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The Democrats' New Groove: Why a Tonal and Regional Messaging Shift May Be Necessary For the Democrats to Take Down Trump

Conservatism has been rising throughout the United States; the 2024 presidential election saw a near uniform rise in conservative votes across all regions, and recent events such as the assasination of right-wing influencer Charlie Kirk have added fuel to the growing flame of adolescent conservative activism. Between 2020 and 2024 alone, the Democrats lost 4.5 million registered voters to Republicans and the party reached a 35-year low in popularity last summer, which some have attributed to a loss of working-class voters (Subramanian). In the last Presidential election, Democrats lost every swing state, and Republicans made major gains even in progressive strongholds (Subramanian). While Trump's current approval ratings are low–staying around the low forties–it seems that some voters who are dissatisfied with Trump are not yet convinced the Democrats would provide a better alternative (Subramanian). The situation seemed bleak for the party, but recent victories made by Democrats such as Zorhan Mamdani and Abigail Spanberger indicate that the party may be regaining political momentum. Yet the Democrats' recent strife does beg the question: Why did the Democrats fall out of favor with the working class, and how can they regain these voters now before it's too late?

The working class was formerly the heart of the Democratic party; union laborers across the country voted blue to support labor protections and liberal economic policies. Yet today, it seems the working class largely feels ostracized and abandoned by the party. The South, in

particular, houses many diverse working-class voters, but has been largely overlooked by the Democrats. Now, winning back the working class and targeting previously overlooked regions may be the Democrats' only path toward mounting a strong opposition against the Trump Administration.

Following a period of introspection after the 2024 presidential election, it seems that Democrats are beginning to successfully target their messaging toward working-class and more socially centrist voters by featuring bread and butter issues that matter most to the working class– rather than divisive social issues. This shift is a promising and necessary step toward mounting a unified opposition to the Trump administration, but even this newfound political momentum comes with its own challenges. To effectively build a cohesive opposition to the Trump administration, the Democrats must unite voters across racial, socioeconomic, and regional lines, and their best shot at galvanizing a broad base of voters is to continue highlighting economic solutions to the affordability crisis and to mobilize consistent political efforts in rural areas, especially the South, where Democratic political energy and resources have been lacking for decades.

How Democrats lost the South and the working-class

In the mid 20th century the country saw a major realignment of the majority of white Southern voters with the Republican party. The evolution of this shift was long, complex, and influenced by a myriad of factors, both social and economic (Maxwell). However, the primary impetus of this shift was the Democrats' support for the Civil Rights Movement. According to researchers at Princeton University who used newly accessible data from Gallup polls conducted during that era to explain this political shift, "defection among racially conservative whites just

after Democrats introduce sweeping Civil Rights legislation explains virtually all of the party's losses in the region. We find essentially no role for either income growth in the region or (non-race-related) policy preferences in explaining why Democrats 'lost' the South" (Kuziemko and Washington). Conservative politicians targeted messaging specifically toward Southern voters and leveraged their dissatisfaction with Civil Rights legislation to win over these voters (Kuziemko and Washington). This effort was referred to as "the Southern Strategy" (Maxwell). Contemporarily, this dynamic still remains, as the South is still considered a conservative stronghold, despite housing the majority of America's Black population (Blackwell).

Around the time the Southern Strategy was taking place, the Democrats also began losing favor among working class whites in the Northeast due to perceived intellectual elitism and classism. David Kuhn's piece "Democrats Cannot Just Buy Back the Working Class" points to class tension between working-class Democrats and student activists during the Vietnam War as a turning point for the party's dynamics. According to Kuhn, a pivotal moment for the Democratic party was the "Hard Hat Riot," which took place in downtown Manhattan in May of 1970. During a protest against the Vietnam War, students from Columbia University got into a skirmish with groups of construction workers who were building a skyscraper (Kuhn). According to Kuhn, the conflict began because "[b]lue-collar families knew what sort of people got student deferments, fled to Canada, were saved by draft boards or retained lawyers to safeguard them. And it chafed many working families to see student protesters, from campus sanctuaries, lecture Americans with less status about social justice while their boys went to war in students' place." Following the Hard Hat Riot, President Nixon began targeting Republican messaging toward the Northeastern working class, who felt ousted and misunderstood by their

party (Kuhn). Eventually, the demographics of the Democrats changed, and now most Democrat voters are either college educated and affluent, members of minority groups, or both (Blackwell).

