



The Democratic Party in Crisis

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Task force for preparation of “Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis”:

Karen Bernal, Pia Gallegos, Sam McCann, Norman Solomon

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Introduction to “Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis”

After a train wreck, investigators scrutinize the causes. A rigorous inquiry -- not content to merely point fingers at external forces -- takes an unflinching look at what occurred. Bringing to light the preventable problems is central to making significant improvements for the future. With such an approach, we can and must learn from electoral tragedy by evaluating the policies, actions and priorities of the Democratic Party.

In the wake of the November 2016 election, the Democratic National Committee chose not to do a public “autopsy.” Overall, the party’s national leadership has shown scant interest in addressing many of the key factors that led to electoral disaster. Instead, the main emphasis has been on matters that the Democratic Party and its presidential nominee had little or no control over -- an approach that largely obscures the party’s role in its own defeat.

Rather than addressing topics beyond the control of the Democratic Party (whether FBI Director Comey, Russia, misogyny of some voters, etc.), this Autopsy focuses on some key factors that have been significantly under the party’s control. While in no way attempting or claiming to be comprehensive, this report focuses on some of our party’s most crucial flaws, fissures and opportunities.

During the 2016 general election, the party experienced a falloff of voter turnout and support among people of color, the young and the working class. Much of our report concentrates on assessing the Democratic Party’s approach to those demographic groups.

This independent report aims to serve as a nationwide discussion paper and stimulus for transformational action. The goal is clarity for the challenges ahead to end Republican rule and gain lasting momentum for progressive change.

The task force of political organizers and research analysts who conducted this Autopsy was coordinated by longtime Democratic activist Karen Bernal, who chairs one of the largest caucuses in the California Democratic Party, the Progressive Caucus, and by RootsAction.org co-founder Norman Solomon, a Democratic National Convention delegate in 2008 and 2016 who was the national coordinator of the independent Bernie Delegates Network.

Executive Summary

Sample of Findings

The Party's Base

- Aggregated data and analysis show that policies, operations and campaign priorities of the national Democratic Party undermined support and turnout from its base in the 2016 general election. Since then, the Democratic leadership has done little to indicate that it is heeding key lessons from the 2016 disaster.
- The Democratic National Committee and the party's congressional leadership remain bent on prioritizing the chase for elusive Republican voters over the Democratic base: especially people of color, young people and working-class voters overall.
- After suffering from a falloff of turnout among people of color in the 2016 general election, the party appears to be losing ground with its most reliable voting bloc, African-American women. "The Democratic Party has experienced an 11 percent drop in support from black women according to one [survey](#), while the percentage of black women who said neither party represents them went from 13 percent in 2016 to 21 percent in 2017."
- One of the large groups with a voter-turnout issue is young people, "who encounter a toxic combination of a depressed economic reality, GOP efforts at voter suppression, and anemic messaging on the part of Democrats."
- "Emerging sectors of the electorate are compelling the Democratic Party to come to terms with adamant grassroots rejection of economic injustice, institutionalized racism, gender inequality, environmental destruction and corporate domination. Siding with the people who constitute the base isn't truly possible when party leaders seem to be afraid of them."
- The DNC has refused to renounce, or commit to end, its undemocratic practices during the 2016 primary campaign that caused so much discord and distrust from many party activists and voters among core constituencies.
- Working to defeat restrictions on voting rights is of enormous importance. Yet the Democratic National Committee failed to make such work a DNC staffing priority.

Populism and Party Decline

- The Democratic Party's claims of fighting for "working families" have been undermined by its refusal to directly challenge corporate power, enabling Trump to masquerade as a champion of the people. "Democrats will not win if they continue to bring a wonk knife to a populist gunfight. Nor can Democratic leaders and operatives be seen as real allies of the working class if they're afraid to alienate big funders or to harm future job or consulting prospects."
- "Since Obama's victory in 2008, the Democratic Party has lost control of both houses of Congress and more than 1,000 state legislative seats. The GOP now controls the governorship as well as the entire legislature in 26 states, while Democrats exercise such control in only six states.... Despite this Democratic decline, bold proposals with the national party's imprint are scarce."
- "After a decade and a half of nonstop warfare, research data from voting patterns suggest that the Clinton campaign's hawkish stance was a [political detriment](#) in working-class communities hard-hit by American casualties from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan."
- "Operating from a place of defensiveness and denial will not turn the party around. Neither will status quo methodology."

Sample of Recommendations

Party Operations and Outreach

- The Democratic National Committee must make up for lost time by accelerating its very recent gear-up of staffing to fight against the multi-front assaults on voting rights that include voter ID laws, purges of voter rolls and intimidation tactics.
- The Democratic National Committee should commit itself to scrupulously adhering to its Charter, which requires the DNC to be evenhanded in the presidential nominating process.
- Because "the superdelegate system, by its very nature, undermines the vital precept of one person, one vote," the voting power of all superdelegates to the Democratic National Convention must end.
- "Social movements cannot be understood as tools to get Democrats elected. The ebb and flow of social movements offer a rising tide in their own right that along the way can lift

Democratic Party candidates -- if the party is able to embrace the broad popular sentiment that the movements embody.”

- “This is about more than just increasing voter turnout. It is about *energizing* as well as expanding the base of the party. To do this we must aggressively pursue two tracks: fighting right-wing efforts to rig the political system, and giving people who can vote a truly compelling reason to do so.”
- “The enduring point of community outreach is to build an ongoing relationship that aims for the party to become part of the fabric of everyday life. It means acknowledging the validity and power of people-driven movements as well as recognizing and supporting authentic progressive community leaders. It means focusing on how the party can best serve communities, not the other way around. Most of all, it means persisting with such engagement on an ongoing basis, not just at election time.”

Party Policies and Programs

- The party should avidly promote inspiring programs such as single-payer Medicare for all, free public college tuition, economic security, infrastructure and green jobs initiatives, and tackling the climate crisis.
- While the Democratic Party fights for an agenda to benefit all Americans, the party must develop new policies and strategies for more substantial engagement with people of color -- directly addressing realities of their lives that include disproportionately high rates of poverty and ongoing vulnerability to a racist criminal justice system.
- With its policies and programs, not just its public statements, the Democratic Party must emphasize that “in the real world, the well-being of women is indivisible from their economic circumstances and security.” To truly advance gender equality, the party needs to fight for the economic rights of all women.
- The Democratic Party should end its neglect of rural voters, a process that must include aligning the party with the interests of farming families and others who live in the countryside rather than with Big Agriculture and monopolies.
- “While the short-term prospects for meaningful federal action on climate are exceedingly bleak, state-level initiatives are important and attainable. Meanwhile, it’s crucial that the Democratic Party stop confining its climate agenda to inadequate steps that are palatable to Big Oil and mega-players on Wall Street.”

- “What must now take place includes honest self-reflection and confronting a hard truth: that many view the party as often in service to a rapacious oligarchy and increasingly out of touch with people in its own base.” The Democratic Party should disentangle itself -- ideologically and financially -- from Wall Street, the military-industrial complex and other corporate interests that put profits ahead of public needs.
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1. Corporate Power and the Party

Corporate domination over the party’s agenda -- and, perhaps more importantly, the perception of corporate control over the party’s agenda -- rendered the Democrats’ messaging on economic issues ideologically rudderless and resulted in a decline in support among working-class people across racial lines.

First, it’s important to debunk some facile media myths about Donald Trump and “the working class.” The bulk of Trump’s support is still from well-off whites who have always composed the core of the Republican Party funding and much of its voting base, and one should work hard to not feed into the easy media trope that Trump is overwhelmingly popular among “blue collar” or working-class voters. Nor should one fall into the trap (as some [pundits have](#)) of using “working class” and “white working class” interchangeably. Aside from erasing working people of color, this trap overlooks the fact that Hillary Clinton in fact [won the working class](#) across races, if one uses those making less than \$50,000 a year as a proxy for the label.

What did happen -- and what ought to deeply worry Democrats moving forward -- is the massive swing of white working-class voters from Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016 and the depressed turnout of black and Latino voters for Clinton relative to 2012 Obama. There was a [16-point swing](#) across all races (though this is overwhelmingly due to whites) for those making less than \$30,000 from the D to R column and a six-point swing for those making between \$30,000 and \$50,000. Turnout among African Americans and Latinos was also far lower than many expected, which represents an ominous trend for the party moving forward. To put it in marketing terms: the Democratic Party is failing, on a systemic level, to inspire, bring out, and get a sufficient majority of the votes of the working class.

