

ROUNDTABLE I  
2008  
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**THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST ROUNDTABLE:**

**ARE SWING VOTERS WORTH THE TROUBLE – CAN BASE  
MOBILIZATION DO IT ALONE?**

This is *The Democratic Strategist's* first Roundtable Discussion for 2008, on the perennial subject of “swing” versus “base” voter political strategies. The participants offer an unusually broad range of perspectives, reflecting the diversity of views within the Democratic community. The contributors include political organizer Robert Creamer, Chris Bowers of *OpenLeft*, Al From of the Democratic Leadership Council, *The Democratic Strategist* Co-editor William Galston, Joan McCarter of *DailyKos* and TDS Managing Editor Ed Kilgore.

**ARE SWING VOTERS WORTH THE TROUBLE? CAN DEMOCRATS WIN WITH BASE MOBILIZATION ALONE?**

*By Ed Kilgore*

*In this introductory essay, TDS Managing Editor Ed Kilgore reviews the history and significance of the perennial issue of base-versus-swing orientations for Democrats, and poses a series of questions whose answers have traditionally divided many observers: (1) Who are the swing and base voters? (2) What is their relative value? (3) What are the opportunity costs involved in reaching beyond the base to swing voters? (4) What's the best long-range strategy for building an enduring Democratic majority?*

While this decade has ushered in a variety of new strategic issues for Democrats, from Internet politics to turmoil in the labor movement, some issues are evergreen. And perhaps the oldest unresolved argument among Democrats is over the nature and electoral value of “swing voters,” those much-pursued and much-maligned counterweights to the Democratic “base.”

Though the debate over “swing voters” has been raging for decades, it's hard to find a subject more bedeviled by definitional and empirical confusion, by straw men and false choices, and by very different evaluations of recent political history.

It's this last factor that's revived the swing voter debate among pollsters, political practitioners, academics, bloggers and journalists.

To cite the most simplistic versions of a common argument, in one narrative of recent Democratic electoral performance, Bill Clinton broke the party's long presidential drought by intelligently targeting swing voters. His successors, Al Gore and John Kerry (along with congressional Democrats in most cycles between 1994 and 2006), failed to completely follow the Clinton template. Republican abandonment of swing voters (politically and substantively) led to the big Democratic midterm victory of 2006.

A competing narrative suggests that Clinton's pursuit of swing voters alienated the party base, blurred essential distinctions between the two parties, and forfeited the Democratic majority in Congress and in the states, while failing to produce a presidential majority. Gore and Kerry failed to match Bush's relentless efforts to energize the Republican base, and Democratic fretting over swing voters made the party a weak and ineffective opposition party. That finally changed in 2006, when a netroots-led mobilization effort based on maximum partisan differentiation produced a Democratic counterpart to the base-driven Republican landslide of 1994.

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It's notable that each narrative diverges sharply over interpretation of the 1994 debacle, the 2000 "draw," and the 2006 breakthrough. And there is naturally (though not universally) a strong ideological underpinning to the debate, with those on the party's Left typically disparaging swing-voter-focused campaigns and governing strategies as unprincipled and disloyal, and those in the Centrist camp often arguing that base-focused campaigns cede critical ground to the GOP and make effective governing impossible.

The base-swing argument has many variations, of course. Most Centrists favor a party message and agenda that's congenial to both base and swing voters, and at most suggest keeping highly partisan base mobilization efforts "under the radar screen." And most Progressives believe in swing voter appeals that don't conflict with sharp partisan differentiation and ideological principles, even if they sometimes seem to yearn for an election (as some hope for in 2008) where swing voter appeals are no longer necessary.

Both camps agree that painting the GOP as extremist can be an effective tool for both base mobilization and swing voter persuasion.

But even if all goes well in 2008 and this dispute does not become a major point of contention among Democrats before November, it will remain a semi-submerged problem for any Democratic administration and Congress in terms of designing a governing agenda. And while it would be naïve to think that this ancient argument can be completely resolved here or anywhere else, it would be helpful to create some general agreement on the terms of debate, and on certain empirically verifiable common ground.

### *Who Are Swing and Base Voters?*

"Base" voters are easier to define: those who predictably and loyally vote for Democratic candidates up and down the ballot, in good years as well as bad, though their propensity to show up at the polls may vary. While some analysts occasionally use the term "base" to refer to activists or self-identified liberals, they are clearly subsets of the broader category of loyal rank-and-file Democratic voters.

Definitions of "swing voters" vary far more, leading to very different opinions about their electoral value. At one extreme, during specific campaigns, "swing voters" are often identified with "undecided voters." At the other extreme, there's a tendency in some media quarters to conflate "swing voters" with self-identified "independent voters" or "moderate voters."

James Campbell of SUNY-Buffalo has **sought to navigate** [[http://www.polsci.buffalo.edu/contrib/faculty\\_staff/documents/campbell/campbellSwingVoters.pdf](http://www.polsci.buffalo.edu/contrib/faculty_staff/documents/campbell/campbellSwingVoters.pdf)] the definitional problem by differentiating between "campaign swing voters" (i.e., "undecided" voters) and

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“pre-campaign swing voters.” He derives the latter category through a sophisticated analysis of National Election Studies data about the ideological and partisan self-descriptions of voters prior to election campaigns. But relying too heavily on voter self-identification is risky; there are many millions of Americans who vote regularly for one party or the other but insist on calling themselves “independents,” and fewer, but still significant, numbers who think of themselves as partisan or as “liberal” or “conservative” yet “swing” in particular elections.

To keep the definition as objective as possible, Mark Gersh of the National Committee for an Effective Congress **has suggested** [[http://www.dlc.org/ndol\\_ci.cfm?contentid=252802&kaid=127&subid=173](http://www.dlc.org/ndol_ci.cfm?contentid=252802&kaid=127&subid=173)] that swing voters be defined as “those who belong to some category of the electorate with an unstable attachment to the major political parties.” And even that definition needs to be qualified to deal with the declining-but-still-significant segment of voters with variable attachment to the parties at the presidential and state-local levels.

Determining the length of voting behavior that denotes “stable attachment” is another difficult problem. While the “Reagan Democrats” who provided the first and most famous universally acknowledged modern swing voter category are now largely Republican or deceased, it may be a bit early to write off or count on other, more recent, swing voter categories, such as older rural voters, married women with children, first-time voters, Protestant Latinos, or Greens.

