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The Democratic Strategist has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As The Democratic Strategists' editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO

LEARNING FROM 2014 AND
TURNING TO 2016:
**DEMOCRATS STILL NEED
A COMPELLING
ECONOMIC MESSAGE**

BY
SHERI RIVLIN AND ALLAN RIVLIN

**TDS STRATEGY MEMO: LEARNING FROM 2014 AND TURNING TO 2016:
DEMOCRATS STILL NEED A COMPELLING ECONOMIC MESSAGE**

By SHERI RIVLIN AND ALLAN RIVLIN

Now that we are getting the second and third level dissections of Campaign 2014 from thoughtful Democratic analysts, we thought it would be a good time for a review. The starting point for the post-election discussion amounted to efforts to reassure dispirited Democrats that the 2014 election was typically unique and 2016 would be different, but nearly all of the Democratic Party strategists who have weighed in have warned against dismissing the dramatic defeat. And broadly speaking, nearly all have the same recommendations to fix things before the 2016 election.

By now we have heard from Celinda Lake, Mark Mellman (twice), Democracy Corps (twice), Mike Lux (twice), Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin, Senator Chuck Schumer, William Galston (twice), James Vega, and CenteredPolitics. Our goal here is to put all of these analyses in the same place seeking out common threads and recommendations—including our own recommendations gained by watching the election from Central Kentucky. It is like our own version of the “Autopsy” conducted by Republican National Chair Reince Priebus after the 2012 election—but compared to that largely ignored document we can hold out hope that more people heed the insights contained below before the 2016 election.

It was even worse than expected.

Democratic expectations were quite low heading into Election Night 2014 but the results were even more depressing than expected. Democrats had accepted the near perfect storm that was forming to make control of the House an impossible dream and loss of control of the Senate the likely outcome. The factors included a bad Senate election map, gerrymandered House districts, a skewed off-year electorate, a stubbornly sluggish economy, Presidential fatigue, new foreign challenges, and a bad issue environment. Heading into election night some Democrats may have been taking comfort in the fact that we will not have to face the same challenges in 2016 because the presidential electorate and the Senate map will be dramatically more favorable, and presumably the economy and news cycle will as well so an energized presidential electorate could deliver the White House and Senate even if the House remains a long shot.

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Almost to a person, post-election commentators reject this notion, largely because the results were even worse than the expectations. Losses in House and Senate races were worse than the lower end of projections with the GOP winning nearly every close contest. But the biggest surprises were in the gubernatorial elections where in mid-western states Democrats failed to knock off far right-wing governors like Sam Brownback in Kansas and Scott Walker in Wisconsin—and Democrats also lost Governor’s mansions in Illinois and Massachusetts, and there was a big surprise loss in Maryland.

All of the analysts and Democratic strategists warn against any calm reaction to a loss of the magnitude just seen and argue it signals real problems that must be addressed before the next campaign. Further, nearly all of the writers attribute the loss to the same Democratic deficiency: the lack of a compelling economic narrative. Many stop there, identifying the need for a stronger Democratic economic narrative but not suggesting what this message should contain. Among those that take the next step of offering recommendations for the content of the economic message there may be a split emerging that mirrors the apparent **split among Democrats**¹ in Washington over the budget resolutions this month. The recommendations for the Party’s needed economic message seem to be divided between those who advise more or less populism in the mix.

Celinda Lake:

Celinda Lake analyzed the exit poll results for a relentlessly detailed **presentation**² to liberal donors that highlighted how badly Democrats were beaten among key segments of the electorate. She shows how views of the economy drive vote choice. Voters who view the economy as excellent or good voted for Democrats and those who view it as poor voted with the GOP. This was also true in 2012 but what has changed is the vote of those in the middle category “not so good.” Obama won this group (55% to 42%) in 2012 but Democrats lost this category (41% to 58%) in 2014 indicating diminished perceptions that Democrats can be trusted to solve economic problems. While the minimum wage proved popular this year, Lake said in an **interview with Matea Gold**³ of the *Washington Post*, “that is not a major economic vision or plan.”