The Democratic Party, as pollster Stanley Greenberg [emphasizes](#), doesn’t have a “white working-class problem” -- it has a *working-class problem*. “If there was one area where

Democratic turnout was undeniably weaker in 2016 than 2012 it was among African Americans,” Patrick Ruffini [wrote in FiveThirtyEight](#). Black turnout, especially in key swing states, was 14.1 percent less than election models predicted -- far more than the 3.2 percent decline among whites. While it’s important to note the [damaging effect](#) of Republican Party attempts at minority voter suppression through gerrymandering and voter ID laws, the Democratic Party has failed to give many of those who can vote a reason to do so.

This is animated, in part, by the perception that the party is in the pocket of the rich. A [poll](#) in spring 2017 found that two-thirds of the public sees the Democratic Party as “out of touch with the concerns of most people in the United States today.” Meanwhile, a [recent review of census data by the Washington Post](#) found that African Americans are “the only U.S. racial group earning less than they did in 2000.” The unfettered capitalist economy partly enabled by Democrats since the 1990s has devastated the working class, doubly so the black working class, and the Democratic Party’s major role in that devastation continues to have a harmful effect on party prospects.

The party has attempted to convince working-class voters that it can advance the interests of the rich and working people with equal vigor. This sleight-of-hand was more feasible pre-2008 economic crash, but it has since lost credibility as inequality grows and entire communities are gutted by free market, anti-union, anti-worker ideology and policy. The champions of the growth-raises-all-boats mythology had their chance and they failed the vast bulk of working Americans. President Obama, with his unique political skills, preempted and co-opted economic populism to some extent (though it surfaced briefly and strongly with the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011/2012), but it re-emerged with Bernie Sanders’ insurgent primary campaign. In her 2016 general election loss, Clinton was [outflanked on economic messaging](#) by Trump’s huckster appeals to anti-NAFTA and anti-free-market sentiment.

Tone-deafness on class was seen time and again in Clinton’s campaign: avoiding clear, class-based messaging and instead offering up bloodless micro-targeted policies. Clinton didn’t propose free public college as such, [but rather](#) student loan abatement for potential “entrepreneurs” and a [series of other](#) convoluted, means-tested “solutions” -- many involving GOP-like bootstrap [work requirements](#). Her messaging on health care was just as deficient. Instead of speaking of health care in simple, rights-based terms (much less embracing single-payer Medicare for all), Clinton talked of “expanding ACA” and frequently employed needless modifiers before “health care” such as “access to” and “affordable.” While she would toss out the concept of health care as a right in the occasional tweets, her speeches and online texts rarely, if ever, framed the topic that way. “If you believe,” Clinton said in her convention acceptance speech, “that every man, woman, and child in America has the right to affordable

health care, join us.” How the word “affordable” adds to that sentence -- other than rendering it rhetorically weak and corporately palatable -- is not clear.

The Clinton campaign mocked Trump for lying about his wealth, floating the idea of labeling him “Poor Donald” -- a too-cute-by-half attempt to call Trump a financial fraud. That actually backfired, making Clinton look like a rich snob and Trump like a regular guy. (It wouldn’t have seemed so glib had Clinton herself [said much about the issue](#) of poverty on the campaign trail. Instead she, like the broader Democratic leadership, relied almost exclusively on the go-to, offend-no-one label “middle class.”) Clinton [told a crowd](#) in Lake Worth, Florida that she liked “having the support of real billionaires” because “Donald gives a bad name to billionaires.” That was a deeply strange messaging choice given that [82 percent of the population think](#) the wealthy “have too much influence in Washington.” Most importantly, during the campaign Clinton -- unable to throw stones from her glass house -- virtually abandoned talking about pay-to-play big money in politics.

The surge in populism (which can be broadly defined as a dislike of “the establishment”), brought on by widening inequality and economic stagnation, will be filled by some political force or other -- either the cruel and demagogic forces of the far right and its billionaire backers, or a racially diverse and morally robust progressive vision that offers people a clear alternative to the ideological rot of Trumpism. The mainstream Democratic storyline of victims without victimizers lacks both plausibility and passion. The idea that the Democrats can somehow convince Wall Street to work on behalf of Main Street through mild chiding, rather than acting as Main Street’s champion against the wealthy, no longer resonates. We live in a time of unrest and justified cynicism towards those in power; Democrats will not win if they continue to bring a work knife to a populist gunfight. Nor can Democratic leaders and operatives be seen as real allies of the working class if they’re afraid to alienate big funders or to harm future job or consulting prospects.

On environmental matters, similar problems abound. Leading Democrats have been forthright in condemning GOP climate denial, yet most of the same Democrats routinely indulge in denial that corporate power fuels climate denial and accelerates climate damage. While scoring political points by justifiably lambasting dangerous Republican anti-science positions, most Democrats have gravitated toward proposals (like various forms of carbon trading and cap-and-trade) that cannot come close to addressing the magnitude of the climate crisis. Steps like a [carbon tax](#) -- necessary, though insufficient -- are badly needed along with imposition of [major regulatory measures](#) to drastically reduce carbon emissions. While the short-term prospects for meaningful federal action on climate are exceedingly bleak, state-level initiatives are important and attainable. Meanwhile, it’s crucial that the Democratic Party stop confining

its climate agenda to inadequate steps that are palatable to Big Oil and mega-players on Wall Street.

It's telling that during the 16 years of the Clinton and Obama presidencies, when so many U.S. jobs were "outsourced" to cheap labor countries, one is hard pressed to recall either Democratic president ever taking a single U.S. corporation to task on the issue, even rhetorically. (To chair his Jobs Council, Obama chose the CEO of outsourcing pioneer General Electric.) Such silence and/or complicity on corporate greed and irresponsibility allowed a charlatan like Trump to grandstand as the savior of jobs and working people.

Perhaps the most literal instance of the party's sense of corporate entitlement came in the summer of 2017 when the Democratic National Committee sent out fundraising mailers designed to look like [collection letters](#) to its supporters. The DNC team scrawled "FINAL NOTICE" across the envelopes and put "Finance Department" as the return address. The message it conveyed, intentionally or not, was: *you owe us*. That, not coincidentally, is a message the party leadership has been sending to core constituencies through its policies and campaign spending priorities.

Meanwhile, for the party, longtime neglect of rural America has come back to haunt. "If the Democratic Party wants to rebuild trust in rural areas -- if it wants to win back states like Wisconsin -- then it has to develop robust social policies that address rural needs," journalist Sarah Jones [observed](#) midway through 2017. Fighting for rural broadband and obtaining more funds for Federally Qualified Health Centers in underserved areas have been important efforts and deserve higher priority. Meanwhile, the party should stop elevating Big Ag allies like Tom Vilsack, the Monsanto-smitten politician who served as Agriculture Secretary in the Obama administration for eight years. "Identifying the corporate power that holds back farm communities could revive Democratic fortunes," author David Dayen [wrote](#) a few months ago. "Obviously, there are huge cultural barriers dividing Democrats from these areas, dominated by a media that paints them in the worst possible light. But the answer to that isn't to walk away from the region, or present Republican-lite 'moderates' who line up with corporate interests; it lies in showing farmers you stand with them, not the monopolies."

It must be stressed that any attempt to win over working-class white voters cannot be at the expense of a firm commitment to racial justice, LGBTQ equality or women's rights. Attempts to win over those who exited the party in 2016 must never involve racist pandering or putting off issues of social justice lest they "offend" whites. Immediately after the 2016 election, several high status pro-Democrat pundits [suggested](#) Clinton's loss was a result of a backlash to "identity politics" -- thus blaming those most vulnerable to Trump for Trump. This posits a false dichotomy between discussing economic injustice and fighting for rights unique to certain

communities. Indeed, women, trans people, Latinos, and African Americans disproportionately comprise the working class -- and issues that specifically target them are, by definition, "working class issues." Just the same, big tent goals such as higher minimum wage, single-payer health care and free public college -- issues that have huge appeal among poor whites -- will disproportionately benefit these communities.

Many party leaders have strongly advocated for women in such vital realms as reproductive rights, pay equity, protection against employment bias and equal access to public services. Yet the widening economic disparities that especially harm women -- sometimes called [the feminization of poverty](#) -- are directly related to policies that boost the power of large corporations. The corporate-friendly inclinations of the Democratic Party have ended up increasing rather than reducing those disparities, with dire consequences. As activist Carmen Rios [points out](#), "women's wages have gone stagnant, and women continue to find themselves on the bottom of every ladder, looking up through a glass ceiling." In the real world, the well-being of women is indivisible from their economic circumstances and security.

