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Democrats disunited

Once the 'party of the unions', US Democrats have lost touch with the working class

Hannes Alpen chats to American sociologist Norman Birnbaum about the state of the US Democrats, nine months after Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton lost to Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election.

It seems the Democrats haven't yet fully digested their loss at the presidential elections last November. How can they move forward?

The Democrats have yet to come to terms with the new economic reality in America. They need to develop a labour policy appropriate for the twenty-first century.

For a long while, back when trade unions constituted about 30 per cent of the labour force, the Democratic Party was more or less the party of the unions. This has changed. The numerical and political decline of the unions certainly correlates with the terrible results the Democrats achieved in the Rust Belt states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan which handed the 2016 election to Donald Trump. As a matter of fact, Trump's notion of rebuilding America is an idea that's long held traction in the American trade union movement.

It will not be possible to restore America's industrial heartland as production becomes increasingly computerised and robotised. The mid-century industrial working class is not coming back. Promising these people that their jobs will return – as Trump did – is utterly shameful and fraudulent.

Why did the Democrats fail to mobilise these Rust Belt voters?

I think the working class felt that they had nothing more to lose. Jobs were gone; social services were defective. All in all they felt their interests were being ignored by politicians. They felt abandoned.

What's more, there's a cultural conflict ongoing within the Democratic Party. Leading party figures come from elite universities

and lead comfortable lives. They generally constitute a very economically successful and politically powerful group that hasn't been conspicuously attentive to the needs of the working class over the past decades. These elites are seen as 'Europeanised' or cosmopolitan, and out of touch with most of the Rust Belt electorate. Trump effectively exploited this by telling voters that those Democrats are nothing like them. In the 2012 election most people voted for Obama over [Republican candidate] Romney for similar reasons: Romney was a patrician and too distant from the people, whereas Obama seemed like he would do something for the middle class. The opposite perception existed of Trump and Clinton.

Democrats were quite right to back civil rights. For instance, Obama's Department of Justice was very interventionist when it came to the insufficiency, and at times prejudice and racial bias, of local policing.

Defending Medicare [the federal health insurance programme for over-65s] and social security has been a pillar of Democratic politics for decades. Unfortunately, the Democrats too often defend these legacies along [former Democrat president] Harry Truman's slogan of 'don't let them take that away'. They present themselves as guardians of what already exists, rather than builders of what could come.

How can the Democrats win over voters in future elections?

The Democrats need a convincing national economic policy. People need to see that it's going to help them at home in their communities; not in some abstract sense.

Bernie Sanders did well with working class voters and young people because he promised to restore what had always been a central aspect of American egalitarianism: free or economically affordable access to public institutions, including college. Ultimately, the Democrats were unable to produce concrete programmes which could have appealed to the masses. Hillary's few slogans – such as 'Stronger Together' – were rather diffuse and carried little weight with voters.

Has there been a change in the kind of people who vote Democrat?

They've changed in the sense that people are getting older. For instance, Afro-Americans who remember being the first in their families to vote are being replaced by people who no longer have such a direct memory of the party's achievements.

The decline of the unions has affected the party. I used to spend a lot of time with unionists, and I was struck not only by their marvellous human qualities, but also by their political sophistication. The union was to workers and their families a mode of political education and

integration.

So once people no longer had these unions, where did they get politically educated? Through the television and local newspapers, which incessantly propagated right-wing economic myths.

What are the biggest challenges facing the Democrats?

One challenge is the party's ambivalence towards the American 'empire'. Voters have grown tired of American interventionism, and Hillary Clinton did not present a convincing alternative. As Secretary of State she was extremely interventionist and used hawkish language. We must stop intervening and need to include the UN in more decisions.

This interventionism is partly due to the influence of the Israel lobby. They like an interventionist American policy for all kinds of reasons that are supposed to benefit Israel, and the Democratic Party has been remarkably tongue-tied on this matter.

The US has also been Israel's single largest source of political, economic, and military support. We arm them to the teeth. Any diminishing of US patronage of Israel is good for the Middle East, as it will oblige the Israelis to have realistic relations with their neighbours in a situation which is totally untenable. The path of the Democratic Party must first include breaking its ties to our domestic military-industrial complex.

What challenges do you see domestically?

There is an extreme reluctance to engage in a programme of national reconstruction, as some segments of the party do not wish to be marked out as big spenders. The spectre of national debt bankrupting the country – which is preposterous – is used to tarnish their image locally.

Since congressional Democrats run in their own states, with separate social and economic compositions and political conditions, it's difficult to consolidate a single national policy. This was also true under Obama.

I think Obama was a terrific president – so good we did not deserve him. But he was only too aware of the restrictions that meant he couldn't carry out certain national policies.

How should Democrats deal with right-wing populism?

Right-wing populism in the US has several components. The first is a generalised distrust of elites. This is in the DNA of American

democracy. Then there's the fact that American populism is closely connected with racism, the most dreadful of our heritages. In the past, the union functioned as a great force for integration. Everyone belonged to the union, regardless of colour.

There is no compromise with racism or xenophobia. The more one capitulates to it, the less chance one has of initiating universal social programmes. After all, right-wing populists like to maintain that the welfare state belongs to [them alone].

One of the things Democrats can do is claim their party represents American tradition, and that developing the American welfare state part of this national tradition.

At the moment the party on the defensive: it doesn't control any branch of the federal government and, worse yet, it only controls about 15 state governments. The Democrats defend public education, scientific research and climate control; they defend social decency and realism in immigration policy. But defending these things is never enough: the party needs to say what it will do when, and if, it takes office again.

The party has a vast reservoir of younger voters and younger activists and thinkers. It has considerable intellectual fire-power, but it needs to find a way of converting this into day-to-day language that its citizens can respond to, just as they responded to Democratic Presidents, Governors, and Senators in the past.



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