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# Are We Out of the Woods Yet? How Democrats and Progressives Need to Rethink their Message Framework

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Are We Out of the Woods Yet?  
How Democrats and Progressives Need to Rethink their Message Framework

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of MASTER OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

By

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## Abstract

The aftermath of the election revealed that the Democratic Party made critical errors and had structural issues that made executing our messaging more difficult. The Democratic Party needs to return to a set of principles that prioritizes all people and their wellbeing to win elections. What do Democrats and progressives need to fix so they can deliver better messages? To better understand the dynamics that impact the Democratic Party's capacity to create messaging I believe one must look at the relationship between the Democratic Party as an institution and the art of political messaging. The research of this paper focuses on how we measure voter sentiment, how we identify who our voters are and how our organizing philosophy impacts our message. The Democratic party and candidates need to commit to long term investments in technology and staff, a different organizing strategy, broad representation in candidates and leadership. We will be a stronger party, capable of enacting a progressive policy agenda if we can learn from the past, correct our mistakes and commit to a new operational and structural changes to our party.

## Executive Summary

The aftermath of the 2016 election revealed that the Democratic Party made critical errors and had structural issues that made executing our messaging more difficult. The Democratic Party needs to return to a set of principles and a change in messaging that prioritizes all people and their wellbeing to win elections. What do Democrats and progressive leaders need to do to build better message framework?

To better understand the dynamics that impact the Democratic Party's capacity to create messaging I believe one must look at the relationship between the Democratic Party as an institution and the art of political messaging. To develop a thoughtful strategy, it is necessary to spend some time looking at the evolution of the Democratic Party. Political parties are the institutions that shape our politics.

Today the Democratic Party is officially governed by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) which is tasked with articulating the party's ideas and beliefs under a party platform. Who are Democrats? What do they care about? These are the fundamental questions that party leaders and candidates need to ask every time they communicate with the public. To understand how Democrats prioritize issues and create policy platforms, the terms social and economic policy must be defined. I define social policy to be legislation and political stances that pertain to human welfare. These include civil rights, healthcare, education, climate change, criminal justice reform and racial/ethnic inequality. Economic policy addresses jobs, taxes, budgets, interest rates, business development, trade, and inflation. These policies overlap with some social policies such as healthcare and education but do not influence the human condition as much as social policies. Researchers Michael Gurevitch and Jay G. Blumler define political communication as, "...the transmission of messages and pressures to and from individuals who are demonstrably unequal: the highly informed and the abysmally ignorant..."<sup>1</sup> Another way to understand messaging is through stories. A political message is a candidate's public justification for running for office. Media strategist Frank Luntz, who has developed messaging strategy for many Republican leaders, states that politicians have a particular challenge about word choice.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Gurevitch, Jay G. Blumler, "Political Communication Systems and Democratic Values" *Democracy and the Mass Media* (Judith Lichtenberg), Cambridge University Press, 1990, 269-287, <http://www.csulb.edu/~mault/political%20communication%20sys.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Frank Luntz, *Win: The Key Principles to Take Your Business From Ordinary to Extraordinary*, Hyperion, 2011

To craft effective messages, it is critical to know the audience you are attempting to reach. It's no secret that we live in a technology driven world. Digital media is sometimes thought to be revolutionary, something entirely different than traditional media such as television or print. The economic, cultural and social dynamics that affect political messaging are all valid and important to understand. The research of this paper focuses on the structural challenges of political messaging. Local party infrastructure and strength plus traditional polling are two key factors in setting up effective messaging.

Historically, campaigns rely on demographic information to develop messages, but recent research shows there are ways to engage with voters on a deeper level. The data showed the American people can be divided into seven categories that have unique characteristics. These are helpful to understand for their own value but more importantly for message development purposes. There are four main areas that Democrats and party officials need to focus on; long term investments, organizing, broad representation, and technological innovations. The fundamentals of campaigns still apply. Success is more likely when campaigns use a blend of new and traditional tools and tactics. While campaigns are by definition short-term projects, the party needs to invest in long-term tools and strategy. Democrats can build a social movement by taking lessons from social movements and their organizational and mobilization strategies.

Campaigns are always about voters, actual humans with real lives and challenges. By investing in new tools we can measure how voters feel, how to engage with them, who votes, where we need to channel resources and what our constituents need. Our collective efforts can help all candidates not just presidential ones every four years. Innovating and testing new technologies and tools will help every movement and candidate gain access to more accurate information about their constituents. We will be a stronger party, capable of enacting a progressive policy agenda if we can learn from the past, correct our mistakes and commit to new operational and structural changes to our party.

## Introduction

I woke up on November 8, 2016 thinking it would be the greatest day of my professional career. I was working to elect the first female president of the United States. I spent the day visiting polling locations in Hollywood, Florida as part of a team of volunteers from the Hillary Clinton campaign. Nothing prepared me for the heartbreak I was about to experience. How could this have happened? I was so sure that our side was right, that our team deserved to win. But we were wrong.

So what are we going to do about it? We can learn from this loss and make sure that it brings about important changes to the Democratic Party.

The aftermath of the 2016 election revealed that the Democratic Party made critical errors and had structural issues that made executing our messaging more difficult. The party platform has moved left on the political spectrum regarding social issues such as marriage equality, women's health, and criminal justice reform, but it has failed to capture an economic platform on infrastructure, job creation, and trade to match. Our collective understanding of social and economic policies needs to evolve; they are not mutually exclusive issues. They are inseparable. Those of us on the left side of the aisle are still reeling from the devastating loss, but we must learn from these mistakes if there is hope of winning in future elections. While good messaging is a key to success, Democrats must choose good messengers. The best message in the world won't be as effective if it's delivered by the wrong person. We also need better tools, stronger institutions, and thoughtful leadership that combined will provide Democrats with the best opportunities to win.

The Democratic Party needs a change in messaging and to return to a set of principles that prioritizes all people and their wellbeing to win elections. Despite having more voters on our side, we lost. If Democrats don't reevaluate and assess what is wrong, then they will continue to suffer electoral losses. And electoral losses mean that a progressive agenda will never be realized no matter how well popular or well-crafted. A deeper level of authenticity is required of operatives to combat against the negativity that surrounds the political arena. Democrats should never be outplayed by another political party's messaging because nearly half of American voters align with the Democratic party.<sup>3</sup> So we have the coalition – we just need to speak to them. This paper seeks to understand the how the Democratic Party serves the American people as a political party and to develop recommendations for creating a strategic messaging plan for Democratic campaigns. Messaging is a

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<sup>3</sup> Drew Desilver, "A closer look at who identifies as Democrat and Republican," *Fact Tank News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, July 1, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/01/a-closer-look-at-who-identifies-as-democrat-and-republican/>

tool in the quest for political power. Power is a means of changing politics to reflect a set of values. To move our country toward a more enlightened future, liberals and progressive need to come together and develop a set of tools and strategies that will allow them to set a political agenda.

### Research Question

What do Democrats and progressives need to fix so they can deliver better messages?

### Literature Review

To better understand the dynamics that impact the Democratic Party's capacity to create messaging I believe one must look at the relationship between the Democratic Party as an institution and the art of political messaging. Trends show that more Americans and registered voters are leaning progressive but there is still a divide in voting behavior. Places like the "rust belt" that used to be Democratic Party strongholds voted for the Republican candidate in 2016. 60% of Democrats and those who lean Democratic have liberal political views compared to 53% of Republicans who express conservative views.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Democrats**

To develop a thoughtful strategy, it is necessary to spend some time looking at the evolution of the Democratic Party. Its foundation, core membership and important events have led us to where we are today. The Democratic Party has touted itself as the "big tent" party<sup>5</sup>.

Political parties are the institutions that shape our politics. They nominate and legitimize candidates, provide a platform with policy and issue stances, and help organize our government. Parties also serve to balance and check power and when out power, it will attempt to convince voters they should be the ones in charge and when they are in power they often try to make good on the promises made that lead to their victories. The United States has had two parties since the ratification of the Constitution divided the colonists into Federalists, and Anti-Federalists thus setting the stage for a binary political system.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "A Wider Ideological Gap Between More and Less Educated Adults", *Pew Research Center, U.S. Politics and Policy*, April 26, 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2016/04/26/a-wider-ideological-gap-between-more-and-less-educated-adults/>

<sup>5</sup> Will Drabold, "Democrats Pitched a Rally Big Tent at Their Convention," *Time Magazine*, July 28, 2016, <http://time.com/4429179/dnc-big-tent-diversity/>

<sup>6</sup> Donnie Fowler, "Political Parties" (presentation, University of San Francisco, Electoral Politics, November 16, 2015).



