NORTH AMERICA 04.01.2019 | David Leonhardt

The secret to winning in 2020

If they want to win the 2020 US elections, the Democrats need a candidate who can and will run as an economic populist

Young or old? Female or male? White, black or Latino? The first stage of the 2020 presidential campaign — the jockeying stage — is underway, and Democrats are trying to figure out who the ideal candidate is.

They're asking the wrong questions, though. Demographic identity matters much less than people often imagine. Think about it: Would an algorithm meant to produce the ideal candidate have spat out any of the past three presidents — a 70-year-old, orange-haired reality-television star, a law professor with the middle name Hussein or the son of a recent one-term president with the very same name?

There is only one quality — beyond, of course, charisma — that Democrats should demand in their nominee. The Democrats need a candidate who can and will run as an economic populist.

They need a candidate who will organize the 2020 campaign around fighting for the little guy and gal. (And most of the potential Democratic nominees could do so.) It would be a campaign about Republican politicians and corporate lobbyists who are rigging the game, a campaign that promised good jobs, rising wages, decent health care, affordable education and an end to Trumpian corruption.

The country doesn't only need this agenda. It *wants* this agenda. A mountain of evidence shows that populism — the real kind, not the faux Trump version — is the Democrats' most effective political strategy. Yet that evidence often gets obscured by less important issues, like a candidate's race, sex or precise spot on a traditional liberal-conservative spectrum.

I've written several recent columns about what a populist agenda should and shouldn't include, and I'll write more in the coming months. This column focuses on politics, not policy — to make the case that populism

is a winning issue like no other.

It's a populist country

The first big batch of evidence is public opinion: On economic issues, most Americans are decidedly populist.

More than 60 per cent think taxes on upper-income people are too low, according to Gallup. Almost 70 per cent say the same about corporations. A clear majority also favors expanded government health care, more college financial aid, a higher minimum wage and tougher anti-corruption laws.

When these issues come before voters as ballot initiatives, the results are equally clear. Minimum wage increases often pass in a landslide, including in red states like Arkansas, Montana and Nebraska. Expansions of Medicaid also keep passing. In Missouri last month, 62 per cent of voters approved a law to rein in the influence of lobbyists (a law that the state's Republican leaders are now trying to undermine).

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These issues are politically potent because they unite the Democratic coalition and divide the Republican coalition. The Democratic base — including Africans-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos, young college graduates and middle-class women — leans populist, polling shows. But so do the white working-class voters who often swing 21st-century elections.

Democrats still aren't going to win a majority of the white working class. But they don't need to. They just need to avoid getting crushed. When they do that, they win elections.

Populism won in 2018

Whether they were social moderates running in red states or proud progressives in safe districts, many of this year's Democratic House candidates ran similar campaigns. They focused on pocketbook issues, not on Trump. They ran as advocates for working families.

In southern New Mexico, Xochitl Torres Small talked about hard work and grit. In northeast Iowa, Abby Finkenauer's campaign slogan was, 'Fighting for Iowa's Working Families.' In dozens of districts, Democrats

campaigned on protecting people's health insurance.

And most of these candidates won. If Democrats repeat their 2018 performance in 2020, they will win the White House.

A fascinating analysis of the midterms was published a few weeks ago. It focused on the fraction of people who voted for Barack Obama in 2012, Donald Trump in 2016 and a Democratic House candidate in 2018 — that is, the national winners in all three elections.

This group is mostly white, mostly without a college degree and disproportionately rural, according to the analysis, by YouGov Blue and Data for Progress. On social issues, the group's attitudes look pretty Republican. Many of its members think sexism isn't that big of a problem, for instance. They express anxiety about demographic change and favor tighter border security.

These are the sort of voters that some Democrats had written off as irredeemable racists. But that's a terrible mistake.

On economic issues, swing voters look decidedly un-Republican. They are even more populist than loyal Democrats. By a wide margin, they favour free college, a big expansion of Medicare and federal action both to reduce drug prices and to create jobs.

'These voters want leaders who are going to look out for them,' Alissa Stollwerk of YouGov told me. Trump persuaded many voters that he was their ally by running a racially focused campaign. Democrats have already shown they can win back a meaningful share of them by running an economically focused campaign.

Look at recent history

It's not just 2018, either. Populism has fared well as a political strategy over the last generation — a period, not coincidentally, when living standards for most Americans have risen with frustrating slowness.

Trump's populism is a mirage, but many voters believed it in 2016. He was the rare Republican who criticised free trade and seemed to care more about protecting Medicare than reducing the budget deficit. Trump managed to out-populist Hillary Clinton, and it's a part of why he won.

Four years earlier, Barack Obama was the populist candidate. He ran for

re-election casting himself as the defender of working people and Mitt Romney as an out-of-touch rich guy. The 2012 Obama was 'more populist than any major party presidential nominee in decades,' as a column in The Guardian put it. The 2008 Obama, of course, ran against the financial crisis occurring on George W. Bush's watch.

The Democratic president before Obama — Bill Clinton — ran as a populist, too. It's true he also pitched himself as a centrist rather than a liberal. But populism isn't the same as liberalism. Most voters don't tote up all a candidate's policies and try to figure out his or her precise ideology. They care more about the values a candidate projects, and Clinton sold himself as an ally of workers.

He gave the central economic speech of his 1992 campaign at Wharton, the elite business school in Philadelphia — during which he called the school 'a powerful symbol of where our country went wrong.' Take that, fat cats.

We're living in a populist era. The question is who figures out how to thrive in it. In 2016, it was Trump. It doesn't need to be in 2020.

Contrast Bill Clinton and Obama with the Democrats who have lost a presidential election over the last generation: Hillary Clinton, John Kerry and Al Gore. Fairly or not, none of them figured out how to portray themselves as defenders of ordinary families.

Finally, it's worth glancing at other countries where, as in the United States, the middle class has been struggling lately. Populism has also been working, for both good and ill, in many of those places.

In Britain, Brexit was a Trump-like triumph for populist politics. In France, President Emmanuel Macron is foundering because he hasn't focused enough on the working class. Across Europe, alternatives on both the left and right are growing at the expense of establishment parties.

Populism takes very different forms — from odious racism to sensible economics — but there is no other political style consistently succeeding in the Western world right now.

Who's the populist for 2020?

There is more than one form that a Democratic populist can take. Franklin Roosevelt, the most successful populist of the last century, was an aristocrat. Bill Clinton and Lyndon Johnson were hardscrabble Southerners. Barack Obama managed to do quite well with much of the

white working class despite having one big obvious difference from them.

So the need to run a populist campaign in 2020 doesn't point to any specific candidate.

Yes, there are a few for whom populism would come easily, including Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. The same applies to Senator Sherrod Brown. While most Democrats were getting thumped in Ohio this year, his blue-collar style helped him win comfortably.

Then there are other candidates for whom a populist campaign would be a natural outgrowth of their careers. Amy Klobuchar, the Minnesota senator, has focused on the disturbing power of large corporations. Kamala Harris, the California senator, has proposed a huge middle-class tax cut.

But almost every single one of the potential Democratic candidates could run a smart populist campaign. Take Beto O'Rourke. His record in the House was not especially populist. He cast a procedural vote for a trans-Pacific trade deal, for example. Yet his Texas Senate campaign captured the energy of the moment. In campaign ads, his top issues included: 'Get big money out of politics' and 'Jobs for Texans.'

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