The definitional problem, of course, vitally affects assumptions about the size of the swing vote. James Campbell (whose overall thesis is that swing voters rarely “swing” elections) calculates the median percentage of the electorate that has been “in play” prior to presidential elections since 1972 at 22, while the corresponding percentage for “swing” voters during election campaigns has been 16. Virtually every analyst believes that the swing vote has been declining over time, with Gersh’s 2004 estimate of about 10 percent of the electorate being meaningfully “in play” being a conservative figure. Another key sub-question is whether “swing voters” are even “voters.” Obviously, weighing the value of swing voters against base voters depends on an assessment of likelihood to vote.

### ***What’s the Value of Base and Swing Voters?***

If swing voters are at least as likely to vote as base voters, then there is one indisputable factor that makes them valuable beyond their numbers: a “turned” swing voter adds one vote to your column, and subtracts one vote from the opposition column. Mobilizing a “base” voter to show up at the polls adds one vote at most, and if the mobilization effort helps the other party mobilize its own base, the net effect could be far less or even negative (viz., the much-

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discussed “backlash” against the Wellstone Memorial event in Minnesota in 2002). This “net effect” is also important in weighing appeals to different types of swing voters. For all the talk about what Al Gore might have done to attract Nader voters in 2000, the fact remains that votes denied Bush had more electoral value than votes denied Nader.

A broader issue is whether swing voters actually “swing” elections. James Campbell, using his above-described definitions of pre-campaign and campaign swing voters, deduces that only two presidential candidates since 1952 have actually had to win a majority of swing voters to win the election, and that some candidates (i.e., those who won big) could have won without any swing voters. The different sizes of the two major party’s bases, he suggests, have largely predetermined most recent presidential elections, with base loyalty and turnout being as important as swing voter behavior.

Even accepting Campbell’s definitions of swing voters, you don’t have to believe candidates must win a majority of such voters to value them as having an exceptional pound-for-pound and dollar-for-dollar significance.

The more important question about swing voter appeals is whether such voters can be turned not only into an Election Day asset, but into future base voters. I’ll discuss that issue a bit later.

### ***What Are the Opportunity Costs of Appealing to Swing Voters?***

Here is where the argument about swing voters gets especially complex, and where agreement over basic terms is essential to any empirically-based examination of the evidence.

The traditional “progressive” argument is that swing-voter-oriented strategies and policies are politically suspect and ideologically disastrous. As evidenced, they say, by the experience of the 1990s, lusting after swing voters at the price of discouraging the base and sacrificing key policy ground (e.g., welfare reform, NAFTA) shifts the center of balance in American politics to the Right, and requires still more concessions to conservatives in order to seduce still more swing voters. It’s a political version of the “race to the bottom” argument against trade liberalization.

But there are newer arguments that deny a conflict between swing and base strategies while repudiating the Clinton-era appeal to swing voters as both unprincipled and ineffective. One theory, associated with linguist-turned-strategist George Lackoff, suggests that swing voters are by-and-large cognitively conflicted, and are best persuadable through a base-friendly progressive message that elevates progressive over conservative “frames.” This approach has been embraced by many netroots activists as well.

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Many Democratic Centrists, however, argue that the most compelling argument to make to swing voters is about the real-life accomplishments of the Clinton Administration, as compared to the real-life failures of the Bush Administration. This essentially non-ideological approach also denies any real base-swing conflict or tradeoff.

But some Centrists go further, and suggest that any political message that does not sway swing voters is disqualified as an effective governing agenda. Center-Left policy achievements, they believe, are not a matter of exploiting temporary Democratic electoral majorities, but of building a long-term governing majority. And on that point, they converge with some folk on the Democratic Left who argue that spurning Centrist appeals to swing voters can, in the end, produce policy results that attract swing voters without sacrificing progressive principles.

### ***What Is the Long-Term Strategy For Dealing With Swing Base and Swing Voters?***

This last question gets to the nub of the swing-base debate. Is it about how to win in particular elections, or how to build a broader party coalition, i.e., to reduce the number swing voters? Is there a conflict between short-term and long-term goals?

With the exception of a few party Centrists who think that bipartisanship and cross-ideological appeals are ends in themselves, and a few party Progressives who think that any majority coalition involves unacceptable compromises, most Democrats would prefer to live in a political world in which the Democratic base is so large that swing voters are expendable, and the essential policy arguments affecting the country are mainly held within our own ranks.

The empirical debate we need is aimed at discussing how we get to that Democratic majority; how big an ideological tent we must pitch to encompass a majority; how temporary Democrats can be made permanent Democrats; and how to create a party agenda and message that increase civic engagement, voting and real-life policy results.

We may never agree among ourselves about all the details of what we should do. But after a long period of conservative ideological ascendancy and partisan gridlock, it's time to get the basics right.

### **PERSUADABLE AND MOBILIZABLE VOTERS**

*This is an excerpt from political organizer and strategist Robert Creamer's recent book, "Listen To Your Mother: Stand Up Straight! How Progressives Can Win." It's reprinted with permission of the publisher.*

In election campaigns our goal is to change the behavior of the voters, since they are the actual decision-makers. Sometimes there are secondary targets as well, but the secondary targets are only important insofar as they can help us impact the primary targets—voters.

And our primary targets are not just any voters. They are the only two categories of voters whose electoral behavior can be changed by a campaign. We call them persuadable voters and mobilizable voters.

Persuadable voters have two characteristics:

- They generally vote.
- They are undecided.

Mobilizable voters also have two characteristics:

- They would support our candidate.
- They are unlikely to vote unless they are mobilized to do so.

In many political campaigns, massive amounts of political resources are wasted because they are used to communicate with voters who are not part of one of these two groups. They are spent trying to convince voters who always vote Democratic to vote for a Democrat, or they are spent trying to convince people who always vote Republican to vote Democratic. They may also be spent trying to convince voters who never vote, but would vote Republican if they did, to vote Democratic. All of these are wastes of campaign resources, since the behavior of these target voters will not likely change.

Democrats are particularly prone to target voters who always vote Democratic—and always go out to vote—with resources that should go elsewhere.

Of course, base Democrats who always vote are critically important to campaigns as potential sources of volunteers and contributors. But they are not primary targets for the campaign's message since we don't want their voting behavior to change. They always vote Democratic, and always go out to vote. They behave that way no matter what is done by the campaign.

*In an election, persuadable and mobilizable voters are never the same people—and our communication with these two distinct groups has two different goals.*

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This is one of the most important rules of effective electoral politics, — and one that is most often violated, forgotten and confused.

A person cannot be a persuadable voter and a mobilizable voter at the same time—by definition. Persuadable voters are very likely to vote and are undecided. Mobilizable voters are unlikely to vote unless we mobilize them, and they will vote for our candidates if they do. These are *mutually exclusive* qualities.

