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Democrats Need To Get Back In Touch



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Prior to the November election, there was considerable talk about how the Republican Party would need to put itself back together after Donald Trump's expected presidential loss. Now it's the Democrats who have to figure out a strategy for the post-Obama and post-Clinton era. But they don't seem much interested in introspection, which is surprising considering they had been expected to score a net gain of between four and six Senate seats and win control the chamber, and close the gap in the House by netting between 10 and 20 seats, instead of only six. And of course they came up 30 to 40 electoral votes short of the number they figured to win to keep the White House.

Instead of planning for the future, Democrats are looking bitterly at the past. They're driven to distraction by hatred and contempt for President-elect Trump, the actions of FBI Director James Comey, hacking by Russian intelligence operatives, fake news, the alt-right movement, and even the shortcomings of Hillary Clinton's candidacy. While some of these concerns are legitimate and possibly were decisive, focusing on them has no constructive benefit for a party that desperately needs a change in direction.

Democrats should start by rebuilding their bench. Barack Obama's two White House victories obscured devastating losses in 2010 and 2014 on the state level in both legislative and gubernatorial races. An aging congressional leadership and little turnover due to high reelection rates caused stagnation in the House, prompting many up-and-coming Democrats to leave because they saw no near-term prospects for advancement.

Those state-legislative losses amounted to destroying the seed corn for the future in the lower chamber, and gubernatorial losses depleted the ranks of future Senate and presidential aspirants.

Scouring the country like baseball scouts looking for new and unrecognized talent is something that the Democratic Party hasn't done in years. Rather than just recruiting for specific races, the party needs to find and groom prospects for future races. Many of the comprehensive training programs that the Democratic National Committee sponsored in the 1960s and 1970s are a shadow of what they used to be, if they exist at all.

Given the vagaries of both congressional redistricting and population patterns, Democrats have little hope of recapturing a House majority in 2018 or 2020, but again they're content with cursing the darkness instead of plotting a bright future. They put too much blame on Republican gerrymandering in the states, and no doubt that is part of their problem. Sure, Republican gains in the 2010 and 2014 elections did boost GOP strength in the state capitals. After all, the midterm election cycles are when the bulk of governorships and many state-legislative seats are contested. The GOP is simply doing to Democrats what Democrats did to Republicans for many years, drawing party lines to their benefit. With the wonders of computer technology and increased straight-party voting, it just has a bigger impact now than in the past.

The other side of the coin is that Democrats have become an urban and coastal party. A glance at the red-blue national maps of presidential and congressional voting shows that the Democratic Party has a very narrow footprint. Democrats are very highly concentrated in urban areas and college towns. Where do Republican voters tend to live? Everywhere else—small-town and rural America and the outermost suburbs. Republican voters are more evenly distributed across many districts while Democratic voters are piled up on top of each other. The result: The party wins a smaller number of districts by often astronomical margins, wasting votes with big victories. My colleague David Wasserman jokes that Democrats need to launch a massive voter relocation program, urging their supporters to move out of the cities and into the outer concentric circles of metropolitan areas, as well as to small towns and rural America.

There was a time when many congressional Democrats, particularly those on the Agriculture Committee, would make a concerted effort to bring their urban colleagues to their Southern and Midwestern districts to help them understand the needs of rural Americans. Today, there are practically no Democrats in the House who represent country districts, so these visits by city folks are just a memory. For older urban Democrats, their view of rural America comes from reruns of *Lassie*, *Petticoat Junction*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

Research shows that Democrats who live outside metropolitan areas think that urban elites and people on the East and West coasts don't understand them. They feel ignored or even disrespected. Democrats don't seem to understand that they can fight for the rights of previously neglected groups and still pursue policies aimed at helping Joe and Jane Lunch-bucket. These goals are not mutually exclusive. The relatively small share of infrastructure spending in the 2009 economic stimulus package is a good example of how Democrats failed to pursue a course that would have created well-paying jobs for laid-off workers and people who choose not to go to college or can't afford to.

Medical-records technology and green-energy projects are not particularly effective in creating jobs for people displaced by trade and environmental policies. If you are going to throw coal miners out of work, you'd better take aggressive steps to find comparable jobs for them and their children and grandchildren. Making agriculture a more important tool of foreign policy, using it to generate good will in countries that are increasingly hostile to the U.S., would bring benefits at home and abroad.

The immediate objectives are to keep Democratic losses in the Senate to a minimum and to start making inroads in gubernatorial and state-legislative races in 2018. But making Democrats a national party again requires a broader vision. They need to define diversity not just along the lines of race and sexual orientation, but also in terms of geography and economic class. In short, they need to parachute into "flyover" country and get back in touch with ordinary Americans.