Building an intersectional coalition -- one that unites the working class across racial lines while addressing issues specific to people who are targeted based on identity -- is key to creating an electoral force that can not only win, but also overwhelm the small group of wealthy white men the GOP works to further enrich. If the Democratic Party is to become such a political force, it will require a much bolder economic agenda to directly challenge corporate power.

2. Race and the Party

Racial minorities have been [crucial](#) to the prospects of Democratic presidential candidates. During the first four elections of this century, the party nominee's share of the African-American vote averaged 91 percent. Support for the Democratic ticket among Latino voters rose to 71 percent in 2012. Common sense, especially without Obama on the ballot, should have caused the party to solidify those gains last year with outreach and policy that would engage with the base and get out the vote. Instead the party squandered its foothold among people of color.

During the 2016 campaign and since then, the Democratic Party failed to connect sufficiently with people of color. It failed to craft policies that speak to the material inequality imposed on people of color, failed to allocate sufficient resources to outreach in communities of color,

failed to cultivate grassroots organizers, and failed to directly address or challenge Republican efforts to suppress minority voters. As a result of these failures, Democrats saw dips in voter turnout and voter support among people of color -- dips that were disastrously concentrated in swing states. In short, these missteps likely cost the party the presidential election.

“For every blue-collar Democrat we lose in western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two moderate Republicans in the suburbs in Philadelphia,” Sen. Chuck Schumer declared in July 2016. “And you can repeat that in Ohio and Illinois and Wisconsin.” Schumer’s boast demands scrutiny not just because of the disastrous results in three of those four states, but because of the people it overlooked. It illustrated a fundamental assumption underpinning Democratic voter outreach: that to defeat Trump, the party could depend on white suburban voters and give short shrift to working-class voters -- including the voters of color who [form 46 percent](#) of the party’s base.

This badly flawed assumption went much deeper than an offhand remark by a leading Democrat. The Democratic spending in the 2016 election focused enormous resources on white voters to the relative neglect of people of color. Steve Phillips, founder of Democracy in Color, [noted](#): “In spring 2016, when the progressive independent expenditure groups first outlined their plans for \$200 million in spending, they did not allocate any money at all for mobilizing black voters.” While officials did spend some token funds on radio and digital outreach to black voters, major financial support for the sort of door-knocking and phone-ringing that has been crucial in countless races was limited -- this despite the fact that a [grassroots, person-to-person ground game](#) is proven to be the most effective tool in getting would-be voters to the polls.

[Inadequate](#) outreach extended to Latino voters as well. The Congressional Hispanic Caucus [critiqued](#) the Clinton campaign’s strategy, saying it did not hire enough Latino consultants who had experience working within the communities that outreach efforts were meant to target. This shortcoming should have been addressed well before the campaign ramped up. In 2014, Albert Morales, then the Hispanic Engagement Director at the Democratic National Committee, [proposed](#) a \$3 million plan aimed at raising voter turnout in Arizona, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico and Texas. Despite the meager cost, the plan was nixed. “I just asked for what I needed,” Morales said. “I ended up getting closer to \$300,000 and it all went to radio.... It was just pitiful.” (This \$300,000 for Latino outreach in those five states ended up being less than a third of [the \\$1 million](#) the [campaign-coordinating](#) Super PAC Correct the Record pledged to spend on social media accounts to counteract anti-Clinton comments on Twitter and Reddit.) The lack of funding was compounded by poorly-timed spending; the Clinton campaign [did not launch](#) a sustained Spanish-language ad campaign until September, putting her well behind the calendar successfully implemented by the Obama campaign in 2008 and 2012.

Clinton's campaign also fell short in its outreach to Native Americans. Notably, Clinton refused to condemn the Dakota Access Pipeline, despite the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's land rights and major protests [generating headlines](#) in the immediate run-up to the general election. Robert Satiacum, a member of Washington's Puyallup Tribe and a Democrat elector, [announced](#) before November 8th that he would not vote for Hillary Clinton in the Electoral College even if she won the popular vote. In his statement, he cited her poor policy and [outreach](#) to indigenous peoples.

Clinton saw some limited success in reaching people of color through outreach to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). While the Trump campaign was slow to mobilize its efforts among AAPI, Clinton's campaign established an outreach arm in [January 2016](#) and had the opposition [playing](#) catch-up.

However, the Clinton campaign's relative success with Asian Americans stands in contrast with its generally stingy spending on minority voter outreach. Rather than invest in a coalition of people of color, Democrats spent lavishly on white suburban voters, as per Schumer's formula. Advisors placed a particular emphasis on [winning over](#) 2012 Romney voters by pointing to Trump's repugnant lack of decency.

That powerful Democrats employed such a strategy is perhaps not surprising in view of their [largely white leadership](#), which has hired overwhelmingly white contractors during the past several election cycles. The party spent \$514 million on contractors during the 2010 and 2012 elections, with just [1.7 percent of that](#) going to minority contractors, by one estimate.

The Democrats' ineffective paid outreach might not have been as notable had the party run with messaging that spoke more deeply and clearly to the material needs of people of color. Communities [vote](#) for policy proposals that address the realities of their lives, and thousands of activists are at the disposal of any presidential candidate who can convincingly respond to a racist criminal justice system and extreme economic disparity.

Dominating the news in the summer of 2016 were police [slayings](#) of black men like Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. While Hillary Clinton [condemned](#) those shootings and established personal connections to family members of other victims of police killings, some black leaders [felt](#) her platform fell woefully short in addressing the underlying realities that produce state violence and impunity. Black Lives Matter activists [gathered](#) outside the national convention in July to protest those shortcomings, among them Samaria Rice, the mother of slain 12-year-old Tamir. Rice was invited to speak at the convention on Clinton's behalf, but declined. "[I want] a lot on the table, not a little bit of talk, a lot of talk about police brutality, police accountability, making new policies, taking some away, and just reforming the whole system. I think that

would make me feel better, and no candidate has [done] that for me yet,” she said in an interview with Fusion.

Focus groups conducted at the height of election season show that Rice was far from alone, and [emphasized](#) growing mistrust of the Democratic Party among young black voters. A September 2016 *New York Times* [poll](#) showed that black voters, particularly young people, viewed Hillary Clinton as part of the political establishment, remained skeptical of her past [support](#) for a criminal justice system steeped in racism, and did not believe she fully embraced black activists, including Black Lives Matter.

Clinton’s shortcomings on racial justice reached far beyond the carceral state. Efforts to separate racial injustice from the economic status quo ignore the fact that the status quo [disproportionately harms](#) people of color. For instance, the typical white family is [16 times wealthier](#) than a black one, and racism is [systematically rooted](#) in the U.S. economy. In fact, a study [predicted](#) that the median wealth of African Americans would fall to zero by 2053; another [found](#) that African Americans are the only group earning less than they did in 2000. Likewise, Native Americans continue to [suffer disproportionately](#) from the 2008 recession, and [one-in-four](#) Native Americans live in poverty. As Mike Konczal of the Roosevelt Institute [writes](#) in "Racial Justice and This Agenda," concentrated wealth puts already economically marginalized minority groups in direct harm -- and colorblind approaches to economic policy fall short. While Clinton did strongly support race-based economic policies, her plan did not offer the kind of populist redistribution package that [would have moved](#) voters hurt by the current economic system.

Aimee Allison, president of Democracy in Color, [wrote](#) in retrospect that while the Clinton campaign trumpeted the 2016 platform as “the most progressive platform in our party’s history and a declaration of how we plan to move America forward,” its promises stopped short of offering sufficient change. Allison cited the [People’s Platform](#) put forward by a coalition of groups in mid-2017, praising it as “a suite of congressional bills that address a range of issues including Medicare for all, criminal justice, immigrant rights, and taxing Wall Street.”

Through their mangled outreach efforts and limited policy, Democrats failed to build on Obama’s success in mobilizing people of color. With Obama on the ticket, black voter [turnout](#) was at 65.2 percent in 2008 and 66.6 percent in 2012, the latter figure eclipsing the white voter turnout rate. But in 2016, the black voter turnout rate dipped to its lowest levels since 2000, slightly lower than John Kerry garnered in 2004.

