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The Democratic Strategist has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As The Democratic Strategists' editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

## A DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

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INDISPENSABLE FOR OUR RECENT  
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*By ED KILGORE, JAMES VEGA AND J. P. GREEN*

The Democrats' recent victory in the October standoff with the GOP over the shutdown and debt ceiling would have been impossible without the absolutely firm and unbreakable unity that was displayed by every sector of the Democratic coalition. You can choose any adjective you want; "vital," "indispensable", "critical," "essential." The contribution of Democratic unity to that victory simply cannot be overstated.

The source of this unprecedented unity is not a mystery. It was created by an unprecedented threat—The GOP strategy of hostage-taking and political blackmail not only presented a profound menace to all progressive priorities but also to the basic norms and institutions of American democracy itself.

As the Democratic coalition and community looks to the future, however, there is a quite different challenge that the coalition must also prepare to confront: Democrats will soon have to begin debating important and deeply divisive issues about the Democratic platform and message for 2016 and beyond. These intra-Democratic debates will set the stage for the more public disputes that will emerge during the next presidential primaries.

The critical challenge Democrats face is this: How can Dems energetically debate their differences while at the same time still retaining a sufficient degree of unity to maintain a united front and "hold the line" against the profound Republican threat?

### **Two Avoidable Obstacles to Democratic Unity**

As a starting point for confronting this challenge, it is essential to note that there are two important ways in which Democrats unnecessarily intensify and exacerbate conflict within their coalition.

First, Democrats unnecessarily magnify conflicts within the Democratic coalition because of the particular methods and the forums for debate that they use when they conduct intra-party discussion.

Second, Democrats unnecessarily intensify conflicts within the Democratic coalition because they often fail to distinguish between disagreements over political strategy from those that involve disagreement over basic goals and principles.

Dealing with these two problems will not provide a complete solution to the problem of maintaining Democratic unity but recognizing and confronting them can materially improve the situation. Let us consider the two issues in turn.

## **1. The methods and forums that Democrats use to debate differences unnecessarily exacerbate friction and disunity within the coalition.**

In other democratic countries, major political parties often have formal or semi-formal mechanisms for conducting intra-party debate on important issues. Some have official party journals or publications where major debates are conducted. Others have standing committees or task forces where contentious issues are debated under the formal auspices of the party itself. These mechanisms structure and contain even the most intense intra-party conflicts within a broader framework that promotes a sense of underlying party unity and loyalty to the political party as an institution.

In the United States, in contrast, intra-Democratic debates are not conducted within any formal structures of the Democratic Party. Rather, both sides of most contentious debates present their perspective in the pages of independent political magazines, major websites or daily newspaper editorial pages, or in the overheated environment of primary battles.

This has a tremendous effect on the style and approach that the authors of such commentaries employ in their arguments. Because of the overwhelming amount of political commentary that is published every day in the American media, each commentator faces a massive challenge in attracting attention for his or her specific position on some particular issue. This encourages the use of arguments that are expressed in the most dramatic and polemical fashion possible. More measured and judiciously expressed arguments that carefully consider both sides of an issue, in contrast, inevitably seem less urgent and consequently attract less attention.

This leads to a cascading series of consequences that inevitably amplify and intensify intra-Democratic conflict and make unity seem almost impossible.

First, the pressure to attract attention to a commentary creates powerful incentives to elevate the debate on any given issue up to the status of a battle over a basic “principle” of some kind rather than interpreting it as a disagreement over political strategy or tactics. For the advocate of any given position, this has clear advantages. For one thing, arguments over principles are generally viewed as more important than debates over strategy and tactics. In addition, defining an argument as a matter of basic principle makes any negotiating position more difficult to challenge. After all, political strategies and tactics are, by their nature, possibly in error and therefore naturally subject to review and revision. Principles, in contrast, are immutable and not subject to compromise.

An unavoidable result of this approach, however, is that it implicitly defines people who disagree with the particular point of view as not simply mistaken, but morally wrong because they are rejecting a basic principle. In consequence, their opinion is seen to represent not simply error but *betrayal*.

It is easy to see the consequence of this rhetorical escalation in the florid metaphors that are so depressingly common in intra-Democratic debate: a particular policy choice that negatively affects some group within the Democratic coalition is frequently described in commentaries as “*stabbing them in back*,” “*throwing them under a bus*,” asking them to “*take a bullet for the*

*team,” “pulling the plug on them” and so on. These are remarkably lurid and violent metaphors that portray advocates of the particular policy as not just wrong but fundamentally malevolent. It follows from this that they cannot be genuine allies in the Democratic coalition.*

The notion of betrayal also leads to a yet further rhetorical escalation: If the advocate of a particular position has committed nothing less than a betrayal, he or she must be acting from base and disreputable motives—from greed, ambition, sycophancy or cowardice rather than from honest but misguided conviction.