Each of these instances in which Democrats lost a major voter base mirrors the contemporary shift in voter dynamics: the Democrats keep losing voters over their dedication to social justice. In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, the loss of those voters was clearly outweighed by the benefit of Civil Rights legislation. However, contemporarily, it is likely more advantageous for Democrats to shift their focus toward economic issues, so that they may effectively mount a cohesive opposition to the current Trump administration.

Reconnecting with the working class

While some may argue that de-emphasizing social issues would be a mistake for Democrats, considering how central these ideals have become to the party's identity, America's current political moment, coupled with the dissatisfaction of the working class with Democratic messaging, indicates that the party must re-strategize to focus its messaging more heavily on economic issues. According to an extensive report conducted by Democracy Matters, a nonprofit affiliated with Democratic super PAC American Bridge 21st Century, working-class voters perceive the party as "too focused on social issues and not nearly focused enough on the economic issues that impact every one, every day" (Schneider). The report indicated that six in every ten working class voters had a negative opinion of the party, which was frequently described by this demographic as "woke, weak, and out of touch" (Schneider). It's not difficult to understand why the working class feels left behind; following the pandemic, in June of 2022, the Consumer Price index hit a record high of 9.2%, and nearly half of all Americans say it's harder to afford groceries today than it was a year ago (Picchi and Cunningham). It's hard not to notice

the growing price tags on grocery store items, even when you're financially comfortable. According to Mitch Landrieu, co-chair of Democracy Matters, when asked why they felt abandoned by the Democratic Party, working-class voters said, "They feel forgotten, left out, and that their issues are not prioritized by the Democratic Party or the Republican Party…[t]hey want somebody focused first, second and third, on their economic stress" (qtd. in Schneider). Until recently, the Democrats have spent considerably more time focusing on their social positions than their solutions to the affordability crisis–and working class voters have noticed. It's clear the Democrats need to shift their messaging away from divisive social issues without losing their commitment to equality. One way this can be done is to focus on economic equity as a means to achieve some of these broader social goals, rather than focusing too heavily on identity politics.

America's current political climate provides Democrats with an opportune political moment to make this shift: many Republicans are now dissatisfied with Trump's lack of follow through on his economic policies, and it will be easy for Democrats to leverage this disapproval in their opposition against the current administration during the upcoming elections. For example, during Trump's campaign, he promised to lower grocery prices, yet the cost of groceries has steadily risen each month since he's been in office (Edgington). Trump also promised to cut Americans' energy costs in half within his first year, a feat that he has yet to accomplish (Edgington). In fact, since Trump took office, average residential electricity costs have risen from 15.94 cents per kilowatt-hour to 17.62 cents per kWh (Edgington). While some of these changes are due to economic forces outside the president's immediate political control, much of this inflation is actually caused by Trump's tariffs (Edgington).

Working-class voters are catching on to this disparity. According to Molly Murphy, a democratic pollster who worked on the Democracy Matters report, the working class "are not

convinced that what they are getting from Republicans is alleviating the stress they're experiencing and Democrats can win them over" (qtd. in Schneider). I see this resentment beginning to build against Trump throughout my home state of Arkansas. In casual conversations at the farmers market, organic farmers who never before cared about federal politics expressed dissatisfaction with Trump due to growing prices of goods they need to sustain their farms. Rice farmers in the Arkansas Delta are growing angry and resentful toward the administration as tariffs put many Arkansas farmers in crisis (Bright). Now is the time for Democrats to seize the economic conversation by centering their talking points around economic issues, and some Democrats are already starting to meet this political moment.

For example, several key democratic victories this November, namely the elections of Zorhan Mamdani in New York and Abigail Spanberger of Virginia, indicate the party is moving in a promising direction. Mamdani and Spanberger couldn't be more different, Spanberger is a moderate, law-and-order Democrat with a background in the CIA, and Mamdani is a young Democratic Socialist (Subramanian). What these two do have in common, however, is that they both centered much of their campaign messaging around economic issues and solutions to the affordability crisis. Mamdani made clear throughout his campaign that his top priority is to make New York City affordable, and he made his strategy known via engaging social media campaigns and public appearances.. One notable campaign advertisement shows Mamdani ordering a sandwich at a local bodega while he discusses how he will boost small businesses in NYC. First, Mamdani highlights the important economic role of NYC's small businesses, stating that "small businesses employ nearly half of all New Yorkers in the private sector," and promises to boost the economic impact of these businesses by "cutting fees for small businesses by 50%" and "increasing funding for small business support initiatives by 500%" (Zohran Mamdani for

NYC). In the ad, Mamdani is depicted as professional but approachable, wearing a cardigan with a button down shirt and ordering a bacon egg and cheese–like a typical New Yorker (Zohran Mamdani for NYC). Mamdani's put together, yet un-elitist, affect no doubt allows him to better connect with working-class voters, making his campaign's emphasis on affordability all the more impactful.

