The Democratic Party Identity Crisis.

How identity politics and populism cemented a divide amongst an already fractured party.

By: Tianna White

In 2008, the election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States seemingly signified a new era of unity for the Democratic Party. Obama's calls for 'one America' built a winning coalition upon the support of minorities, millennials and white professionals; <u>working-class whites</u> remaining an important, yet shrinking base of support. Eight years later in 2016, that era seemingly shattered. The election of Donald J. Trump marked a new era in American domestic politics, one in which appeals to populist values claimed its place in American society–– values that have since sparked an identity crisis for the modern day Democratic Party.

In the 2020 Presidential election, the Democratic party united not under its fervent belief in Joseph R. Biden and his policies, but rather under the collective goal of defeating Trump. Initially, strong support––especially among younger voters––for more left-wing candidates such as democratic socialist Bernie Sanders dominated opinion polls during the primaries. Yet, Biden's eventual nomination redirected that energy, channeling progressive support into the popular slogan 'settle for Biden.' Amidst what Biden called 'the battle for this nation's very soul,'

the Democratic party came out victorious, yet notably losing seats in the House and just narrowly gaining control of the Senate. Since Biden's inauguration, however, the focus has shifted. In an era in which identity politics consumes domestic debates while elements of populism––both right wing and left––sweep through the nation, the question arises of whether to appeal to a broad coalition of voters or rather a more progressive, yet passionate base of people. The Democratic party is now grappling with a new challenge: rebuilding a unified party vision amidst its members' deep ideological and generational divides on issues of race and class.

A WINNING COALITION: *From Bill Clinton to Joe Biden*

Embedded in the core of winning an American democratic election is the necessity to build and mobilize a <u>winning coalition</u>: a broad-base group of supporters spanning across different ethnic and socio-economic groups. The necessity for a winning coalition stems from the reality that the electoral college penalizes party support that is concentrated around dense, metropolis areas. Combined with Republican successes in <u>gerrymandering and geographic demobilization</u>, the Democratic party has struggled to build a winning coalition; one cognizant of the electoral system while articulating an appealing, yet broad vision. As modern-day movements such as Occupy Wallstreet and Black Lives Matter sweep the nation, concerns of race and class now dominate Democratic party coalitions.

Democratic presidential candidates have traditionally campaigned on populist undertones, promoting the image that Democrats fight for the working-class while Republicans serve the elites. During his 1992 presidential campaign Bill Clinton separated himself from the promotion of a welfare state, instead promising supporters that he would focus on directly aiding the middle class. In a <u>speech</u> he made in Macomb, a county in the swing-state of Michigan, Clinton told audiences, "I'll help you build the middle class back." Yet, within these appeals to working class peoples Democratic candidates have largely avoided issues of race, especially within the states central to building winning coalitions–– a conscious effort as to not alienate the vast voting-blocs of <u>44% eligible white working class voters</u>. During that same speech made in Macomb county, Clinton directly spoke to ease the racial anxieties of these focus groups, saying "let's forget about race and be one nation again." In 2008, Obama's bid for presidential candidacy proved these same strategies. Knowing that he already had large support from minority voters, he generally designed his campaign to <u>ease racial anxieties</u> and underlying fears that he would value one group at the expense of others. His keynote addresses promoted the notion of 'One America,' and his campaign proved a stunning success. He won the overwhelming support of Black and Hispanic voters, totalling at <u>95% and 66% respectively</u>, and his campaign garnered over half of the votes from the ideological middle, which was more than those gained by his predecessors. Overall, Obama won the support of 43% of white voters, compared to Hillary Clinton in 2016 who won <u>39%</u>.

In 2016, Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign attempted to retain similar levels of the minority vote as seen during Obama, yet Clinton knew she could not automatically assume this support. Much of her campaign focused on returning to issues of race, her grand strategy largely

a reaction to Trump's own rhetoric as she asserted that "Donald Trump has built his campaign on prejudice and paranoia." While Clinton's strategy retained similar minority votes to those of Obama––the Hispanic vote remaining at 66% while the African American vote dropping to 91%––it largely proved to alienate her from the white working class. Her polling numbers amongst white voters without a college degree were significantly lower than Obama's ever were, notably in states such as Ohio and Iowa. Contrastingly, Trump's campaign appealed to the very voters that seemed to despise Clinton. His attempts to foment a culture war precipitated as he denounced political correctness, "trying to convince his voters that they weren't just losing the debates over gay marriage or immigration, but that the elite wanted to banish them as bigots if they even dared to question the prevailing liberal view." Trump shattered traditional notions of Republican ties to the elite, instead turning that narrative on 'Crooked Hillary' as he ran ads depicting her as a wall-street puppet.