The result of this cascading series of rhetorical techniques is the widespread popularity of political commentaries that take the following form. *“Issue X is a matter of basic principle for all true Democrats. By opposing it, Democratic politician Y has stabbed his issue X supporters in the back and thrown them under a bus. Obviously politician Y cares more about currying favor with disreputable interest group Z than he or she does about representing the people who elected him.*

And this kind of unnecessarily divisive rhetoric quickly migrates into highly competitive primary elections, where differences defined in the broader debate as representing a “struggle for the soul of the Democratic Party” become major talking points and voter mobilization levers.

Democrats who reject an insistence on principle often create an inverted version of this divisive logic in their own 800-word commentaries when they denounce other Democrats as consistently and indeed almost inherently incorrect. This inverted version of the previous cascading series of escalations is elaborated as follows:

First, insistence on principle is held to be almost intrinsically destructive to Democratic political success. By demanding that candidates uphold a range of firm progressive values, advocates argue that defenders of a “principled” approach make it impossible for more moderate Democrats to triumph in many marginal districts that Dems absolutely must win in order to gain control of Congress and insure that a Republican does not win the presidency.

As a consequence, advocates of a principled approach easily become defined as not merely wrong but as genuinely dangerous and destructive. They “*undermine*” and “*sabotage*” the Democratic coalition because of their intransigence. Objectively, it is argued, their actions do nothing less than aid and support the GOP.

This, in turn, makes it easy to caricature the motivations of the advocates of a principled approach as “*infantile*,” “*childish*” or “*self-indulgent*” rather than in any way sincere or reasonable.

To be sure, there are some cases where fierce and bitter rhetoric from one or the other perspective can be justified by the facts. But such oratory is so depressingly common in intra-Democratic debate that one has to suspect that it is being employed in cases where it does not accurately apply. If Democratic candidates employ this kind of heated rhetoric against each other in the 2016 primaries, it will unavoidably damage the eventual nominee’s chances of winning in the general election.

Although the problems that this kind of rhetoric creates are substantial, a basic solution is actually not particularly complex or difficult. It is simply necessary for the leaders of the groups and organizations that compose the Democratic coalition to clearly and explicitly recognize that serious discussion and negotiation of the major issues that divide Dems cannot be adequately conducted through 800-word political commentaries and polemics or primary campaign broadsides. Democrats need an agreed-upon forum where advocates of different positions within the Democratic coalition can present and defend their positions at length and which offer the ability to carry on an extended back and forth discussion and critique of each other's arguments.

There is nothing impossible or even particularly difficult about implementing this proposal. In the Winter, 2012 issue of *Democracy Journal*, there is an exchange of views between William Galston and Lawrence Mishel on economic policy that is a perfect model and template for how such exchanges can and should be conducted. Galston and Mishel are both leading, widely-respected advocates of the contrasting centrist and progressive-left perspectives that exist within the Democratic Party on economic issues and their mutually respectful but firm assertion of their respective views establishes precisely the right tone and depth for intra-Democratic debates. The Galston-Mishel exchange clearly demonstrates that it is possible to firmly debate differences while maintaining an underlying foundation of Democratic unity.

(Note: It may be tempting to think that the more in-depth research reports produced by the think tanks with which Galston and Mishel are affiliated, (Brookings and the Economic Policy Institute, respectively), might fulfill much of this function. However, even a cursory comparison of those analyses and the Democracy Journal exchange reveals the important differences. In the Democracy Journal exchange the debate is direct and allows for back and forth discussion rather than separate, unrelated statements of positions. As a result the areas of agreement as well as disagreement are clearly distinguished and the real issues that divide the two sides are clearly defined in a way that is directly applicable to the formulation of political platforms. It is these unique characteristics of the Democracy Journal exchange that a new Democratic forum would most importantly need to replicate.)

The specific challenge that the major groups and organizations within the Democratic coalition must address is to explicitly agree upon the necessity for a new forum and standard of debate and to create or designate such a forum, either under the formal auspices of the Democratic Party or under the auspices of an independent entity such as Democracy Magazine.

This, by itself, will make a material difference in reducing unnecessary intra-Democratic conflict but there is also another step that will also substantially enhance Democratic unity—clearly distinguishing between arguments that are over political strategy from those that are over basic principles and goals.