Our message to persuadables is intended to convince them to vote for our candidate when they cast their ballot.

Our message to mobilizables is not intended to convince them to vote for our candidate. By definition they are already likely to support our candidate. Our message to mobilizables is intended to convince them to go to the polls and cast a ballot—to take action. These are very different goals, directed at two entirely different groups of people.

In elections, the subject of the campaign’s persuasion message is the candidate. The subject of the mobilization message is the voter we are trying to motivate.

There is a lot of confusion about political messages. You constantly hear the media, the pundits and even political consultants tell us that the Democrats’ message is about the economy, or the Republicans’ message is about national security, or that one candidate’s message is about education, and another’s is about taxes.

This is never true in American politics. The subject of a campaign message is never an issue, or even a problem.

The subject of a persuasion message is always the same: the candidate or, in some political systems, the party. A political message is always about the subject of the decision we are asking people to make. With mobilization, the subject is not the candidate. It is the voter, because the voter’s action is the subject of the decision we are asking the individual to make.

First, let’s deal with persuasion. Issues like prescription drugs or Social Security or tax cuts are often symbols that are used to describe the qualities of a candidate or party. But they are not the subject of the message in a political campaign.

With persuadables, our goal is to convince the voter to cast his ballot for our candidate. So, the candidate is the subject of the message.

If you want to prove to yourself that persuasion messages in elections are about candidates and not issues, reflect on some recent examples:

- In the 2000 election, all of the polls showed that a much greater percentage of the population supported Al Gore’s positions on most critical issues than voted for Al Gore, the candidate.

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- In 1984, Illinois voted overwhelmingly to reelect President Ronald Reagan. At the same time it elected Paul Simon, US Senator—a Democrat who espoused views directly contrary to those of Reagan on most critical issues.
  - In 2002, former Senator Robert Torricelli & Senator Frank Lautenberg had virtually identical views on most major issues. New Jersey polls showed that former Senator Torricelli would lose overwhelmingly to the Republican in the New Jersey Senate race, yet when he was replaced on the ballot by Senator Lautenberg because of a campaign financing scandal, Lautenberg won easily.
  - In 2004, one million Illinois voters supported Democrat Barack Obama for Senate and also cast their vote for George W. Bush in the Presidential race.

### ***The Nine Qualities—Political Movements and Parties***

There are nine major candidate qualities that stand out as most important in persuading undecided voters to support candidates.

More than anything else, communicating about these qualities is the key to persuading undecided voters to support our candidates—and becoming part of a lasting progressive majority.

These qualities are also the things people look for when they consider their allegiance to a political movement or party.

Voters don't just look for these nine qualities in candidates. They look for the same qualities in political parties and movements.

Think about any of the qualities and apply them to the Democratic Party—or the progressive movement.

- Is the party on my side?
- Is the party committed to core values—or just winning elections?
- Does the party provide and advocate strong effective leadership—or is it ineffective and weak?
- Is the party self-confident—or does it appear to be directionless and unsure?
- Does the party respect me—or does it take me for granted or treat me like I'm stupid?
- Do I like the people in the party? Does it make me feel like I belong and connect emotionally to leadership?
- Does the party have integrity—or is it corrupt and self-dealing?
- Does the party have a vision for the future of our city, state, country our world—for the next generation?
- Does the party and my participation in it inspire me and empower me?

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These are the qualities that determine both whether a voter chooses a candidate and whether he participates in, and has allegiance to, the Democratic Party, the progressive movement, or just about any other political organization or movement. They are, in effect, the qualities we look for in the leaders and the movements that give meaning to our lives.

These 9 qualities persuade swing voters. What messages motivate mobilizable voters?

### ***Six Motivational Messages for GOTV***

There are Six Major Messages That Motivate People to Vote. We said earlier that while the subject of a persuasion message is the candidate, the subject of a mobilization message is the voter.

GOTV MESSAGE # 1 – YOUR VOTE MATTERS—IT’S CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

GOTV MESSAGE # 2 – INSPIRATION

Most important antidote to the sense that “nothing I actually do affects my life” is inspiration. Inspiration is, after all, a feeling of empowerment. It is the feeling that the individual or group can rise to the challenge and overcome previously insurmountable obstacles.

GOTV MESSAGE # 3 – FEAR RESOLVED INTO ANGER

Simply stated, “Something bad could happen to me or my family as a result of the election—and I’m not going to let them do it.”

GOTV MESSAGE # 4 – IT’S US VERSUS THEM

To motivate mobilizable voters, we have to make them feel like part of our “team.” We want them to start rooting for our guy—not to persuade them (presumably they are already persuaded)—but to give them an emotional investment in victory. We want to make them think about our candidate’s victory as “their victory.” We want our candidate’s victory to give them a sense of personal meaning and significance.

GOTV MESSAGE # 5 – LET’S GET ‘EM”

This message is about punishment. It’s not about fear of what might happen in the future, but justice for what has happened in the past. It’s about showing them that we matter, that we’re not going to allow them to push us around forever. They stole the election, or they took money that should have gone for our kid’s education, or they ignored our communities, or they insulted us. This time we’re going to throw the bastards out.

GOTV MESSAGE # 6 – “I WON’T GET OFF YOUR PORCH UNTIL YOU VOTE”

*The "Inherent" Conflict Between Persuasion and Mobilization is a Myth.*

These message principles—or their rough equivalent—are appropriate to candidate and issue campaigns, as well as to the overall campaign to move the center of American politics and create a long-lasting progressive majority.

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We have seen that the messages that mobilize and persuade voters are different, but they do not need to be incompatible or contradictory.

The most important single conclusion of this analysis is that, in most cases, the messages that can persuade swing voters on the one hand and motivate mobilizable voters on the other are often different, but they are rarely in conflict. In fact they share many elements.

A small industry has developed debating the relative importance of appealing to the "base," and "moving to the center" to attract swing voters. Generally, this debate ignores the basic principles of political communication or the factors that people really use to make political decisions. It assumes that the messages are about "issues" and not the qualities of the candidates.

In fact, with both base and swing voters, the progressive candidates who are most effective self-confidently communicate a progressive vision: they constantly appeal to voters' progressive values and inspire them with their own passion and commitment. Candidates are more effective with both persuadables and mobilizables if they show that they will stand tall for the baseline concerns that people identify as "their side," and treat people with respect and empathy.

The issue and policy positions taken by candidates and parties are certainly important symbols of a candidate's qualities. But they are rarely as important as the ability of the candidate to appeal to the full range of physical and nonphysical self-interests, and especially to give the voters a sense of their own meaning and significance.