### *The History*

The Democratic Party can trace its roots to the 1790s when Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists battled with Thomas Jefferson and the Republicans over the size of government. In many ways, we are still having this fight over the government's role in citizens' lives. Factions emerged during President John Q. Adam's administration and the party split into National Republicans and Democrats.<sup>7</sup> In 1832, Andrew Jackson was nominated for president by the Democrats at a political convention that drafted a party platform and party rules.<sup>8</sup> The Democratic Party officially named itself in 1844 and won six presidential elections between 1828 and 1856.<sup>9</sup> Through the early 1900s, the Democrats lacked any significant electoral power but that all changed when Franklin D. Roosevelt won in 1932. Roosevelt found a broad coalition – small farmers, city folks, and laborers that led to the Democrats becoming the majority party in the country. This collection of voters is often referred to as the New Deal Coalition.<sup>10</sup> This is a significant shift in political history because it brought together many people with opposing or conflicting views. Roosevelt saw the value in each part of the coalition and created a platform to serve them all.

During the Civil Rights era, there was a political fight to give voting rights and protections to people of color. Democrats retained the presidency until 1952, accumulating enough political power to propose a law prohibiting discrimination related to voting. This social movement went beyond the racism and inequality that many experienced. It also created the environment for political changes that would change the makeup of the Democratic Party for years to come. As a result of the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, many Southern Democrats changed their allegiance to the Republicans.<sup>11</sup> President Lyndon Johnson is famous for acknowledging that by signing that bill, he was handing the Republicans the Southern voters for a generation. The debate over civil rights in 1968 fractured the party and resulted in a political convention in Chicago that is now infamous for the violence that erupted between police and protestors.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gary Miller, Norman Schofield, "The Transformation of the Republican and Democratic Party Coalitions in the U.S., *The Conference on Constitutional Political Economy*, ICER, Cambridge University Press, June 2007, <https://0-www-cambridge-org.ignacio.usfca.edu/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S1537592708081218>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, Democratic Party, July 28 2016, Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Democratic-Party>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

For the next 20 years, Democrats struggled to recreate the power they had during President Franklin Roosevelt. In 1992 Bill Clinton became president and his support of international trading agreements and cuts to social programs caused friction with longstanding labor supporters.<sup>13</sup> In 2006 Democrats regained control of Congress and elected Barack Obama in 2008 and again in 2012. The Democrats had a filibuster proof 60-40 majority in the Senate that lasted until early 2010.<sup>14</sup> During the mid-term elections 60 Democratic seats in the U.S. House of Representatives were lost to the Republicans. In 2016, Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election.

### *Machine Politics (the good kind)*

Over the course of American political history, an operation developed that worked to trade votes and electoral power for money, jobs, and influence. This is often referred to as machine politics or patronage. There is an illegal and immoral tinge to this operation, but there are aspects that I find instructive. Authors Joseph R. Reid Jr. and Michael M. Kurth define political patronage as “a political currency with which to ‘purchase’ political activity and political responses from voters whose loyalty was ensured by an organizationally created web of jobs favors and payoffs...distributed at the discretion of political leaders.”<sup>15</sup> This clearly is a violation of every ethical code we have for politicians. However, to trade jobs, favors and money, politicians had to know something very specific about the community they were working with. Leaders, their staff and members of machine operation had to spend time in the community talking to folks about what they wanted and needed. “Plunkitt of Tammany Hall said that to accomplish these tasks, ‘you have to go among the people. See them and be seen. I know every man, woman and child in the...district...I know what they like and what they don’t like, what they are strong at and what they are weak in...’”<sup>16</sup> This refers specifically to the time of Boss Tweed in the 1860s.<sup>17</sup> He was a powerful politician and leader of a political operation in New York. What is most important about what he accomplished is how much information he knew about the constituents. Whether he cared about the well-being of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph D. Reid Jr., Michael M. Kurth, “The Rise and Fall of Urban Political Patronage Machines,” *Strategic Factors in Nineteenth Century American Economic Research*, University of Chicago Press, January 1992, <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c6971.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Boss Tweed refers to a politician in New York named William Tweed who operated the machine politics operation in Tammany Hall. He is famous for his ability to control voters. His operation and his power are the most classic example of the dangers of machine politics.

voters is suspect, but I give the operation credit for investing the resources to learn about the voter needs and motivations.

In various points across my research and my time working on political campaigns I read and heard the sentiment that politicians don't care about the voters of their district. The sense of disconnect, of apathy and of distrust pushes voters further apart from their representatives. I'm not advocating for the boss mentality that accompanies machine politics, but I see an opportunity to invest in community that appears to be lacking today.

Politicians are obligated to represent the interests of their community but if they don't spend the time to meet with them then they are only guessing at what is best. Writer Thomas Frank wrote about how the conservative movement changed his home state in a book titled *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives won the Heart of America*. Frank spoke with a local Republican party chair named Mark Gietzen, and learned how he and his team converted many residents from Democrat to Republican. Mr. Gietzen built a social movement targeting one voter at a time. That was a long but successful project. "Gietzen and company wanted not only Wichita's votes but its participation. They were going to change the world."<sup>18</sup> This represents a different approach to persuading voters and interacting with them, by working to build a relationship with individuals and connect them to something larger than one vote. The Democratic Party can invest in local party structure so that leaders can spend time getting to know the community, rely information about voter feelings and needs and create a system that connects voters to the political process in a more direct way.

### *Official Party Structure*

Today the Democratic Party is officially governed by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) which is tasked with articulating the party's ideas and beliefs under a party platform. This platform is updated every four years at a national convention. In their own words, Democrats "believe that cooperation is better than conflict, unity is better than division, empowerment is better than resentment, and bridges are better than walls...Democrats are the party of inclusion. We know that diversity is not our problem – it is our promise. As Democrats, we respect differences of perspective and belief, and pledge to work together to move this country forward, even when we disagree. With this platform, we do not merely seek common ground – we strive to reach higher

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives won the Heart of America*, Henry Holt and Company LLC, New York, 2004, 9-162.

ground.”<sup>19</sup> By stating their intentions, the Democratic Party must execute messaging that supports the statements above. Failure to align the goals and beliefs of the party with political messages can result in electoral losses. It is necessary that political campaigns provide messages that align with the party at large and that resonate with the voters they hope to influence. As the national organization of the Democratic Party, the DNC provides the process and the formal event where we select our presidential nominee. The DNC sets the tone, establishes values and articulates policy positions that a candidate can adopt. There is space for individuals to decide how and what they want their campaign to say, but aligning with the formal party can help voters identify a candidate they want to vote for. In an age where candidates are more accessible to the public, it can be easier to identify them for one of their policy positions or beliefs. For example, I may vote for Kamala Harris because she is pro-choice but when I select her name on the ballot, I vote for her because she is a Democrat. Belonging to an established organization can provide credibility and recognition. Senator Bernie Sanders ran for president as a Democrat even though he previously identified as an Independent. There are several reasons for this and the significance of each depends on one’s point of view. What is key to focus on here is that Sanders made a choice to align with the Democratic Party because it more closely matched his values than the Republican Party. Being a Democratic candidate allows voters to presume a set of values and policy positions without having to spend a lot of time getting to know the candidate. That is one of the critical roles the DNC plays in political campaigns. The national organization provides a framework that candidates use as they create their campaigns to communicate with Democratic voters.

### *Who is a Democrat?*

Who are Democrats? What do they care about? These are the fundamental questions that party leaders and candidates need to ask every time they communicate with the public. There are many ways to analyze voters. Some of the challenges candidates and parties face is the technology and tools that are widely used do not retrieve the most helpful data. Traditionally, tools like a telephone poll may provide information on how people in a household identify as Democrats. But what if a house has no landline? The data gathered from polls like these may miss large numbers of people which in turn affects the analysis of the data. There has been research conducted to analyze voters differently in the hopes of understanding their beliefs and values. This work reveals a deeper

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<sup>19</sup> “Our Platform”, *Democratic National Committee*, Accessed February 2017, <https://www.Democrats.org/party-platform>

understanding of voters' perspectives and how they see political parties. The Pew Research Center also conducted a political typology survey in 2014 and found several ways to describe voters. Nearly seven out of ten Americans identify or lean toward Democrats.<sup>20</sup> Out of the registered voters in America, almost half (48%) are Democrats.<sup>21</sup> Once we know who our voters are, we can communicate with them. The way candidates engage with their voters is through a political message.