Latino voter numbers tell a similar story: Latinos [cast](#) ballots for Clinton at a 66 percent clip, down 5 percent from Obama’s 2012 numbers [despite](#) Clinton’s opponent [calling](#) Mexican

immigrants “rapists” and placing a border wall at the center of his platform. Clinton did gain a marginal [increase](#) among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) compared to Obama’s 2012 campaign -- 79 percent support of voters, compared to Obama’s 77 percent -- but even that success comes with a major asterisk: Trump’s support among the AAPI community grew in key battleground states like Pennsylvania and Nevada, where both campaigns concentrated their efforts among AAPI voters.

On the whole, people of color were [more likely](#) to stay at home than white voters. A dip in turnout among voters of color is not surprising, given that Obama’s campaigns had resulted in historic numbers. But that makes the Democratic strategy all the more puzzling; 2016 was the perfect time to pour resources into outreach to voters of color and solidify gains from the Obama years. Instead, the party allowed that progress to fall by the wayside.

The numbers get grimmer still when the scope is [narrowed](#) to predominantly black areas in crucial counties like Milwaukee County in Wisconsin, Wayne County in Michigan and Philadelphia County in Pennsylvania, where Clinton’s tallies plummeted compared to Obama’s in 2012. If Clinton had retained votes in those three counties alone she either would have won the states or significantly cut into Trump’s razor-thin margins of victory. The importance of minority voters grows yet more vital when considering the Republicans’ [“wildly successful”](#) voter suppression efforts. Conservative legislatures passed laws that targeted millions of people of color in Wisconsin, North Carolina and Florida -- three states Clinton lost.

One year after the election, there are scant signs that the national Democratic Party leadership has learned much from the failures of 2016. Outreach efforts since then do not indicate a solid commitment to implementing new policies or strategies for more substantial engagement with people of color. The party’s spending to fight against voter suppression laws or for automatic voter registration has been dwarfed by its quest to gain the votes of registered Republicans. Yet “the turnout of people of color and progressive whites” is crucial, Steve Phillips [persuasively argues](#), and that turnout will have a far larger impact on control of Congress than any marginal gains the Democrats achieve among Republican voters.

The hotly contested and incredibly expensive race this spring for an open congressional seat in Georgia’s Sixth District amounted to the party doubling-down on the fruitless pursuit of conservative voters. Democrats sought to flip the seat in a longtime Republican stronghold with the aptly named white-bread [“Panera theory,”](#) which holds that the path to victory for Democrats in the coming elections runs through affluent suburban white voters. Democratic nominee Jon Ossoff courted traditional Republicans believed to be dismayed or disgusted by Trump -- voters for whom decorum, not policy, was the last straw. Just as the party had in 2016, Democrats poured seemingly bottomless funds into white outreach; they [spent more money](#) on

Ossoff's campaign than on any other House race in history, pulling out all the stops for the white moderately-conservative voters they wanted to believe were finally theirs.

Ossoff lost to Republican Karen Handel despite significantly [outspending](#) her. But even before the tallies came in, [flaws](#) in the Democrat's strategy were clear. A big one was that it took voters of color for granted. Democratic pollster Cornell Belcher [lamented](#) the tactic in a conversation with the *Los Angeles Times*. "We are spending the vast majority of our dollars chasing a shrinking, increasingly resistant, mythical swing vote as opposed to trying to hold onto the majority coalition that voted for us in 2008 and 2012," he said. "I would argue that is a mistake." He noted that [more than half](#) of African Americans feel the party takes their vote for granted.

There are all too many indications that the Democratic Party leadership and their messengers do indeed feel that people of color owe their votes to the party, particularly in the age of a Republican Party deeply [aligned](#) with white supremacists. This concept of indebted voters seems to lie at the root of Democrats' refusal to develop policies and strategies that are responsive to people of color, and it seeps into the party's messaging. For instance, in response to one of Trump's most brazen acts of white supremacy, the pardon of Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio in August, [prominent](#) Democratic [media](#) figures put the responsibility at the feet of recalcitrant voters for failing to defeat Trump, rather than party leaders who got their strategy wrong.

The consequences of such approaches have been grim for the Democratic Party. In the wake of the 2016 election defeat -- and with the significance of voters of color set to [keep growing](#) in the election cycles to come -- the party must hold up its end of the bargain with minority voters.

3. Young People and the Party

"We needed to be in the low 60s with young people, and at the end of the day, we were in the high 50s," Hillary Clinton's campaign manager, Robby Mook, told a conference held at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government weeks after the election. "That's part of why we lost."

As with Clinton's under-performance in communities of color, her campaign's lackluster youth turnout speaks to a broader problem of voter enthusiasm. These two groups were surely not going to flip to Donald Trump, but there was a sizable portion who simply stayed home or voted third party. Why was this? And what can be done to prevent this depressed turnout in 2018 and 2020?

It's important to note that young voters are increasingly more left-wing than their counterparts a generation ago -- on social and political issues as well as ideology. In addition to their [overwhelming embrace](#) of self-described socialist Bernie Sanders, young people are more and more rejecting capitalist politics -- with one [January 2017 poll](#) showing 43 percent of voters under 30 favorable toward socialism vs. only 26 percent unfavorable. (The generational trend is glaring, with just 23 percent of those 65 or older favorable toward socialism.) In an April [poll](#) by Harvard, a majority of young people responded that they do not "support capitalism."

This generational shift was on stark display during one post-election CNN town hall when [an NYU student](#) cited the Harvard poll on millennials' loss of trust in capitalism and [asked](#) Rep. Nancy Pelosi about the party moving left "to a more populist message" on economic issues. The Minority Leader bolted out of her seat and insisted, "I have to say, we're capitalists, that's just the way it is" before letting out a chuckle. The combination of knee-jerk dismissal and "just the way it is" cynicism perfectly distilled the problem the party has selling itself to today's youth.

At the core of this disconnect is what, at first, appears to be a paradox: young voters are getting more left-wing but also less likely to identify as Democrats. According to a recent [Brookings survey](#), only 37 percent of youth in 2016 identified as Democrats -- down from 45 percent in 2008. But the percent who identified as "liberal" in 2016 was 37 percent, up from 32 percent in 2008. So how is it, young voters are moving leftward but identify less with the nominally "left" major party?

This tension speaks to the broader "anti-establishment" mood across generations and Democrats' inability to tap into this sentiment. Most people, especially the young, feel the "establishment" is letting them down and are looking for an alternative that will challenge it as such, rather than offer slow, piecemeal reforms. (In the 2016 general election, [8 percent](#) of voters under age 30 cast ballots for a third-party presidential candidate and, as NPR [reported](#), "in some battleground states that number was much, much higher.") Perhaps the extent of the distrust is unfair -- after all, it is true Clinton did have some relatively [progressive policy reforms](#) -- but the framing and sales pitch were, to most youth, "more of the same."

There's no doubt the angst is real and justified, notably among college students and those who aspire to college. The average cost of college went [up 1,200 percent](#) since 1978, and the totality

of student debt in the U.S. [went up 400 percent](#) from 2003 to 2013. Massive military boondoggles like the F-35 jet fighter program -- fought for and supported by Democrats -- cost more than the *total student debt* in the country ([\\$1.45 trillion](#) vs. [\\$1.3 trillion](#)). [All but four Democrats](#) in the Senate voted for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018 that had a [Pentagon budget increase](#) greater than the total cost of [all the state college tuitions](#) for every student in the country (\$80 billion vs. \$70 billion). Yet we've saddled an entire generation with crippling debt for the privilege of learning. Something about the current state of the social contract is intuitively wrong and requires urgent and radical overhaul.

Bernie Sanders understood this reality-based sentiment and -- mostly propelled by millennials -- turned what conventional wisdom had pegged as an obscure, 2-percent campaign into a photo finish with the establishment's preferred candidate. Once the nomination was settled, much of this grassroots energy dissipated as the Clinton campaign declined to adopt positions like single-payer health care and free public college that resonated with young voters. While Clinton's policies themselves were often progressive compared to the status quo, they were mostly presented in piecemeal wonkese, while bold moral demands were ignored in favor of a complex web of targeted "solutions." The primary lesson of Sanders' campaign -- that presenting a clear moral vision rather than McKinsey & Co. policy papers could galvanize youth support -- was missed entirely, and the Clinton campaign suffered for it.