This means that if we proceed properly, the old conflict between appealing to swing voters and to base voters simply does not exist.

**PAY ATTENTION TO CONTEXT: HOW NOMINATIONS SHAPE THE SWING VOTE.**

*by Brookings Institution senior fellow and TDS Co-Editor Bill Galston*

It's hard to discuss "swing voters" without a precise definition of the term. The best I've seen so far is that of Northeastern University political scientist William Mayer's: A swing voter, he says, is one who could go either way, one not so solidly committed as to make persuasion all but futile. Relative to committed voters, swing voters have mixed or balanced attitudes about the major-party candidates, as measured by the difference between the two on the **American National Election Studies** (ANES) [<http://www.electionstudies.org/>] so-called "feeling thermometer." If the maximum theoretical difference is 100, corresponding to total approval of one candidate and disapproval of the other, voters who see a gap of 15 points or less constitute the pool of potential "persuadables." Since 1972, swing voters, so defined, have averaged 23 percent of the total in ANES preelection surveys.

Mayer does not underscore a crucial point that emerges from his data: the ideological distance between the major-party candidates strongly affects the percentage of swing voters. In 1976, the Republicans nominated a moderate after a fierce intra-party battle, while the Democrats nominated a newcomer widely regarded as their most conservative candidate in decades. As a consequence, swing voters amounted to a full 34 percent of the electorate, by far the highest in any election in the past three decades. In 2004, by contrast, the Democrats nominated a Massachusetts liberal to run against a Republican who had governed as a movement conservative. In this context, swing voters amounted to only 13 percent of the total, by far the lowest in the past three decades.

This relationship has important consequences for 2008: the Democrats' choice between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama will shape, not only how swing voters will vote, but also how many swing voters there will be. Consider a recent Greenberg Quinlan Rosner/Public Opinion Strategies survey [<http://www.greenbergresearch.com/index.php?ID=2154>] for NPR, which compares the two Democrats against McCain. In a Clinton/McCain contest, McCain receives 9 percent of the Democratic vote, while Clinton receives 5 percent of the Republican vote. In an Obama/McCain matchup, by contrast, McCain gets 18 percent of the Democratic vote and Obama, 13 percent of Republicans. Roughly speaking, a general election between Obama and McCain roughly doubles the number of partisans who can contemplate crossing party lines. All other things being equal, a less polarizing contest, when voters can see advantages and disadvantages in both candidates, will expand the pool of voters open to persuasion.

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The net effect of this expansion depends on circumstances. The NPR survey indicates that McCain receives only 48 percent of Independents when facing Obama, versus 58 percent against Clinton. But because Clinton does a better job of consolidating the base, McCain ends up with same share of the total vote—48 percent—against each of the Democratic contenders.

A snapshot cannot foreshadow the dynamics of the general election, of course. The partisans of Sen. Obama can argue, plausibly enough, that wavering Democrats will “come home” as the differences between him and Sen. McCain are cast in higher relief. The partisans of Sen. Clinton can retort that this same process of differentiation will reduce Obama’s appeal to Republicans, and that in addition, as Independents learn more about the gap between his unifying rhetoric and his traditionally liberal position on the issues, some of them will switch as well. To pile uncertainty on uncertainty, the relationship between Independents and swing voters is loose at best: as Mayer shows, many Independents are covert partisans, and they make up only 41 percent of the total pool of swing voters. At this point, we have far more variables than equations, making prediction impossible.

What we can say is this: if a McCain/Obama contest did no more than increase the share of swing voters from its 2004 low to its post-1968 average, an additional 10 percent of the electorate would be in play after the parties’ conventions, shifting both campaigns away from all-out mobilization and toward persuasion. By contrast, if Sen. Clinton turned out to be as polarizing as her detractors maintain, the tone of the 2008 election could bear more than a passing resemblance to 2004... which is not to say that the outcome would necessarily be the same.

## **SWING VOTERS AND SWING ACTIVISTS**

*By Chris Bowers, Co-founder of OpenLeft and Treasurer of BlogPac*

In any discussion of “swing voters,” who are typically grouped by demographics or psychographics, it is first important to differentiate themselves from “swing states” in presidential elections. “Swing states” are the perhaps a dozen or so states with partisan voting tendencies in presidential elections that most closely mirror national partisan voting tendencies. In close presidential elections, “swing states” are the states that could narrowly vote for the nominee of either major party no matter who wins the national popular vote. As such, they determine the winner of the Electoral College, and are thus rightfully termed “swing” states.

“Swing voters,” or swing voting demographics, are typically defined as demographic groups with partisan voting patterns that closely mirror those of the national electorate as a whole. But a moment’s reflection should remind us that swing voters are not analogous to swing states. Eking out a narrow victory among such closely-divided groups as Catholics or self-identified “moderates” is meaningless unless it contributes to victory in swing states. The proper goal in appealing to swing voters—and for that matter, all voters—is to outperform historic partisan performance in as many demographic groups as possible, and by as much as possible, thus winning “swing states.”

It is in this fundamental sense that every voting demographic is a swing voter demographic, and the ancient dichotomy between swing and base voter strategies is largely a false choice.

I do not argue that “base voters”—those voters who always vote and who never split their tickets—do not exist. They do, and they are well known to local campaigns and precinct captains. But if any special messaging, campaign resources or assistance of any sort is required to bring a voter to the polls, then that voter is not a “base voter.”

If the outcome of a person’s vote is ever in doubt—because they may not vote, may vote Republican, may be undecided between the two parties, may be undecided between a major party and a third party, or may have a physical illness, disability or travel related conflict that could prevent him or her from voting—then that voter is a swing voter who must be targeted in some fashion by the Democratic campaign in question. If, in order to secure someone’s vote, it is necessary to appeal to that person with a partisan, progressive ideological message, that person is just as much a swing voter as someone whose vote can be secured through a message of bipartisan unity and an anti-ideological message of moderation and pragmatism. Beyond the individual level, unless a voting group has a partisan voting tendency of 100% in favor of a given party, and unless every member of that demographic will always vote without any

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prompting whatsoever, then it is always possible for the nominees of both major parties to outperform their historic vote share and historic vote total in every single demographic.

