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Have The Democrats Devised A 2010 Survival Plan?

The following is a monthly column by Bernie PORN, president of the Lansing-based polling firm of EPIC-MRA.

A recent video message from President Barack **OBAMA** urged several key groups of first-time voters from the 2008 election to participate in the 2010 election thereby continuing the push for change. Translation: vote for Democrats.

I considered that video message to be the first sign of a Democratic 2010 survival strategy.

Then, when I read a memo released on May 6th by Stan **GREENBERG** and Women's Voices, Women Vote Action Fund on "Democracy Corps" letterhead, which was entitled "How To Survive 2010," I knew that my instincts were correct.

Greenberg was the pollster for former President Bill **CLINTON**, and before that conducted surveys and focus group research for Democratic organizations in Michigan beginning in the mid 1980's.

These efforts studied Reagan Democrats and disaffected union members to find out what motivated them to vote for Republican candidates, especially Ronald **REAGAN**.

During that difficult time for Democrats, Greenberg was instrumental in helping Democrats understand what influenced voting preferences of important voter groups.

Greenberg On Avoiding Big November Losses

The Greenberg memo begins by arguing "Democrats need to make substantial progress in the next six months. The basic problem is math." He then notes "independent voters prefer Republicans over Democrats by two to one in congressional trial heats (52 to 26 percent)," and that white blue-collar and senior citizen voters support GOP candidates by similar margins.

These findings reflect many of the same voting patterns we are seeing in our EPIC-MRA statewide surveys in the Michigan race for governor. The Greenberg memo suggests these voter groups could become more competitive as the election nears, but that the kind of improvement needed to avoid political disaster in November may come too late for Democrats to be able to avoid large electoral losses.

Therefore, the key suggestion was to urge Democrats to focus on key voter groups where they could make up much of the numbers they have lost among independent, white blue collar and senior citizen voters. It was clearly suggested that the goal of increasing voter turnout and the margin among unmarried women, younger voters and minority voters could provide Democrats

with a much better opportunity to be competitive in 2010 than wooing the votes of independent voters, white blue collar and white senior citizen voters who thus far are leaning for GOP candidates.

Unmarried Women, Younger Voters and Minorities Key For Democrats

Greenberg calls these key voter groups part of a Rising American Electorate (RAE), which he defined as the voter groups that gave Democrats solid majorities in 2008 and in 2006 to ultimately win congressional majorities, as well as the White House. The problem is that these voter groups do not turn out well in off-year elections when the office of president is *not* on the ballot.

Notwithstanding the historic difficulty of persuading these voters to participate in lower turnout years, this strategy seems to suggest getting these voters motivated to vote by significantly higher numbers may be much easier for the Party of Jefferson than persuading enough independents and white blue collar and senior voters to switch their support from Republican candidates for Congress.

This strategy does seem to be a stunning admission by Democrats; they are not only currently failing to connect with key voter groups that were won by Democrats in 2006 and in 2008, but that these groups have now shifted by large percentages to support Republicans. It suggests a further admission that while the performance of Democrats can and must improve among independents, white blue collar and senior citizen voters, any improvement is not expected to be large enough or timely enough to avert what will otherwise be significant losses in November.

Strategy: Energize Presidential Voters In This Non-Presidential Election

Therefore, the game plan is develop narrative messages that both persuade and attempt to energize those presidential election year voter groups who support Democrats by large margins to do something they have a history of not doing in off-year elections - vote.

Clearly, if independent voters, blue collar and senior citizen white voters are not a part of the equation for victory, Democrats could have a serious uphill battle to avoid an election of potentially disastrous proportions in November, but this new strategy suggests that if they can energize these key supportive groups, which is a big question in my view, they can minimize their losses.

Unmarried Women

Unmarried women make up 25 percent of the population, and if they can be energized to vote in numbers that they do not normally reach in off-year elections, they could help Democrats avoid the kind of losses that could conceivably change control in the U.S. House. The national surveys continue to show that these voters have not yet indicated that they are engaged in the 2010 election by nearly the numbers they would need to show up to make a difference for Democrats, but Greenberg suggests that it may be possible to energize this important group of voters by connecting with them on a few key issues.