Biden's 2020 presidential campaign focused on re-building and mobilizing a winning coalition, specifically targeting key Midwestern states Trump had won over Clinton during the 2016 election. Four years of frustration over the Trump administration meant Biden knew he had the support from minority and younger voters–– evident in slogans to 'settle for Biden.' Though his campaign acknowledged issues of race more than some of his predecessors had, partially a result of the George Floyd protests that swept through the nation in March 2020, it proved a rather pragmatic approach. Biden's moderate stance and rejection of liberal appeals amidst growing left-wing calls to 'defund the police' and 'medicare for all' served to win swing voters. Yet, while Biden may have managed a precarious winning coalition built upon moderate appeals and an overarching mission to defeat Trump, that coalition has since returned to its divisions. In moderate swing states such as Pennsylvania, House representative Conor Lamb noted his hopes that the election was a "wake up call to the left," for many constituents disproved of "the Democratic message when it comes to police in Western Pennsylvania, and when it comes to jobs and energy." Meanwhile, notable leaders of the Democratic left-wing such as representative Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez have voiced caution over the administration, hoping it's not "actively hostile and try to put in appointments that are going to just squash progressives and organizing."

The Impact of Identity Politics

To many Democrats, the struggle to build a winning coalition is largely due to the proliferation of 'identity politics' in modern political spheres, many critics citing Clinton's 2016 loss over her appeals to identity politics and hence her failures to attract white working voters. Identity politics, generally defined as a left-wing political style that centers the interests and concerns of historically marginalized groups, has captured the worldview of many progressive leaning Democrats while becoming a target of criticism for moderates and Republicans. As the Democratic electorate becomes the party of "nonwhites and white racial liberals," white voters in 1996 composing over 75% of the Democratic party compared to 58% in 2017, Democratic candidates have increasingly expressed their support for identity-based issues. On one end, there is a both a moral and strategic sense that in order to reflect the changing democratic

electorate, candidates must appeal to minority voters–– for some of the most important political coalitions are based on race.

Yet, identity politics have made it increasingly difficult to <u>bridge social and cultural divides</u>, generally repelling the support of white working class voters that are key to turning a political coalition into a winning one. As issues transcend beyond topics such as the economy to instead how economic and racial inequality are intertwined, Democrats in general elections are cognizant of the increasing polarization, now <u>faced with the choice</u> to "in essence declare war on other groups to talk about how [minority groups] have been victimized." According to some Democratic elites such as <u>Vice President Kamala Harris</u>, identity politics have been unduly "misused to marginalize legitimate concerns in minority politics," the necessity to address race in today's political climate of cementing importance. While both Republicans and Democrats have played into the culture war of identity politics–– notably seen with Trump and his hostilities towards different racial and ethnic groups––Democrats have lost a consensus on how to navigate issues of race and class. Energy in the Democratic party over the past four years has centered more around 'anti-Trump' rather than a clear vision for America's future, and the party is increasingly struggling to structure issues in a way that appeals to their progressive base without alienating the groups necessary to mobilize a winning coalition.

A Populist Coalition? The Future of the Democratic Party

As Trump's right wing-populist values have seemingly consolidated the Republican party's dogma of beliefs, the Democratic party has witnessed the emergence of its own left-wing populist candidate: self-proclaimed democratic socialist Bernie Sanders. Sanders' bid for the 2016 Democratic nomination posed a greater challenge to Clinton than initially anticipated. Though then just a little-known Senator from Vermont, Sanders' grassroots campaign quickly garnered a passionate base of young voters with his promises of more radical reforms–– most memorably with his advocacy in Medicare for All. During the primaries Sanders narrowly won against Clinton in key states like Michigan and in 2020, Sanders <u>dominated Biden</u> with 57% of the votes from individuals ages 18-44. Sanders' success in both primaries potentially hints at a <u>new era in the Democratic party</u>, one in which party politics rewards ideological radicals and those able to form a zealous 'cult' of support––mirroring the effect Trump has had on the Republican party.

This is not to say, obviously, that Sanders' rise has completely changed the nature of the Democratic party just as Trump has changed the nature of the Republican. In the <u>same exit poll</u> during the Michigan primary, voters aged 45 and older demonstrated a vast amount of support for Biden–– totally at 63%––while turnout from younger voters dropped from 45% in 2016 to 37% in 2020. The party's ultimate push for Biden reflects its continued focus on building a winning coalition composed of older voters and white working class peoples––voters typically more moderate and resistant towards progressive reforms. Yet, the effect that Sanders and other progressive Democrats such as Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez have had on the party's standard bases of support cannot go untried. As the Democratic party confronts issues of race and class amidst its members' deep ideological and generational divides, it is now facing an identity crisis.

Though the party has historically opted to support more conventional-type candidates, it is now plagued with the question: will it continue to aim its winning coalition upon the support of key moderate-leaning groups, or will it drift towards its increasingly progressive base?

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