Consider, for example, that **according to an analysis of national exit polls** [<http://www.openleft.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=630>] from the 2004 and the 2006 elections, in 2006 Democrats actually improved their overall share of the national vote more from Democrats, 2.4%, than from Independents, 2.1%. Even though John Kerry won 89% of the Republican vote, by increasing the Democratic vote for Democrats to a record 93%, and by increasing the self-identified Democratic share of the electorate from 37% to 38%, Democrats gained more among self-identified Democrats than they gained among any other group. Further, **according to the National Annenberg Election Survey**, [<http://www.mydd.com/story/2005/2/16/164537/337>] the largest gains Republicans made in partisan self-identification from 2000 to 2004 among any demographic group were born again / evangelical white Christians. As a group, at the end of 2004, white, born again / evangelical Christians self-identified as Republicans 8% more than they did in 2000, accounting for the largest partisan shift of any demographic group in the country. While self-identified Democrats would typically be viewed as “base” voters for Democrats, and while white, born again / evangelical Christians would typically be viewed as “base” voters for Republicans, those two groups were actually the two largest “swing” demographics in the 2006 and 2004 elections respectively. Even voting demographics with partisan voting tendencies that favor one party in the extreme should be viewed by both parties as swing demographics worthy of voter targeting efforts.

Every demographic is a swing demographic. It is possible for a nominee to improve on his or her party's share of the vote in every demographic, and it is also possible for a campaign to increase the size of any demographic group as a percentage of the electorate. As such, at least in terms of votes, the swing voter versus base mobilization question is not a binary opposition, but rather a question of *which voters can be captured for the least amount of campaign resources*, and what sort of messaging will result in the largest number of votes possible. And it is over this issue of resources where the true base- versus-swing issue emerges.

Unsurprisingly, base voters tend to be disproportionately represented among donors and campaign volunteers. So the real base/swing dilemma is this: how can a campaign maximize its collection of resources from base voters in a way that will it allow effectively spend the most resources targeting the myriad forms of swing voters described above?

On the one hand, while the base provides the resources necessary to target swing voters, messaging that appeals to the base might actually turn off swing voters, rendering the resources a campaign collects from the base useless. On the other hand, messaging that appeals

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to swing voters could repel or discourage base activists, thus denying a party or a campaign sufficient resources with which to target swing voters. Thus, the swing versus base struggle is actually a struggle over maximizing resource collection and expenditures. Or, to put it another way, it is actually a choice between targeting swing voters and targeting *swing activists*, defined as *base voters who may not deny votes but may deny resources*.

Consider examples of both extremes. In the fourth quarter of 2007, Ron Paul's presidential campaign raised more money than any other Republican campaign for President by a very big margin. However, as of the New Hampshire primary, Ron Paul averaged only 9% in the two traditional early states, had only earned one delegate, and remained stagnant at only about 4% in national polls, well behind less well-heeled rivals such as Mike Huckabee and John McCain. In this instance, the problem is that the Ron Paul campaign secured this overwhelming amount of resources primarily through fringe, libertarian messaging that drastically limited his appeal to the broader Republican electorate. He was able to secure resources from an excited, mobilized, activist base. However, the fringe messaging required to appeal to these activists dramatically lowered the value of his campaign's resources when targeting swing voter groups.

A contrary example comes from the 2000 Presidential election, when the George Bush campaign outspent the Al Gore campaign **by nearly \$66,000,000, or roughly 45%**. [<http://www.opensecrets.org/2000elect/index/AllCands.htm>] The entire difference in expenditures took place before the 2000 Democratic National Convention, during which time Bush was able to build a **substantial, often double-digit, national polling advantage on Gore**. [<http://www.pollingreport.com/wh2gen1.htm>] In the opposite problem faced by the Ron Paul campaign, for much of the 2000 campaign Al Gore faced a substantial resource deficit to George Bush because his campaign was unable to create the same level of excitement among swing activists. After eight years of appealing mainly to swing voter groups rather than to resource building among swing activists, the Democratic Party was found itself facing an ultimately crippling resource deficit.

So, what should Democrats do in this situation? How is it possible to generate resources from the base but still have a broad, appealing message to the already extremely diverse groups of swing voters facing Democratic campaigns? In the 2004 election, and especially the 2006 election, Democrats were able to solve this problem primarily through negative, anti-Republican and anti-Bush messaging. Four years ago, John Kerry smashed all fundraising and volunteer records for national Democratic campaigns, **spending over \$300,000,000** [[http://www.opensecrets.org/presidential/index\\_2004.asp?sort=E](http://www.opensecrets.org/presidential/index_2004.asp?sort=E)] and reducing George Bush's monetary advantage from nearly 50% against Al Gore to just over 10% against Kerry. Two years later, in 2006, Democratic House challengers **raised 60% of what their Republican**

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**opponents did, up from 42% in 2004.** [[http://politicalwire.com/archives/2006/08/20/democrats\\_closing\\_the\\_fundraising\\_gap.html](http://politicalwire.com/archives/2006/08/20/democrats_closing_the_fundraising_gap.html)] Four years of ineffective, disastrous Republican trifecta (House, Senate, and presidency) rule in Washington had left the country longing for a change of direction in Washington, and the very realistic prospect of taking over Congress also made the Democratic activist base excited. Anti-Republican sentiment thus created message coherency when targeting swing activists for resources and most groups of swing voters for votes. Democrats raised record amounts of resources, and won over a wide range of receptive swing voters with a coherent, anti-Republican message. According to 2006 exit polls, **nearly every demographic group swung more than a net of 6% in favor of Democrats,** [<http://www.mydd.com/story/2006/11/10/14200/519>] a testimony to the broad base of anti-Republican swing voters across a wide variety of voting demographics.

Unfortunately, anti-Republican messaging won't solve this problem for Democrats indefinitely. The more elections Democrats win and the longer they remain in power, fewer and fewer voters will view Republican politicians as primary causes of the problems facing the country. Granted, with both an obstructionist Republican Senate and Bush still in power, this should not pose a real problem for 2008. Democratic Presidential campaigns cumulatively received money more than one million donors even before the Iowa caucuses; every Democratic Party Committee is breaking fundraising records; campaign rallies and email lists have never been larger; the audience for progressive media continues to grow; and campaign volunteering remains at, or near, record levels. However, right now this is because Republicans are still largely in power in Washington, and because the memory of their misrule remains ripe. What happens when the unifying coherency of negative, anti-Republican messaging can no longer apply? What happens when, say, Democrats achieve a trifecta and a governing majority of their own in Washington?

At that point, I believe, the answer no longer rests with Democratic campaign strategy. Swing voters are simply too diverse a group for any single message to appeal to them. Moreover, the messaging needed to appeal to swing activists will eventually diverge from the messaging needed to appeal to swing voters, even if they temporarily converge in the context of ending the Iraq war and reversing an economic downturn.

