To: Interested Parties Fr: New Deal Strategies, Justice Democrats, Sunrise Movement, Data for Progress Re: What went wrong for Congressional Democrats in 2020 Dt: November 10, 2020

### Overview

Last week's election was a split-screen: while we are all happy about President-elect Joe Biden's resounding defeat of Donald Trump, Democrats are right to be concerned about their underperformance down the ballot. Based on current projections, Biden's margin of victory will come close to President Barack Obama's margin in 2012. But in 2012, House Democrats gained 8 seats, while in 2020 they are on track to lose at least that many.

The <u>economy</u> was voters' top concern in this election. When Democratic leaders make unforced errors like showing off two sub-zero <u>freezers</u> full of ice cream on national television or cozy up with Wall Street executives and corporate lobbyists while Trump tells voters we are the party of the swamp, it is not surprising that we lose. We need a new generation of leadership grounded in a multiracial, working class experience and background.

As we speak, Congressional Democrats are debating why they underperformed and some have been quick to blame progressives. There is no denying Republicans levied salient rhetorical attacks against Democrats, but these will continue to happen as they do every cycle. We cannot let Republican narratives drive our party away from Democrats' core base of support: young people, Black, Brown, working class, and social movements who are the present and future of the party. The question is: how are we going to prepare?

While the answer is not simple, this memo attempts to lay out some fundamental truths Democratic Party leadership must face and lessons to be learned if they truly want a united party that can overcome the divide-and-conquer tactics of FOX News and the GOP to win elections. If we abandon our core progressive base and agenda, Democrats will not hold onto the House majority in the 2022 midterms and will have no hope of gaining grounds in the Senate.

### Invest in the base

Historic voter turnout by Black voters, Native voters, Latino voters, and young voters ensured victory for President-elect Biden and Vice-President elect Harris. Scapegoating progressives and Black activists for their demands and messaging is not the lesson to be learned here. It was their organizing efforts, energy and calls for change needed in their communities that drove up voter turnout.

Democratic leadership has failed over the years to make sustained investments in field organizing, forcing grassroots organizations to carry the bulk of organizing work in key battleground states on their own. In <u>Arizona</u> it was Latino organizers over the past decade, led by groups like Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA), who delivered record Latino turnout and won statewide for the first time in over 20 years with <u>over</u> 70% of voting Latinos choosing Biden. In Georgia, after being told it could never become a swing state, it was progressive Black-led organizations like Black Voters Matter, New Georgia Project

and Fair Fight Action who <u>registered</u> over 800,000 new voters, almost 50% of them under 30 and people of color since 2018 to prepare for this moment. And progressive allies like Way to Win who put \$100 million in resources behind these strategies in Arizona, Georgia, and 10 other states.

At the Congressional level, progressives never stopped knocking doors. For example, as the *Washington Post* reported on Congresswoman Ilhan Omar's efforts to turn out voters in her Minnesota district: "Since the start of early voting in September, her campaign has been working to turn out every potential voter, including tens of thousands who sat out the 2016 election. The towns and counties of the Iron Range cast 180,023 votes four years ago; Hennepin County, home to Minneapolis, cast 679,977 votes. While the Biden-Harris campaign resisted in-person canvassing, Omar's campaign kept doing it, hiring dozens of people to knock on doors and pull out votes." Trump and the GOP really thought they could win Minnesota - what they didn't count on was 88% turnout in Ilhan's district with over 400,000 votes. The same was true of Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib's campaign and district in Michigan, where she focused heavily on engaging low-propensity voters and folks who didn't turn out in 2016, contacting over 201,000 unique voters with information on how to vote for Joe Biden, Kamala Harris and Gary Peters, boosting turnout in Detroit and Wayne County, and helping deliver victory for the Democrats.

Despite an obvious preference by Democratic leadership to focus on the suburbs and former Republican voters rather than working-class communities of color, progressives like Stacey Abrams, Rep. Omar and Rep. Rashida Tlaib are showing us - through turnout results in their states and cities - where Democrats must invest to build the party.

Before Congressional Democrats place more blame, we suggest conducting campaign post-mortems, which should include an analysis of each campaign and decisions that were made regarding the allocation of resources, the consultants and pollsters hired, and the decision to under-invest in field and digital programs. Republicans will always sling mud, spread lies and call Democrats names - that is not within our control. But what we can control is defining ourselves better and refusing to keep doing the same things that have failed.

## **Support Black Lives Matter**

Two months ago, progressive strategists Ian Haney López, law professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and Tory Gavito, President of Way to Win, publicly and privately <u>warned</u> Democrats that Trump's racist appeals against immigrants and Black Lives Matter polled effectively with a fair number of both African American and Latino voters — but they also demonstrated that a progressive message framing racism as a divide-and-conquer class weapon polled even more effectively. According to their research, "a majority across the groups we surveyed did not repudiate Trump-style rhetoric as obviously racist and divisive, but instead agreed with it," they wrote in the *New York Times*. But, they continued, "There's a winning message Mr. Biden and his party can deliver that resonates with most Hispanics no matter how they conceptualize the group's racial identity... The key is to link racism and class conflict."