Spanberger's campaign, too, did a very effective job at forefronting affordability through its advertisements. For example, one campaign ad in particular depicted an elderly Virginia woman discussing her financial hardships: "I'm almost 71 years old and I still have to work. I can't retire yet. I live paycheck to paycheck. As a member of the working class, I see how broken a lot of things are …. We need to help working families grow their incomes and keep more of what they earn" (American Bridge 21st Century). This advertisement effectively connects to working-class voters, but it takes a slightly different approach than Mamdani's advertisement. This ad forefronts the hardships faced by an older woman, who could be anybody's grandmother, intentionally appealing to the everyday Virginian. No one wants their grandma to live paycheck to paycheck, and Spanberger's ad perfectly tapped into the emotional burden of financial hardship to illustrate the importance of making living more affordable to her constituents.

Various political analysts have attributed November's victories to this messaging shift. The former mayor of Chicago and U.S. ambassador to Japan, Rahm Emmanuel, said he believes "The first lesson for Democrats" out of these recent victories, "was we didn't trip over our shoelaces. We stayed focused on what people needed to hear from us–that we were concerned about it, and we didn't get into some cultural war debate that we can't win" (qtd. in Subramanian). It seems the Democrats may continue to build momentum and win back former working-class voters by maintaining this messaging shift. These recent victories, particularly that

of Mamdani, also provide a clear formula for how to avoid getting "into some culture war debate that we can't win" without losing sight of the importance of social justice (qtd. in Subramanian). Throughout his campaign, Mamdani made his progressive social stances clear without making them the central focus for his campaign–a position that seems more palatable to politically moderate voters. It should be noted, too, that both Spanberger and Mamdani calibrated their social messaging to fit the demographics of their constituents. New York City is much more socially progressive than Virginia, so it makes sense that Mamdani would be more upfront in his campaign about his commitment to social justice. While this strategy of calibrating degrees of political "wokeness" to suit the culture of a particular region will work in localized elections, it will surely pose an interesting challenge for the party as they consider which candidate to put forward for a 2028 presidential run.

Overall, it is clear the Democrats need to continue changing their strategy and focus more heavily on economic issues in their messaging, but to most effectively combat the influence of the Trump administration, they must also expand their messaging to target the South, which has been overlooked by the party in recent decades.

The Role of The South

The South is a rapidly expanding region, and with this population growth comes increased political importance at the federal level. According to an analysis published by NextDems, a nonprofit focused on providing resources to emerging Democratic leaders, the South "has immense potential because … [c]urrent projections for the 2030 Census show that several Southern states are looking to gain as many as nine additional seats after the reapportionment in the House of Representatives, which would be the largest gain for the South

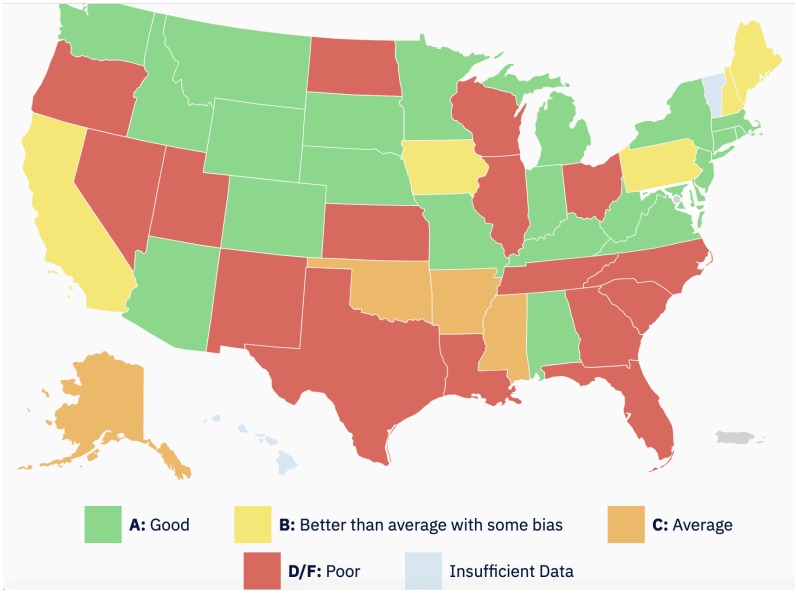
in 10 years in history," and many Democratic strongholds "are projected to lose representation due to population outflow" (Linen). With Southern urban centers set to gain lots of new, young voters, the weight of this region will become notably more significant in future elections. Since Democrats are set to lose some of their geographic strongholds, it is critical that the party begins targeting the South. As NextDems put it: "If Democrats fail to organize in the region, they are allowing Republicans to continue to dominate it" (Linen). Failing to invest politically in this region would be a major mistake for Democrats, especially considering the rich and rapidly changing voter demographics of the South.