Mark Mellman:

Mark Mellman **writing in The Hill**⁴ argues that beyond the negative electoral map (which he promises will favor Democrats in 2016) emotions played a role. The emotion he identifies is worry and he notes that voters were worried about the economy but they also had many other concerns. “In the end, an election year that was built to be bad for Democrats was made even worse by the deep anxiety hanging over the electorate: worry about the economy, about terrorism and about an epidemic of deadly disease.”

Mellman returned the **following week**⁵ to answer the puzzle of why Democratic candidates promoting increasing the national minimum wage lost even as referenda to raise state minimum wages passed in the red states of Arkansas, Alaska, Nebraska and South Dakota.

¹<http://www.politico.com/story/2014/12/2015-gop-budget-back-up-plan-113498.html>

²<http://ourfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Wednesday-Group-Celinda-Lake-Nov-12-111114-F.Revised.pdf>

³http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/democratic-donors-see-need-for-party-to-embrace-more-powerful-economic-message/2014/11/14/394bc3e4-6c17-11e4-9fb4-a622dae742a2_story.html

⁴<http://thehill.com/opinion/mark-mellman/223795-mark-mellman-what-happened>

⁵<http://thehill.com/opinion/mark-mellman/224644-mark-mellman-a-winning-message-but-losing>

His answer is that the Democratic economic message has a credibility problem and a related performance problem. With the economy still struggling and voters stressed out over other issues after six years with a Democrat in the White House, voters doubt Democrats have the answers and with our support for government programs amid low expectations for government execution, Democrats have a credibility gap with many voters. “We have a credibility problem rooted in both policy and performance,” Mellman writes. “Our policies are wise and widely supported. But voters can easily support the [policies] without supporting their advocates if they don’t believe the prescriptions are particularly central to solving their problems or if they see government as unable to deliver effectively.”

Democracy Corps and Women’s Voices Women Vote:

Stan Greenberg and James Carville’s Democracy Corps in partnership with Page Gardner’s Women’s Voices Women Vote Action Fund fielded an [Election Night poll](#)⁶ contrasting 2014 voters with non-voters more likely to match the 2016 electorate that clearly revealed the economic anxiety present in both groups. The survey strongly makes the case that the 2014 voters were remarkably adverse for Democratic candidates, and that 2016 will likely be much better. As usual for Democracy Corps the focus is on the relative absence of the rising American electorate (RAE) voters—a category that includes young voters, racial minorities, and unmarried women—from the ranks of 2014 voters and the projection that they will show up in larger numbers in 2016. This raises the question of why RAE voters failed to turn out despite Democrats’ efforts to reverse historical trends of low RAE turnout in non-presidential election years, especially in 2010.

Democracy Corps answered the question a week later by [releasing another poll](#)⁷ actually taken in the weeks before the election (October 16-21). Their conclusion is that “despite an American public very focused on what jobs pay and helping working families, very critical of the top 1 percent and CEOs, determined to see something done about inequality and supportive of long-term plan to invest in new industries and rebuild the country,... this new survey shows that the average voters and even the growing progressive base of minorities, Millennials, and the unmarried have [not] yet heard an economic narrative to rally around, but they clearly want to.”

Mike Lux:

Writing in the Huffington Post, Mike Lux also used [one article](#)⁸ to set up the problem and [another](#)⁹ to offer his solution. Lux makes the case that the 2014 election was lost because Democrats spent too much time distancing themselves from Obama and too little explaining why voters should support Democrats’ positions. “We need to confidently tell our story of two agendas: the Koch/McConnell agenda of a government that does nothing for the 99 percent and everything for the 1 percent, and our agenda of expanding the middle class and taking on the big money special interests that tilt the playing field in their favor.”

⁶ http://www.democracycorps.com/files/dcor_WVWV_post_elect_memo_11714_v3.pdf

⁷ <http://www.democracycorps.com/Economy-Project/new-take-on-the-new-economy/>

⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-lux/democrats-failed-to-tell_b_6108012.html

⁹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-lux/an-agenda-and-narrative-t_b_6219860.html

Lux calls for an economic message that has appeal and delivers benefits to RAE voters but also meets the aspirations of older white married women and men as well. “We have to start a serious re-engagement with working class white voters—in message, outreach and organizing, and policy. We can’t ignore them and hope the surging RAE vote alone carries us to victory.”

