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MANAGING EDITOR:

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

**DEMOCRATIC POLLSTERS:
THE WAY SURVEY QUESTIONS ARE
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IN THE RIGHT WAY.**

BY
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TDS STRATEGY MEMO: DEMOCRATIC POLLSTERS: THE WAY SURVEY QUESTIONS ARE FRAMED CAN SIGNIFICANTLY AGGRAVATE OR MODERATE THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SUPPORTERS OF BERNIE SANDERS AND HILLARY CLINTON. LET'S BE CAREFUL TO FRAME THEM IN THE RIGHT WAY.

By JAMES VEGA

In this election the argument between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders has been continually framed as a battle between cautious centrism and visionary progressivism. Expressed more bitterly, it is between “corrupt” centrists and “unrealistic” or “delusional” leftists.

For most observers and commentators this certainly seems like the only logical way to describe this conflict. The vision of intra-Democratic disagreement as a “battle for the soul of the party” has been a shopworn cliché of political discussion since the Clinton years and the battle over the “Republican-lite” strategy that Dems followed in 2002.

But there is a very different way to conceptualize many of the policy arguments between the center-left and progressive-left wings of the Democratic Party—to view them as arguments that are essentially about short term versus long term objectives.

Take a simple example. Most Democrats would very likely agree with the long range goal of providing “universal health care.” Within this framework, however, they are currently divided between those who would build on the current structure of Obamacare and those who would move to immediately replace it with a single payer system.

Is this really a fundamental philosophic difference between two groups of Democrats or is it rather a strategic debate over how to proceed toward a shared long-term objective? Would extending aspects of Obamacare represent a defeat for the second goal or a stepping stone toward its achievement? In American political discourse today the answer is automatically assumed to be the first and rarely even considered to possibly be the second.

In the left-of center parties in the parliamentary systems of Western Europe, on the other hand, the idea of viewing policy disagreements of this kind as being fundamentally arguments about immediate objectives versus long term objectives is a long standing and far more common way of thinking. Throughout the post WW II era Social Democratic and left of center parties routinely distinguished between immediate objectives that could be sought and achieved by a current coalition government (and which could therefore be seen as partial victories providing stepping stones to more ambitious goals) and objectives that could not be achieved immediately but which would continue to be sought in the future.

If America had a parliamentary system the Sanders and Clinton wings of the Democratic Party would long ago have separated into two distinct political parties—each with their own unique political platform, legislative agenda and philosophy. If the two in combination succeeded in winning a parliamentary majority—as they very well might in an election like the current one—

they would meet and negotiate a common platform for governing—one in which the compromise program that would emerge would not be interpreted as a complete “sellout” by the supporters of the more ambitious of the two parties but rather as a temporary, tactical set of negotiated compromises that did not reduce or weaken their commitment to their long range goals.

In America this kind of understanding is much harder to reach because political coalitions are most often formed around specific candidates and specific elections and do not endure from one election cycle to the next, making each individual election seem to require either winning all of one’s demands at once or winning nothing at all. But the distinction between short term and long term objectives is still vital for the intra-Democratic dialog.

Because the data from public opinion polls are so often used to frame policy debates, the way in which polls are structured and conducted can play a key role in either illuminating or obscuring the basic choice between these two ways of viewing many policy differences. Poll questions can be framed in a way that makes the choices they pose appear to be forced choices between irreconcilable proposals or they can be framed in ways that present them as choices between short and longer term objectives.

Consider, for example, the way most poll current political campaign managers would tend to visualize the following three options on an opinion survey

- A. “Other than providing for national defense and the fair administration of justice, government should do as little as possible to interfere in the lives of people”.
- B. “Government should work to protect the average American, providing a safety net in case something bad happens over which they have no control”.
- C. “Government should guarantee a decent standard of living for everyone including job creation and basic housing”.

Most campaign managers would immediately tend to assume that these three options should be viewed as mutually exclusive choices arrayed on a continuum from conservative to liberal or moderate to extreme. If they were further informed that 24% of respondents chose the first option, 34% the second and 39% the third, their interpretation of the results would naturally tend to fall into a “centrist” vs. “leftist” mental schema, with the second option being considered politically the best position for a political candidate to choose because it represents “the middle” in contrast to the third option which any candidate seeking the “median voter” should reject as “wrong” because it is more “extreme.”