The South is often written off as a conservative stronghold that the Democrats have no hope of infiltrating, but this view of the region fails to account for the extensive existing and diverse communities of Southern progressives. One op-ed written by Stacy Abrams, former Georgia congressional representative, highlights the connection between current grassroots Southern progressive movements with the origins of the Civil Rights movement. Abrams asserts that "learned from civil rights leaders and labor organizers and justice warriors, the strategy is simple: engage and demand. Our transformation is being led by young people, women, people of color, and everyday Southerners who believe democracy should deliver" (Abrams). Abrams emphasizes the role of activists and local grassroots organizing in spreading progressive movements throughout the South. Across the region, Democrats have been mobilizing to meet their communities' needs and encourage Democrat voters to go to the polls, but these efforts are often overlooked because they are highly localized.

The South has much more potential to vote democratically than is often recognized, its diverse voter demographics, combined with its low voter turn out, indicate this region is ripe with untapped potential that the Democrats must begin to target. Only 30-45% of democratic

Southern voters actually voted in the last presidential election, likely because many of these voters felt like their votes wouldn't make a difference in states considered to be conservative strongholds (Linen). Increased targeted messaging toward Southern Democrats would likely go a long way to getting these voters out to the polls. Rural voters in all regions of the U.S. are also frequently overlooked by the Democrats, who typically target their messaging to urban centers. However, in 2000, Republicans had only a 6% lead over Democrats in rural areas, with 51% of rural voters identifying as Republican and 45% as Democrat (Linen). The Republicans have somewhat strengthened their hold over rural voters in recent years, but even still, it's estimated that only roughly 10% of rural voters display "overwhelmingly partisan tendencies" (Linen). These figures indicate that rural voters, who make up 14% of the American electorate, could be won over by Democrats if the party chose to target this demographic more strategically (Scala and Johnson).

The South is also the region with the most gerrymandering in the country, a trend that began with racial gerrymandering in the Post-Reconstruction Era, an effort that set out to inhibit Black men from exercising their newfound right to vote (Tyson Darling). Today, racial gerrymandering is illegal under the 14th amendment, yet there is still much controversy in the South surrounding its enforcement, and a recent Supreme Court ruling may threaten the sanctity of this protection ("U.S. Supreme Court Decision"). The Princeton Gerrymandering Project created a redistricting report card of the states in the U.S. (pictured below).



(Princeton University)

The report card grades states based on the bias of their redistricting. On the website, the map is interactive and specific scores are available for the house, congressional, and senatorial district maps of each given state. The map above shows the given overall letter grade for each state. The highest concentration of failing grades is in the South, with Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee receiving low grades in part due to having unfair minority distributions that were red flags for potential racial gerrymandering (Princeton University). Considering the high frequency of partisan and racial gerrymandering in the South, it is important that the Democrats make an effort to reach these voters who are unable to be heard at the district level.

In light of the 2024 Supreme Court ruling on the case of Alexander v. South Carolina State Conference of NAACP, where the court overturned a unanimous ruling by three federal judges that ordered the redrawing of South Carolina's 1st Congressional District on the basis of discrimination against Black voters, it is imperative that Democrats invest in efforts to protect the rights of Black Southern voters ("U.S. Supreme Court Decision"). In the original redistricting, the South Carolina legislature moved 30,000 Black voters into the state's single minority Black district, a move that many speculate was to concentrate the Black vote and

weaken its statewide influence (League of Women Voters). The first district flipped from Republican to Democrat in 2018, and to balance the voter population of the underpopulated (and predominantly Black) sixth district, the legislature split the first district's Black population between the two (League of Women Voters). The Supreme Court's decision to overturn orders to redraw this district sets a dangerous precedent for the future of racial gerrymandering in the U.S. and may lead to worsening discrimination against Black Southern voters. Now more than ever it is critical that the Democrats begin investing in these communities, not simply to garner support, but to defend the voting rights of some of the party's most loyal supporters.