## **2. Democrats often fail to correctly distinguish arguments over strategy and tactics from arguments over basic principles and goals.**

On first consideration one would think that it should be straightforward to separate these two kinds of arguments. But the problem is that almost any decision that at first glance seems self-evidently a matter of political strategy—a congressperson's decision to vote with the

party majority on some particular bill in order to maintain party unity, for example—can easily be recast as a matter of basic principle. This can be done simply by focusing on the more abstract moral and ethical implications of the particular bill or other decision in question while ignoring the actual strategic context in which the Representative's vote was cast.

## **The Map Table and the Bargaining Table**

There is, however, one very clear and straightforward visual image that can be very helpful in clarifying the very important distinction that exists between debates about strategy and those that are about basic goals and principles. It is to imagine the kind of “*table*” at which the debate should be conducted.

The classic mental image most people have of debates over strategy are the discussions that occur among a group of military commanders as they stand around a map table and move small plastic units representing brigades and divisions in order to consider different deployments or routes for the forces at their disposal. While these generals may disagree on these matters, the physical setting itself essentially defines several key characteristics of any disagreements (1) that the participants all consider themselves ultimately “on the same side,” and not as adversaries or enemies (2) that they share the same final objective, (3) that they see themselves as collaborating in a common endeavor and (4) that their arguments are about how to achieve an objective, not whether or not the objective ought to be achieved.

As a result, while debates over strategy among military commanders can be extremely fierce and bitter they very rarely descend into accusations of “betrayal,” “cowardice,” or “corruption.” In fact, there is a very firm military protocol in most military establishments that demands that certain basic standards of mutual respect and cordiality be upheld no matter how deep disagreements between commanders may become. These rules of military etiquette are firmly upheld precisely in order to reinforce the fact that despite their disagreements the commanders are indeed ultimately “on the same side.”

In debates where two sides have different objectives and goals, on the other hand, the typical “table” that is employed is a “*bargaining table*” rather than a map table. Such tables, usually rectangular, are generally arranged so that representatives of the two sides sit opposite each other. Typical examples of the kinds of negotiations that are conducted in this format are those between union and management or between two political parties in a parliamentary system when they are negotiating a common platform for a coalition government.

As with the map table, the physical setting of the bargaining table itself actually defines several key characteristics of the situation, characteristics that are the opposite of the map table example. These characteristics are that (1) the participants do not consider themselves “on the same side,” but rather see their goals and interests as to a significant degree in conflict (2) that they do not share all of the same ultimate objectives, (3) that they do not see themselves as fully committed to collaborating in a common endeavor and (4) that they accept that reaching agreement will be achieved by a relatively formal series of negotiated give and take compromises rather than by an informal process of gradually arriving at a consensus.



The two visual images of the map table and bargaining table provide a useful method for distinguishing between debates that are fundamentally about political strategy and debates that are fundamentally over basic objectives and principles. An observer simply needs to examine a particular debate and ask the question “Which kind of table is the appropriate one to use for the discussion of this particular problem?”

***And here is the key point:*** *When one employs this approach it quickly becomes apparent that many Democrats reflexively assume that all intra-party debates between different sectors of the Democratic coalition should necessarily be conducted at a bargaining table and should reflect the relatively antagonistic and confrontational assumptions that are embedded in that negotiating framework. There is rarely a careful attempt to consider if the more collaborative approach suggested by the map table framework might actually be more appropriate to the disagreement in question.*

## **A Specific Example**

One of the most contentious intra-Democratic debates of the last several years has been over the question of whether Democrats should be willing to negotiate any concessions at all regarding the major programs that comprise the basic American social safety net (e.g., social security, Medicare, food stamps, etc.) or if they should instead refuse to negotiate *any* change that would produce a reduction in the level of benefits for *any* recipients. In the political debate this division is defined as between those who want to firmly “hold the line” on benefits versus those who are willing to contemplate some compromise.

In general, this is treated as a matter of basic principle. As a result, it is not surprising that a substantial amount of the commentary criticizing any compromise is presented in the dramatic language of “betrayal,” and “cowardice.”

This way of defining the debate has the disturbing effect of lumping groups that range all the way from the GOP and “nonpartisan” groups like “Save the Debt” over to groups clearly within the Democratic coalition like the Center for American Progress, the Center on Budget Priorities and the Obama administration itself all on one side of the basic divide. Progressive groups like the Economic Policy Institute, The Campaign for America’s Future, the AFL-CIO and the Congressional Progressive Caucus are grouped on the other.

