



To: Interested Parties

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Re: NDN Post Election Memo, 2014 – A Wake Up Call for Democrats

The Republicans Are a Far Stronger National Party Today

Next year, the Republicans will have their largest House majority since 1929, 53-54 Senators, control of 32 governorships and 66 of the 99 state legislative chambers. 22 states now have Republicans in control of the Governor's mansion and in both houses of the legislature. Their very successful redistricting efforts of a few years ago also give them advantages in the ways lines are drawn for Federal and state legislative races that will not be easily reversed until after the next redistricting. This is a formidable achievement by the Republicans in recent years.

It is remarkable that our political system could have given the Republicans this degree of power and control during the set of elections which gave the Democrats their largest back to back national Presidential majorities – 53% and 51% - since 1940 and 1944. It is perhaps this success that allowed national Democrats to become complacent or unconcerned about GOP advances in other areas. But the scale of Republican success in recent years outside the Presidency has altered the balance between the two parties now, and may even leave the GOP a stronger national party than the Democrats over the next decade.

By power I mean all that comes with politics – strength of candidates, bench, staff and consultant talent, fundraising capacity, use of technology and of course control over government and policy. Part of what we are witnessing is the coming to power of the children of Reagan – forty something Gen Xers who came of age during the Reagan era. This age cohort is the most Republican of any age cohort in the US, meaning there are lots of them and they have a great deal of generational support for their politics. This generation of politicians is young, gaining in experience, and will be a force to be reckoned with in national and state politics for a generation to come. To regain power Democrats will have to take on and defeat this increasingly successful and energetic generation of politicians over the next decade, perhaps starting with the Presidential race in 2016 (Christie, Cruz, Paul, Rubio, Ryan, Walker).

So while it is true Democrats have developed a post-Southern Strategy majority coalition, a coalition that is perhaps the best and most durable of the Democratic coalitions since the 1940s, it remains to be seen if it has the political infrastructure and bench to take advantage of this historic opening in the coming years.

Running Away from the President/No National Narrative – Many commentators have already weighed in on this but I think Democrats have to understand that in the modern media age mid-term elections are also national elections, particularly when you have the Presidency. The lack of a forceful narrative and mechanism to deliver it from the White House and national party in 2010 and 2014 allowed the national Republicans to make gains that were greater than the political landscape of those elections warranted. As an old War Room guy, I believe that every attack needs to be countered or it sticks, and that if you are not on offense in politics you are losing. And in neither mid-term did the national party mount a major effort to defend the good works of the President and the Democratic Party.

In 2014 the failure to define the election on Democratic terms was particularly impactful. It not only didn't give Democrats a reason to engage more enthusiastically in the election, it left the message playing field open for the GOP to fill the closing months of the elections with issues like the Central American migrant crisis, Ebola and ISIS that ended up causing true harm to the Democratic brand and successfully fired up GOP voters – particularly older white voters who turned out in very large numbers.

Looking ahead to 2016, I think it would be wise for the entire party, but particularly its Presidential aspirants to learn the lesson of Gore 2000 and the 2014 mid-terms: you cannot run away from the President of your party. Doing so leaves candidates with all of the downside of that President and none of the upside. And while many are disappointed with how the President has performed in recent years, the net effect of his policies and of Democratic governance have been well worth trumpeting: strong GDP growth, falling unemployment rates and deficits, soaring stock markets; tens of millions now insured and the health care cost curve being bent; a hugely successful national energy strategy that has lowered fossil fuel prices, expanded domestic production while advancing renewable energy and taking needed steps toward combating climate change; an immigration strategy which has both humanely lifted the threat of deportation from millions of striving undocumented immigrants while ensuring the border is far safer, etc. In his final two years the President can burnish this record through policies focused on the middle class and broad economic growth, successful management of tough foreign policy challenges, completion of Atlantic and Pacific trade deals and needed additional reforms to the immigration system. But to ensure that the public understands all that has been done, the President must become far more energetic in selling his accomplishments to the American people, and bringing other Democrats along with him.

By owning the economic and policy successes of the Obama Era, it also allows Democrats to draw a very stark contrast between the economic policies of the last two Democratic and Republican Presidents. The last two Republican Presidents brought recessions and exploding deficits. The last two Democratic Presidents brought growth and declining deficits. This contrast will be useful as we enter the Presidential season and a whole host of Republican candidates who already sound if they are running for George W. Bush's third term.

GOP Does Not Have A Lot of Ideological Running Room In The Next Congress – It is going to be interesting to see how GOP leaders approach their agenda next year. Given the success of the Democrats on the economy, deficits, health care, energy and climate policy and border security, where exactly does the GOP go that is different from where we already are? Cutting taxes or increasing defense spending as some Republicans have suggested would increase the deficit. Attempts to cut domestic spending beyond what has already been cut have already failed in the Republican led House last year. Repealing the ACA would strip tens of millions of people of their health insurance and increase the deficit. Cut subsidies for renewable energy? Really?

So while we should expect investigations and fights over critical social issues, it is not surprising that the GOP's agenda so far has been modest. Corporate tax reform becomes possible if it is revenue neutral or generates more revenue. Boots on the ground in Iraq? Don't think so. Opposition to an Iranian nuclear deal? Perhaps. Finding common ground on a Middle East strategy in the next two years might be challenging, but it is not clear that the GOP really has an alternative approach at this point.