Clinton herself seems to have recognized that lesson from 2016, writing in her book *What Happened*:

Bernie proved again that it's important to set lofty goals that people can organize around and dream about, even if it takes generations to achieve them.... Democrats should reevaluate a lot of our assumptions about which policies are politically viable.... I criticized Bernie's "free college for all" plan as providing wasteful taxpayer-funded giveaways to rich kids. But it's precisely because they don't benefit everyone that targeted programs are so easily stigmatized and demagogued.... The conclusion I reach from this is that Democrats should redouble our efforts to develop bold, creative ideas that offer broad based benefits for the whole country.

Troublingly, many in the party want to ignore this advice and double down on the old strategy of dismissing the youth-driven Sanders movement. A network of aggressive Clinton loyalists is expending much energy punching left and mocking progressive policies as naive delusion. Of what use is it for the president of the Center for American Progress to go after young activists like National Women's March co-organizer Linda Sarsour [on Twitter](#) for daring to criticize party leadership? There's an undeniable current with Clinton surrogates that their time is better spent attacking Sanders supporters rather than trying to welcome them.

It doesn't have to be this way. As several of the 2020 hopefuls -- and many [pundits](#) -- know, the future of the party rests with the Sanders platform and the Sanders base (regardless of his future role). It rests with a progressive policy agenda that can rally and excite rather than scold and extort. None of this is to suggest that Hillary Clinton did not have many adamant supporters -- she certainly did, and she worked hard to earn them. But, in the aggregate, Clinton did not motivate and bring out demographics the party ought to have at the scale that was needed. The most glaring shortfall in this capacity was among the young, who increasingly want politics to be for something profoundly positive rather than just against Republicans; who want a movement, not a chore.

4. Voter Participation and the Party

A core challenge for the Democratic Party will be to raise the voter participation rate while drawing presently apathetic and uninvolved nonvoters and occasional voters into the process -- largely younger people and African Americans. The United States has [one of the lowest](#) voter participation rates in the developed world, and voting skews heavily toward older, richer and whiter voters.

There are two primary drivers of depressed turnout for Democrats, and it's essential to be honest about both. The first we'll call "Republican-created problems," and the second we'll call "self-inflicted" ones.

Republican-created problems are ones that the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton had little to do with in 2016 and indeed made some efforts to combat. These include the elaborate right-wing efforts to disenfranchise minority voters through voter ID laws, gerrymandering, the Supreme Court's gutting of the Voting Rights Act, and [online disinformation](#). In an article published by *The Nation* one day after last year's November election, Ari Berman [noted](#) that 14 states had new voting restrictions in place for the first time in 2016:

27,000 votes currently separate Trump and Clinton in Wisconsin, where 300,000 registered voters, according to a federal court, lacked strict forms of voter ID. Voter turnout in Wisconsin was at its lowest levels in 20 years and decreased 13 percent in Milwaukee, where 70 percent of the state's African-American population lives, according to Daniel Nichanian of the University of Chicago.

Working to defeat restrictions on voting rights should clearly be a top priority for Democrats, augmenting battles through the courts with coordination efforts between grassroots activism and the party apparatus. Yet the Democratic National Committee has not made such work a staffing priority. “In the past, the DNC had one full-time staffer focused on voter protection,” *The Nation* [reported](#) in late May 2017. The magazine described the upcoming progress of the DNC’s new Voter Protection and Empowerment Unit: “The new unit will have four staffers.”

The Democratic Party’s “self-inflicted” voter suppression will be the main focus of this section because (a) there’s more that can be done in the short term to combat it, and (b) a candid conversation about it is far less common in liberal circles. It’s not enough to just blame Republicans for a dearth of voter participation in 2016. Democrats must be candid about the extent of their own responsibility.

Part of the problem is tepid voter enthusiasm, namely among African Americans and the young. In 2016 the turnout of African-American voters fell [well below](#) several models; [59.6 percent of eligible black voters](#) cast ballots, down from the 66 percent who voted in 2012. This cannot be chalked up entirely to Obama not being on the ticket. Nor was this trend seen just in states with successful voter suppression efforts aimed at African Americans; it occurred across the board. As the *New York Times* [documented in its profile](#) of black voters in Milwaukee, there was a clear sense that the Democratic Party, while certainly preferable to Republicans, had stopped fighting for working people.

A loss of confidence in the party is apparently also coming from its most reliable voting bloc, African-American women. The Democratic Party has experienced an 11 percent drop in [support from black women](#) according to one [survey](#), while the percentage of black women who said neither party represents them went from 13 percent in 2016 to 21 percent in 2017.

The underlying economic conditions, while perhaps ameliorated by a Democratic president, are still failing many millions of poor and working-class Americans. By co-opting the language, and [often times the policies](#), of the Republicans, it became increasingly hard for Democrats to distinguish themselves from the GOP. And if there’s a general sense that the differences are not significant, it makes voting seem that much less urgent. The overriding issue is not about the reality of the differences, it’s about the *perception* of them. In a 2013 survey, 60 percent of Americans said it [doesn’t matter which party controls Congress](#) -- a poisonous image problem that can best be countered with a clear, progressive reboot of the Democratic Party.

Another large group with a participation issue is young people, who encounter a toxic combination of a depressed economic reality, GOP efforts at voter suppression, and anemic

messaging on the part of Democrats. No matter which way one looks, the issue boils down to -- most urgently -- an inability to authentically market the party as a defender of the less well-off.

To significantly boost voter participation, Democrats need to stand for a progressive platform that truly distinguishes them from the Republicans and the status quo that has let so many Americans down. To best end the malaise, the party must offer a vision that motivates. A party doesn't grow by simply tallying up members and scolding them into showing up. To flourish, the Democratic Party needs an emphatic mission and a clear moral message that excites and provides a purpose that is distinct from the otherwise cynical spectacle of politics. Inspiring programs for truly universal health care, racial justice, free public college tuition, economic security, new infrastructure, green jobs and tackling the climate crisis can do this.

This is about more than just increasing voter turnout. It is about *energizing* as well as expanding the base of the party. To do this we must aggressively pursue two tracks: fighting right-wing efforts to rig the political system, and giving people who can vote a truly compelling reason to do so.

5. Social Movements and the Party

Democratic Party leaders at the DNC and throughout the country must build relationships with social movements on the basis of genuine cooperation and coalition-building.

Why does [polling](#) show that Bernie Sanders is the most popular politician in the nation? What does that have to do with current social movements? If we were watching a video and came across these two questions, we might want to hit the "rewind" button at this point.

Let's go back to 2010, the year before the first Occupy protest on Wall Street. University students were marching in public spaces and occupying campus buildings to protest budget and staff cuts, tuition hikes and crushing student debt. The term "occupy everything" would become the spark that inspired the Adbusters organization to call for a peaceful occupation of Wall Street to protest corporate undermining of democracy, increasing disparities in wealth, and the lack of accountability for oligarchic forces that had caused a financial near-meltdown. By September of 2011, the Occupy Wall Street call to action had worldwide impact, with protests in more than 80 countries. In the United States, within weeks, over 600 communities had held protests and occupations of their own.

The slogan “We are the 99 percent!” became the rallying cry at Occupy protests and spoke to the growing concentration of wealth with the 1 percent. On a scale never seen before, it was a massive rebuke of neoliberal economic policies -- privatization of public space and institutions, attacks on labor unions, corporate globalization and systemic police repression. The dramatic upsurge of articulated resentment at vast economic injustice caused a major shift in the country’s political discourse, which served as a whetstone for Obama to sharpen his attacks on Mitt Romney. The GOP nominee’s wealth and his services for the rich kept him in a defensive crouch. As the *New York Times* [reported](#) midway through 2012, the Obama-Romney battle was proceeding “in an era of populist backlashes against the 1 percent and increased concern about the economic and social ramifications of income inequality.”

Yet after Obama’s re-election, denial of some inconvenient truths had devastating results. The Democratic Party establishment, largely insulated from the unease coalescing among the base, stayed the same course during the second term. The status quo consensus assumed that the upheaval about income inequality was simply a moment in time that could be addressed with improved messaging -- an assumption that would later prove to be far off the mark. During Obama’s second term, the mantras of “wait and see” and “give him time” gave way to an accelerated erosion of the base. [Black voter turnout was to drop 7 percent](#) between 2012 and 2016. The numbers of black voters in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania who [stayed home](#) on Election Day in November 2016 may well have been determining factors in Clinton’s losses in those states. What would cause such a case of mass ennui that so many people, in communities that would certainly be on the short end of the stick under a Trump administration, decided to sit this one out? In part, communities that had invested their votes in the hope for change -- two key words of Obama’s 2008 campaign -- were instead experiencing disillusionment.