Yet when this issue is considered from the perspective of the critical and fundamental distinction between strategy on the one hand and objectives on the other, the basic line of demarcation appears quite different. The critical fact is that the Republican and Democratic Parties have fundamentally different long-range objectives regarding the social safety net: the Republican Party seeks to either (a) dismantle the social safety net through various forms of privatization or to (b) at least dramatically reduce its size to a level where neither progressive tax reform nor reductions in the military budget are necessary for fiscal stability. These objectives reflect a profound underlying antagonism and hostility to the entire ethos and spirit of the New Deal reforms and a desire to “roll back” the progressive policies and programs initiated since that time.

(Note: This basic “anti-New Deal” perspective is also shared by groups that are outside the formal boundaries of the GOP. They include most of the “nonpartisan” groups that advocate for debt and deficit reduction as ends in themselves and also many members of the business community who contribute money to Democrats but share the basic Republican perspective on the New Deal legacy.)

Within the Democratic coalition and community, on the other hand, there is firm and overwhelming basic agreement with the basic ethos and spirit of the New Deal reforms. Although not committed to keeping the New Deal programs intact exactly as they are (particularly in the areas where they are actually regressive in their economic impact) the large majority of Democrats have a basic commitment to the objective of at a minimum preserving and hopefully even expanding the social safety net in the future. As a result, there is also within the Democratic coalition widespread support for substantial progressive tax reform and upper income tax increases and for cuts in military and other “pork barrel” government spending as alternative methods for achieving fiscal stability.

Seen from this perspective it becomes clear that the debate over the view that there should be absolutely no reductions in the benefit levels of any of the major social safety net programs needs to be conducted in two entirely different frameworks when dealing with these two profoundly different groups.

## Two Distinct Frameworks

When facing the Republican and other advocates of dismantling or substantially reducing the size of the social safety net, for Democrats the negotiating framework must necessarily be that of the “bargaining table.” Democrats do not share the same objectives with the GOP and their allies and can only negotiate with them in an essentially adversarial way. In challenging the conservative “*dismantle the social safety net*” view, Democrats can and must point out the genuine need and suffering of millions of Americans, the degree to which current benefits are actually inadequate rather than excessive, the ethical and social immorality of demanding sacrifice from those least able to afford it and other similar arguments against benefit reductions.

In intra-Democratic debate with other sectors of the Democratic coalition and community, on the other hand, advocates of the firm “*absolutely no reductions to benefits*” position need to view the debate as one that is fundamentally over political strategy and that can more productively be conducted in the framework of the “map table” rather than the “bargaining table.”

For progressive Democrats it may seem difficult to think of this debate as actually being over political strategy rather than basic principle. For many, it seems self-evident that rejecting any benefit reductions is a simple question of “right and wrong.”

But the reality is that from the perspective of the Obama administration, this debate was—and still is—a debate primarily and essentially over political strategy. Consider Greg Sargent’s “insider” description of the Administration’s thinking that he wrote back in 2011 at the critical moment when the **fateful decision to pursue a “grand bargain”**<sup>1</sup> was undertaken:

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2013/04/05/the-morning-plum-why-obama-wants-a-grand-bargain/>



Many liberals have long suspected that Obama *actively wants* to cut entitlements. So here is my understanding of White House thinking on why a Grand Bargain is a good outcome.

Obama and his advisers... believe a Grand Bargain is good for Democrats in general, because it essentially would lock in a medium-term agreement over core disputes—about the safety net and about the size of government, and who should pay for it—that have produced a debilitating stalemate in Washington.

Yes, Republicans would continue railing about government spending, the thinking goes, but no one would listen, since they would have already endorsed a deal stabilizing the deficit. This would deprive Republicans of the ability to focus attention on one of their core targets—Big Government—as a way to avoid grappling with other issues, such as jobs and long-term middle class economic security, immigration, guns, and perhaps even climate change. Reaching a deal on the deficit will force Republicans to confront those problems more directly and to choose between real cooperation on them or continue to calcify as a hidebound, reactionary party incapable of addressing major challenges facing the country.

Liberals will point out that it's folly to offer Republicans so much up front [in a grand bargain], because they'll only denounce the offer as "unserious" and demand more, shifting the debate further in their direction. But officials insist the White House has no intention of budging on its demand for new revenues or allowing Republicans to pull Obama further towards them. (This doesn't mean liberals shouldn't make it clear that any further concessions on revenues are unacceptable.) The offer in the budget, the thinking goes, will drive home that Obama is the one who occupies the compromise middle ground, and if Republicans refuse to deal, it will be crystal clear in the public mind who is to blame for continued austerity.

