidates and voters into the electorate has led the more adept Democratic politicians to adopt more progressive positions in order to keep in touch with their changing districts and constituents. Other Democratic politicians who thought they could ignore the change have been sharply challenged and in a significant number of cases replaced.

In heavily Republican districts, on the other hand, a different dynamic has developed and a new kind of eclectic and "moderate" but still very clearly democratic candidate has emerged. In college educated suburbs, these candidates are appealing to formerly Republican middle class professionals who are recoiling from Trump's extremism. In rural and white working class areas, where support for Trump and the GOP remains most firm, these new candidates are combining moderate but recognizably democratic social and economic policies with a willingness to respect and support many enduring elements of cultural traditionalism that exist among their constituents.

In their distinct ways, these two trends represent not a civil war among Democrats, but a process of renewed outreach and revitalization of the party—one that has the potential to build a solid and enduring Democratic majority.

The greatest threat to this process, in fact, is not the possibility—and indeed the likelihood—of setbacks or defeats in 2018 but rather of a wave of demoralization if anything less than complete success is achieved. With hundreds of new candidates running for the first time, it is inevitable that many will not be elected in their first attempt. This is both natural and impossible to prevent.

In order to lay the foundations for victory in 2020, 2022 and beyond and to begin to rebuild grass roots Democratic “machines” in districts across the country many candidates must run for office this year against extremely long odds.

But what has happened all too often in the past is that Democratic voters who became energized by a charismatic candidate have focused all their hopes and enthusiasm on that one political campaign. If the campaign is successful, many feel that their job has been done and they can return to normal daily life. If the campaign fails, many become demoralized and reject the value of political action in general.

It is this danger that represents the greatest threat to the extraordinary Democratic resurgence we are witnessing today. Conservatives long ago realized that to achieve dominance, they had to take the long-term perspective of progressive movements for social change and make a commitment to political activism that accepted many defeats and extended for many years. To realize the potential of this year’s Democratic revival, Democrats must do the same. Democrats do not have to adopt the extremist “politics as warfare” mentality of their conservative opponents to recognize that a military metaphor is in this case appropriate. Many individual battles will inevitably be lost but in broad perspective the great Democratic counteroffensive against Republican extremism is already rapidly and steadily gaining ground.