Once in power, in order for Democrats to appeal both to swing activists and to swing voters over the long-term, Democrats must govern in a manner that makes people's lives tangibly better. That was the foundation of the New Deal coalition that controlled Congress and the Presidency almost continually from 1932-1968. By vastly expanding access to higher education, home ownership, pensions, and good jobs, not to mention improving the relative standing of American in the world, Democrats made people's lives better and made them feel good about

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their country. A new Democratic trifecta can do the same thing. If a Democratic governing majority passes legislation that reduces the cost and improves the quality of health care while providing universal access, it will appeal both to swing activists and swing voters. If Democrats build a green energy economy that creates good jobs, reduces transportation and heating costs, ends dependency on foreign oil, and makes the world a more livable place, it will appeal to both swing activists and swing voters. The same can be said about improving education, or American's image around the world. Once the unifying coherence of running against Bush and Republican obstruction is gone, real-life accomplishments are the surest, and perhaps the only, way for Democrats to appeal both to swing voters and to swing activists, and to build a durable electoral majority.

## **EXPANDING THE DEMOCRATIC BASE**

*By Al From, Founder and CEO, Democratic Leadership Council*

Politics is littered with false choices—and, to me, no choice is more false for Democrats than choosing between a political strategy aimed at increasing our base vote and a political strategy aimed at winning over swing voters. To win elections consistently and build an enduring political and governing majority, we need to pursue both strategies.

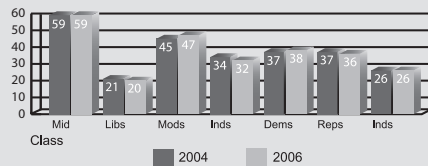
I define base voters as those who reliably vote Democratic in every election whether we do well or poorly. In any election, they will likely be the largest bloc voting Democratic, but they are less than 50 percent of the electorate. We need to get every one of them to the polls—and we need to increase their numbers. That's why we should pursue strategies to find and turn out non-voters who would surely vote Democratic if they made it to the polls.

Swing voters are those who vote Democratic in some elections, Republican in others. Even in today's more polarized electorate, they swing back and forth between the parties. When enough of them join Democratic base voters in voting for us, we generally win. When too many of them vote for the other side, the Republicans win. We obviously need strategies to persuade swing voters to vote Democratic in each election—and we ought to take every opportunity we can convince them to change their voting habits and become reliable Democratic (or base) voters.

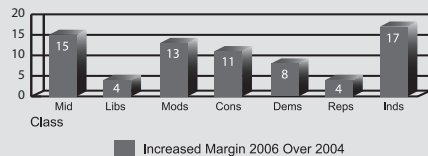
In recent elections the Republicans have pursued a strategy that aims nearly entirely in expanding their base—in finding Republicans who have been non-voters and getting them to the polls. That strategy worked for them in 2002 and 2004, but failed in 2006. I'm convinced that it is ultimately a losing strategy for the Republicans because it will drive too many swing voters and voters with loose party attachments to the other side as it did in 2006.

## Winning the Swing

In 2006, the electorate didn't become more liberal or more Democratic. For most demographic categories, the 2006 electorate was nearly identical to the 2004 electorate.



The difference is that in 2006, centrist voters with loose party attachments voted Democratic in much higher numbers.



For Democrats, I'm convinced that such a strategy would be a disaster. For starters, Democrats cannot consistently win elections without winning moderate voters by substantial margins like we did in 2006. Consistently, over the last several decades there have been more conservatives than liberals in the electorate – the electorate may vary a little but it's usually around 30 percent conservative, 20 percent liberal and 50 percent moderate. That means if the Republicans win the conservatives and Democrats the liberals, we have to win 60 percent of the moderates just to break even. That's not an ideological statement; just pure arithmetic.

To get a better understanding of just what a consistent winning coalition for Democrats would look like, the Democratic Leadership Council is in the midst of a study of voting patterns in the five most recent presidential elections and the 2006 Congressional elections. We're examining and breaking down the exit polling in each of those elections – three of which we won, two we lost, and one we tied (the 2000 election; technically a loss since Bush assumed office even though Gore won the popular vote).

In our study we're trying to determine (1) which voters constitute the real Democratic base—voters who vote reliably Democratic in every election, win, lose or tie—and (2) which voters are the true swings—they tend to vote Republican in GOP years and Democratic in years we win.

Our purpose is to look at ways to build an enduring Democratic majority coalition that includes both groups.

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Our study is not yet completed, but we have made some preliminary findings that give us a good indication of those voters who usually make the difference between victory and defeat for Democrat.

It is reasonably clear from the data that in 1992, 1996 and 2006—elections that Democrats won—Democrats made their most dramatic gains among white middle-age men with some college education or a college degree, in non-union households. Geographically, the gains were centered in suburbs and to some extent rural areas, not cities. Ideologically, the gains were among self-identified moderates and conservatives. And in terms of party ID, virtually all the gains were among Republicans and independents. Democrats made the greatest gains in “winning” years among those with relatively low percentages of self-identified liberal ideology or Democratic partisan attachment. If you compare 2004 and 2006 (the last “winning” and “losing” columns), for example, it’s clear that the ideological and partisan trends of earlier election held in 2006, despite the belief of some observers that the victory was a product of base mobilization or a more liberal electorate. (See the table above)

I believe that to achieve a Democratic majority in 2008, we need a strategy and message that can bring both base and the swing voters into our fold just as in 2006. In the long run, we can cement that majority for decades to come by governing effectively once back in office. That’s an important lesson in politics that the Bush crowd never learned. Good government remains the best politics, and in both, nothing succeeds like success. Democrats should always remember that.

## **SWING VOTERS AND TICKET-SPLITTERS IN THE MOUNTAIN WEST**

*By Joan McCarter, Fellow/Contributing Editor, DailyKos*

Ed Kilgore began this roundtable discussion with two questions: are swing voters worth the trouble? Can Democrats win with base mobilization alone?

From a regional perspective, and specifically the region that currently holds the hopes of so many Democrats—the Mountain West—there's little choice for Democrats but to find a way to appeal to swing voters. In the Mountain West region, comprised of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico, Republicans hold about a **12 point registration advantage** (Pew Research Center, [<http://people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=140>]). The reality is that a Democrat doesn't win in many parts of the region unless they can appeal to the always elusive independent or unaffiliated voter, not to mention some Republicans.

This isn't a new phenomenon for Democrats in the West—it's why you rarely find a Western Dem who is an enthusiastic supporter of gun control, for example. Finding avenues of nonpartisan, and even anti-partisan, appeal have been critical to the survival of the Western Democrat in the lean years since Ronald Reagan helped solidify the region as solidly red, as has keeping the national party at arm's length. The key for the Democratic Party in shaping a strategy for the 2008 elections will be allowing Democrats running in the region to run with a high degree of independence from the national party's message and structure. The key for Democrats running in the West will be to find those issues that can be branded as Democratic and that uphold our progressive values.

