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Democrats Need to Reach Out to the Heartland



If Democrats want to keep blaming others for their sorry performance on Election Day, they're obviously free to do so. Yes, they were hurt by the disclosure of Hillary Clinton's private email server, claims that the Clinton Foundation was a "pay-to-play" operation, and even fake news. Yes, if FBI Director James Comey hadn't reopened the Clinton email investigation, the voting needle might have moved in states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and possibly Pennsylvania. Yes, Russia's email hacks might have dented Democrats' support.

But to simply blame these things is a form of denial. Democrats may see Donald Trump as a horrific freak of nature, but the fact remains that he received 63 million votes—2 million more than Mitt Romney in 2012 and 3 million more than John McCain in 2008. While Democrats can blame gerrymandering for their failure to win a House majority, figures compiled by Cook Political Report House Editor David Wasserman show that Republicans beat Democrats in the national House popular vote, 63,153,387 (49.1 percent) to 61,776,218 (48.0 percent), with independent or other-party candidates pulling another 3,682,600.

Increasingly Democrats are becoming a party of urban areas, college towns, minority voters, and the East and West Coasts. The heartland, often derided by Democrats as "flyover country," is now becoming a no-fly zone for the party. Wasserman figures that while President Obama won 690 (22 percent) of the nation's 3,113 counties, Clinton carried just 487 (16 percent). Every single Senate election in 2016 was won by the same party that prevailed in the presidential race in that state. The adage that "I vote for the person, not the party" has never been less true than today.

Simply put, Democrats need to expand their sensitivity-training courses to include people who live in small-town and rural America—middle-class white voters, people who live paycheck to paycheck, and whites who attend church at least once a week. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal coalition of voters is now officially dead. Democrats were losing these voters before Donald Trump came along and will continue to do so beyond his presidency unless they show genuine concern for these constituencies. To be sure, the country is changing and becoming more diverse, but it is not doing so at the same pace everywhere. Democrats are running up the score in places that do not help them win majorities in the House, Senate, and Electoral College.

An analysis by Tyler Fisher and Alyson Hurt for NPR found that Trump won 70.6 percent of the vote from rural counties and places with populations under 2,500 that were not near metro areas, compared to 25.1 percent for Clinton. Trump won 66.1 percent of the vote in small counties that were near metro areas (Clinton 30.1 percent), 65.8 percent in counties with populations between 2,500 and 19,999 not near metro areas (Clinton 29.4 percent), and 66.3 percent in similarly-sized counties near metro areas (Clinton 29.5 percent).

While many Democrats and journalists are busy reading *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (I personally find the title offensive), far more can be learned from *The Politics of Resentment* by University

of Wisconsin political science professor Katherine Cramer. It is the product of nine years of interviewing rural Wisconsin voters to learn about their anxiety, fears, and resentment of urban America and its elites.

If any Republican candidate in modern history should have done badly with white churchgoers, it was Donald Trump. And yet, exit polls show that Trump carried the 26 percent of the white electorate who consider themselves evangelical or born-again voters by a 65-point margin, 81 to 16 percent. Among the 33 percent of voters of all races who attend church at least once a week, Trump won by 16 points, 56 to 40 percent, and among those who go at least monthly, Trump won by 12 points, 54 to 42 percent. Democrats can take solace in winning people who say they never go to church by 31 points, 62 to 31 percent, but they will be distressed to learn that this group makes up just 22 percent of the electorate.

Democrats worried about their poor showing among churchgoers would be well-advised to read *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* by Sojourners president Jim Wallis, whom I would describe as a liberal evangelical. Wallis argues that conservatives have no corner on religion in general or Christianity in particular, but that Democrats are increasingly becoming a secular party while Republicans are becoming the party of people of faith.

In short, Democrats need to get over Donald Trump and the specifics of what happened in 2016 and begin to think about how, in their rush into America's future, they left behind a large number of voters who are still very much here, right now. To malign these people as bigots, racists, and misogynists ignores the fact that some actually voted for President Obama at least once, have voted for women in previous elections, or have voted for Democrats in the not-so-distant past.

Ironically, in Clinton's inartful but memorable "basket of deplorables" talk at an LGBT Gala for Hillary in September, she alienated many of these people in the first half of her speech while squarely addressing many others in the largely overlooked second part of her remarks. As reported by PolitiFact, she said:

But the other basket—and I know this because I see friends from all over America here ... people who feel that the government has let them down, the economy has let them down, nobody cares about them, nobody worries about what happens to their lives and their futures, and they're just desperate for change. It doesn't really even matter where it comes from. They don't buy everything he says, but he seems to hold out some hope that their lives will be different—they won't wake up and see their jobs disappear, lose a kid to heroin, feel like they're in a dead end. Those are people we have to understand and empathize with as well."

The aftermaths of elections are filled with "what ifs." What if Hillary Clinton had omitted the section of the speech on the basket of deplorables? What if Democrats take to heart the paragraph quoted above? It would certainly be a good way to get back in touch with the heartland.