

ED KILGORE,
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**

**THE PROGRESSIVE WING
OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY
IS FACING A FUNDAMENTAL CHOICE
ABOUT POLITICAL STRATEGY.**

BY
JAMES VEGA

TDS STRATEGY MEMO: THE PROGRESSIVE WING OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY IS FACING A FUNDAMENTAL CHOICE ABOUT POLITICAL STRATEGY.

By JAMES VEGA

There is no question that, as a recent Politico article stated, “*An ascendant progressive and populist movement*” is increasingly dominant in the Democratic coalition today. This is true even though it may not yet be literally “*on the verge of taking over the party*” as the article over-optimistically claims.

The single most dramatic evidence of this rapid rise of the progressive-populist wing is, of course, the emergence of Elizabeth Warren in a few short years as the most widely popular and generally respected progressive leader in the Democratic universe since Teddy Kennedy in his prime.

But progressive-populist Democrats have not yet grasped the critical fact that Elizabeth Warren is not only a compelling progressive champion. She is also presenting progressive and populist Democrats with a very new and distinct approach to progressive political strategy. It is a new approach that inevitably requires progressive Dems to make a profound and fundamental choice regarding how they will relate to the rest of the Democratic Party.

To understand how distinct Elizabeth Warren’s approach is, it is necessary to contrast it with the approach it implicitly seeks to replace.

For last 25 years, the progressive-populist wing of the Democratic Party has defined its relationship to the rest of the party as being essentially a “*battle for the soul of the party*”—an internal struggle waged against more conservative factions and policies. During the 2002 congressional elections, for example, a substantial number of Democratic candidates were running on the twin platform planks of “*Republican-lite*” economics and the avoidance of “divisive” social issues. At that same time the most extreme advocates of this conservative approach were attempting to marginalize the progressive wing of the party as “the extreme left” and define them out of the Democratic coalition.

Progressives very forcefully pushed back, beginning with the Netroots organizing of groups like Daily Kos, MoveOn, Talking Points Memo and others and the presidential campaign of Howard Dean. After the 2004 reelection of George W. Bush, reality itself then gave the progressive resurgence massive reinforcement. Conservative foreign policy was deeply discredited by the growing realization that the war in Iraq was an unwinnable fiasco, changing demographics and energetic grass-roots organizing produced strong liberal trends in regard to many social issues and the economic crisis profoundly discredited Republican economic policy, allowing Barack Obama to win the 2008 election. By this time many Democrats who in the 1990’s might have chosen to identify themselves as “centrists” now embraced the label “progressive” to indicate a more firm and categorical rejection of the GOP’s increasingly extremist and polarizing conservatism. Once Obama was elected, the failure of every single

one of his sincere attempts to compromise and find a middle ground with the GOP on economic issues convinced even many moderate and more conservative Democrats that a major change toward a more robust progressive, populist stance was absolutely necessary.

This led to the basic change of approach that was evident in Obama's much more populist and confrontational 2012 campaign. The essentially universal support Democrats gave to this new approach reflected a general recognition that "*Republican-lite*" economic strategies and "*moving to the right*" on social issues like immigration, gay and reproductive rights was simply no longer a serious option. Today there is no major sector of the Democratic coalition that seriously espouses a return to either of these two approaches and the occasional op-ed in *Politico* or the *Wall Street Journal* that attempts to resurrect this strategy now meets not only with overwhelming repudiation from Democrats but with widespread derision and ridicule as well.

As a result, both populism and firmly progressive stances on social issues are now without question very clearly "ascendant" in the Democratic coalition. The issue, however, is how progressive Democrats who support these approaches are going to relate to the rest of the Democratic Party.

On the one hand many Democrats tend to assume that the traditional "*battle for the soul of the party*" perspective remains valid. Among more "radical" thinkers like Adolph Reed and Thomas Frank, Obama himself is now quite seriously being defined as actually a deeply cynical, covert conservative who had the opportunity to implement genuinely progressive reforms but who deliberately refrained, using Republican intransigence as a transparently bogus excuse for his inaction. Others do not go that far but nonetheless believe that the only viable political strategy for progressives is to exert absolutely constant and intense pressure on all Democratic candidates by running more progressive challengers against them whenever possible.

It has largely escaped notice up to now that Elizabeth Warren does not actually share this basically sectarian, "*struggle for the soul of the party*" conceptual framework for how progressive-populists should seek to build support for their perspective within the Democratic Party. Instead, she is proposing an approach based on establishing what can be termed a "*clearly defined progressive agenda*" strategy and sincerely inviting all sectors of the Democratic coalition, including moderate and conservative Democrats as well as progressives, to join in supporting it.

Consider this description of Warren's very distinct approach, offered by John Nichols¹ in The Nation:

...What Elizabeth Warren brought to the Netroots Nation gathering was a progressive vision that is of the moment—a vision rooted in the understandings that have been established in the years since the "Republican wave" election of 2010. As Republicans in Congress practiced obstructionism, and as an increasingly activist Supreme Court knocked down historic democratic protections and Republican governors aggressively attacked labor rights, voting rights and women's rights, citizens responded

¹ <http://www.thenation.com/blog/180723/elizabeth-warren-offers-democrats-more-2016-candidacy-she-offers-2014-agenda>

with rallies, marches and movements—in state capitals, on Wall Street, across the country. They developed a new progressive vision that is more aggressive and more precisely focused on economic and social justice demands, and on challenging the power of corporations and their political allies.