Sargent emphatically noted that *"I'm not defending this thinking; I'm simply detailing it"* and, in retrospect, it is clear that the administration's strategy was basically and profoundly flawed. This reality was clearly underlined in recent weeks when the Center for American Progress, which had originally supported the administration's support for a "grand bargain" in 2011, released two new analyses that explicitly revised its former position on the issue based on reviewing the events that have occurred since that time.

But the key point is that the administration and its supporter's approach was indeed fundamentally based on a *political strategy* that turned out to be profoundly wrong and not on an actual *objective or desire* to undermine the social safety net. Progressive critics of the administration's approach have the right to be as fierce and uncompromising in their attacks as they choose and as passionate in their opposition as they have been in the past. But in order to have a productive intra-Democratic debate, it must be recognized that the relevant arguments against the Obama administration's approach require debating a very different set of issues than those that are appropriate in debating the conservative view.

The Obama administration's approach is based on viewing any particular concessions on social safety net benefit levels as an inseparable part of a larger set of negotiating issues that include restoring government revenues lost in the 2001 Bush tax cut, balancing the defense

of entitlements with the restoration of funding for desirable and progressive discretionary programs like food stamps, meals on wheels, scientific research and other progressive priorities and, hopefully, using flexibility in negotiations to demonstrate that Democrats are the more “reasonable” political party, enhancing the likelihood of Democratic electoral victories in 2014 and 2016.

There is absolutely and emphatically a compelling progressive-left challenge to this approach—but it is one that directly disputes the efficacy of this “trade-off” or “bargaining” method of negotiating with the GOP and which argues that a firm, principled stance will actually be more effective as both a negotiating strategy and as a platform for future elections. As noted above, progressive critics of the administration’s approach have the right to be as fierce and uncompromising in their attacks and as passionate in their opposition as they have been in the past. But they should be able to nonetheless retain sufficient perspective to see that the main intra-Democratic argument is about political strategy and not about long range objectives or fundamental principles regarding the social safety net and to frame their debate with the administration and other Democrats on that basis.

This will become particularly critical as the Democratic coalition begins to focus its attention on the 2016 primaries. There will be a nearly irresistible temptation for candidates to employ every available argument at their disposal and to use the most inflammatory rhetoric possible in order to dramatically distinguish themselves from their competitors and to mobilize their potential supporters. In the heated circumstances of a primary campaign maintaining the distinction between disagreements over political strategy from those over basic objectives and principles and treating other Democratic primary competitors as ultimately “all on the same side” will seem a luxury that a candidate simply cannot afford.

But this is a temptation that must be carefully balanced against the vital need for maintaining a basic level of Democratic unity in the face of the unprecedented extremism of today’s GOP. Every Democratic candidate must carefully weigh the personal benefits of using “scorched earth” attacks on opponents with the broader damage that such tactics can inflict on the Democratic coalition as a whole. It will be of little use for a candidate to win the primary contest if it costs him or her the subsequent election.

To put it simply, neither progressives nor centrists have to accept the strategic arguments of those they disagree with in order to accept that when dealing with groups and organizations that are clearly within the Democratic coalition, the intra-Democratic argument should be metaphorically conducted around a map table and not across a negotiating table.

## **Conclusion**

There are two practical conclusions to be drawn from this analysis:

1. Democrats must recognize that the current system of conducting debates through 800-word political commentaries is extremely dysfunctional and deeply and unnecessarily exacerbates intra-Democratic conflict. Democrats need a new shared venue and new rules for intra-party debates about the platform and policies for 2016 and beyond.

2. Dems need to more clearly distinguish between arguments over strategy on the one hand and objectives or principles on the other and to insist upon using different standards when debating with members of the Democratic coalition over strategy than when debating with Republicans or their business allies over basic principles and objectives.

The critical issue is this: Democrats are facing a profoundly dangerous opponent in today's radicalized GOP—one that presents a threat unlike any they have faced before in living memory. If the GOP ever succeeds in gaining control of the presidency and senate, they could quite literally destroy the American social safety net in a matter of weeks using the budget reconciliation process. Democrats cannot avoid debating contentious issues about the party platform and policies in the coming period but they must also maintain sufficient unity to hold the line against the unprecedented threat they now face.

In this new political environment, despite all their disagreements, ultimately Democrats must maintain a basic level of unity. When contrasted with the profoundly grotesque social agenda and genuinely sinister anti-Democratic tactics of today's Republican extremism, Democrats must accept that, for all their differences, they are indeed deeply and inextricably “all on the same side”.