### *Social and Economic Politics*

To understand how Democrats prioritize issues and create policy platforms, the terms social and economic policy must be defined. I define social policy to be legislation and political stances that pertain to human welfare. These include civil rights, healthcare, education, climate change, criminal justice reform and racial/ethnic inequality. President Roosevelt's New Deal is an example of economic policy aimed at providing paid work for citizens during the aftermath of the Great Depression. The power of the New Deal came in part from the articulation of economic policy discussed as social policy. The Social Security Act has the word social in it but it is an economic policy that protected elderly workers. The combination of economics and social issues broadened the scope of the New Deal. In a time of great personal anxiety for many people after the Great Depression, these policies and programs addressed many aspects of peoples' lives.

Economic policy addresses jobs, taxes, budgets, interest rates, business development, trade, and inflation. These policies overlap with some social policies such as healthcare and education but do not influence the human condition as much as social policies. At least that is the political perception. I believe that social and economic policies significantly impact peoples' lives and should be treated with the understanding that the consequences of these policies affect real people. Taken together, social and economic politics shape our laws and the lives of Americans. I argue that nearly all policies are both social and economic. Policies and laws reach beyond their specific written intention and people are impacted by them in various ways and to varying degrees. We have to recognize that reality as we discuss the merits of policies and advocate positions on issues. While the abortion debate is highly controversial and emotionally rooted for many voters, it is possible to

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<sup>20</sup> Drew Desilver, "A closer look at who identifies as Democrat and Republican," *Fact Tank News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, July 1, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/01/a-closer-look-at-who-identifies-as-democrat-and-republican/>

<sup>21</sup> Drew Desilver, "A closer look at who identifies as Democrat and Republican," *Fact Tank News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, July 1, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/01/a-closer-look-at-who-identifies-as-democrat-and-republican/>

make an economic argument about it. Raising children is expensive and arguably a woman should have the right to decide whether to incur the costs associated with having a child. Also, the cost of the operation can affect whether a woman can have the procedure. We can debate the values of these two arguments but it is important to understand that even the most social of issues can have an economic component. The Democrats can create messages that address the relationship between social and economic policies and their compound influence on people's lives.

Researchers Gary Miller and Norman Schofield published a paper in 2007 on the transformation of the political parties in the United States. Their work reveals the changes in the Democratic Party and the factors that constrain and influence its ability to attract voters. They indicate that social and economic factors have a profound effect on elections. Additionally, the authors acknowledge the vast differences in electorates in each state that requires politicians to piece together coalitions of voters. They discuss the New Deal Coalition of Franklin D. Roosevelt as an example of highlighting economic policy and suppressing social policy.<sup>22</sup> This led to many successful Democratic wins but was not sustainable indefinitely. They too acknowledge the lasting impact of the Civil Rights Act as turning point for the party. Miller and Schofield contend that the New Deal Coalition is not a winning coalition because so long as social conservatives remain Republicans. Additionally, they believe that the Democratic Party is more pragmatic on economic policies and will remain so.<sup>23</sup> From an electoral perspective, softening on social policies may be strategic, however the authors contend that the Democrats situate themselves between social activists and a centrist electorate.

They believe that candidates who are well liked can afford to move to the center on key social issues and less liked candidates are more dependent on dedicated activists.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately Miller and Schofield argue that the ability of Democrats to win elections by advancing social policy is dependent on the candidates and is constrained by social issue activists. They believe policies that speak to balanced budgets, open immigration and are business friendly must be part of the party platform. This aligns with the party platform written by Democrats.

Author Ron Fournier of *The Atlantic* argues that Americans have lost faith in political institutions and in the very idea that they can trust them ever again. The impact of the “populist” movement

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<sup>22</sup> Gary Miller, Norman Schofield, “The Transformation of the Republican and Democratic Party Coalitions in the U.S., *The Conference on Constitutional Political Economy*, ICER, Cambridge University Press, June 2007, <https://0-www-cambridge-org.ignacio.usfca.edu/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S1537592708081218>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

that led to Democratic losses will not end if Democrats do not face the current reality head on.<sup>25</sup> Populism is a term and philosophy that is used to defend many types of policies but for the purposes of this research, I have defined it to be a set of beliefs that there is a divide between corrupt elites and ordinary citizens. Populism can be liberal, conservative and centrist. Examples include the Occupy movement because it argued that 99% of the population was negatively impacted by the 1% that had the most wealth. In 2016, Bernie Sanders called himself a Democratic Socialist and proposed policies aimed at redistributing wealth and opportunity to more citizens. David Brooks of *The New York Times* adds to this reality by pointing out that the narrative in the 2016 election cycle was significantly changed by the Republican party. He claimed Republicans talked about trade and jobs in a way that Democrats used to, which ultimately contributed to Republican electoral victories.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Art of Political Messaging**

#### *What is political messaging?*

Researchers Michael Gurevitch and Jay G. Blumler define political communication as, "...the transmission of messages and pressures to and from individuals who are demonstrably unequal: the highly informed and the abysmally ignorant..."<sup>27</sup> That may offer a bleak look at messaging but the relationship dynamic is what I find most compelling. Political messages can reflect a unilateral relationship between the campaign and the voter. Campaign officials, Democratic Party leaders and hired experts spend lots of time determining what and how information should be shared. I argue messaging should invite a bilateral relationship or at least an appearance of one. If voters feel connected to the messaging they receive, perhaps they will feel more connected to the campaign as a whole. It is possible to create a message that offers the opportunity to participate in a larger story.

Another way to understand messaging is through stories. A political message is a candidate's public justification for running for office. It is the reason for why voters should choose you over the

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<sup>25</sup> Ron Fournier, "The Great Unraveling", *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/03/the-great-unraveling-your-thoughts/474690/>

<sup>26</sup> David Brooks, "The Coming Political Realignment", *The New York Times*, July 1, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/01/opinion/the-coming-political-realignment.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/01/opinion/the-coming-political-realignment.html?_r=0).

<sup>27</sup> Michael Gurevitch, Jay G. Blumler, "Political Communication Systems and Democratic Values" *Democracy and the Mass Media* (Judith Lichtenberg), Cambridge University Press, 1990, 269-287, <http://www.csu.edu/~mault/political%20communication%20sys.pdf>

opposition.<sup>28</sup> These definitions reveal why and how messages can work. Political campaigns spend time and money trying to figure out what people think and how they feel. They rely on statistics, demographics and traditional tools like polling. What if there are better ways to find out what voters think? If campaigns can use precise language, specific imagery and contextual information that is relevant to a community then political messaging can evolve beyond a unilateral exchange from the campaign to the voter.

Media strategist Frank Luntz, who has developed messaging strategy for many Republican leaders, states that politicians have a particular challenge about word choice. Luntz is often associated with the promotion of the phrases death tax instead of estate tax, and climate change over global warming.<sup>29</sup> “They are living, breathing embodiments of the language they use...when you’re a politician, one wrong word changes the...meaning of something.”<sup>30</sup> This articulates the pressure on political campaigns and politicians to craft the most effective message. Luntz emphasizes the relationship that politicians have to their voters through the words they choose in political messages. Politicians are not separate from their words, and voters use those words to decide how to feel about a candidate. Luntz’s work illustrates the impact of word choice on public opinion.

### *Connecting to Voters Through Narratives*

To craft effective messages, it is critical to know the audience you are attempting to reach. Our partisan divides should not surprise anyone but there may be a new way to think about it other than simply ‘red vs. blue’. *The New York Times* writer Ross Douthat claims Cosmopolitanism better articulates the differing political views in America.<sup>31</sup> He argues that there is a shared social structure that consists of four key elements: worldview, education, values, and other groups to shame.<sup>32</sup> This allows to certain people with particular characteristics to claim the title of ‘global citizen’ thus separating themselves from others who do not fit squarely into that box.

Frank Luntz offers another way to view the partisan divide in politics. He argues that, “the battle in America is between the people (us) versus Washington (Obama/Pelosi/Reid) and Wall

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<sup>28</sup> Zach Friend, *On Message: How a Compelling Narrative Will Make Your Organization Succeed*, Turner, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Molly Ball, “The Agony of Frank Luntz,” *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/the-agony-of-frank-luntz/282766/>

<sup>30</sup> Neal Conan, “Frank Luntz: How to ‘Win’ with Smart Messaging” *Talk of the Nation*, NPR, 2011 <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/08/134366924/Frank-Luntz-How-To-Win-With-Smart-Messaging>

<sup>31</sup> Ross Douthat, “The Myth of Cosmopolitanism” *The New York Times*, July 2, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/opinion/sunday/the-myth-of-cosmopolitanism.html>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



Street (insert name of big bank here). It's the overworked, overtaxed, over-hassled American versus those who create the rules and always seem to win."<sup>33</sup> Luntz speaks to an underlying assumption that citizens are tired of politicians overpromising and under delivering on policies.<sup>34</sup> This is important because part of political messaging includes campaign promises and motivations for candidates to seek elected office. Part of the problem facing Democratic candidates today is that promising to 'fix the roads' sounds great on the campaign trail, voters want action in office and failure to do that (regardless of fault) hurts politicians in the next campaign. There needs to be a better way to articulate hope and promise of political change without comprising reality.