The South is a very diverse region, as it contains the majority of America's Black population, along with a rapidly growing immigrant and Latin American population. Although the South possesses a deeply racist history, it is also the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement and the scope of political beliefs in the South remains vast, in part by virtue of its racial diversity. The South also remains the region with the country's highest rates of poverty, food insecurity, and poor education, making it a prime area for Democrats to target their messaging (Blackwell). According to an op-ed written by Troy Blackwell, a Southern Democrat who worked for the Biden administration: "Ignoring the South is not just a political mistake — it's a moral failing not to engage with the very communities that form the foundation of Democratic support." I agree with Blackwell's position: it is certainly a "moral failing" that Democrats have not prioritized the voters who could benefit most from their progressive policies.

The ramifications of this political and moral failure have never been more clear to me than they were during my time in Shaw, Mississippi, a small, impoverished Delta town. I visited Shaw several years ago with my father who was working on a GIS mapping project for Communities Unlimited, a nonprofit that does community and infrastructure development

projects in underserved Southern communities. As we drove through Shaw, I witnessed a level of poverty that I had never before seen in the United States. Dilapidated houses interspersed with antebellum-era shacks lined the dirt roads, with packs of stray dogs wandering between them. An old juke joint played blues while floods of drunken men filled the street outside. The downtown was completely shuttered; every building's windows were boarded, and "condemned" signs hung on nearly every door. As we passed through the streets, I remember thinking: where have the Democrats been? Why hasn't the Left invested in the communities that need them the most? Shaw is a small town and an acute example of how the political disenfranchisement and economic suppression of Southern black communities has resulted in extreme poverty, and it's places like Shaw that make me feel so strongly about the importance of expanding Democratic momentum in Southern states.

Over the past several decades, Democrats' superficial investment in this region has left many Southern minority voters feeling "taken for granted as reliably Democratic" (Linen). In other words, the Democrats rely on them for their votes, but don't invest in improving their communities, or platform solutions to issues that impact them most. As a result, "post-election data has displayed that the party's lead over Republicans in Black and Hispanic party preferences has decreased" (Linen). Moving forward, Democrats need to show Southern voters–particularly those of color, and those who live in places like Shaw–that they are committed to making consistent and reliable efforts to invest in their communities and that the party supports existing Southern democratic movements.

The Democrats must also more effectively appeal to more socially conservative Southern voters, to build a stronger opposition against the current Trump administration. The Democrats should resist the urge to condescend to voters who disagree with them socially and appeal to

more universal Southern values of faith and family, along with shared economic hardships. Scholar Michael Zweig asserts in his article "White Working-Class Voters and the Future of Progressive Politics," that "as we try to overcome backward and divisive attitudes anywhere in our movements, it would be wise to follow the old adage, 'Hate the sin but love the sinner.' In particular, as we seek to organize white workers, we cannot do so starting with disdain. We know from countless union organizing and contract fights that material gains often count for far less than the imperative to be treated with respect and dignity" (Zweig). Zweig provides an important reminder that those who feel judged and ostracized cannot be won over. Back home in Arkansas, I often hear conservatives lamenting that the worst part about liberals is their elitism and their propensity for policing language. Perhaps one of the first steps toward winning over Southern voters–along with the working class more broadly–is to put aside perceived moral superiority and roll up our sleeves to tackle the economic issues preventing working Americans from living the comfortable lives they deserve.

Conclusion

The Democrats have a long road ahead of them, and several promising victories last November indicate they may be up to the task. To fully take advantage of this opportune political moment, the Democrats must build a bigger tent and call in voters they have previously lost. However, this effort cannot be done superficially, and it will require both a messaging shift and a clear commitment to investing in previously ignored regions–especially the South. As the Democrats move toward the 2028 presidential election, it is imperative that they maintain this momentum and carefully choose a unifying candidate to represent the party. Perhaps a Southern or Midwestern down-to-earth figure would fit the bill, as working across the aisle will prove

more critical now than ever. Overall, the road to victory will not be easy, but if Democrats show a unified commitment to connecting with the working class and Southern voters, it seems the country may rally behind them.

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