Note: this discussion has been well informed by a Democracy Corps **survey and memo** from April, 2007 [[http://www.democracycorps.com/reports/analyses/Democracy\\_Corps\\_April\\_5\\_2007\\_Interior\\_West\\_Memo.pdf](http://www.democracycorps.com/reports/analyses/Democracy_Corps_April_5_2007_Interior_West_Memo.pdf)].

### **(1) Who are the swing and base voters?**

In the Mountain West, swing voters can be just about any voter. While in each of the states the Republicans have a distinct registration advantage, that imbalance obviously doesn't play out state-wide or in every race. Part of this is due to the inheritance of Western voters of the idea of the Western character. Paramount to that ideal is independence, an ideal that plays out politically to an extent in voting behavior. Historically, party structures in the Mountain West have been relatively weak; politicians are more likely to run as individuals first and members of a party second and voters pride themselves on voting for the individual, not the party. There's a marked anti-partisan attitude among traditional Western voters.

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Getting an empirical handle on the exact voter breakdown in some of these states to determine base vs. swing percentages is a challenge. If you take the last two presidential elections as establishing the base Democratic vote, the range is from 26 percent in Utah to 48.5 percent in New Mexico. It's not a perfect measure for the voting demographics, but gives an essential baseline, particularly in states like Idaho and Utah where it takes a real yellow dog to vote for the Democratic nominee.

It's important to note that, in the context of this region, anti-partisan is not the equivalent of bipartisan. Western voters are highly pragmatic, looking for problem solvers first, and ideological debate is of less interest than action on many issues. While they would like the parties to work together, it's more important that things get done, even if that takes a bulldozer of a politician, like Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer was in the 2007 legislative session, to do it. Because the independently minded voter places a higher value on action than on compromise, contrast is more important than comity in appealing to them. The individual candidate is also more important than the party he or she represents for many Western voters.

Thus, the prototypical swing voters in the Mountain West are better defined as ticket-splitters than as "swinglers." They might be perfectly willing to send the Democrat that they know and trust back to the House of Representatives in DC, but if a fellow Democrat is running for another House or Senate seat, they'll probably look to the Republican in the race, just to make sure their own sense of checks and balances is maintained. Thus, their ticket gets split.

Consider the case of Wyoming, which has had a Democratic governor for 24 of the last 32 years—three decades that have been unkind to Democrats there. They haven't sent a Democrat to Congress since 1976. When I interviewed former Gov. Mike Sullivan recently, I asked him about that, and what was at work in the state to create that dynamic.

There is a kind of basic feeling that checks and balances are good, and recognition that we are very Republican. The legislature is very Republican, and maybe it doesn't do harm to have a Democratic governor sort of sitting on them.... It's okay because you're here, and you're close enough to be watched. But the electorate isn't going to send you somewhere else. D.C. is too far off and they're not sure they can watch you at that distance, and they know that if you get back there you're going to be captured by those pinko communists.

I ran for Senate in '94, and it was a very interesting experience. I wasn't all that excited about going to Washington but I was convinced that it was the right thing to do. I think I ended up with a 70 percent approval rating when I left [the governor's] office and I got soundly beaten. People kept coming up to me and saying "Governor, we love you, but you know, you go back there and you're going to have to vote with

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the party and that party back there doesn't represent our values." And there was no way of convincing the majority of the people that it could be otherwise.

Those voters, who reelected Mike Sullivan easily in 1990, with 65 percent of the vote, sent him to the curb just four years later, when he lost by 20 points to Craig Thomas. Wyoming is an extreme example for the region, but the dynamics at play for the Western voters are probably just amplified in this small population state.

So a large portion of the region's electorate is likely at some point in their voting career to split their ticket. What Democrats need to determine is how, precisely, to capture some of those ticket-splitters

### ***(2) What is their relative value?***

The relative value of these ticket-splitters in the West is quite high, perhaps the highest in any region of the country. It's clear in every state, at least at the local and state level, they can swing elections. In the larger population states in the southern part of the region—Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado—and potentially Montana, they have the potential to swing a presidential election. The question for Democrats running down-ballot in these states is the degree to which they associate with the top of the ticket candidate, and the national platform.

The other states of the region, Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming, are unlikely to vote Democratic at the presidential level in the near term. But appealing to the ticket-splitters in these states is critical for any Democrat to get elected beyond highly localized district races. Those politicians who have been most effective in the past two decades in these states have been governors, Cecil Andrus in Idaho, and Mike Sullivan and Dave Freudenthal in Wyoming. These are states particularly hostile to Washington, DC politicians, particularly distrustful towards an external message and what they consider outside influence.

### ***(3) What are the opportunity costs involved in reaching beyond the base to swing voters?***

The risk, of course, for Democrats in the region is the same as in any area—diluting the Democratic brand further and not providing the strong contrast to the other party that any healthy political system requires. This risk is greater where the climb for Democrats is even more uphill—the northern group of states, and where arguably the stakes are highest.

There is also the risk of misreading the basic anti-partisan orientation of these voters as a longing for bipartisanship. This can result in short-lived and uneasy compromises that erode the Democratic brand. Again, these voters are more swayed by results than by process. There

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are battles that can be won, even in the most unlikely of places, by taking strong, principled, progressive stands.

Consider Jon Tester's refusal in the 2006 Senate campaign in Montana to buy into the post-9/11 "fear" narrative. When Conrad Burns tried to paint him as weak on national security because Tester would allow the PATRIOT Act to be weakened, Tester shot back, "I don't want to weaken the Patriot Act—I want to repeal it. What it does, it takes away your freedom... and when you take away our freedoms, the terrorists have won." That statement reverberated through the remainder of the campaign, bringing many libertarian-leaning Republican and independent voters to take a second look at the Montanan.

To take another example, consider Cecil Andrus's 1990 veto of an abortion bill that would have given Idaho the most restrictive abortion law of any state at the time. The bill easily passed through the legislature, and Idaho's active right-to-life and conservative religious communities were strongly supportive. Despite the potential threat to his reelection that year, Andrus vetoed the bill on the grounds that it was unduly punitive to women. He added the politically smart objection that the bill was sponsored by national right-to-life groups who were trying to use Idaho as their vehicle to further their national agenda. He cruised to reelection that year, losing just one county.

