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To: Interested Parties
From: Justice Democrats, Sunrise Movement, New Deal Strategies, Data for Progress
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Re: **The Path Forward for Democrats**

President-elect Biden faces numerous unprecedented challenges, including a pandemic which has taken 250,000 lives to date, the economic fallout from the pandemic, and the climate crisis. The scope and scale of the problems do not leave any room for the Democratic Party to waste time hoping Republican leadership can be coaxed into caring about the American people. Progressives are going all-in on the Georgia Senate runoffs and will deploy all the resources at our disposal to hold Republicans accountable at all times. But one way or another, the fact is that in a narrowly-divided Congress, it will be up to the Biden Administration to use the full power of the executive branch to deliver immediate and tangible results to the working people of this country. Progressives stand ready to enthusiastically support him if he does.

In Congress, Democrats face an enormous challenge in holding the House in 2022, and must enter 2021 with a clear strategy. The status quo is a glide path to the minority, and a Republican Congress will doom any chance of progress for working people. In the past one hundred years, the president's party has lost seats in the House in [every first-term midterm](#) but three. We all want to keep the House in Democratic hands, but defying these historical trends will require bold action and a smart, strategic approach.

To have a fighting chance at holding the House in 2022, winning more seats in the Senate, and holding on to the presidency in 2024, Democrats should be guided by four strategic imperatives.

- I. **Reclaim a populist economic message.** When Democrats run on a populist economic message, they win. This is not a radical proposal: In 2012, President Obama beat Mitt Romney by running as a populist seeking to make the rich pay their fair share. But in 2020, in an election where the economy was voters' top concern, Democrats had no economic message. A strong populist message can be adopted by Democrats across the ideological spectrum while also linking economic justice to racial justice. A message framing racism as a divide-and-conquer weapon deployed by the wealthy and the powerful against working people of all races polls more effectively than race-blind messaging *and* messaging that only says "Republicans are racists."
- II. **Invest in a progressive, ground-up organizing strategy and let voters choose in primaries.** The consultant-driven, top-down model is simply not working. Democrats are strongest in states where progressives and local leaders have organized from the ground up - like Nevada, Colorado and Georgia. The President-elect and national party leaders must start to invest in local infrastructure and party building. They must also trust voters to choose the candidates, and stay out of primaries.
- III. **Don't get fooled again: Run against McConnell.** Democrats must learn from the first two years of the Obama administration, when being strung along by McConnell yielded no meaningful Republican cooperation while depressing the base and leading to electoral disaster in the 2010 midterms. McConnell has made it clear that he does not care about getting relief to the American

people, even during a global pandemic. He is only interested in amassing power through judicial appointments and leaning into destructive politics. The progressive agenda is popular, McConnell is not, and he will be the only thing blocking popular policies from passing. Rather than play on McConnell's terms, Democrats should isolate him and hold him up as the face of Republican obstruction from day one.

- IV. Biden has a mandate to govern — act like it.** Biden won a convincing victory and defeated an incumbent president, a rare accomplishment. He has a mandate, and he must act like it by wielding his power decisively. Healing the country will require taking care of the working people of this country, and not the machinations of beltway consultants, who have a vested interest in preaching the gospel of grand bargains and bipartisanship while profiting off of government dysfunction brought on by Republican obstructionism. The Biden administration and Congressional Democrats must avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. They must make progressive personnel appointments at all levels and refuse to fall into destructive austerity politics of Republicans and conservative Democrats which only benefit those at the top.

I. Reclaim a populist economic message

When Democrats run on a populist economic message, they win. This is not a radical proposition — it is what Democrats have done in their most successful recent elections.

Today, 60 percent of registered voters and 66 percent of independents think the economy is rigged to benefit the wealthy and the powerful. This finding has been consistent over the past quarter century. “The idea of taxing the rich resonates with Americans’ underlying attitudes,” Frank Newport of Gallup [wrote](#) last year. “For over a quarter of a century, Gallup research has shown that a majority of U.S. adults believe upper-income Americans pay too little in taxes.”

In the 2008 and 2012 election cycles, Democrats ran on a populist economic message. In 2008, President Obama won 365 electoral votes while Congressional Democrats won 8 Senate seats and 21 House seats. In 2012, Obama won 332 electoral votes while Democrats won 8 seats in the House and defied expectations to pick up 2 in the Senate.

Democrats today should remember that as Obama swept the rust belt in 2012 (including Ohio), he sounded like Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders. Today, Warren’s proposal for a two-cent wealth tax is popular across the political spectrum, including [with](#) 66 percent of independents and even 55 percent of Republicans. The simple fact is that a progressive, populist economic message is broadly popular and will help all Democrats succeed. While there may be reasons that party leadership refuses to take on corporations or the rich and powerful, those reasons don’t have anything to do with the concerns of the majorities of American voters.

Notably, in 2012, the centrist group Third Way [tried](#) to dissuade Obama and other Democrats from embracing populism. Thankfully, in 2012 Democrats ignored Third Way’s advice on the economy, stuck with populism, and won.