Two years after Occupy, the country would again erupt in mass national protests, this time over the killings of African Americans by police. The movement for Black Lives Matter would organize nationally to address systemic racism and, in doing so, call politicians to account for policies that devalued and killed black people -- while helping to create a burgeoning prison-industrial complex, a school-to-prison pipeline and a “[New Jim Crow](#).” In urban areas, the reality was especially acute, with communities suffering from a loss of services and chronic absence of jobs after many manufacturing plants had relocated overseas.

During her presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton was confronted numerous times about her support for her husband’s record of massive prison expansion through his 1994 crime bill. Her reference at that time to teenaged “[super-predators](#)” [needing to be brought “to heel”](#) would haunt her during the campaign. That some of the largest Black Lives Matter protests were [in the Midwest](#) -- or that her “[personal commitment](#)” to remedy the Flint water crisis would

necessitate repeated interaction, something approaching relationship building -- seemed lost on the minds of her campaign. She would go on to lose Michigan.

Clinton's failure to recognize the power of mass movements evidently left her unprepared to consider how she -- as the standard bearer for a status quo that had overseen such massive social dislocation and wealth disparity -- could begin to develop substantive relationships with the affected constituencies. Such thinking would have afforded the opportunity to more deeply engage with the struggles they faced, and to reckon with the groundswell of anger toward policies that had failed so many Americans.

The beginning of this section rhetorically asked why Bernie Sanders is the most popular politician in the nation, and how that phenomenon is connected to current social movements. The answer is that Bernie Sanders has understood the significance of this period of widespread discontent and mobilization of increasingly intersectional social movements -- in opposition to policies that protect structural racism, corporate domination, outsourcing, privatization and oligarchy.

The director of the Labor Institute, Les Leopold, recently [pointed out](#): "Sanders didn't change but the world did. His message about the ravages and unfairness of runaway inequality hit home because it is true. He and his campaign became the next phase of the revolt against the 1 percent initiated by the remarkable, yet short-lived, Occupy Wall Street. Sanders took this discontent many steps forward by clearly articulating a social-democratic agenda for working people. He turned 'We are the 99 percent' into a clear policy agenda. That agenda, not just his enormous integrity, is why he remains so popular."

Also key: how Sanders responded when faced with critiques brought on by Black Lives Matter activists who called him out on his campaign's lack of meaningful policy positions (up to that point) regarding police brutality and structural racism. Sanders demonstrated a respect and engagement with those activists in scenes that are all too rare in politics. At that juncture, his willingness to listen and learn, combined with on-the-ground enthusiasm and inspiring public events, served Sanders well in the later primaries as he won a [majority of young minority voters](#) (including young black voters who had viewed Clinton with skepticism), all part of the overall trend of millennial votes that went to him. These connections with activists increased the strength and momentum of Sanders' campaign [as the primary season continued](#); in Michigan he proved the pollsters wrong in part because they didn't expect the [surge of support](#) from black voters and young voters overall. This is a lesson the Democratic Party would do well to learn. There are profound opportunities to demonstrate the ability to go beyond surface graciousness and become a better leader for it.

A party that functions primarily during election seasons has lost the initiative in terms of integrating itself into the daily lives and concerns of potential and actual supporters.

During the 2016 campaign, numerous reports of deep cynicism among voters mirrored the vast discontent so unmistakably expressed in recent protests. Reporting about the Flint water crisis, Lucia Graves [wrote](#) in the *Guardian*:

Interviews with residents before, during and after Clinton's visit revealed fear of a candidate helicoptering in on the campaign trail, attempts to salvage a modern economic and environmental crisis that is Flint's own, and few answers for a city being abandoned by its residents.

"Don't jump on a cause just to get votes," said Flint Lives Matter organizer Calandra Patrick, as Clinton's jet arrived in town. "It doesn't matter to me if she makes an appearance or not -- it doesn't matter to me one bit."

There are solid reasons to believe that Clinton's concern about the crisis in Flint was genuine. The cynicism on the part of portions of the electorate was more informed by a longer-term assessment of her record, and by their overall attitudes toward politicians and -- by extension -- the Democratic Party.

Social movements cannot be understood as tools to get Democrats elected. The ebb and flow of social movements offer a rising tide in their own right that along the way can lift Democratic Party candidates -- if the party is able to embrace the broad popular sentiment that the movements embody. Candidates' lip service to social movements is commonly understood as such; failing to make genuine common cause with grassroots outlooks can undermine campaign enthusiasm, volunteers, online participation, recurring small-dollar contributions, and turnout at election time.

One of the most memorable grassroots themes at the 2016 Democratic National Convention was the sustained protest against the Trans-Pacific Partnership by environmental, labor and other activists in the streets of Philadelphia and by many delegates inside the arena. President Obama's all-out push for the widely unpopular trade pact loomed over the convention's platform drafting process as Obama surrogates and Clinton delegates worked to prevent explicit language opposing the TPP, even though during the primaries Clinton had made public [her switch](#) from supporting to opposing it. Shortly before the convention, progressive populist and Sanders supporter Jim Hightower [warned](#) that working-class families in swing states wouldn't be content with "soft words," and that "using lame language tells them we will not stand with them."

Party activists opposing the TPP ran up against party leaders who favored corporate globalization over sovereign laws, workers' rights, the environment, public health and financial regulation. The grassroots that energized the Fight for \$15 -- showing the power of union activism teaming up with non-union advocates for workers -- encountered a party leadership that barely paid lip service to the importance of labor unions and union growth. That growth would certainly help to expand the middle class and, with it, support for the party.

In this era of Trump/GOP rollback against health care gains and worker protections, Democrats need to be clear whose side they're on. As labor activist Jonathan Tasini [said](#), "if raising wages and preserving pensions is what Democrats want, they're not going to get it without growing the power of unions. Unions built the middle class. Wages are low because, over the past several decades, employers have effectively stolen the productivity gains made by workers -- and only by revitalizing unions, publicly, aggressively and explicitly, will that change."

On any normal canvassing trip for a campaign these days, it's quite common to encounter voters at the door who express skepticism, wariness and an overall lack of interest in the subject of the outreach. Voters have come to expect shallow interaction to the point where it is difficult for the party and its candidates to be seen as being authentic on issues during a campaign. For more marginalized communities, the effect is magnified. On a daily basis, they see inaction and the lack of prioritizing of their issues by politicians, governments and political parties; routinely they see themselves as powerless to effect change since they lack meaningful access to conventional avenues of power.

The Democratic Party is badly positioned to present itself as a foe of the powerful forces causing [widespread economic distress](#) for working people, the poor and "[near poor](#)," the elderly, millennials, people of color -- in short, the party's purported base. Weakness of messaging is directly related to the comfort that corporate power enjoys not only in legislative halls across the nation but also within the party itself. Such corporate dominance prevents the party from truthfully projecting itself as an ally of the working class. In contrast to all the posturing, the institutional lack of authenticity is a key reason why [40 percent or more](#) of voters consider themselves independent, a number well above the 30 percent or less for Democrats and Republicans alike.

Overall, the party leadership conveys ambivalence toward progressive populism, with performances that approximate and hum the tune but often seem to be fumbling with the words, as if awkwardly lip-syncing. Unable to belt out populist themes, party leaders are apt to seem most candid when they acknowledge what has become of the party's orientation. Astute observers could hardly be shocked when, in December 2012, President Obama [told](#) a Miami-based Univision station during an interview at the White House: "The truth of the matter

is that my policies are so mainstream that if I had set the same policies that I had back in the 1980s, I would be considered a moderate Republican.” In a time of economic distress, such “moderate Republican” policies badly undercut the potential for synergy with progressive social movements -- while alienating much of the party’s base and discouraging voter turnout from core constituencies.

Since Obama’s victory in 2008, the Democratic Party has lost control of both houses of Congress and more than 1,000 state legislative seats. The GOP now controls the governorship as well as the entire legislature in [26 states](#), while Democrats exercise such control in only six states. Republicans now outnumber Democrats in governors’ offices by more than 2 to 1. The reversal of fortunes in state legislatures was extreme during the Obama presidency, as a *New York Times* writer [noted](#): “In 2009, Democrats controlled both the state senate and house in 27 states, the Republicans 14. After the 2016 elections, Republicans controlled both branches of the legislatures in 32 states to 14 for the Democrats.”