Warren’s Netroots Nation speech incorporated what has been learned, and what has been demanded. [She offered] specific ideas, rooted in recent struggles and using the language of those struggles to form an agenda:

1. *“We believe that Wall Street needs stronger rules and tougher enforcement, and we’re willing to fight for it.”*
2. *“We believe in science, and that means that we have a responsibility to protect this Earth. And we will fight for it.”*
3. *“We believe that the Internet shouldn’t be rigged to benefit big corporations, and that means real net neutrality. And we will fight for it.”*
4. *“We believe that no one should work full-time and still live in poverty. That means raising the minimum wage. And we will fight for it.”*
5. *“We believe that students are entitled to get an education without being crushed by debt. And we are willing to fight for it.”*
6. *“We believe that after a lifetime of work, people are entitled to retire with dignity, and that means protecting Social Security, Medicare, and pensions. And we will fight for them.”*
7. *“We believe—only I can’t believe I have to say this in 2014—we believe in equal pay for equal work. And we’re willing to fight for it.”*
8. *“We believe that equal means equal, and that’s true in marriage, it’s true in the workplace, it’s true in all of America. And we’re willing to fight for it.”*
9. *“We believe that immigration has made this country strong and vibrant, and that means reform. And we are willing to fight for it.”*
10. *“And we believe that corporations are not people, that women have a right to their bodies. We will overturn Hobby Lobby and we will fight for it.”*

As Nichols notes, “the specificity of the agenda matters just as much as the promise to fight.” These ten points are sufficiently specific to avoid being dismissed as a typical politician’s vacuous clichés but they are also framed in broad moral terms rather than simply as a laundry list of specific programs or legislation. They establish a basic framework or what a European might call a “common program” for progressives that defines what the progressive agenda is and invites all Democrats to support it.

This is a critical change. It defines the progressive and populist approach to the rest of the Democratic Party not as a battle against specific factions and individuals but as a struggle to win support for a specific agenda.

Nichols then makes a key point:

Warren's focus is on a set of essential issues and on bold responses to them. She says things that need to be said—about the agenda and about the attitude that might get Americans excited about not just a particular campaign (for president in 2016 or for US Senate seats in 2014) but about a political agenda that extends beyond individual elections.

This is a vital distinction. It underlines the fact that Warren's approach is aimed at building long-term, widely based support for a solidly progressive political program, not on winning an intra-Democratic contest in any one particular election.

Nichols then notes another key point:

...Warren does not get personal. She does not mention other Democrats—except the Senate candidates she campaigns for, including progressive populists such as South Dakota's Rick Weiland, who hailed Warren as "a tremendous supporter, a tremendous help" to his determined run.

Warren's refusal to define herself and her progressivism in opposition to other individual Democrats, whether Clinton centrists or Obama moderates, makes perfect sense as part of this strategy. The whole purpose of building an approach around an agenda or platform is to create a new basis for unity within a political coalition whereas historical "score settling" is inherently divisive. Warren's approach is particularly appropriate now because many individuals who were advocates of "centrist" or "New Democratic" ideas in the past have now quite emphatically changed their opinions in response to the dramatic events of the last decade. Today one can find a substantial number of Clinton supporters who today will firmly agree that the financial deregulation measures taken in the late 1990's were a major blunder and one can also find many people inside and around the Obama administration who will immediately agree that Obama's basic political strategy in 2010-2011 was fundamentally wrong.

As a result, to continue to view progressive political strategy as requiring an unabated struggle against all former adversaries is, in many cases, quite literally to "fight the last war." In Warren's agenda-based approach, everyone who is now genuinely willing to support her progressive-populist agenda is "on our side" regardless of positions they may have held in the past.

(This does not mean, of course, that arguments over the shape of programs and policies will not continue to occur. Even within the progressive and populist wing of the Democratic Party there will continue to be intense debates on these issues as well as equally strong differences of opinion over the extent to which progressive programs and policies should be compromised in order to win the support of non-progressives, both within Democratic Party and outside.

But the basic character of these debates will be significantly transformed. If progressive-populists commit themselves to building wide support for a progressive agenda like Warren's within the Democratic coalition, the options available to non-progressive Democratic

candidates then become significantly more constrained than they are now. Non-progressive candidates will find that they have to either endorse the basic thrust of the agenda or justify their decision not to do so. To the extent that the agenda expresses positions that are widely popular, this will pull the position that non-progressive candidates ultimately adopt quite distinctly to the left.

In contrast, when disagreements between progressive and non-progressive candidates are framed as choices between irreconcilable political ideologies or feature accusations of personal corruption and loyalties to groups like Wall Street, the positions non-progressive candidates ultimately adopt will tend to become defined and expressed in a way that is more unsympathetic and antagonistic to progressive values and policies than they would otherwise be.)

For many progressive Democrats there will be a tendency, largely based on habit and sentiment, to want to combine Elizabeth Warren's "progressive agenda" approach with the traditional "struggle for the soul of the party." But here is the critical, indeed vital point: progressive Democrats cannot support Warren's approach and the "battle for the soul of the party" approach at the same time. The two approaches are inherently and inescapably antithetical. The purpose of placing a clear and broad progressive agenda at the center of one's political strategy is to create something around which to try and unite a political party. The purpose of a "battle for the soul of a party" is to prioritize purifying the party by defining some groups or sectors as unacceptable.

Warren's progressive agenda approach is designed to appeal not only to Democrats but to many moderates and independent voters outside the Democratic Party as well while at the same time **shifting the center of gravity of the entire Democratic Party itself to the left.** The "battle for the soul of the party" approach is designed to divide the Democratic Party into rival camps and seek the ascendancy of one side over the other.

The reality is simple. You can't do both things at the same time. Elizabeth Warren's new approach makes it necessary for Progressive Democrats to make a clear choice.