Progressives, however, will feel that this way of visualizing the issue fundamentally mischaracterizes the real nature of the choice. From a social movement perspective, the second and third options appear more like sequential steps toward the long-term objective of providing basic economic security for every American rather than as two mutually exclusive options. Specifically, progressives would tend to suspect that many of the people supporting option three would also support option two, leading to a very different way of visualizing the issue.

In fact, these three choices, which were polled by The Tarrance Group and Lake Research in the mid-1990's, actually offered one of the very rare examples of a question wording that did not preclude a short term vs. long term interpretation. The actual question wording that was used is shown below (with the additional words shown in italics):

- A. *“Other than providing for national defense and the fair administration of justice, government should do as little as possible to interfere in the lives of people”.*
- B. *“In addition to providing for national defense and the fair administration of justice, the government should work to protect the average American, providing a safety net in case something bad happens over which they have little control”.*
- C. *“In addition to everything just mentioned, government should guarantee a decent standard of living for everyone including job creation and basic housing”.*

It is quite striking how the minor change in question wording dramatically changes the fundamental nature of the choice. Rather than appearing as a forced choice between mutually exclusive alternatives, the second and third options now become potentially compatible options and can be seen as offering more firmly progressive respondents the alternative of supporting both the shorter-term, immediate goal and also the longer-term, more ambitious one.

And in fact, since the percentages given above (a= 24%, b= 34% and c=39%) are the actual percentages the survey uncovered, the conclusion the data allows can be stated in the following, dramatically different way.

A commanding majority of 73% of the respondents supported the provision of a “safety net” for the average American, and, within this broad majority, more than half also endorsed the more ambitious goal of “guaranteeing a decent standard of living”

On reflection, it quickly becomes apparent that there are a vast number of issues that are usually cast as forced choices between moderate and radical alternatives, only one of which can be “right,” that can actually be reframed and viewed as non-exclusive choices between short-term and longer-term goals. Hillary Clinton’s positions on Dodd-Frank reform, the 15 dollar minimum wage, Obamacare versus single payer and a variety of other issues can be viewed by Sanders supporters either as philosophical battles with a centrist opponent or as modest and limited reforms that can potentially serve as stepping stones toward the ultimate achievement of more ambitious long term goals. This second perspective suddenly comes into clear focus if the “in addition to” syntax is used instead of the “either-or.”

This reframing of issue choices from a “moderate vs. radical” schema to a choice between “short-term and long-term objectives” one is of vital importance for reducing intra-Democratic conflict. The “moderate vs. radical” schema makes it extremely difficult for left progressives to discuss political compromise with centrists because it automatically defines their long term social objectives as inherently “wrong”, rather than simply more ambitious, visionary or far-sighted. A “long-term vs. short term” schema, in contrast, allows progressives to negotiate with centrists about accord on short term goals without being forced to, in effect, disavow their long range goals as a precondition to entering the negotiation.

There will still be areas of disagreement—based on different views of the importance of upholding certain basic principles versus the value of winning particular partial reforms or elections—but the number and intensity of disagreements will be significantly reduced. Every single debate will no longer automatically be automatically defined as a bitter “battle for the soul of the party.”

During the current election campaign the debate between Sanders and Clinton supporters has often been defined as an inescapable battle for control of the Democratic Party because that is the only way the issue is ever presented. Substantial differences between the Sanders and Clinton wings of the Democratic Party do indeed exist, but that does not mean the two wings cannot collaborate productively. The history of both social movements and West European political parties demonstrates that successful collaboration between political forces has only two fundamental requirements—a basic level of mutual respect and a clear recognition of the transcendent importance of unity in defending existing social achievements from conservative assault and dismemberment.

Democrats are well aware of the importance of the second requirement and if they also recognize that many policy differences can be seen as negotiations over short term versus long term goals rather than as insuperable philosophic differences, tensions within the Democratic coalition can be greatly reduced. The proper formulation of opinion poll questions can play a significant role in achieving this objective.