Despite this Democratic decline, bold proposals with the national party’s imprint are scarce. Whatever the virtues of [“A Better Deal”](#) that Democratic Party leaders rolled out in mid-summer 2017, the months that followed gave scant indications that it ignited much grassroots enthusiasm, while [one](#) critique after [another](#) after [another](#) faulted the party’s new manifesto as too cautious, too corporate and too removed from the energizing passions of the current era. The party leadership appears to have concluded, yet again, that major structural changes are not needed, in the party or in the country. Amid all the calls to “resist Trump,” top party leaders seem to have largely pinned their hopes on Donald Trump finally going too far, an ominous echo of an electoral strategy that failed in the 2016 general election.

For the Democratic Party, the goal of outreach cannot be only to get votes. The enduring point of community outreach is to build an ongoing relationship that aims for the party to become part of the fabric of everyday life. It means acknowledging the validity and power of people-driven movements as well as recognizing and supporting authentic progressive community leaders. It means focusing on how the party can best serve communities, not the other way around. Most of all, it means persisting with such engagement on an ongoing basis, not just at election time. When insincerity and a poor record of community engagement are detected, the outcome is a depressed turnout on Election Day. Democratic Party pros have routinely discounted the political importance and electoral impacts of genuine enthusiasm at the grassroots. But passionate supporters and vital movements are crucial to lifting the fortunes of the party and the country.

6. War and the Party

The most audible dissent inside the 2016 Democratic National Convention came during the two speeches that most forcefully touted policies of perpetual war. Former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta was taken aback when [delegates repeatedly interrupted](#) his primetime address with chants of “No more war.” The next night, just after Gen. John Allen encountered [the same chant](#) during the convention’s final session, the *Washington Post* [cited poll numbers](#) that indicated the chanting delegates represented a substantial portion of views among Democrats nationwide.

The wisdom of continual war was far clearer to the party’s standard bearer than it was to people in the U.S. communities bearing the brunt of combat deaths, injuries and psychological traumas. After a decade and a half of nonstop warfare, research data from voting patterns suggest that the Clinton campaign’s hawkish stance was a [political detriment](#) in working-class communities hard-hit by American casualties from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Even controlling in a statistical model for many other alternative explanations, we find that there is a significant and meaningful relationship between a community’s rate of military sacrifice and its support for Trump,” concluded a [study](#) by Boston University’s Douglas Kriner and Francis Shen at the University of Minnesota. The professors wrote: “Our statistical model suggests that if three states key to Trump’s victory -- Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin -- had suffered even a modestly lower casualty rate, all three could have flipped from red to blue and sent Hillary Clinton to the White House.”

Clinton’s warlike record and campaign positions helped Trump to have it both ways, playing to jingoism while masquerading as an opponent of the protracted wars that had disillusioned so many Americans. The ongoing Clinton embrace of militarism abetted Trump’s efforts to gain media coverage that framed him as the relatively [noninterventionist](#) candidate.

In their study, Professors Kriner and Shen said that Democrats may want to “reexamine their foreign policy posture if they hope to erase Trump’s electoral gains among constituencies exhausted and alienated by 15 years of war.” But while public support for ongoing war on many fronts has ebbed, the Democratic Party’s top leadership has continued to avidly back it. This disconnect not only depresses enthusiasm and support -- reflected in donations, volunteer energies, turnout and votes -- from the party’s traditional base; it also undermines Democratic capacities to draw in voters who identify as independent or have gravitated to another party.

As with its allegiance to trade agreements that benefit large corporations at the expense of American workers, the top of the party remains woefully out of touch with voters who do not share elite enthusiasm for endless war. Much as the national Democratic Party has ceded economic “populism” to Donald Trump and certain right-wing elements, Democratic leadership has largely ceded the anti-interventionist terrain to some elements of the GOP -- as well as to the Libertarian and Green parties, whose antiwar presidential candidates Gary Johnson and Jill Stein received 4.33 percent of the popular vote between them in 2016, nearly 6 million votes.

The most influential think tanks and media outlets routinely treat adherence to military-industrial-complex orthodoxy as a prerequisite for acceptable candidates. But many voters have other ideas. If anything should be learned from the 2016 presidential election, it is that the inside-the-Beltway conventional wisdom holds much more sway with Democratic Party elites than it does with the electorate.

While abdicating responsibility in profound moral dimensions, the Democratic Party leadership has continued to sidestep the immediate, cumulative and long-term negative effects of perpetual war. Overwhelmingly, national party leaders have remained tethered to conventional wisdom that keeps this country engaged in a self-propagating “war on terror” on several continents. Top-ranking congressional Democrats have rarely responded to Republican militarism with a message other than “[us too](#),” or “us too, even more so.” This party-line reflex prevents the Democratic Party from appealing to the anti-interventionist sentiments of large numbers of Americans who question policies of continuous war.

The [platform](#) of Justice Democrats notes that “the United States maintains 800 military bases worldwide at a cost of \$100 billion a year” -- and “this is money that can be spent at home creating jobs, rebuilding infrastructure, and investing in the future of the people.” The organization adds: “The disastrous war in Iraq cost trillions, the war in Afghanistan is 15 years in with no end in sight, and we’re currently bombing seven different countries. We spend more on our military than the next eight countries combined. Despite countless lives lost and destroyed, terrorism has only gotten worse.”

Given that the all-volunteer U.S. military gains recruits in a social context of extreme income inequality, a de facto “economic draft” puts the heaviest burdens of war on the working class. Those burdens have largely worn out their welcome. Yet Democratic Party leaders have rarely made an issue out of the spiraling military costs or the long-term consequences of what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the madness of militarism.” While frequently invoking the legacy of Dr. King, the Democratic leadership has had no use for his cogent warnings about the home-front ravages of war. In a landmark 1967 [speech](#) at New York’s Riverside Church, Dr. King deplored the priorities of a bipartisan establishment demonstrating its “hostility to the poor” --

appropriating “military funds with alacrity and generosity,” but providing “poverty funds with miserliness.” Fifty years later, the vast majority of Democratic leaders [go along](#) with such warfare-state priorities.

Like the Clinton-Kaine campaign, the national Democratic Party’s [2016 platform](#) was in tune with foreign-policy approaches popular among elites. A bloated military budget remained sacrosanct and uncuttable (except for the bromide of eliminating “waste”). Giving a thumbs-up to U.S. war efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and beyond, the platform endorsed continual U.S. warfare that has expanded to many parts of the globe since late 2001. That warfare has been terribly harmful to countless people -- but hugely lucrative for military contractors. Overall, the Democratic Party leadership has refused to make a distinction between truly defending the United States and waging interventionist wars. The party’s top leaders have conflated U.S. warfare in many nations with defense of our country. This stance is politically damaging and vastly destructive.

7. Democracy and the Party

To gain and retain the support of voters -- and as a matter of principle -- the Democratic Party should be democratic in its operation as well as in its name. Yet some of the party’s operations have violated basic precepts of fairness as a bedrock of democracy. The credibility and prospects of the party diminish when the Democratic National Committee is widely understood to be operating with bias during the presidential nomination process.

In the course of choosing a nominee for president, the superdelegate system deprives voters of a level playing field and adds to the manipulation of pre-primary fundraising. Such procedures are apt to prematurely create the appearance of an inevitable nomination of one candidate over the others.

A special committee of the DNC, the Commission on Presidential Nominations, created superdelegates in the early 1980s to enable present and former elected Democratic officials and DNC leaders to automatically become delegates to the national convention -- with the power to cast a nomination ballot for whichever candidate they wish, regardless of the results of any primaries or caucuses. The superdelegate system puts at a disadvantage the candidates who lack support from entrenched leadership.

At the 2016 Democratic National Convention, there were 712 superdelegates -- 15 percent of the total delegates. According to the Sunlight Foundation, [at least 63 of those superdelegates](#) were registered as lobbyists at the federal or state level at some point, often for large corporations and other special interests. Meanwhile, superdelegates do not reflect the diversity of registered Democrats or the voters in party primaries and caucuses. While the party's charter rightfully mandates that equal numbers of pledged delegates be male and female, at the 2016 convention a [large majority](#) of the superdelegates were men.

The system of superdelegates doesn't just unfairly reduce the power of voters by giving disproportionate leverage over the nominating process to party officials. It also lends itself to manipulation of the process, helping to create an appearance of pre-primaries inevitability. By mid-November 2015 -- fully 11 weeks before any state primary or caucus -- Hillary Clinton had already [gained a commitment of support](#) from 50 percent of all superdelegates, 359 out of 712.