According to the census, 65 percent of uninsured Americans are unmarried, but the new health

care law is not getting the kind of support from voter groups included in what Greenberg refers to as the Rising American Electorate, and this is especially true of unmarried women. Indeed, unmarried white women are split on the health care law with 46 percent supporting and opposing it.

However, because unmarried women are much more supportive of Democrats than independent voters, blue collar white voters or white senior citizens, the assumption is that unmarried women will respond to a positive message about how the health care law will indeed help them by providing them with health insurance coverage they have been unable to get.

RAE Voters More Hopeful About the Economy

Unmarried women, younger voters and minority voters [Greenberg's Rising American Electorate] were more vulnerable before the recession and they continue to experience difficulty even as we see signs that the economy is improving nationally. The economic challenges these voters face largely explains their support for Democrats, but polling data also shows that they are showing more optimism about their economic situation and their potential progress in the future.

Lower percentages of these key voters feel that the country is headed in the wrong direction, they think the economy will improve within a year by higher percentages than other voter groups, and, while proposals for middle class tax cuts appeal to independent and other voter groups, these RAE voters support more direct government investments, including investments in education, mortgage relief, pay equity and more direct government funding of job producing projects.

These voters also see a college education as more important to their economic future than other voter groups. They are more hopeful and because of that important distinction, the Greenberg analysis suggests that these voters can be motivated to go to the polls in larger numbers to support Democrats -- that is if a message can be developed that will connect -- but more importantly, it is essential for Democrats to make the attempt because the prospects of success in getting these voters to the polls is far greater than the prospects of persuading independent voters, blue collar whites and white senior citizens to respond to persuasive messages from Democrats.

Independent Voters

In 2008, Democrats received support from independent voters by a 52 to 44 percent majority. They now trail by 52 to 26 percent. White senior citizens favor Republicans by 58 to 32 percent, and married women support Republicans by a 47 to 40 percent plurality, showing the difficult problem Democrats face in November. These groups were much more supportive of Democrats just a year ago. Between the health care debate and a depressed mood about the economy, Democrats have lost a lot of ground, and it is much more so than they should have naturally lost as the majority party following the election of a Democratic president.

If Democratic candidates are unable to change the dynamics among independent voters and be more competitive, they will not be able to improve their position enough by November, regardless of how effective they are in getting younger voters, minority voters and unmarried women to the polls.

Motivating younger voters to participate in off-year elections will be much easier said than done. However, given the data among independent voters both nationally and in Michigan, it is a strategy that is certainly worth trying.

How Michigan Democrats Compare

In Michigan, the Democratic candidates for governor are only narrowly leading among those younger voters who have chosen thus far to participate in the November election, and both House Speaker Andy **DILLON** (D-Redford Twp.) and Lansing Mayor Virg **BERNERO** are running poorly among independent voters, although Dillon is running somewhat better than Bernero thus far.

Until Bernero is better known, it will be difficult to tell how each would comparatively compete in the general election. Dillon is about 20 points better known than Bernero at this time.

A continuing problem for both candidates is that they are not doing as well among Democrats as they must do to have any chance at winning. While they are getting between 60 to 70 percent of the Democratic vote, Attorney General Mike **COX** and U.S. Rep. Pete **HOEKSTRA** (R-Holland) are getting the support of Republicans in the high 70 percent to mid 80 percent range. Again, much of that difficulty can be attributed to lower name recognition for Dillon and Bernero compared to the GOP candidates. With the exception of Sen. Tom **[GEORGE]** (R-Texas Twp.), all of the Republican candidates are better known than either Democratic candidate.

Would it be worthwhile for Democrats to attempt to follow Greenberg's national strategy here in Michigan? Yes, Democrats will need to energize their base and motivate their voters to turn out by larger margins than they have indicated so far, or they have little chance of winning. However, they must also appeal to independent voters, and that will require developing a message designed to contrast the party's approach in addressing Michigan's problems with that of GOP candidates.

However, before a real general election assessment can be made, the two winning nominees must first survive the primary election process, and that will hold our attention at least until August.