Over the last half-century, Republicans have harnessed strategic racism to divide the electorate. Too often Democrats shy away from conversations about race and keep issues of economic justice and racial justice in separate siloes. Data has consistently shown that an explicit multiracial, populist message mobilizes and persuades voters.

Republican attacks levied at Democrats this cycle based on terms like "defund the police" or "socialism" have become scapegoats for Representatives like Abigail Spanberger, Conor Lamb, and other senior Democrats. Not a single Democrat — progressive or otherwise — argued that Democrats should run primarily on these themes. Moreover, these attacks will never go away, nor will demands for reform from social movements. The attacks are designed to stoke racial resentment, which is core to the GOP's election strategy. Our party should not feed into it.

We remember how controversial the simple statement "Black Lives Matter" was in 2014. In 2016 and 2018, Democrats were nervous about being too closely associated with Colin Kaepernick and Black athletes kneeling during the national anthem. The latest choice for Democrats to locate our fear and blame is the slogan from many Black and young activists who marched the streets this summer: "Defund The Police." Conservative Democrats may change the terms and people we blame and fear year-by-year, but Democrats must take on the Republican Party's divide-and-conquer racism head-on and not demobilize our own base.

This election, the Black youth leading the Black Lives Matter movement have turned their power in the streets into votes and have helped secure Biden's victory in key cities. As the country faced one of its darkest and ugliest realites this summer, the continued violence and murder of Black people by the police, Black-led youth orgnizations in Minnesota, Georgia, and Wisconsin took to the streets to change a system that continues to say Black lives don't matter. This sparked a national reckoning and conversation about what it means to reimagine public safety and the allocation of resources. Solidarity marches and protests sprang up in big cities and <u>rural</u> small towns. According to an analysis by Tom Bonier of TargetSmart, the protests drove up <u>voter registration</u>, with the earliest signs coming from Georgia, and helped close the enthusiasm gap that plagued Biden into the summer.

Fast forward to election day: Black voters matched and <u>exceeded</u> white voter participation in key cities like Philadelphia, Detroit, Milwaukee and Atlanta, which delivered the presidency to Biden. Most impressively, in Georgia, young voters skewed heavily Democratic, casting ballots for Biden about 18% more than for Trump - especially young voters of color and young Black voters, 90% of whom <u>voted</u> for Biden. If Black youth had come out in slightly lower numbers, Biden would lose the state and we would not have the opportunity we do in the Senate.

The lesson to be learned from this election cannot and should not be to lean into racist resentment politics, or back away from the social movements that pushed Democrats to power. If Democrats cower from the national conversation sparked by the Black Lives Matter movement, then the only ones left owning this space will be the GOP. The Democratic Party has long taken the base of its party, Black voters, for granted. We need a Democratic Party dedicated to economic and racial justice. And we cannot allow billionaires on FOX News to divide and conquer America. We must invest in all our workers to create good-paying jobs, safety and shared prosperity for all, not just for those on the top.

#### Run on a bold economic message

In an election where the economy was voters' top concern, many Congressional Democrats had no discernible economic message. Some focused their entire message on saying that the left is going too far

and Trump is going too far and that they want to seek "common ground." Or according to Lamb in the <u>New York Times</u>, that achieving great things is no longer possible in America. That is not a message about how to improve people's lives.

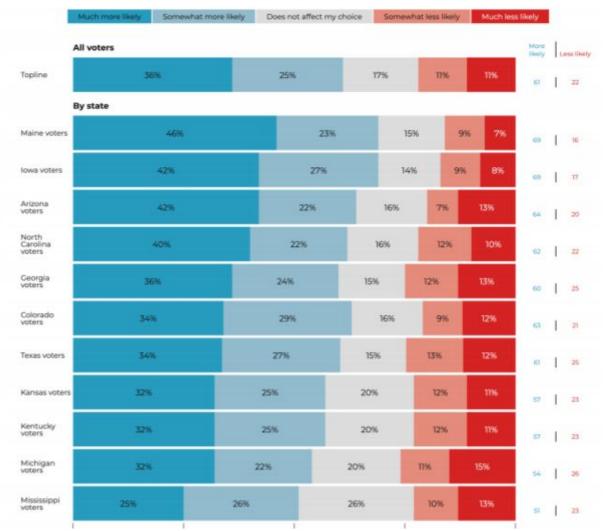
After the Democratic convention, the party's lack of an economic message was clear. As Ron Brownstein <u>observed</u>, the convention "had a conspicuous blind spot: The event did not deliver a concise critique of Trump's economic record" despite an abundance of opportunities to do so. In poll after poll, Trump led Biden on the economy. By the end, as Biden embraced larger policy ideas like a Green New Deal-style green jobs <u>proposal</u>, he got back to <u>parity</u>, with many analyses showing that this message was the most motivating for young voters, voters of color, and swing voters alike.

