

The Newport Beach Women's Democratic Club

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*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world;
Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has. -- Margaret Mead*

Agenda for Tuesday, October 20, 2015

Newport Beach Yacht Club
1099 Bayside Drive (next to the Balboa Island bridge)
Newport Beach, California
(Valet Parking)

5:30: Networking: Upstairs on the Deck (No Host Bar; Taco Tuesday Buffet is \$20, no obligation)

6:15: Welcome from President Jean Ardell: Downstairs

Paula Clarkson and Debra Curry: Women and Our Money

7:15: **Business Meeting**

Minutes and Financial Report: Call for approval if no changes

President's Report: Jean Ardell: Introduction of Guests and New Members;
Need for a Recording Secretary.... Upcoming November Candidates Panel

Update on The Perfect Photo of Newport Beach for consideration for use in all NBWDC branding: Karen Tringali

Saboohi Currim kindly forwarded the thought-provoking article below, which is well worth reading. At next month's candidates' forum, we'll likely be discussing some of the issues it raises.

From *Vox: Policy & Politics*: "Democrats are in denial. Their party is actually in deep trouble" (Updated by [Matthew Yglesias](#) on October 19, 2015, 7:00 a.m. ET [@mattyglesias](#) matt@vox.com)

The Democratic Party is in much greater peril than its leaders or supporters recognize, and it has no plan to save itself.

Yes, Barack Obama is taking a victory lap in his seventh year in office. Yes, Republicans can't find a credible candidate to so much as run for speaker of the House. Yes, the GOP presidential field is led by a megalomaniacal reality TV star. All this is true — but rather than lay the foundation for enduring Democratic success, all it's done is breed a wrongheaded atmosphere of complacency.

Related [The Republican Party doesn't want to believe its voters agree with Trump. But they do.](#)

The presidency is extremely important, of course. But there are also thousands of critically important offices all the way down the ballot. And the vast majority — 70 percent of state legislatures, more than 60 percent of governors, 55 percent of attorneys general and secretaries of state — are in Republican hands. And, of course, Republicans control both chambers of Congress. Indeed, even the House infighting reflects, in some ways, the health of the GOP coalition. Republicans are confident they won't lose power in the House and are hungry for a vigorous argument about how best to use the power they have.

Not only have Republicans won most elections, but they have a perfectly reasonable plan for trying to recapture the White House. But Democrats have nothing at all in the works to redress their crippling weakness down the ballot. Democrats aren't even talking about how to improve on their weak points, because by and large they don't even admit that they exist. Instead, the party is focused on a competition between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton over whether they should go a little bit to Obama's left or a lot to his left, options that are unlikely to help Democrats down-ballot in the face of an unfriendly House map and a more conservative midterm electorate. The GOP might be in chaos, but Democrats are in a torpor.

Democrats list their biggest enemies

Democrats have been obliterated at the state level

The worst part of the problem for the Democratic Party is in races that are, collectively, the most important: state government.

Elections for state legislature rarely make the national news, but they are the fundamental building blocks of American politics. Since they run the redistricting process for the US House of Representatives *and* for themselves, they are where the greatest level of electoral entrenchment is possible.

And in the wake of the 2014 midterms, Republicans have overwhelming dominance of America's state legislatures.

In what Democrats should take as a further bleak sign, four of the 11 states where they control both houses of the state legislature — Maryland, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Illinois — have a Republican governor. This leaves just seven states under unified Democratic Party control.

Republicans have unified control of 25 states. Along with the usual set of tax cuts for high-income individuals and business-friendly regulations, the result has been:

- An unprecedented wave of [restrictions on abortion rights](#)
- The spread of union-hostile "[right to work](#)" laws into the Great Lakes states
- New [curbs on voting rights](#), to further tilt the electorate in a richer, whiter, older direction
- Large-scale layoffs of teachers and other public sector workers who are likely to support Democrats

Admittedly, one of the Democrats' seven states is California, which contains more than 10 percent of the nation's total population. But Texas and Florida combine for more people than the Golden State, and the GOP also dominates Ohio, Georgia, and North Carolina — all of which are among the 10 largest states by population. Democrats' largest non-

California bastion of unified control is Oregon, home to only about one percent of the American people.*

As of 2012 or so, Democrats thought they had a solution to this. Hard-right GOP governors in places like Wisconsin and Florida had become unpopular and were clearly overreaching — reading a wave driven by the poor economy in 2010 as an ideological mandate for sweeping conservative policy change. And that worked in Pennsylvania's 2014 gubernatorial election — Tom Wolf rode a backlash against then-Gov. Tom Corbett's hard-right policies to victory. But Scott Walker, Rick Scott, Rick Snyder, and even Maine's Paul LePage were all reelected. And while the old plan didn't pan out, no new one has risen to take its place.

The GOP is flexible

Liberals accustomed to chuckling over the ideological rigor of the House GOP caucus won't want to hear this, but one of the foundations of the GOP's broad national success is a reasonable degree of ideological flexibility.

Essentially every state on the map contains overlapping circles of rich people who don't want to pay taxes and business owners who don't want to comply with labor, public health, and environmental regulations. In states like Texas or South Carolina, where this agenda nicely complements a robust social conservatism, the GOP offers that up and wins with it. But in a Maryland or a New Jersey, the party of business manages to throw up candidates who either lack hard-edged socially conservative views or else successfully downplay them as irrelevant in the context of blue-state governance.