Some journalists offer economics as another perspective on the partisan challenge of messaging. Thomas Edsall of *The New York Times* writes that income stagnation and loss of manufacturing jobs created the climate for voter angst that had been building for 40 years.<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to inspire people who are negatively impacted by political policies. It is difficult to address all the issues facing a population or constituency. If a strategic choice is made to focus on social over economic issues but the target audience is more affected by economic policy, that results in disconnect between campaign and voter.

There is an argument about the changing social cultural dynamics that impact messaging. Dylan Matthews of *Vox* states that racial resentment is a real factor that moves voters and it needs to be acknowledged.<sup>36</sup> Democrats can work to turn that resentment into a positive narrative without giving up on the challenge of racism. As I discussed earlier, if Democrats aim to be the party of the people, then they need to understand the facts that large numbers of voters are motivated by nationalism. This argument focuses on the challenges of civic identity and presents an opportunity for Democratic candidates to address this uncomfortable reality in a nuanced and persuasive way.

Writer and sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild wrote a book *Strangers in their Own Land* and was featured in news articles about her research on White voters. She coined the term, "Deep Story" to explain how some people can hold seemingly contradictory views on policies and government. The deep story is something that feels true, lacks facts or judgements, and reflects the feelings that ground opinions. Hochschild spent nearly five years in Louisiana learning about residents and the

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<sup>33</sup> Frank Luntz, *Win: The Key Principles to Take Your Business From Ordinary to Extraordinary*, Hyperion, 2011

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Edsall, "Why Trump Now?" *The New York Times*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/02/opinion/campaign-stops/why-trump-now.html>

<sup>36</sup> Dylan Matthews, "Taking Trump voters' concerns seriously means listening to what they're actually saying" *Vox*, October 15, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/10/15/13286498/donald-trump-voters-race-economic-anxiety>

social dynamics that impact their political views.<sup>37</sup> One reason why political messaging can fall flat is if it doesn't address the deep story of the voters who hear it. Hochschild explains this by saying, "so many arguments aren't really between one set of facts and another; they're between one deep story and another."<sup>38</sup> Political messaging has to be compelling but it should also be respectful of the people who receive it. Hochschild writes about how the residents she spoke with feel like a minority, forgotten about and left behind by our culture at large.<sup>39</sup> Quite literally, folks said they feel like strangers in their own country and not only is that personal tragedy for these hardworking people but problematic for politicians. Democratic candidate need to understand and work to encourage these folks at home again. Any effective messaging in these areas needs to acknowledge this challenging social feeling that motivates these voters.

Thomas Frank's book on the conservative movement and Kansas reveals a lot about the power of messaging. There are three major themes to his book; partisanship, authenticity and backlash culture.<sup>40</sup> Each uniquely impacts voters and is also interconnected to the others. Frank's case study of Kansas illustrates how partisanship operates within one political party. The moderate and conservative Republicans have created a system that divides voters by class. Frank argues that to conservatives, moderate politicians are liberal in that they are more educated and out of touch with citizens. By making that case it is easy to see how they paint Democrats and liberals as incredibly out of touch. In this narrative, being out of touch also implies a lack of authenticity.<sup>41</sup> Frank repeatedly discusses authenticity as a tool used to discredit Democrats and therefore this is something that party leaders and candidates need to pay attention to. If candidates appear inauthentic then they have double the work to do to get voter support.

Wrapped up in the authenticity conversation is a phenomenon Frank describes as backlash culture, which is a style of conservatism brought forth by the social activity of the 1960s.<sup>42</sup> This can be seen via what Frank calls "latte libel," which suggest that liberals can be identified by their likes and consumer preferences.<sup>43</sup> This tool focuses on what people eat and where they live over their

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<sup>37</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, "I spent 5 years with some of Trump's biggest fans. Here's what they won't tell you," *Mother Jones*, September/October 2016, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters>

<sup>38</sup> Brad Plumer, "What a liberal sociologist learned from spending five years in Trump's America" *Vox*, October 25, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/9/6/12803636/arlie-hochschild-strangers-land-louisiana-trump>

<sup>39</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, "I spent 5 years with some of Trump's biggest fans. Here's what they won't tell you" *Mother Jones*, September/October 2016, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-white-blue-collar-supporters>

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives won the Heart of America*, Henry Holt and Company LLC, New York, 2004, 9-162.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

policy positions. A famous example is a 2004 television ad used against Howard Dean in which a pair of voters advised him to, “take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking... Volvo-driving... left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs.”<sup>44</sup> Frank uses this example to demonstrate how liberalism functions outside the direct influence of liberals or conservatives. He states that conservatives see liberalism as in power even when liberal politicians are not and that conservatism is the policy of the oppressed majority.<sup>45</sup> Their position allows them to criticize and accuse liberals of anything while removing any blame from themselves. This belief system is a useful trick by backlash culture as Frank states, “as a culture war, the backlash was born to lose. Its goal is not to win cultural battles but to take offense, conspicuously, vocally... indignation is the privileged emotion.”<sup>46</sup> To believe in this logic, that liberalism is all powerful and conservatism is merely a response gets all conservative politicians off the hook for their failure to change American culture.<sup>47</sup>

The argument then becomes about how do we as a society define authenticity and who gets to have ownership over that description. Democrats and liberals, both voters and politicians, need to determine how to carry themselves to be perceived as authentic and create a substantive response when accused of being inauthentic. Democrats should not ignore these tactics. Any message plan has to include ways to combat this conservative narrative. It is in the interest of conservatives to continue this battle of culture and foster these divisions. Democrats need to develop messages that highlight this narrative and work to undermine it among committed and persuadable voters.

### *Digital and Traditional Media*

It's no secret that we live in a technology driven world. What that means for political campaigns is still not entirely clear. Surely the political world should keep up with new technologies and tools, but it is important to ask if these new tools actually help win elections. Researchers Victoria A Farrar-Myers and Justin S. Vaughn edited a collection of research papers on new media in political campaigns. Today, a viral tweet or video can be more effective than traditional media so campaigns must acknowledge the potential power in digital content. New media covers digital tools such as blogs, online newspapers, and social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Snap Chat). Traditional media platforms such as cable news, print newspaper, radio, and mailed content

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<sup>44</sup> David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives won the Heart of America*, Henry Holt and Company LLC, New York, 2004, 9-162.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

can have digital counterparts; a print newspaper like the New York Times can also be read online. The important difference between new and traditional media is the speed at which content is shared and the lack of filters that allow misinformation to spread without correction.

The credibility that has been present with traditional media platforms such as cable news, differs from new media channels. These channels can be operated by a single person who is solely responsible for the content they share and with no one to fact-check, it can be very easy for false information to spread. These differences present challenges and opportunities that campaigns and Democrats need to understand. There is value in traditional and new media platforms, but it is critical to understand which benefits come from each platform.

As the research reveals, these tools must be used effectively, not merely be present in the campaign to work. One of the challenges with digital media is the ease by which ordinary citizens can participate in creating and sharing content. This makes the media landscape more democratic and less structured. This a promise or a threat to democracy depending on how you see it.<sup>48</sup> In either case we have a constant stream of information and content that has a white noise affect, drowning out individual voices. Democrats have to cut through the noise to be effective not simply be among the voices.

Digital media is sometimes thought to be revolutionary, something entirely different than traditional media such as television or print. There are three examples that show these two forms of media share both characteristics and results. Interviews with political journalists showed that while Twitter is on the rise, the way that news is reported has not changed, it's now just in overdrive.<sup>49</sup> Analysis of campaign controversies found no marked difference in traditional and new media coverage.<sup>50</sup> Social media and new tools can be thought of as additional tools in the media toolkit. Digital media is part of a broad media landscape. The consequences of social media are significant but are limited by context and partisanship.<sup>51</sup> The conclusion of research on the 2012 Presidential election found that successful social media usage requires reliance on traditional political practices of driving interest in a message by filling media channels with meaningful content.<sup>52</sup> Campaigns must

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<sup>48</sup> Victoria A. Farrar-Myers, Justin S. Vaughn, "Controlling the Message: New Media in American Political Campaigns," New York University Press, 2015

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

spend time creating content that is effective at moving people, not just taking up space on the Internet.

The state of democracy as it relates to social media is an important piece of the political messaging conversation. Campaigns find themselves among many voices and producers of digital content that may influence a voter. While the access and opportunity to engage in political conversation is good in theory, it can have negative consequences.