In 2020, the simple fact is that Democrats had no economic message. Driving an economic message was [not](#) a major focus of the convention. And Congressional Democrats did nothing to make up the gap. The pattern shows up in paid media. According to the digital firm Van Ness Creative Strategies:

- *Of the 23,000 Facebook ads Sara Gideon ran this cycle, zero included written copy with the words “jobs” or “economy.”*

- *In North Carolina: Cunningham used the word “economy” zero times in Facebook ad copy in the month leading up to the election — while running over 700 direct donate ads in-state, despite having a robust national fundraising apparatus. Note: As of 11/20, incumbent D Governor Roy Cooper got 264,829 more votes than Cunningham.*
- *Further, Cal Cunningham had [one](#) piece of Facebook ad copy (paired with 4 different graphics) that used the word “jobs” (and it was in the context of an in-state direct donate ad!).*
- *In key Senate races, ads that did mention jobs or the economy tended to bury that messaging in fundraising campaigns, which are generally targeted to strong partisan voters, already squarely with Democrats. This was a frequent practice of Democratic candidates across competitive Senate and House races.*

Party leadership must learn from the 2020 election cycle and craft a popular economic agenda that resonates with workers across the country.

A populist message connects economic justice to racial justice

Too often, Democrats keep issues of economic justice and racial justice in separate siloes. But nonwhite voters of all income levels, and working class Americans of all races, share a common enemy: corporate power and the super rich. In addition to being highly effective overall, a populist message gives Democrats a way to link economic justice to racial justice in a persuasive, unifying appeal.

Republicans understand the power of multiracial populism and are jumping on it. Recently, Senator Marco Rubio [declared](#) that “the future of the [GOP] is based on a multiethnic, multiracial, working-class coalition.” Trump’s gains with Latino and Black voters show that Rubio might be right — Republicans will claim multiracial populism if Democrats let them.

Progressive strategists saw Trump’s gains with nonwhite voters coming. In September, Democratic strategists presciently [warned](#) that Trump’s racist appeals against immigrants and Black Lives Matter polled effectively with a fair number of both African American and Latino voters. This warning was born out by the election results, as Trump increased his vote share with both groups. However, the same strategists explained, a message framing racism as a divide-and-conquer weapon deployed by the wealthy and the powerful against working people of all races polled even more effectively. Over the last half-century, Republicans have harnessed powerful racist appeals to divide the electorate.

Other recent [studies](#) support these findings. A 2018 [study](#) by Demos demonstrated that a message of unity linking racism to populism is more effective than colorblind populist narratives. For America “to be a place of freedom for all, we cannot let the greedy few and the politicians they pay for divide us against each other based on what someone looks like, where they come from, or how much money they have,” the most effective narrative in Demos’ research states. “Together, we can make this a place where freedom is for everyone, no exceptions.”

II. Invest in a progressive, ground-up organizing strategy and let voters choose in primaries.

Democrats can’t keep chasing one-off campaign cycles, haphazardly investing in some toss-up races and hoping for the best. We have to start investing in ground-up organizing and connecting communities with ways to engage in party politics beyond GOTV or being a [political hobbyist](#). The national party must invest in long-term and sustained party building. As recently highlighted in the [Washington Post](#), Democrats

have a long history of failing to engage their grass-roots supporters beyond a presidential year, while Republicans tend to invest in the continued mobilization of their voters by funding local and state party organizations.

In states where progressives and local leaders have invested in organizing from the ground up for years – like Nevada, Colorado, Arizona and Georgia, the results speak for themselves. As Senator Doug Jones [said](#), “Stacey Abrams’ work in Georgia should be a model for the party. The DSCC and DCCC spend too much time investing in candidates and not the electorate. They don’t invest in House districts, they don’t invest in states.”

The national party committees must start inviting local and state grassroots organizations to help shape the strategy and the allocation of resources to rebuild party infrastructure in key states. This is even more important in light of the fact that Democrats failed to win control of [numerous state](#) legislatures during a critical redistricting year. We have to invest in the health of the party down ballot to fight the continuous Republican effort to [disenfranchise](#) Black, Indigenous, brown, poor, and young voters and erode the health of our democracy.

Let the voters choose in primaries

In addition to centering individual candidates instead of party infrastructure, the national campaign committees continuously — and wrongly — assume they know what makes a candidate viable. This cycle has made it painfully clear that [fundraising prowess](#) alone does not guarantee success, nor are DC-based consultants with no familiarity of a district beyond data points on a spreadsheet best equipped to decide who is a viable candidate and who is not. The national party mold of the “perfect” candidate often does not align with the idiosyncrasies of any given community. This is why it is so important the national party stop meddling with open seat primaries, as it has in the [past](#). We are glad that Senators in the Democratic Caucus are beginning to speak out and [make this case to Schumer](#).

III. Get on offense: Run against McConnell

Regardless of the political constraints, what matters to the American people are results. They overwhelmingly voted for President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris because they trusted them to make their lives better. Republicans have made it clear time and time again that they are not interested in [governance](#) or [serving](#) their constituents. The only question is whether Democrats spend the next two years playing into Republicans’ hands by feeding the pretense that McConnell is seeking to negotiate in good faith. Instead, Democrats should hold Republicans up as the obstructionists they are, rather than legitimize them as good-faith negotiators.