At last year's national convention, the Democratic Rules Committee voted to reduce the number of independently voting superdelegates by 60 percent beginning in 2020, but the new rule still needs to be formally approved by the DNC. Even if this plan were to be implemented, the remaining superdelegates would still represent a barrier to a democratic Democratic National Convention. The superdelegate system, by its very nature, undermines the vital precept of one person, one vote. The voting power of all superdelegates must end.

Secretary Clinton's ability to accumulate a lopsided number of superdelegate commitments before the primaries was enhanced by a joint fundraising committee with the DNC and state parties, called the Hillary Victory Fund. That fund raised almost \$530 million between July 1, 2015 and the last quarter of 2016, according to the FEC. The DNC's partnership with the Hillary Victory Fund assisted her in gaining early loyalty of superdelegates.

In August 2015 -- six months before the first vote was cast in any primary or caucus -- the DNC worked directly with the Clinton Campaign and 32 state Democratic parties to implement the Hillary Victory Fund. The Hillary Victory Fund was made possible by the Supreme Court ruling in the case of *McCutcheon v. FEC*, decided in April 2014, which struck down aggregate limits on total giving to federal campaigns. Before the decision, the most an individual could have given to a joint fundraising committee was \$123,200. After the decision, an individual [could donate \\$356,100](#) to the Hillary Victory Fund in 2015 and the same amount again in 2016, for a total contribution of over \$700,000 -- and \$1,400,000 if an equal amount were also donated in the spouse's name. According to the agreements signed by the [participating party committees](#), the Clinton Campaign got the first \$2,700 of each donation, the DNC was to get the next \$33,400, and the remainder was to be split among the 32 state parties. The arrangement turned out to

be a raw deal for the state parties since the DNC ultimately used them [as pass-throughs](#) to funnel money back to the DNC for distribution to the Clinton Campaign or another Clinton PAC.

Essentially, the DNC-Clinton Campaign deal was an [enticement](#) for superdelegates from various states to get on the bandwagon early.

The joint funding agreement provided that the Hillary Victory Fund was to be administered by the Clinton Campaign's own chief operating officer, Elizabeth Jones, who [notably controlled](#) how money was transferred to both the states and the DNC. Jones had the "sole discretion" to decide when transfers of money to and from the state parties would occur through the vehicle of a shared account, thereby facilitating the pass-throughs to the Clinton Campaign. Counsel for Bernie Sanders sent an [open letter](#) to the DNC stating that "joint committee funds, which are meant to be allocated proportionally among the participating committees, are being used to impermissibly subsidize [Hillary for America] through an over-reimbursement for campaign staffers and resources." (The Sanders Campaign had a joint fundraising fund with the DNC, the Bernie Victory Fund, headed by the DNC's chief financial officer, but its [only funding](#) was a \$1,000 donation from the national committee.)

The Democratic Party's national charter requires the DNC to be evenhanded in the presidential nominating process, but the DNC's use of a joint fundraising committee that favored one candidate during the primary season violated this charter obligation.

Article 5, Section 4 of the charter states:

In the conduct and management of the affairs and procedures of the Democratic National Committee, particularly as they apply to the preparation and conduct of the presidential nominating process, the Chairperson shall exercise impartiality and evenhandedness as between the Presidential candidates and campaigns. The Chairperson shall be responsible for ensuring that the national officers and staff of the Democratic National Committee maintain impartiality and evenhandedness during the Democratic Party Presidential nominating process.

In June 2016, DNC donors, Sanders donors and registered Democrats filed a lawsuit against the DNC and its chair, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, alleging that the plaintiffs were injured when the defendants acted to tip the scales in Clinton's favor during the primaries. Before a U.S. District Court dismissed the case for lack of standing in August 2017, statements in court by legal counsel for the defendants included remarkable and disturbing assertions: DNC officers claim that they are under no obligation to be fair or impartial during the nomination process.

In the [record](#) at the hearing on Defendants' Motion to Dismiss, a DNC legal representative stated:

We could have voluntarily decided that, "Look, we're gonna go into back rooms like they used to and smoke cigars and pick the candidate that way." That's not the way it was done. But they could have. And that would have also been their right.

The DNC representative denied outright any duty to follow its Charter:

There's no right to not have your candidate disadvantaged or have another candidate advantaged. There's no contractual obligation here...it's not a situation where a promise has been made that is an enforceable promise.

Those assertions from the DNC reflect a high-handed disrespect for basic elements of democracy within a party calling itself "Democratic." That disrespect has been underscored by a series of events that began in the spring of 2016 when Donna Brazile, who was serving as DNC vice-chair as well as a CNN commentator at the time, passed on questions to the Clinton campaign that could give her an edge in an upcoming debate with Sanders. After the misconduct came to light, Brazile initially denied it, but CNN forced her resignation in October 2016. The DNC, however, had no problem keeping Brazile in her position as interim chair until February 2017, even after -- in November 2016 -- Brazile [confessed](#) to passing on questions to the Clinton camp. In the autumn of 2017, Brazile's name was still the one attached to some [DNC fundraising emails](#) being sent out to millions of people, as though her failure of integrity and contempt for evenhandedness as a DNC officer was totally acceptable.

To sum up: The conduct of top officials at the Democratic National Committee -- especially in the absence of any acknowledgement of past DNC wrongdoings or any binding commitments to end such improprieties -- engenders no faith that they will act with integrity for a truly democratic process in the future.

8. The Party and the Future

“People of color will become a majority of the American working class in 2032,” the Economic Policy Institute [reports](#), based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The shift will occur even faster among the young. “The prime-age working-class cohort, which includes working people between the ages of 25 and 54, is projected to be majority people of color in 2029.” For workers between 25 and 34, “the projected transition year is 2021.”

If the Democratic Party is to determine how to truly connect with this new universe of voters -- and young people overall -- the party must grasp that the [high support](#) for Sanders from those voters in the 2016 primaries and his enduring popularity are markers for a sustained progressive wave. The Democratic Party can learn to ride that wave or choose to duck under it.

For the party, the changing demographics and long-term upsurge for progressive socio-economic policies are opportunities and challenges. Emerging sectors of the electorate are compelling the Democratic Party to come to terms with adamant grassroots rejection of economic injustice, institutionalized racism, gender inequality, environmental destruction and corporate domination. Siding with the people who constitute the base isn't truly possible when party leaders seem to be afraid of them. Retaining control of the national party apparatus has meant locking the doors of the Democratic National Committee to ward off groundswells of participation.

This metaphor turned literal on July 25, 2017 when the president of Our Revolution, former Ohio State Senator Nina Turner, went to deliver 115,000 signatures in support of a progressive “[People’s Platform](#)” at the DNC headquarters in Washington. She [was turned away](#) at the door. “When I stepped on this side of the barrier, I was told I had to step on the other side, and that’s indicative of what’s wrong with the Democratic Party,” Turner said. Speaking to activists outside the DNC offices, she declared that the party needs more than “a fancy new slogan to reform itself” -- a reference to the “A Better Deal” slogan and agenda rolled out by the party leadership earlier that week. Her words speak for many: “We need a new New Deal.”

The stakes couldn’t be higher, yet the party seems intent on doubling down on its approach, despite the trendline. As Robert Borosage [points out](#), “The scope of Democratic reversals over the last eight years is staggering. Hillary’s loss was only the last insult. Democrats have lost everywhere -- the Senate, the House, and in state legislatures, and governor’s mansions. Since Obama was elected in 2008, Democrats have slowly lost the House and the Senate, and over 1,000 state legislative seats. The Republican Party can now claim 34 governors, a record high for the party. Republicans are in full control [in 26 states](#); Democrats in six.”

Operating from a place of defensiveness and denial will not turn the party around. Neither will status quo methodology. When discussing the loss of the presidency, we deny ourselves a

deeper assessment if the conversation is limited to Clinton and Sanders, what their campaigns and supporters did and didn't do, and what should have been done. In fairness to Clinton, much of the party's weakness was in place well before her 2016 run. What must now take place includes honest self-reflection and confronting a hard truth: that many view the party as often in service to a rapacious oligarchy and increasingly out of touch with people in its own base.

Revitalized progressive populism -- multicultural, multiracial and multigenerational -- means fighting for genuine democracy. Outmoded narratives and facile calls for "unity" must be replaced with a new vision of politics that is explicitly inclusive and participatory. The party must learn how to speak a populist tongue that is in sync with real advocacy for a clear agenda, putting public needs above corporate profits. An imperative is to find common political denominators that are inspirational and practical, cutting across demographic lines while building foundations for social advancement and a humane future.