In 2016, the phenomenon of ‘fake news’ took hold of the Internet. Ordinary citizens who felt strongly about issues and candidates had a platform to share misinformation that wove its way into political conversations on television and voter’s minds on election day. Campaigns must find a way to engage in these conversations to counter false information. There is not a huge difference in what is said, but who says it.<sup>53</sup> It is especially important for Democrats to understand this dynamic and engage in it with the intention to spread factual information that is important to voters. Ignoring misinformation is not enough, because in the absence of a counterargument, a lie can be taken as truth. The political stakes are too high for that risk. In the fast-paced media cycle and the vast amount of information available it can be difficult to decipher truth from fiction particularly if it is partisan in nature. Democrats must develop a plan to combat misinformation and produce meaningful truthful content. Leaders and politicians can navigate media challenges by responding to false claims in clear, succinct and understandable ways with words and sentiment that align with our beliefs.

Democrats need to find better words to address that personal anxiety and cultural divide voters feel. We need to speak to and about people in a way that reflects how they speak about themselves. There is a danger of further alienating voters if they continue to feel like politicians do not understand who they are. Sarah Smarsh of *The Guardian*, calls for a reflection on the way national media characterizes voters. She believes, “...one dimensional stereotypes fester where journalism fails to tread.”<sup>54</sup> Smarsh contends that if Democrats continue to frame their messaging in a way that conflates poor people with poor character, then this social partisan divide will only get worse.<sup>55</sup> However, if Democrats can acknowledge that this classist pattern, the political messages may be able to speak to people in a way that makes them feel heard and validated.

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<sup>53</sup> Victoria A. Farrar-Myers, Justin S. Vaughn, “Controlling the Message: New Media in American Political Campaigns,” New York University Press, 2015

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Smarsh, “Dangerous Idiots: how the liberal media elite failed working-class Americans”, *The Guardian*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/oct/13/liberal-media-bias-working-class-americans>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

The economic, cultural and social dynamics that affect political messaging are all valid and important to understand. I argue that to effectively move voters to Democratic candidates, campaigns have to address all three. Americans lead complicated lives and hold nuanced views so messaging must speak to that reality.

## Research

### **Party Infrastructure**

Amanda Marcotte of *Salon* wrote about how despite suffering national losses, Democrats in Nevada did exceptionally well in the 2016 election. Hillary Clinton won the state by 2.4 percentage points, and Democratic candidate Catherine Cortez Masto became the first Latina Senator in history<sup>56</sup>. Democrats also added one seat to the U.S. House and five Democrats beat Republican incumbents for state level seats.<sup>57</sup> Marcotte determined two reasons for their success and offers how both the national party and the state parties can learn from this example. U.S. Senator Harry Reid represented Nevada for 30 years. In that time, he committed to the state Democratic Party infrastructure by hiring quality people for all positions, participated in year-round networking and fundraising and invested in long term projects for the party that would be useful in future elections. For example, the state party was able to hire researchers and analysts to dedicate time to opposition research which was collected and used in every race necessary.<sup>58</sup> Marcotte acknowledges that this is not an easy task and it requires commitment to state politics but I would argue that investing in the communities from which you serve benefits you the politician, the community and the national party.

Without strong infrastructure in every state, it will be difficult to execute strong cohesive messaging. Secondly, the state of Nevada has a very strong, active union presence. Not only are union workers vital to the Democratic coalition but they also represent the intersectionality of identity and class politics. Union workers are not a bloc; they are women, people of color, members of the LGBT community and possess various levels of education.<sup>59</sup> They are multidimensional

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<sup>56</sup> Amanda Marcotte, “The Nevada playbook: Harry Reid’s Democrats won big here in 2016 – and it can be done in other states”, *Salon*, February 1, 2017  
<http://www.salon.com/2017/02/01/the-nevada-playbook-harry-reids-Democrats-won-big-here-in-2016-and-it-can-be-done-in-other-states/?source=newsletter> )

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

people who can go in to the community at large and advocate and organize. The Democratic Party is much stronger when union members feel empowered to advocate because the issue is personal to them not solely based on the party affiliation. If the Democratic Party is strong and effective in every state, then that benefits all candidates at all levels.

### **Measuring Voter Sentiment**

Candidates use data to tailor their messages to their voters' interests. One of the ways to collect data is by polling. Campaigns use polling to understand the sentiments, perceptions, and views of voters on policy issues. There are two primary ways to collect this research; qualitatively and quantitatively. Focus groups can be arranged by pollsters and campaign staff to interact with a selected groups of voters that is statistically designed to reflect the larger voting population. They allow for open ended questions where voters can share their views, opinions and attitudes. Campaigns can learn why voters feel the way they do and how they view certain issues by engaging with them face to face in focus groups. Surveys allow campaigns to reach more voters by asking a list of questions that measure broad sentiments of voting populations. Campaigns can use survey data to understand what moves voters on a large scale by taking the whole of the data collected and analyzing it. Taken together this data can inform a campaign's message plan. Democrats need to know how their voters feel about issues on the Democratic platform and need to take in information from the voters about what they want from their representatives. Thomas Edsall of *The New York Times* wrote about the changing Democratic coalition and what it means for future campaigns. For the first time in 60 years, Democrats are more favorable among upper income white voters and whites with both a college degree and those with graduate degrees.<sup>60</sup> This expands the cross section of white voters that are aligned with the Democrats but they should not be over relied on. Edsall claims that this trend is the inversion of the New Deal coalition of Franklin D. Roosevelt. From 1994 – 2014, the number of voters with post graduate degrees and self-identified as liberal rose from 7% to 31%.<sup>61</sup> However, there is a divide between so-called 'upscale Democratic white voters' and 'downscale Republican white voters'.<sup>62</sup>

This partisan divide is challenging for both parties but especially Democrats who need broad support of white voters to have a majority of the electorate. Again we must recognize the impact

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Edsall, "The Great Democratic Inversion", *The New York Times*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/27/opinion/campaign-stops/the-great-democratic-inversion.html>

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

that cosmopolitanism has on this social divide. Edsall cites a UVA-IASC study on political views in which the researchers divided white voters in two categories – “the social elite” and “the disinherited”.<sup>63</sup> The findings are important to understand how voters view themselves in relation to the government. The social elites are voters with advanced degrees of which 49% are Democrats.<sup>64</sup> Nearly 75% of those respondents believe the economy is improving and almost 69% say that you can get ahead by working hard.<sup>65</sup> 66% of the respondents disagreed with the statement “people like me” have no say in government.<sup>66</sup> These voters have an overall trust in government and belief in their individual capacity to get ahead which is not how those in the disinherited category feel. These voters are more religiously conservative and do not have college degrees.<sup>67</sup> In the survey, 50% feel alienated and nearly 85% believe public officials don’t care “what people like me think”.<sup>68</sup> This is troubling for many reasons but namely, if these folks think that politicians don’t care how they feel at the onset, then why would they be compelled to believe any messaging directed toward them? Democrats can’t presume to know how these voters feel or know what they think.

Democrats need to spend more time talking to and learning from voters about how they see the world before we start crafting political messages designed to motivate them to vote for our candidates. Compared to the social elite voters, almost 73% say they are no longer able to get ahead through hard work and 75% believe the government threatens the freedom of “ordinary Americans.”<sup>69</sup> These numbers clearly illustrate a partisan divide that is made more stark by the rise of the social elites in the Democratic Party and the disinherited in the Republican Party. Edsall points out these trends have been growing for 50 years and originated in the 1960s and 1970s culture conflicts labelled as ‘the silent majority,’ ‘Reagan Democrats,’ and ‘the angry white man.’ These set the stage for political divide we see today. However, Edsall argues there is some hope for Democrats. In the 2016 Florida Republican primary, 60% of voters felt betrayed by the party, matching trends in Michigan (58%) and Pennsylvania (59%).<sup>70</sup> There is an opportunity there to appeal to those unhappy voters. On the other hand, Edsall says there is a danger of losing some Democratic voters who are unsatisfied with current policies. He believes Democrats must stabilize

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas Edsall, “The Great Democratic Inversion”, *The New York Times*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/27/opinion/campaign-stops/the-great-democratic-inversion.html>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



the affluent white voters and disadvantaged minority coalitions by balancing the economic interests of all groups.<sup>71</sup> If the Democrats can create messaging that is nuanced enough to speak to personal economic conditions of different sections of the electorate, then they have a strong chance of building a lasting coalition.