Lux lists specific elements of his recommended Democratic economic agenda including: a \$15 per hour minimum wage; investments in transportation infrastructure, schools, energy efficiency, and alternative energy; fair trade and currency policies; regulatory reform and immigration reform. His narrative to tie these policies together emphasizes helping the middle class rather than serving the CEO class, jobs at higher wages and more opportunity for workers to get ahead. “The things we are advocating for are more jobs, better jobs with higher pay, and a level playing field so that workers and small businesses can get a fair shake rather than being rolled by big money.”

Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin:

Writing in the Center for American Progress blog, [Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin](#)¹⁰ pinned the GOP electoral gains on structural factors but also the lack of an economic agenda from Democrats. “Absent any clear or far-reaching national agenda and message to address people’s real economic concerns about jobs, wages, and opportunity, the Democrats essentially ceded control of the national campaign, opting to try their luck with a series of localized and targeted campaigns.”

Teixeira and Halpin offer their recommendation for Democrats: “In order to maximize support among core constituencies and reach further into the Republican hold on white voters, they must develop and promote a sharp vision of economic equality and greater opportunity for those left out of the recovery. An agenda of job creation and investment; higher wages for workers; greater equality for women; college affordability and student-debt reduction; and strong family policies through paid leave, expanded child care support, and universal pre-K can attract a sizable chunk of the white working class, particularly among women and Millennials, and appeal to base voters who are economically pressed.”

Ruy Teixeira has been a consistent advocate for the imperative that Democrats wrap their economic policies in an overarching thematic statement—most recently settling on the goal of “an economy that works for everyone, not just the wealthy few” as we addressed in our last [CenteredPolitics.com](#) post¹¹. We strongly agree with the imperative of settling on a theme and offer an alternative frame so there are more alternatives for testing and vetting heading into the 2016 election. Our candidate topic sentence is: “We need to get more money into the hands of hardworking American families so they can spend it in their local communities on things like school supplies, home improvements and restaurant meals—so the middle-class will once again become the job creators, lifting the economy back to health.”

¹⁰<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2014/11/06/100712/the-political-consequences-of-the-great-recession/>

¹¹<http://www.centeredpolitics.com/2014/11/democrats-often-leave-out-the-economic-topic-sentence-we-need-to-get-more-money-in-the-hands-of-hardworking-families-2/>

Senator Chuck Schumer:

Probably the most attention grabbing analysis of 2014 was that delivered by **Senator Chuck Schumer**¹² in a speech to the National Press Club, which was far better than the headline grabbing swipe at the Affordable Care Act. Schumer argued that Democrats can win the 2016 election by addressing the long-term frustrations caused by decades of stagnant middle-class wages. “The most salient factor in our political economy is that for the first time in American history, middle-class incomes have been in decline for over a decade, and the grand optimism over the American dream is in jeopardy. The 2014 election results can be explained this way. During 2013, neither party convinced the middle class that they had an effective way to get them out of this morass, that they had an effective plan to create good jobs and raise incomes.”

Although Schumer insists he is not by nature a populist, he argues for an element of populism in the framing of the message is necessary. “We must convince Americans that government can be on their side and is not just a tool of special interests. We must re-energize our vision by making a forceful case when Democrats will govern again that we will make government the people’s champion, not captive to the powerful. This message has an element of populism. Democratic populism does not mean the rabble rousing populism or divisiveness of Huey Long or William Jennings Bryan. It recognizes that the powerful have much more access and influence over government and specific and strong actions must be taken to curb that influence so government can really represent the average person.”

William Galston:

Former policy guru for Bill Clinton now at the Brookings Institution, William Galston, has now written two articles in a row in the *Wall Street Journal* discussing and mostly praising the Schumer speech. The **first article**¹³ compliments Schumer for ignoring the many excuses Democrats could have for the loss and focusing on a message moving forward aimed at the middle class. “The American people are sending a large and urgent message to Washington: We want an economy that works for all of us, not just a favored few, and nothing we’ve heard from either party so far convinces us that you know how to get us there,” Galston writes. “That Democrats need to refocus on the well-being of average Americans—is incontestable. A presidential election that focuses on opportunity for the middle class and mobility for those working hard to reach the middle class is what the people want and the country needs.”

