

Democratic Strategies Lost Big. Here's Why and How to Fix It.

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It is time to shine a light on the perpetually losing strategies used by Democrats, and particularly on the Democratic infrastructure that promotes those strategies.

I am asking whether the old strategies can be separated from the community of strategists, so that new strategies can be adopted by that community that are authentic, moral, and fully general.

The strategists form an infrastructure that all Democrats have come to depend on—candidates, elected officials, Democrats in government, and citizens who align, or might align, either morally or practically with progressive policies. This well-funded, and well-connected strategic infrastructure includes public relations firms, pollsters, consultants, researchers, trainers, communication specialists, speechwriters, and their funders.

Democrats depend on this expensive infrastructure. The strategists seem to assume that their strategies are natural and obvious, the best that can be done. It is time to look closely at these strategies and question them. The same mistakes, if they are mistakes, should not be repeated.

You probably noticed some of these strategies during the 2014 election:

- Direct your strategy to the election, rather than to changing how Americans understand what Democrats are and to changing day-to-day political discourse. **In reality, it is the day-to-day discourse changes that most affect elections and move our politics over time.**
- Use demographic categories to segment the electorate, categories from the census (race, gender, ethnicity, age, marital status, income, zip code), as well as publicly available party registration. **This does not include segmentation for conservative and progressive moral worldviews, which can be done with the right questions..**
- Assume uniformity across the demographic categories. Poll on which issues are “most important,” e.g., for women (or single women), for each minority group, for young people, and so on. **This separates the issues from one another and creates “issue silos.” In reality, issues are systemically related via moral worldviews.**
- Assume language is neutral and that the same poll questions will have the same meaning for everyone polled. **In reality, language is defined relative to conceptual frames. And the same words can be “contested,” that is, they can have opposite meanings depending on one’s moral values.**
- Assume that people vote on the basis of material self-interest. Design different messages to appeal to different demographic groups. **In reality, poor conservatives, as well as rich liberals, will vote against their material interests when they identify with a candidate and his or her values. Values trump issues.**
- In polling, apply statistical methods to the answers given in each demographic group. This will impose a “bell curve” in the results. **The bell curve will impose a “middle” in each case. The middle may well be illusory, given the wide separation in worldviews. This is shown in biconceptualism research.**
- Assume that most voters are in the middle imposed by the bell curve. Suggest that candidates and elected officials move to the middle. If their beliefs are on the left of the “middle,” they should still move to the right to be where the bell curve claims that most voters are. **This will be helping conservatives, by supporting their beliefs. And your candidate may be saying things Democrats don’t believe. Your candidate will become Republican-lite. Voters**

at least some conservative values will go for real Republicans, not Republicans-lite.

- Check the polls to see how popular the present Democratic president is; if he is not popular, design your message to dissociate your candidate from the president. **This will reinforce the unpopularity of the president. When members of his own party disown him, voters will come to think he should be disowned and so should the party he leads.**
- Attack your opponents as being “extremists” when they hold views typical of the far right. If voters happen to share any of those views, you will be attacking those voters as extremists, even if that are partly progressive. **Your opponents will be seen as courageous, standing up for what they believe. You will be helping your opponents.**
- Attack your candidate’s opponent for getting money from rich corporations or individuals. **This will help your opponent among Republicans (and some Democrats) who respect the values of the wealthy and successful.**
- Argue against your opponents by quoting them, using their language and negating that language. **In reality, negating a frame reinforces the frame, as in the sentence “Don’t think of an elephant!” This practice will mostly reinforce the views of your opponent.**

Such strategies miss the opportunity to present an overriding moral stand that fits the individual issues, while saying clearly what ideals Democrats stand for as Democrats. There happens to be such an overriding ideal that most Democrats authentically believe in.

Why is this important?

First: Because all politics is moral. Voters vote for what they see as right. Conservatives and progressives have almost opposite ideas as to what is right. In candidates, voters look for people who have what they see as the right character, people who will do, and stand up for, what they see as right.

Second: Progressive and conservatives have very different understandings of democracy. For progressives empathy is at the center of the very idea of democracy. Democracy is a governing system in which citizens care about their fellow citizens and work through their government to provide public resources for all. In short, in a democracy, the private depends on the public.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) says it out loud. If you have a business it depends on public resources: roads, bridges, the Interstate highway system, sewers, a water supply, airports and air traffic control, the Federal Reserve, a patent office, public education for your employees, public health, the electric grid, the satellite communications, the Internet, and more. You can’t run a business without these. Say it out loud: The private depends on the public.

The same holds true of individuals, who depend on public resources like clean air, clean water, safe food and products, public safety, access to education and health care, housing, employment — as well as everything listed above.

These public resources provide necessary freedoms. In fact, most progressive issues are freedom issues, such as:

- Voting: Without the ability to vote in free elections, you are not free.
- Health: If you get sick and don’t have health care, you are not free.
- Education: Without education, you lack the knowledge and skills to earn a decent living or be aware of the possibilities of life, and are therefore not free.
- Women: If you are denied control over your body, you are not free.
- Marriage: If you are in love and denied the ability to marry publicly, you are not free.

- Vast income inequality: When most economic gains go to the wealthiest of the wealthy, and not those who did the work, then most working people are not free.
- Race: When you are treated with suspicion and disdain, you are not free.
- Corporate Control: When corporations control your life for their benefit, you are not free.
- Global Warming: As the glaciers melt, the rivers go dry, the seas rise up, the fish die, and you are overwhelmed by drought, violent storms, floods, heat waves and freezes, you are not free.

And one more, which played a major role in the 2014 election:

- Fear: When you are emotionally gripped by whipped-up unreal fear, you are not free.

As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt pointed out, freedom from fear is a vital freedom. In the 2014 election, conservatives played on fear—of ISIS and Ebola.

Progressives instinctively know all this, but few say it. Instead, they follow the old strategies and talk issue-by-issue, interest group by interest group, about isolated facts, policies, and programs.

Imagine if Americans understood instinctively that Democrats stand for the most basic of freedoms, that those freedoms arise from public resources provided by citizens like themselves who care about their fellow Americans as well as themselves. In my experience, that is overwhelmingly true. Why not say it? Proudly. Over and over.

And why not train ordinary progressive citizens who want to be spokespeople to speak out in their communities. The conservatives have been doing this for decades, throughout the US and in 15 other countries, with scary success. They need to be countered.

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