#### ***(4) What's the best long-range strategy for building an enduring Democratic majority?***

Democrats in the West have the greatest opportunity before them to make significant gains in the solidly red states, and to increase their advantage in the purple states of the region by seizing the key issue for Westerners, by emphasizing the cluster of issues that can be summed up by the phrase "quality of life." That includes both an economic and an environmental message, often intertwined. Access to public lands, water and air pollution, unfettered growth, drought, climate change—all of these issues tie into the critical land-based economy of the West, and all appeal to both native Westerners and new immigrants to the region who live there for the quality of life.

On the economic side of the equation, a strong populist message can resonate. Wages in many states in the region are lower than national averages. While some areas are booming economically, particularly some parts of the southern tier (e.g., Colorado, Arizona) and around cities like Denver, Phoenix and Salt Lake City, much of the region has sluggish economic growth. Lack of health insurance is a major concern. As the Democracy Corps survey found, nearly a quarter (23 percent) of voters here went without health insurance in the last five years or

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currently lack insurance. This is a problem for all age groups: 47 percent of young people are without coverage, as are 24 percent of those aged 50-64.

Tied into the region's economy is the region's environment. The economy throughout the region is still largely driven by the land—by the resources it holds and the opportunities it provides. In those communities experiencing the healthiest economic growth, not coincidentally those communities closest to public lands, according to a recent **Sierra Club report** [<http://www.sierraclub.org/wildlegacy/downloads/2007publicwildlandsreport.pdf>], there is increased employment, higher earnings and income, lower poverty, and improvements in local educational attainment and health. Property values also increase the closer they are to protected public lands, according to a U.S. Department of Commerce study included in the report.

The new reality for the West is that protected and well-managed public lands are worth more to many western communities than the oil, gas, or timber that you can pull out of them. What's more, greater numbers of Westerners earn their living off of those well-managed and protected lands, along with enjoying them during their leisure time. Those life-style considerations have made the region more attractive to the high tech industry, providing jobs and creating a workforce that is concerned about maintaining the air, water, and land that makes where they live so special.

These concerns are most dramatically demonstrated by a recent event. On January 22, 2007, 10,000 Idahoans turned out to hear Vice President Al Gore give his talk and slide show on global warming. Originally scheduled for a 1,000 seat venue, tickets for the speech disappeared in 10 minutes. The speech was then moved to the Boise State University basketball stadium, where 10,000 tickets sold out in less than five hours (more rapidly than tickets for Elton John, as the evening's emcee and organizer Bethine Church was quick to point out). Local news showed lines of a couple of hundred people showing up hours before the event, hoping for a chance at a ticket.

The turnout for Gore was remarkable in this state where he garnered just under 28 percent of the vote in his 2000 bid for president. Their intense interest in the message was as surprising as their openness to the messenger. This deeply conservative state has embraced anti-government, anti-regulation, pro-growth, and pro-industry stances in every confrontation over environmental and conservation issues during the past five decades. If Idaho is ripe to hear an alternative message on these issues, they will play for Democrats throughout the region.

On issues that are particularly dicey for Democrats in the West, such as immigration and gun control, it's important to adopt an approach based on the kind of pragmatism that Western voters value above all else.

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As resource development, particularly oil and gas drilling, expands on public lands that were once prime hunting and fishing ground, the traditionally conservative “hook and bullet crowd” is increasingly allying with conservation organizations to try to preserve open spaces. This is a critical and long term issue for Democrats to seize, and an issue that can erode some of the most extreme gun rights sentiment.

In the short term, immigration is a key issue, rated as critically important for voters in the West. But again, they have a more pragmatic and nuanced view of the debate than is generally suggested in the traditional media narrative. Westerners recognize that some of the more stringent measures suggested by Republicans—a border fence, massive deportations—are just impracticable and don’t provide long term solutions. But Westerners also recognize the value that immigration brings. Here is where Democrats can again capitalize on coalition building—between immigrant communities and the economic sectors that depend upon them. Needless to say, solidifying the Hispanic vote in the region is going to be critical to growing the Democratic base.

These are the kinds of coalitions that Democrats can build without sacrificing more progressive values, as long as they remain solutions-based. Western voters have shown themselves to be nothing but flexible in choosing their leaders, provided those would-be leaders give them a compelling reason for voting for them. It’s on these kinds of core issues—protecting the land, expanded economic opportunities, curbing out of control growth, responding to climate change—that Democrats can find key inroads.

The next generation of Western Democrats should learn from the great tradition of principled and progressive Western Democrats—Frank Church, Cecil Andrus, Mike Mansfield, Mo Udall, Bruce Babbitt, Gary Hart. These leaders were able to be unapologetic Democrats, to take controversial stands on critical issues, and to stand up for the ultimate progressive value of the common good.

## **THE SWING/BASE DEBATE: NEW DIRECTIONS**

*By Ed Kilgore, Managing Editor for The Democratic Strategist*

Our Roundtable Discussion at this site on base and swing voter strategies surprised me quite a bit. Given the diverse nature of our contributors, and widely varying interpretations in the party of the most recent political trends, I had expected a more traditional argument between those focused on specific categories of swing voters, and those suggesting that the Democratic base is growing rapidly enough to justify a strategy tailored to mobilization.

Instead, there appeared to be general agreement that base and swing voter strategies need not conflict, and might well work in tandem. But other divergences from the ancient debate on this subject were more interesting.

Robert Creamer and Chris Bowers each proposed a new taxonomy of base and swing voters, with the former dividing the electorate into true base voters plus persuadable and mobilizable voters, and the latter defining anyone who needs motivation to vote as a swing voter, while identifying a subset of base voters as "swing activists" who provide much of the resources necessary to appeal to swing voters.

Joan McCarter, whom we asked to discuss the Mountain West as a "swing region," added another oft-forgotten distinction: between swing voters and ticket-splitters. The latter have declined in importance nationally in recent years, but still matter a lot in certain parts of the country.

Meanwhile, Al From focused on documenting the stability of partisan and ideological attachments in the electorate, even in the "wave" election of 2006.

And Bill Galston brought the discussion into the context of the current Democratic nomination contest, noting that the basic difference between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in general election trial heats is that the latter puts a significantly larger number of swing voters into play, both positively and negatively.

There were other interesting points made in the course of the Roundtable, such as Creamer's argument that "persuasion messages" are always about candidates, not issues, and Bowers' important reminder that abstract talk about national swing-voter targets can be irrelevant to the contests in the "swing states" that actually determine presidential elections. And there was a striking convergence between Bowers and From--representing two very different ideological traditions within the Democratic Party--that a successful progressive administration will be the key to long-term expansion of the Democratic base.

Finally, I hope my own contribution to the Roundtable will continue to be useful in the future as an introduction and history of the swing/base debate.