

Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority

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SERIOUSLY WHEN PROPOSING
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When Democrats begin to make the case for a new progressive program their commentaries will invariably include a sentence that reads as follows:

“And what’s more, as a XYZ recent poll shows, a majority of Americans support this program.”

Usually, one poll (or perhaps two or three at most) are treated as entirely sufficient proof not only that the proposed reform is genuinely popular with most Americans but also that anyone who raises questions about its appeal must therefore be acting out of ideological opposition to the reform and not because they have sincere questions about its popularity.

In reality, however, every Democrat knows that interpreting opinion poll data is not really that simple. The history of the Obamacare campaign revealed that simple poll questions like *“Would you support a plan to provide health insurance for all Americans”* proves very little about how a proposed reform will actually fare in real-world political debate. The major objectives of Obamacare (i.e. insuring that all Americans have access to health care) and key provisions (like guaranteeing coverage for those with pre-existing conditions) all polled extremely well in early testing and gave advocates a false sense of confidence about the likely support for the proposed legislation.

What happened, of course, was that the plan was attacked in ways that were not anticipated or planned for (“death panels,” “socialism,” “rationing,” and so on) and was made to appear deeply unpopular by a conservative grass roots mobilization whose size and energy was not expected.

The challenge Democrats face is even greater today because the progressive wing of the party is now proposing not one single major reform but a wide range of new social policies and programs that will face both normal skepticism and also bitter organized resistance from conservatives and the GOP. In this environment relying on standard polls that only ask a few straightforward, neutral questions is simply inadequate.

But what other methods of opinion research are available that can provide a more complete and accurate picture of public attitudes toward proposed reforms?

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*.

There are three research methods that Democrats should employ when planning the political campaigns for new policies.

1. Arguments in favor of progressive proposals should be systematically tested against comparable conservative arguments against them.

In the past this has been done in an academic setting with participants viewing videotaped advertisements and speeches for and against various proposals and then being interviewed by researchers to assess their reactions. This kind of research is impractical to conduct during a conventional telephone opinion poll but the more recent technique of creating “web panels” of registered voters now allows the participants to read contrasting messages and indicate their reactions.

Stan Greenberg’s Democracy Corps has conducted the most extensive, publically available research that uses this relatively new technique. The analysis below of public attitudes toward Trump’s 2017 tax cut shows the variety of different ways that distinct pro-Democratic arguments opposing the Republican measure can be tested against each other as well as against contrasting messages that support it.

Trump-GOP tax cut integral to Democratic midterm message.¹

What this research also indicates, however, is how important it is that Democratic strategy not be based simply on polls that simply show “a majority of Americans support the Democratic position.” In the case of the contrasting Democratic and GOP messages on the 2017 tax cut, for example, of the 53% who “supported” the Democratic position, only 37% of the respondents indicated that the message actually made them “much more likely” to support a democratic candidate who asserts it compared to 16% who were only “somewhat more likely.” Those who agreed with the contrasting Republican position were only slightly less convinced of their own view than were those who agreed with the Democratic view (27% of the web sample strongly agreed with the GOP view and 16% somewhat agreed). This means that a third of the voters were not fully convinced by either of the two arguments and, as a result, what appears at first glance to be an unambiguous majority of Americans supporting the Democratic position is revealed by more in-depth probing to be actually a majority of 59% that is either firmly opposed to the measure or not yet fully convinced by it.

Moreover, in planning political strategy it is also vital to distinguish between the attitudes of voters who are likely to vote Democratic in any event from uncommitted voters. In the case of the 2017 tax cut the Democracy Corp research indicated that among people of color and unmarried women support for the Democratic position is close to 60%. But it is substantially lower among the white working class men and women who Democrats often assume will be extremely supportive of populist Democratic messages on this issue.

2. Progressive proposals should be carefully examined by coordinated batteries of focus groups.

The press will frequently publish journalistic accounts of a single focus group of ten or a dozen randomly recruited people as they discuss a particular topic but these can only provide, at best,

¹http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/1085/Dcor_AFT_June%20Web%20National_Memo_6.14.18_for%20sharing.pdf

something comparable to the kind of information that a journalist obtains from interviews while researching a story.

To have greater validity than this a coordinated battery of focus groups is needed, both to reduce the danger that any single group might be extremely atypical but also to study the views of a variety of demographic subgroups that are composed of similar people like younger educated women or older blue collar men. It is in these more homogeneous social groups that people feel comfortable exchanging views and ideas in ways that reveal the deeper thinking that lies behind their responses to opinion poll questions.