This leaves me an area where I think we could see significant bi-partisan cooperation – shoring up and modernizing the liberal international order. As we've written before, in a time of great global change America must do more to ensure our values and the system which has produced so much prosperity and avoided great wars prevails. One could imagine the White House and GOP Congress working to pass the nearly completed, geo-politically vital Atlantic and Pacific trade deals; bolstering NATO and the EU in combating the very real Russian threat; assembling a global coalition to end the Ebola epidemic in West Africa and leave behind a better public health care system in the region; along with our partner Mexico, develop a long term strategy to bring greater citizen security and prosperity to Mexico and Central America; and leading a global effort to keep the Internet open and free.

While this kind of broad, strategic partnership is possible, the way the Republicans closed this election makes me concerned about the appetite for global engagement we may see in the new GOP majority. Many of the GOP's ads run in the last few months of the campaign were deeply xenophobic – Ebola, ISIS, border/scary immigrants – and all sorts of combinations of them together. How the GOP pivots from putting up walls to tearing them down will be one of the more interesting issues to watch over the next few years.

The GOP Senate Majority Is Likely To Be Unstable, and Perhaps Short – Running the Senate GOP Conference these next two years will be no easy feat. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell will face challenges from a bigger pool of Tea Partyish hardliners in his conference; struggles with aligning with the even more conservative House; the challenge of having up to 4 members of the conference run for President; and perhaps most importantly, the difficult math of passing anything through the Senate.

Let's look at getting to 60. Assuming the GOP ends up with 53 or 54 Senators next year, they will need to get 6 or 7 Democrats and hold all of their own to pass legislation. Of the 34 Senators up for re-election next year, 24 are GOP held seats, just 10 are Democratic, and only 2 Democrats are likely to face tough races (even these – CO, NV – fare far better for Democrats in a Presidential year). For the Republicans 7 of these 34 seats come in states Obama won twice and are likely to go Dem again in 2016 – FL, IA, IL, NH, OH, PA and WI. Of these 7, 4 – FL, IL, PA and WI – were won with less than 52% of the vote in a high water mark GOP midterm election. Confirming what a tough map the GOP will have in 2016, Republicans will also be defending three states likely to be very competitive next time – AZ, GA, NC. The Senators from these states are simply going to have a hard time consistently aligning with the more conservative part of the conference as they will be facing much more Democratic leaning electorates in their states next cycle.

There really isn't an analogous group for the Republicans to target on the Democratic side. The 2016 potentially vulnerable Dems, Reid and Bennett, are in the leadership and will not be inclined to break with their party. There are only 5 Senators in redder states who might from time to time vote with the Rs – Donnelly, Heidkamp, McCaskill, Manchin, and Tester. So even if the GOP has 54 Senators next year, it is hard to see how McConnell routinely or even occasionally gets to 60. At 53 Senators, it gets harder still.

Pulling against the GOP "gang of 7" and other non-conservative Senate GOPers will not only be a more conservative Senate, but a more conservative House with less need to accommodate Democrats. Legislation coming out the House is likely to be more conservative than what comes from the Senate, making it harder for McConnell to get to 60 to reconcile bills with the House. Certainly one would expect President Obama to be far more aggressive in issuing veto threats early in these legislative fights to put even more pressure in the Senate for Dem heavy Rs and more conservative Dems to oppose whatever comes out of the Republican House Majority.

The Senate map is so favorable to Democrats in 2016 that it will put the Rs on the defensive politically from day one, something that may encourage McConnell's team to be even more cautious of the hard line House than usual. Taken together, it is a bit hard to see how the Republicans can make their possible new found control of Congress anything other than messy. The issue next year will not be what President Obama does – his agenda is well established at this point – but what can this new and potentially unstable Congressional majority do.

Our System Needs Reform – In just these past four elections the US political system will have given one Party its biggest back to back majorities at the Presidential level in 70 years, while also stripping it of both Houses of Congress. From a political science/design standpoint, it is frankly hard to produce election results like this in a political/electoral system even if one tried.

And it gets worse. In 2012 Democrats won more one than 1 million more votes in the House than the GOP but didn't win the chamber. In 2014, according to the final major national media poll, registered voters favored the Democrats 46-42, but it was a wave for the Republicans. Only 37% of eligible voters

participated in 2014, and less than 10% of all voters were able to participate in a close Federal contests with all that it entails – ads, voter contact, political debate, voting. Results like these should raise legitimate questions about whether our government still has the [“consent of the governed”](#) as just too few people are determining who has control in Washington.

There is so much wrong with the system now – unregulated money, difficulty of voting, an anachronistic Electoral College, an already reactionary small state basis made worse by high concentrations of recent immigrants in a small number of states – for the center-left to not make [political reform](#) one of its highest priorities in the years ahead.

Reinvigorate the Democratic Party – President Obama and his team should leave his fellow Democrats a reinvigorated DNC with a new mission. He should establish a “2024 Project,” one focused on doing what is required for Democrats to roll back recent GOP gains and come out of the next redistricting as the dominant political party in America with majority control in the Senate, House and state houses and legislatures across the country. At the core of this project must be strategies to expand the new majority coalition built in recent years into terrain critical for winning more control in Congress and in the states.

Among the more operational things the DNC should take primary lead on now is recruiting and training a new generation of candidates and operatives needed to beat a new generation of Republicans, expanding and turning out the new majority coalition, and advancing efforts to make it easier for people to vote in every state and locality in the country. A \$50 to \$100m fund should be put aside for a national paid media effort in off-year elections too.

Too many of these important responsibilities have been left to others parts of the center-left ecosystem. It is time for the most important piece of this ecosystem – the Democratic Party itself – to be challenged to fulfill its rightful and vital role as the enterprise charting the future of all Democrats over the next decade.

We will be issuing a separate memo on the Hispanic vote soon.

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