How we collect data is as important as the results we find. Traditional political data collection comes from voter polling. Dan Wagner, of Civis Analytics, a data analytics firm focusing on taking data and turning it into helpful information, presented an argument about the state of political data challenges at a conference I attended. Wagner summarized his argument into three central points; people, and organizations, measurement and tools.<sup>72</sup> He made the case that Democrats and progressives need to engage with leadership in business and technology industries to develop better tools and ideas about solving the challenges of tracking how voters think and behave. The conversations voters have about politics have become more digital than in-person so we need to tools to listen and learn what is being said online. The political industry may not be the best place to innovate and create new tools so leaders need to recognize the value and skills of others that can support the Democratic cause.<sup>73</sup> We need to realize that where and how people consume their political information has changed. Wagner cited a Pew Research statistic stating that 62% of adults over 65 use Facebook, which indicates that older voters are communicating in different ways so politics needs to match those changes.<sup>74</sup>

Ace Smith, a veteran campaign manager, said he believes that political campaigns need to evolve the tools used to collect information on voters. Online polling is an example of a tool that has more complexity but is not widely used.<sup>75</sup> The benefits to online polling are the ability to be dynamic and adapt the information sent out while it's being tested. A voter can take a survey online and see visuals, hear audio, read text and respond in real time about he or she feels about that content. It's even possible to ask respondents to highlight parts of paragraphs, specific phrases or words that strike them and those can be directly turned into campaign messages. Cell phones also have potential to change how polling is conducted because it can be done in short pieces which is then

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<sup>71</sup> Thomas Edsall, "The Great Democratic Inversion", *The New York Times*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/27/opinion/campaign-stops/the-great-democratic-inversion.html>

<sup>72</sup> Dan Wagner, *Democratic Data and Technology: perspective on the problem and some recommendations*, Conference presentation, March 10, 2017

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ace Smith (Campaign Consultant), personal communication, February 2017

put together to reveal voters' feelings. This is called data stitching because it sections out data in small pieces to categorize it based on.

### Identifying our Voters

It is important to recognize where campaigns and parties can improve. Jamal Simmons wrote for *Medium* about critical messaging errors made by the Hillary Clinton campaign staff. While this past campaign cycle felt out of the ordinary considering the external forces and the candidate who ultimately won, Simmons wants us to remember that there are some campaign rules that still apply. Political campaigns are about the future and about the voters. Simmons contends that the focus of the Clinton campaign was too much about herself than about the American people.<sup>76</sup> Her slogans – “Ready for Hillary,” “I’m with her,” “Stronger Together” – were not as compelling as they needed to be. These are important lessons to learn and as painful as they might be for those who are personally attached to that campaign (myself included), we have to recognize where we can improve if we hope to win again.

We must know who are voters are to create effective messages. The challenge is if we rely on historical information, we may miss the mark on how voters feel right now. For instance, according to *The New York Times* article by Nate Cohn, 20% of self-identified liberal white working class voters, voted for the Republican candidate.<sup>77</sup> That number shocked me and is clearly indicative of a change that motivated voters who were presumed to vote one way to vote another. How did Democrats miss this? According to Cohn, Democrats focused on the ‘rising American electorate’ or those with higher incomes and educations. This concentrated Hillary Clinton’s votes in the richest and most educated parts of the country.

In addition to knowing who voters are, we have to understand what they care about. Rather than focusing on readily available data such as gender, age, and location which can be found in by anyone, what if we can create messages based on voters’ beliefs and values? That information is surely more difficult to find and analyze but the result is more meaningful messages that can create a bilateral relationship between a voter and a political campaign.

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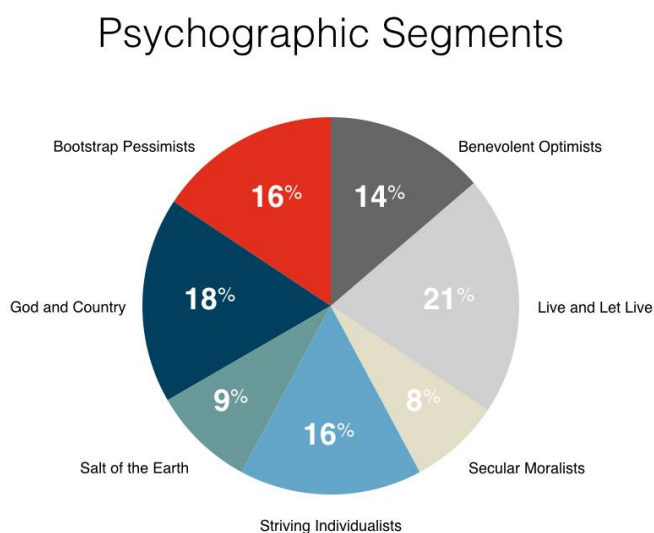
<sup>76</sup> Jamal Simmons, “Trump’s Victory Proves Campaign Rules Still Apply”, *Medium*, December 6, 2016, <https://medium.com/@JamalSimmons/the-rules-still-apply-38602c5ca300#.7z2w0udcz>

<sup>77</sup> Nate Cohn, “How the Obama coalition crumbled, leaving an opening for Trump”, *The New York Times*, December 23, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/23/upshot/how-the-obama-coalition-crumbled-leaving-an-opening-for-trump.html>

A communication strategy firm, Hattaway Communications, conducted a research study in 2016 that sought to understand Americans' hopes and values.<sup>78</sup> This research shows Democratic leaders and candidates how to create messages that will motivate people on a deeper level than previously possible. The Hattaway research revealed the ways in which how we view ourselves, our nation and our hopes for humanity intersect.<sup>79</sup> With the data collected, it is possible to divide the American public into seven sections. This illustrates a departure from categorizing people based on their demographic information and focuses on the power of speaking to someone and knowing their values. It also takes much of the guess work out of message creation. Once we know the views, beliefs and values of a certain group of people we can confidently create a message that should be influential to them. The seven categories are: Benevolent Optimists, Live & Let Live, Secular Moralists, Striving Individualists, Salt of the Earth, God & Country, and Bootstrap Pessimists.<sup>80</sup>

The figure below illustrates the percentages of each segment. Of the seven categories, four align with Democratic policy positions and values, one could be persuaded and the final two can receive messages that counter the misinformation spread by other parties. This means that over half of the electorate can be targeted with tailored messages and they are already aligned with Democratic policies. So there is no reason why these voters should feel disconnected from a Democratic candidate or cause.

Figure 1: psychographic segments of the population



<sup>78</sup> Hattaway Communications, *American Aspirations*, Conference presentation, March 10, 2017

<sup>79</sup> Hattaway Communications, *American Aspirations*, Conference presentation, March 10, 2017

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

The data showed these seven categories have unique characteristics that are helpful to understand for their own value but more importantly for message development purposes. The seven sections are more complicated to place on a spectrum of left to right, liberal to conservative but I want to illustrate the impact and nuance found in each group. The first group, benevolent optimists, describe themselves as “compassionate, generous and responsible.”<sup>81</sup> They are the youngest and have the highest proportion of people of color. They believe in respecting others differences, strive to have purpose in life and are the most likely to be strong Democrats.<sup>82</sup> They represent 14% of the adult population.<sup>83</sup> Somewhat in the middle, we have the striving individualists, who describe themselves as “responsible and self-reliant.”<sup>84</sup> While this group is also comprised of young people, they are focused on personal achievement. They represent 16% of the adult population.<sup>85</sup> Next, we have the salt of the earth. These folks describe themselves as, “family-oriented, hardworking, responsible, religious.”<sup>86</sup> They are loyal to American values and are guided by strong moral principles but are open minded. While they are very religious and more of the Gen X age than millennials, they are relatively moderate and could be persuaded to vote for Democratic candidates.<sup>87</sup> Lastly, there are the bootstrap pessimists who also call themselves, “hardworking, responsible, family-oriented, religious.”<sup>88</sup> They do not want to compromise, are the least open minded and the most pessimistic.<sup>89</sup> This group represents 16% of the adult population, is dominated by men, and is most likely to live in the South.<sup>90</sup> This group is more aligned with the Tea Party but by knowing how they see themselves, using words like hard-working and responsible just like the other groups, Democrats can produce messages that counter negative information that is spread by political opponents like the Tea Party. These segments do not cleanly fall in to Democrat or Republican categories and it is important to understand how people see themselves before we make assumptions about their political views.