But while Biden was buoyed by voters' faith in his ability to handle the pandemic, that support did not extend to Congressional Democrats. They failed to fill the void with anything resembling a coherent economic message. Predictably, on election day, exit polls showed that the <u>economy</u> was voters' top issue. And predictably, down ballot Democrats paid the price for their lack of an economic message.

Whatever moderates think of progressives like Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, it is clear they have forged a far more compelling economic message than what centrists like Lamb or Spanberger have to offer. In a country where 60 percent of registered voters and 66 percent of independents think the country is <u>rigged</u> to benefit the wealthy and the powerful, a narrative that centers corporate power and the ultra wealthy as barriers to progress on the economy is compelling across the political spectrum.

# Voters In Key States Are More Likely To Vote For A Candidate Who Supports A Wealth Tax

Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for a Senate candidate who supports the following proposals: -- Put a 2% tax on the assets of individuals with a net worth of over \$50 million



### Progressives held their own in swing and R+ districts

Based on election results, there is simply no evidence that progressive Democrats did worse than their more moderate counterparts in swing and R+ districts. Using ideology scores from GovTrack.us and looking at House districts rated swing or Republican-leaning:

- Four of the six House Democrats who lost rank among the ten most conservative Democrats in the House (Peterson, Brindisi, Cunningham, Horn). All six rank among the 22 most conservative.
- Of the 11 most liberal candidates in these swing districts, at least nine are expected to win (all 11 still could). Of the 11 most conservative, only five (maybe six) are expected to win.
- The swing district Democrats who saw the biggest dropoff from their 2018 results were more conservative than those who outperformed their 2018 results. At this writing, nine House Democratic candidates outperformed their 2018 results. All nine have an average ideology

score of 0.34 (more progressive). Meanwhile, the nine Democrats who saw the biggest dropoff from their 2018 margins have an average ideology score of 0.41 (more conservative).

- Of all Democrats running in R+3 districts, the two who received the highest vote share were the most liberal: Katie Porter and Tom Malinowski.
- All of the Democrats in swing districts who are Medicare for All co-sponsors won their re-elections, and all-but-one of the Democrats in swing districts who are Green New Deal co-sponsors won their re-elections.

## **Cookie-cutter candidates and retreads**

On the Senate side, the DSCC's track record of recruiting has-beens and cookie-cutter candidates who go on to lose winnable races continued.

To recruit Cal Cunningham, the DSCC pushed out state senator Erica Smith, a Black woman who represents a North Carolina <u>state senate district</u> that includes a "pivot county" which flipped from Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016. In addition to Smith's demonstrated ability to appeal to swing voters in North Carolina, she likely would have helped boost Black turnout across the state. Even before Cunningham's scandal, an analysis by the firm Black Futures Lab warned that Black support was lagging for him across the state.

In Georgia, the DSCC endorsed Ossoff quickly but was slow to endorse Warnock. As the *New York Times* reported, "For Mr. Warnock, that support was somewhat tardy in arriving... months passed without much investment from national Democrats... In some quarters, suspicion arose that Mr. Warnock had been recruited to help stimulate Black turnout for the benefit of other candidates."

In the last six years, winnable races that Senate Democrats lost because of poor DSCC recruiting decisions include those run by: Bruce Braley, Cal Cunningham, Katie McGinty, Deborah Ross, Ted Strickland, Patrick Murphy, and more.

### In conclusion

For Democrats to succeed, Pelosi and the rest of Congressional Democratic leadership have to be clear-eyed about their failures. Even as we celebrate President-elect Biden's historic defeat of Trump, they must be held responsible for these disappointing down ballot results. The path forward is clear. If Democrats are going to survive the 2022 midterms and gaining grounds in the Senate, they must:

- 1. **Invest in organizing the base.** The much-vaunted "Reid machine" in Nevada, which was delivered again in 2020, does not have some special secret sauce. It is simply the result of years of sustained investment in local infrastructure, including organized labor and allied progressive organizations. This is the model. It is not flashy, but it works.
- 2. **Connect economic justice to racial justice.** Over the last half-century, Republicans have harnessed powerful racial appeals to divide the electorate. The lesson to be learned from this election cannot and should not be to lean into racist resentment politics. Too often Democrats keep issues of economic justice and racial justice in separate siloes. <u>Data has shown</u> that an

explicit multiracial, populist message mobilizes and persuades voters. We need a Democratic Party dedicated to economic and racial justice and that names the Republican Party's racism as a class weapon.

3. **Drive an economic message that connects with all working people.** Whatever moderate Democrats think of Sanders and Warren, the unavoidable reality is that they have provided Democrats with a profoundly compelling economic message. In a country where 60 percent of registered voters and 66 percent of independents think the country is <u>rigged</u> to benefit the wealthy and the powerful, a narrative that centers corporate power and the ultra wealthy as barriers to progress on the economy is compelling across the political spectrum. Democrats should adopt it.