Again, Democracy Corps has produced the largest publically available series of coordinated batteries of focus groups that examine political issues. Most recently they have conducted an extensive series of focus groups examining the distinct attitudes of different subgroups of the Republican electorate toward Trump and the GOP. The scope of D-Corps research is suggested by the titles below:

[Inside Trump's GOP: not what you think](#)²

[Macomb and America's new political moment](#)³

[The loyalist GOP Evangelical Conservatives](#)⁴

[Tea Party Trump Loyalists](#)⁵

[Trump-skeptical secular conservative Republicans](#)⁶

[Disillusioned GOP moderates](#)⁷

Some of these focus group sessions were conducted in coordination with standard opinion polling so that the comments of the participants on specific subjects could also be related to the larger poll results.

When conducted on this scale, focus groups can begin to reveal widely shared concerns and points of view that are too subtle and complex to be detected by simple opinion polls. These more complex perspectives can then provide the foundation for targeted messages aimed at weakening these groups' commitment to the GOP.

²http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/1090/Dcor_GOP_July%20National_Memo_8.3.18_for%20release.pdf

³http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/1082/Report_Macomb%20&%20America's%20New%20Political%20Moment_Democracy%20Corps_May%202018.pdf

⁴http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/1093/Dcor_GOP_Evangelical%20Conservative%20Memo_8.13.2018_for%20release.pdf

⁵http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/1092/Dcor_GOP_Tea%20Party%20Memo_8.13.2018_for%20release.pdf

⁶http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/1091/Dcor_GOP_Secular%20Conservative%20Memo_8.7.2018_for%20release.pdf

⁷http://www.democracycorps.com/attachments/article/1089/Dcor_GOP_Moderate%20Memo_7.27.2018_FOR%20RELEASE.pdf

Focus groups are also of particular importance for detecting potential doubts and issues about Democratic proposals that do not show up on opinion surveys. One example is the Democratic proposals for a \$15 minimum wage. This is often assumed to be a clearly “working class” reform that will be strongly popular among all working men and women. In focus groups, however, one frequently finds workers being extremely skeptical and saying things like *“Wait a minute, I had to work for 5 years before I got bumped up to \$15 an hour and now you’re telling me any guy off the street is going to get the same salary as I’m getting? That ain’t right”* or *“I work with two employees who use a leaf blower and a lawn mower, doing lawn work in neighborhoods where I can’t charge more than \$40 an hour. If I gotta give both guys \$15 an hour and then pay for gas I’m flat out of business.”*

Now there are, in fact, ways to address these concerns but Democrats will never even begin to understand the issues if they just automatically assume that a \$15 minimum wage will be wildly popular and a big vote winner with all working people.

3. Democrats should seek feedback about the reaction to progressive proposals from the canvassers who go door to door promoting candidates.

Most political campaigns do virtually no real research during their door to door canvassing campaigns. Usually the election year canvassers have a canned speech they are suppose to recite and a sheet where they note whether a person is a supporter, an opponent or a persuadable voter. Most effort then goes into making sure that the candidates’ supporters actually get to the polls on Election Day.

One organization that does a far deeper and more meaningful form of canvassing is Working America, the largest community organizing group in white working class America. Here are links to two articles that give some basic background on the organization and what it does:

[How to Get White Workers to Vote for Clinton⁸](#)

[Rebuilding the Working Class⁹](#)

This spring and summer Working America canvassers have gone door to door in Ohio and Pennsylvania conducting extended conversations with people in these districts. In Ohio they spoke with over 400 voters which represents a level of in-depth research in a single geographic area that is far more extensive and informative than any opinion polls or focus groups can provide.

Here is a report on what they found:

[Fissures emerge in Ohio’s Reliably Republican CD-12¹⁰](#)

Individual candidates and campaigns cannot replicate the skill and experience of the highly trained, professional canvassers that Working America has developed over a period of 15 years but as progressive Democrats build more and more of their campaigns around new and ambitious

⁸<http://prospect.org/article/how-get-white-workers-vote-clinton>

⁹<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/rebuilding-working-class-labor-canvassing-election>

¹⁰https://www.workingamerica.org/ohio12report?link_id=0&can_id=59af36e2ffe97693a6c17b40017079a3&source=email-a-view-from-the-front-porch-94-days-out&email_referrer=email_395702&email_subject=a-view-from-the-front-porch-94-days-out

proposals it is vital that they try to develop the ability to conduct more research-intensive methods of campaign canvassing that can give them real-world feedback regarding how voters in their districts perceive new progressive proposals.

The basic point is clear. Just quoting a poll that says that *"a majority of Americans support proposal XYZ"* reveals little or nothing about the actual appeal of a Democratic initiative. In past decades conservative think-tanks and their funders invested very substantial sums in public opinion and messaging research before they released major proposals. They recognized that it makes no sense to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on political advertising that features conservative proposals and not invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in research on how to best package and present them. It is time for progressives and Democrats to follow their example and invest far more in serious in-depth opinion research on new progressive proposals than they have done up to now.