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<sup>81</sup> Hattaway Communications, *American Aspirations*, Conference presentation, March 10, 2017

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Hattaway Communications, *American Aspirations*, Conference presentation, March 10, 2017

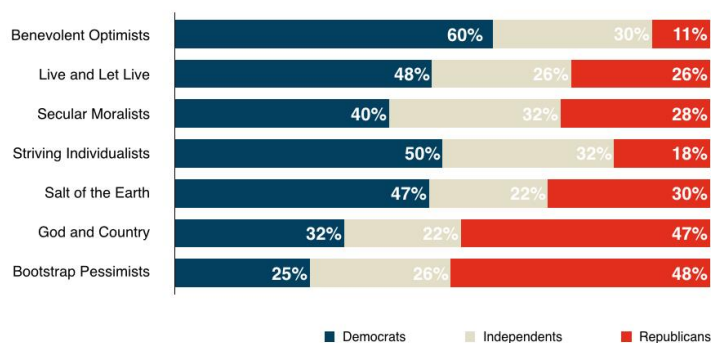
<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

To illustrate this point, “one out of every four bootstrap pessimists is a Democrat. And among salt of the earth, there are many more Democrats than Republicans.”<sup>91</sup> The figure below demonstrates an answer to a question I posed at the beginning of this paper, “who are Democrats and what do they care about?” We now have a way to understand the values of our voters, the way they see themselves, and the way they see our politics.

Figure 2: segments do not follow party lines

### Segments Transcend Party Divides



We can broaden our definition of a Democratic voter by using these metrics. The way we divide voters into somewhat binary boxes (supporter/opposition, Democrat/Republican, or voter/nonvoter) does not accurately or adequately reflect who they really are. If we developed messaging that spoke to their goals and values, we could create a more in-depth and meaningful relationship with them.

Activist and author Steve Phillips wrote a book, *Brown is the New White: How the Demographic Revolution Has Created a New American Majority*, that argues despite a growing electorate of supporters, the Democratic party has failed to change its message strategy. Phillips argues that the leadership of the Democratic Party and the progressive movement have failed to see the rise of other ethnic groups as a political force to win elections.<sup>92</sup> People of color make up over 37% of the U.S.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Steve Phillips, *Brown is the New White: How the Demographic Revolution Has Created a New American Majority*, The New Press, New York, 2015, 3-171.

population and the fastest growing groups are Latino and Asian Americans.<sup>93</sup> We now have a progressive majority in which 23% of all eligible voters are progressive people of color and 28% are progressive white voters.<sup>94</sup> This coalition is 51% of the voting age population and will only grow larger over time. Phillips makes the case that progressive leaders have repeatedly failed to invest in the growing communities of color. For example, in 2004 had John Kerry received 96% instead of 84% of the Black vote in Ohio, he would have become president.<sup>95</sup> Investment is more than determining where money is spent, it is also about long term campaign strategy. The two major strategies campaigns focus on are mobilization and persuasion. Mobilization concentrates on getting people who agree with you to actually cast their vote for you. Persuasion centers on convincing someone who is undecided that they should go vote and vote for you. Despite evidence that mobilization is the most effective strategy to produce votes, more energy is placed on persuasion tactics.<sup>96</sup> Democratic campaigns should reinvest their resources and focus their messages on getting supporters out to vote. Democrats must spend energy and time in places that are not predominately progressive to expand their share of the vote. It can't be all about the odds, it must be about people and where they are. As Jamal Simmons wrote, campaigns are about people and their future. Therefore, Democrats need to invest in communities where people need them the most.

Political campaigns could learn valuable lessons from the strategies of some social issues. For example, the marriage equality movement struggled on the ballot in 2004 and 2008 across several states. After electoral losses, many of the organizers reevaluated the messaging and the organizing structure. Initially the messages were about equal rights for all, which is somewhat abstract. Steve Phillips discusses the impact of this movement through marriage equality leaders working to support pro-marriage equality candidates in states like Massachusetts, New York and California.<sup>97</sup> Each candidate that won added to the momentum that influence public attitudes. In 2012, there were new measures in Maine and Minnesota. The organizers for these campaigns focused on personal relationships with each voter contact. Volunteers focused their efforts on marriage as a whole and connected with voters on their personal feelings about marriage and love for their spouse.<sup>98</sup> Often the voter on the would soften their feelings and realize the significance of these marriage equality

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Steve Phillips, *Brown is the New White: How the Demographic Revolution Has Created a New American Majority*, The New Press, New York, 2015, 3-171.

<sup>98</sup> Nicole Derse (political consultant) in discussion with the author, February 2017.

propositions.<sup>99</sup> These advocates and political leaders changed public opinion over 10 years which is relatively short amount of time. This is a huge lesson in being able to self-assess and change course to be more effective.

### **Organizing Philosophies Impact Messaging Choices**

How we organize as a campaign is profoundly important. Becky Bond and Zack Exley who worked on the Bernie Sanders campaign believe in a system called ‘big organizing.’<sup>100</sup> This involved many hours of volunteers building a voter contact file basically by hand, which meant that when they needed to call voters to volunteer, give money or vote, they knew exactly who they were calling. This system is the inverse of ‘small organizing,’ which relies on big data analytics, predictive modeling and micro targeting to limit the number of people you need to connect with.<sup>101</sup> What is striking about these two operating systems is they represent an ideology – science based or human based. I believe both are extremely valuable and necessary for a successful campaign. However, relying on either too much leaves out an important piece of the equation.

Another tool that can be helpful is a listening tour, in which candidates spend time in the community they hope to represent and listen to constituent concerns. Now presidential candidates can’t visit every town in America but they can make a better effort to sit in front of citizens and listen to them. Often campaigns do a lot of the legwork and conduct polling or focus groups to gauge voter sentiment but they distill that information and rely it to the candidate.

The example of the Republican party leader in Wichita demonstrates the effectiveness of spending time in the community with the intent to build a movement and maintain long-term voter engagement. The efforts that Thomas Frank during his time writing about Kansas revealed the power that comes from changing voter engagement from transactional to relational. The resistance that has erupted in the wake of the 44<sup>th</sup> President’s administration is an incredible opportunity to harness that energy and channel it into political change. Democrats need to step into these social movements like the Women’s March, the ACLU protests and others and become part of the conversation. Millions of voters, nonvoters, and potential voters have joined causes they feel

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<sup>99</sup> David Fleischer, “Executive Summary,” *The Prop 8 Report*, <http://prop8report.lgbtmentoring.org/read-the-report/executive-summary>

<sup>100</sup> Becky Bond, Zack Exley, “Hillary Clinton’s vaunted GOTV operation may have turned out Trump voters”, *The Huffington Post*, November 11, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hillary-clintons-vaunted-gotv-operation-may-have-turned-out-trump-voters\\_us\\_582533b1e4b060adb56ddc27](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hillary-clintons-vaunted-gotv-operation-may-have-turned-out-trump-voters_us_582533b1e4b060adb56ddc27)

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

strongly about and Democrats can capitalize on that by offering them an opportunity to participate in these movements as Democrats. Without a strong Democratic party that has the support of these powerful organizations and individuals then progressive or liberal policies will never be enacted.

### **Candidates as Message**

The best messages won't do as well if we don't have strong candidates to deliver them. Thus any strategic messaging plan must account for the candidate selection process and a mechanism by which campaigns work with the Democratic Party. There is no candidate test that will help determine the likelihood of success but Democratic Party leaders can commit to investing resources to recruit candidates from different backgrounds – geographically, economically, educationally ethnically – to create an environment where Democratic political candidates reflect the communities they hope to serve. The official procedures for nominating and selecting Democratic candidates are complicated and not fully transparent. There was justified criticism during the 2016 Democratic primary process as it appeared that the party structure favored Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders. I care about recruiting good candidates to run for office as Democrats across the country and across every level of government. While our national institutions need improvement and innovation, my concern is centered on whether the candidates who run for office reflect Democratic values and reflect the communities they hope to represent.

### The Path Forward

The fundamentals of campaigns still apply. Success is more likely when campaigns use a blend of new and traditional tools and tactics. We must remember that social media is a tool to convey a message, not a message in itself. No matter the form or speaker, content must be meaningful and intentional. The audiences must be moved by the intention and the subject of the message. The effects of social media may happen at the margins but elections are also won at the margins. If we refocus the emphasis on the smallest influence, we may see a big difference. As our society continues to be more technology oriented, we have moved from party-centered campaigns to candidate-centered campaigns. As social media promotes the individual within a political context perhaps we are headed toward a voter-centered campaign, in which voters are more than just the receiver of political information. I want the Democratic Party to be voter oriented. If we are the 'big tent' party, we need to do a better job of speaking to whom we claim to represent.



On March 29, 2017, the current chair of the DNC, Tom Perez asked for the resignation of all current staff members.<sup>102</sup> While this is standard practice, it offers an opportunity to remake the structure of the DNC leadership in a way that will foster innovation and forward thinking. Rebuilding the Democratic Party will not be an easy task and our leadership needs to be strategic with resources (financial) and capital (staff). I want the DNC staff to reflect what America looks like. The Democratic Party offices should commit to hiring more women and people of color for positions in campaigns and leadership roles. Additionally, there must be class diversity represented. It is not adequate to strive for gender parity if there is only one social class represented. The Democrats need to represent real diversity by gender, ethnicity, and class. If the national organization can take this opportunity of a clean slate, then so can state and local party offices. It is important that citizens see themselves represented by political decision makers. Democrats need to reflect the communities they serve.