Democrats, of course, are conceptually aware of the possibility of nominating unusually conservative candidates to run in unusually conservative states. But there is a fundamental mismatch. No US state is so left-wing as to have created an environment in which business interests are economically or politically irrelevant. Vermont is not North Korea, in other words.

But there are *many* states in which labor unions are neither large nor powerful and non-labor national progressive donor networks are inherently populated by relatively affluent people who tend to be emotionally driven by progressive commitments on social or environmental issues. This is why an impassioned defense of the legality of late-term abortions could make Wendy Davis a viral sensation, a national media star, and someone capable of activating the kind of donor and volunteer networks needed to mount a statewide campaign. Unfortunately for Democrats, however, this is precisely the wrong issue profile to try to win statewide elections in conservative states.

Republicans have a plan

Any serious article about the prospects for Democratic Party policymaking in 2017 starts with the premise that Republicans will continue to hold a majority in the US House of Representatives. This presumption is built on four premises:

1. The natural distribution of population in the United States tends to lead the average House district to be more GOP-friendly than the overall population.
2. GOP control of most state legislatures lets Republicans draw boundaries in a way that is even more GOP-friendly than the natural population distribution would suggest.
3. Incumbents have large advantages in House elections, and most incumbents are Republicans.
4. So-called "wave" elections in which tons of incumbents lose are typically driven by a backlash against the incumbent president. Since the incumbent president is a Democrat, Democrats have no way to set up a wave.

One striking fact about this is that the presumption of continued GOP control is so solid that you don't even get pushback from House Democratic leaders when you write it down. Privately, some backbench Democrats express frustration that the leadership has no plan to try to recapture the majority. In their defense, it's not like anyone *outside* the leadership has a great plan either.

But this isn't just a parochial issue for the House Democratic caucus. It means that the party's legislative agenda is entirely dead on arrival at the federal level. And it's particularly striking that this stronghold of conservatism comes from the exact institution that so frequently generates embarrassing headlines for the GOP. House Republicans act extreme in part because they know they can get away with it.

The GOP, by contrast, has basically two perfectly plausible plans for moving its agenda forward. One is to basically change nothing and just hope for slightly better luck from the economic fundamentals or in terms of Democratic Party scandals. The other is to shift left on immigration and gain some Latino votes while retaining the core of the party's commitments. Neither of these plans is exactly brilliant, innovative, or foolproof. But neither one is crazy. Even if you believe that Democrats have obtained a structural advantage in presidential elections, it's clearly not an enormous one. The 51 percent of the vote obtained by Barack Obama in 2012 was hardly a landslide, early head-to-head polling of 2016 indicates a close race, and there's always a chance that unexpected bad news will hit the US economy or impair our national security.

Winning a presidential election would give Republicans the *overwhelming* preponderance of political power in the United States — a level of dominance not achieved since the Democrats during the Great Depression, but with a much more ideologically coherent coalition. Nothing lasts forever in American politics, but a hyper-empowered conservative movement would have a significant ability to entrench its position by passing a national right-to-work law and further altering campaign finance rules beyond the *Citizens United* status quo.

VIDEO: Democrats on the biggest threat to national security

The first step for Democrats is admitting they have a problem

In some ways, the Democrats' biggest disadvantage is simply their current smugness. A party that controls such a small share of elected offices around the country is a party that should be engaged in vigorous debate about how to improve its fortunes. Much of the current Republican infighting — embarrassing and counterproductive though it may be at times — reflects the healthy impulse to recognize that the party lacks the full measure of power that it desires, and needs to argue about optimal strategies for obtaining it.

On the Democratic side, the personal political success of Barack Obama has created an atmosphere of complacency and overconfidence. If a black guy with the middle name Hussein can win the White House, the thinking seems to be, then anything is possible. Consequently, the party is marching steadily to the left on its issue positions — embracing same-sex marriage, rediscovering enthusiasm for gun control, rejecting the January 2013 income tax rate settlement as inadequate, raising its minimum wage aspirations to the \$12-to-\$15 range, abandoning the quest for a grand bargain on balancing the budget while proposing new entitlements for child care and parental leave — even though *existing* issue positions seem incompatible with a House majority or any meaningful degree of success in state politics.

Whatever you make of this agenda substantively, there's no way to actually enact it without first achieving a considerably higher level of down-ballot electoral success than Democrats currently enjoy.

But instead of a dialogue about how to obtain that success, Democrats are currently engaged in a slightly bizarre bidding war between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders to see whether Congress in 2017 will reject a legislative agenda that is *somewhat* to the left of Obama's or *drastically* to its left. The differences between them are real, of course, and at least somewhat important.

But the much more significant question facing the party isn't about the White House — it's about all the other offices in the land. The problem is that control of the presidency seems to have blinded progressive activists to the possibility of even having an argument about what to do about all of them. That will change if and when the GOP seizes the White House, too, and Democrats bottom out. But the truly striking thing is how close to bottom the party is already and how blind it seems to be to that fact.

* Correction: Earlier versions of this article said that Minnesota or Washington was the biggest non-California Democratic-controlled state, but in fact the Republicans control one legislative house in both of those states.



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