McConnell has a tried and true playbook: he holds out the promise of bipartisanship, then yanks it away after Democrats have wasted enormous amounts of time and political capital chasing the mirage. He has been explicit about his strategy. “When you hang the ‘bipartisan’ tag on something, the perception is that differences have been worked out, and there’s a broad agreement that that’s the way forward,” he [said](#), explaining that this is why on Obamacare, he “worked very hard to keep our fingerprints off of these proposals.”

Instead of letting McConnell play his game, Democrats must run against him from day one. This aggressive approach reflects the political realities of our time. American politics today is defined by polarization and negative partisanship. Republicans have perfected exploiting that polarization to amass more power and further enshrine minority rule. McConnell is deeply [unpopular](#) and has [delegitimized](#) the Senate and the Supreme Court through his reckless power grabs. He is not a guardian of decorum or civility and it’s time Democrats end the illusion that he is someone who will be moved to do what is right.

IV. Biden has a mandate to govern — act like it

Facing historic levels of voter suppression and a president willing to deploy all of the power at his disposal to undermine the election, Biden won a convincing victory. Incumbent presidents are rarely defeated, and doing so is a monumental accomplishment. Biden has a mandate, and he must act like it by wielding his power decisively. Healing the country will require taking care of the working people of this country, and not the machinations of beltway consultants, who have a vested interest in preaching the gospel of bipartisanship while profiting off of government dysfunction brought on by Republican obstructionism. Republicans are already making a mockery of it by questioning Biden's legitimacy (McConnell), pressuring states to throw out legal ballots (Graham) and calling for investigations into the Biden family (Issa).

The Biden administration and Congressional Democrats must avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. As the previous section outlined, that starts with running against McConnell instead of validating him. It also means making progressive personnel appointments and refusing to fall into destructive austerity politics that only benefit the wealthy.

Democrats didn't turn out for Biden and defeat Trump by millions of votes to then turn around and allow McConnell to rob them of their ability to govern. McConnell has only one goal: to grow his power. He will do whatever he can to make Biden and Congressional Democrats cut painful deals that would be toxic to the very voters Democrats desperately need to turn out in 2022. Pursuing piecemeal deals with McConnell and allowing him to be a co-governing partner virtually guarantees a depressed Democratic base in the 2022 midterms.

Pick progressive decision-makers at all levels

As Biden picks his team, progressives will urge him to appoint bold progressive decision-makers at all levels, not just cabinet-level nominees. The personnel Biden selects at positions such as OMB and OIRA will be just as influential, and maybe more so, than many cabinet members. Progressives will focus on these picks as much as the higher-profile ones.

Reject austerity politics

Austerity politics are a trap for Democrats and destructive for the American people. To see this, just look at Bowles-Simpson, which proved to be a massive mistake on both political and policy grounds. By trying to play on Republicans' deficit-cutting turf, Obama gained no credit politically. He also failed to secure Republican cooperation on policy issues. Meanwhile, Bowles-Simpson strengthened Republicans' hand in every subsequent big-ticket policy negotiation, while significantly undermining Democrats. From the debt ceiling to the fiscal cliff and through every major policy fight of the Obama administration, Republicans were able to put massive spending cuts on the table and validate their demands by saying they came from the bipartisan Bowles-Simpson commission, appointed by Obama himself. Besides the political failure, if these cuts had gone through they would have been devastating to the American people. Democrats must learn to fight for the people who elected them instead of chasing the ghost of bipartisan "common sense" solutions that only make sense to the wealthy and the powerful.

In Congress, Democrats can show they have wised up by not reinstating the PayGo rule. PayGo is a relic of outdated austerity politics and serves no productive purpose for Democrats. This rule [hamstrings legislation](#) for no other purpose but to earn brownie points that only Democrats seem to care about and which gain Democrats nothing in terms of actual political capital. It is time for Democrats to show their

willingness to fight for the people who voted for them by delivering tangible results which means freeing themselves from self-imposed restrictions.

Use every tool of the federal government to act on the greatest crises of our time

Biden has said he plans to use his mandate to deliver on the greatest crises of our time: public health, climate change, systemic racism, and the economy. The joint task force between Biden and Sanders after the 2020 Democratic primaries secured key commitments from Biden on climate. Biden must deliver on agreements such as creating an Office of Climate Mobilization and beginning to develop stronger vehicle efficiency standards on his first day in the Oval Office. Biden can also use executive power in the Treasury to shift financial flows from fossil fuels to climate solutions and create a green development bank. He can create 100% clean energy and efficiency standards for power, vehicles, and buildings, and direct his cabinet to create millions of jobs by beginning to transition all federal buildings and vehicles toward 100% clean energy.

Conclusion

The above recommendations are by no means a comprehensive guide, but they serve to move the party forward and prepare it to build back better. Whether Democrats accept it or not, the approaches of past eras are not going to meet the realities of 2020 and beyond. The approach laid out in this memo provides the best hope of preventing Republicans from taking back the House in 2022 and locking Democrats out of power in 2024.

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