In the **second article**¹⁴, Galston picks a fight with populists, throughout the world and throughout time. In Galston’s view populism is a dangerous but easy resort for scoundrels in times of challenge to the middle class. He praises Schumer for crafting a “non-populist liberal” position, which is a little strange because Schumer himself terms his proposals, “Democratic populism” in distinguishing them from “rabble rousing populism.”

We think this is likely more of a semantic issue than a substantive one. Many of the analysts, including Schumer and Galston, acknowledge that working-class and middle-voters have good reasons to believe the rules of the game are rigged against them and in favor of the wealthy

¹²<http://www.c-span.org/video/?322914-1/senator-charles-schumer-dny-november-midterm-elections>

¹³<http://www.wsj.com/articles/william-galston-democrats-its-time-to-move-on-1417563117>

¹⁴<http://www.wsj.com/articles/william-a-galston-populism-rises-on-a-wave-of-frustration-1418773376>

and powerful. Nearly all also agree that Democrats need to offer real solutions to empower and enrich the economically stressed. Galston may be more aware of the historical excesses of populist movements, and is right to caution others away from facile use of the term without full awareness of this baggage. But terminology aside, there is widespread agreement that the Democratic message must be popular (if not populist) and aimed at the middle class, and there is probably the same level of agreement to avoid race baiting, wealth bashing, or other past populists extremes.

James Vega:

The outlier in all of the analyses is James Vega [writing](#)¹⁵ in The Democratic Strategist, and rather than focusing on the lack of a Democratic message, Vega puts the spotlight on the calculated political strategy of Republican extremism. We all know there is truth to the unprecedented lengths to which Republicans have made disrupting the political process, and any possible success attributable to President Obama or his party. Clearly the President's low approval rating, and lack of success in maintaining economic stimulus, and even the enthusiasm gap and composition of the electorate can be traced to the commitment to sabotaging the Democrats at every opportunity as Vega details.

Our reaction to this post is that we feel a bit like offensive football players watching the defensive game film. We take the point and want to know that there are members of our team paying close attention to the tactics of the other side but we recommend selective acceptance of his recommendations. But mostly we just want the football. We posit that if Democrats successfully meet the challenge and develop policies and a compelling economic message that offers a credible path forward for struggling workers, then many of the problems Vega writes about will take care of themselves.

The spotlight on Republicans leads us to marvel at their unity and message discipline. All across the nation Republicans ran on a message that can be reduced to two names connected by an equals sign. My opponent supports Obama (Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi) was not a very sophisticated message but it proved to be enough to turn out the Republican base. If Democrats can settle on a compelling narrative for the next election it would be progress if we could reach half as much discipline in delivering it.

Democrats currently have a remarkable level of agreement on a broad range of economic policies but we have not coalesced around a message that reached voters as convincing enough to motivate sufficient numbers to support us at the polls. There is widespread agreement that Democrats support:

- Raising the national minimum wage
- Equal pay for women and men
- Investments in transportation infrastructure, building and modernizing schools, and upgrading data networks and energy transmission grids
- Making college more affordable and helping families with student loan debt
- Universal pre-K and expanded child care support

¹⁵http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Vega_2014_GOP_extremist.pdf

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- Comprehensive immigration reform
 - Tax reform that closes loopholes for wealthy individuals and corporations

We know we need to come together to develop a compelling message to tie these policies together and connect them to voters' aspirations for more jobs with higher wages and chances to advance. We know we need to appeal to diverse voter segments including the white working class and the rising American electorate.

The greatest mystery of the 2014 mid-term election is the question of why all of our leading analysts knew how important it is for Democrats to have a compelling economic message aimed at middle class voters, and yet we managed to get to the end of the election cycle without coalescing around an effective narrative. The most important question is: what has to change to solve this problem in time for the next cycle?