#### *Long Term Investments*

While campaigns are by definition short term projects, there needs to be investment in long term tools and strategy. We need the good kind of machine politics that build long term relationships with voters. Leaders and candidates need to devote financial and human capital to spending time in communities to truly understand their needs. We need to commit to full time, long term staff whose sole purpose is to engage with constituents. These staff members need to connect to existing community organizations and develop relationships with them. The Democratic Party does not have to reinvent the wheel to know how voters feel and what they need. While we should invest in more meaningful target strategy like the Hattaway team demonstrated, we can also connect with local organizations that already know their communities.

The broad range of policies, issues and ideas that inspire thousands of organizations are an untapped resource for the Democratic Party. This is not about going after a group because they can offer votes, this is about investing in partnerships. Democrats are not one cohesive and one of the challenges of developing messages that address the various concerns of all Democratic or possibly Democratic voters, is the risk of sending mixed messages. How can we address climate change, social justice, wages, terrorism and healthcare all in one message narrative? The truth is we can't and

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<sup>102</sup> Eric Bradner, Dan Merica, "DNC Chair asks for staff resignations as overhaul begins," *CNN Politics*, March 29, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/03/28/politics/dnc-tom-perez-staff-resignation-letters/>

we shouldn't. each of these and other issues are complicated and interconnected to other issues. Democrats need to start our messaging with statement about our values and who we are as a political party. We need to spend time thinking about how we want to talk about the issues voters care about. There should be process where we identify our values, a theme about our values, the issues themselves, the policies about the issues, and then the message which is a final product of that thought process.

Democrats can build a social movement. We can target voters based on their values and beliefs. Democrats need to be and project authenticity. The Hattaway research showed the sections of voters who align with Democratic values and who can be moved to vote for our candidates and policies. By actually championing the values of the communities they hope to represent, candidates will have far greater success than if they doing the bare minimum to get elected. There is an energy and heightened activism in response to the current administration that the Democrats must capitalize on. This does not mean stifle and declare what efforts are worthy. Rather it means supporting the people and organizations that are doing difficult work every day to protect citizens and our institutions. The Women's March, the ACLU, Indivisible and countless others are part of the coalition of groups resisting the policies of the 45<sup>th</sup> president. However, there is a disconnect between the efforts of organizations and official political parties. For instance, at the San Francisco Women's March there was not strong presence of the local or state Democratic Party. Over 100,000 people attended the march and yet there were no party volunteers walking around with voter registration forms.<sup>103</sup> This was a perfect opportunity to merge social action with political participation. Why wasn't the Democratic Party there to engage with voters? The Democrats, both candidates and party operatives, need to engage with and participate in the acts of resistance.

Steve Phillips made the case recently in an article for *The Nation* that Democratic Party committees and progressive groups are on track to spend over \$500 million dollars by the 2018 elections.<sup>104</sup> He argues that this money should not be allocated to paid advertising as it is traditionally done, but rather it should be invested in community organizing. Phillips draws on the math of University of California, Berkeley professor Lisa Garcia Bedolla to illustrate how effective this investment would be. According to Phillips, "...an investment of \$1 million can increase voter

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<sup>103</sup> "Massive Crowd Assembles in SF For Women's March Rally," *CBS SF Bay Area*, January 21, 2017, <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2017/01/21/huge-crowd-san-francisco-rally-womens-march/>

<sup>104</sup> Steve Phillips, "The Key to Taking Back Our Country: Fortify the Front Lines of the Resistance," *The Nation*, March 27, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-key-to-taking-back-our-country-fortify-the-front-lines-of-the-resistance/>

turnout by 20,00 people. Investing the \$500 million in this fashion could swell the ranks of progressive voters by nearly 10 million people. *That* is how we take our country back.”<sup>105</sup>

Democrats should take advantage of the opportunity to change strategy and commit to a different course of political activity that focuses on individual voters. Investing in voter mobilization and grassroots organizing accomplishes several tasks. It keeps citizens engaged throughout election cycles and reminds them that the political parties are important more than every four years. It eliminates the challenges campaign staff face when going into communities where they have no operation because there will already be a permanent one that can immediately coordinate with the campaign for any specific task. This investment also demonstrates a commitment to the lives of the people who we aim to represent. If the party staff members and during election cycles, campaign staff continually interact with people at all levels (city, county, state) then we will be able to take the information gathered and use it to create meaningful and motivating political messages.

### *Science and Art*

Campaigns are always about voters, actual humans with real lives and challenges. Democratic candidates and their teams need to spend more time out among them. We can create better technology by developing relationships with different experts in technology and business industries. Using the best of new tools allows campaigns to do less guesswork and spend time engaging with voters in more meaningful ways. Democrats should invest energy into developing new tools to measure how we are doing. We can encourage creativity and innovation by everyone and bring as many ideas into testing as possible. Don't presume we have the best solutions. Our leaders need to recruit and train people to keep up with technology and innovation. Accepting a bit of risk is a worthy investment if we can learn how people communicate, share information and speak about politics over digital platforms and among friends.<sup>106</sup> In an age of digital content, it is not enough to create the most visually appealing, emotionally motivating video if it only speaks to voters who agree with our values. Learning how to decipher who watches a YouTube ad and what they think will be critical to Democrats' future success. We can't afford to continue doing polling and data collection the same way it has been done.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Dan Wagner, *Democratic Data and Technology: perspective on the problem and some recommendations*, Conference presentation, March 10, 2017

It is possible to measure who turns out to vote and who does not. The Texas Organizing Project, an organizing and advocacy group, has tools to measure who votes.<sup>107</sup> They developed a neighborhood based operation that focused on voter mobilization that helped elect a progressive mayor in Houston.<sup>108</sup> Democrats should research this organization and others that are working at the local level to engage citizens in political activity. The data these groups have can help Democrats understand the effectiveness of message strategy and evaluate the investment of resources. If campaigns fail to self-critique, then future campaigns will make the same mistakes and we can't afford to do that.

Our collective efforts need to help all candidates not just presidential ones every four years. Innovating and testing new technologies and tools will help every movement and candidate gain access to more accurate information about their constituents. Even though each campaign results in a winner and a loser, from a leadership perspective we need to think about long term strategy for what will provide the best opportunities for success.

The Democratic Party and Democratic leaders have come a long way since our founding. Our world may look a lot different than it did then, but our purpose is fundamentally the same. We have an obligation to represent the will and needs of the American people. The operational and strategic choices that caused our party to lose elections can provide a chance to learn and evaluate our institution. Given our current political climate we cannot afford to wastes the opportunities to innovate and create a better political organization. If we can take advantage of the technology, reorient our interaction with voters and commit to communicating with voters through values and beliefs, then we will be a stronger party.

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<sup>107</sup> Steve Phillips, *Brown is the New White: How the Demographic Revolution Has Created a New American Majority*, The New Press, New York, 2015, 3-171.

<sup>108</sup> Steve Phillips, "The Key to Taking Back Our Country: Fortify the Front Lines of the Resistance," *The Nation*, March 27, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-key-to-taking-back-our-country-fortify-the-front-lines-of-the-resistance/>

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## Appendix

There are 10 states that were decided by less than 5% in 2016. That means that it's possible that with a strong candidate, a strong message and effective execution those states can be won by Democrats. In 2020 there will be more swing dates, the map has changed. Campaigns need to prepare for the reality of that not what we want it to look like. It will be a 2-part job; defend blue states and attack red states that could swing our way.<sup>109</sup> These are the 10 states that Democrats and Progressive need to direct their resources and energy because if we can turn these states into Democratic states then we can build a political movement that advances the liberal/progressive agenda.

<b>State</b>	<b>Percentage Margin</b>	<b>Votes</b>	<b>Winner</b>
Michigan	.3%	13,080	Republican
New Hampshire	.2%	2,701	Democrat
Wisconsin	1%	27,257	Republican
Pennsylvania	1.2%	68,236	Republican
Florida	1.2%	114,455	Republican
Minnesota	1.5%	44,470	Democrat
Nevada	2.4%	26,434	Democrat
Maine	2.7%	19,995	Democrat
North Carolina	3.8%	177,009	Republican
Arizona	3.9%	91,682	Republican

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<sup>109</sup> David Cantanese, "The 10 Closest States in the 2016 Election," *US News*, November 14, 2016.  
<https://www.usnews.com/news/the-run-2016/articles/2016-11-14/the-10-closest-states-in-the-2016-election>