

# Moving Left to the Center

BY PAUL STARR

**T**he Democrats are now cursed in three ways that they can overcome only with a new boldness and determination.

Ever since the mid-1990s, we have been writing in this magazine about an “emerging Democratic majority” as a result of demographic and generational change. That support has materialized. Votes from Latinos and other growing minorities, as well as the young more generally, have contributed to Barack Obama’s victories and rising hopes for the future.

But those groups are also the source of the first curse facing the Democrats: Their new majority comes from low-turnout constituencies. When voting participation drops as it typically does in mid-term elections, the decline tends to be especially sharp among minorities and the young. While Republicans are blessed with a reliable base, Democratic turnout depends on their voters’ fluctuating interest and enthusiasm.

The Democrats’ second curse stems from Republican entrenchment in the states and the Supreme Court. The 2010 midterms, dominated by older voters, gave Republicans unified control of key swing states, which they have since used to change voting laws, gerrymander legislative districts, weaken unions, and in other ways keep themselves in office. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court has removed barriers to money in politics and eliminated federal checks on state voting rights’ abuses. The combination may sustain Republican power in Congress and state legislatures at least through the rest

of the decade and give historic importance to the 2020 election, which will affect redistricting after the decennial census that year. It’s a common pattern: Those who hold power based on past majorities often use it to entrench themselves when their future grows uncertain, and the Republicans are doing exactly that in the states and the courts.

The third curse afflicting the Democrats results largely from the preceding two: The party lacks the necessary power to deliver on promises of economic revival and social justice to the groups whose enthusiastic support it needs. Republican control of the House has stymied the Obama administration on economic policy and even on immigration reform. The Supreme Court’s decisions on campaign finance also make the Democrats more dependent than ever on fundraising among the wealthy.

Even if Democrats had a free hand and the willingness to use it, the economic challenges would be difficult. Throughout the advanced economies, growth rates have been slowing and inequality has been rising for 40 years as a result of structural changes mainly due to technology and globalization. With every recession since 1980, recoveries have taken longer. But national policies do make a difference, and even when Democrats cannot carry out a program on behalf of working people, they need to advocate policies that make as loud and stark a difference as possible with those of the Republicans.

Call this approach “moving left to the center.” Obama’s belated emphasis on raising the minimum

wage and increasing overtime pay are good examples of the approach. Taxing the 1 percent to finance broadly distributed benefits also fits this description. If the Democrats are going to convince their supporters it is worth the trouble to vote, they need to draw unambiguous distinctions on economics with Republicans.

**What used to be centrist only seems populist now.**

Such policies will predictably be described as class warfare. But, to use a well-worn phrase, this is about saving capitalism from the capitalists. The objective is actually to get back to an income distribution more like the level that prevailed in the Eisenhower administration. The entire political and legal spectrum has been moved so far to the right that what used to be centrist only seems populist. The purpose of moving left to the center is ultimately to move the center back closer to where it used to be.

In highlighting the Democrats’ three curses, I don’t mean to suggest any reason to envy the Republicans’ position. Gallup recently published two analyses of age and politics: One claimed that the elderly have “realigned” with the Republicans, while the other argued that the young have moved further

toward the Democrats. That divergence will help Republicans in 2014, but they should be nervous about its long-term implications.

The shift among the young, the Gallup data show, does not stem only from the growing numbers of Latinos and nonwhites, up from 29 percent to 45 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds between 1995 and 2013. Young non-Latino whites have also shifted toward the Democrats. Since 2006, Gallup reports, Democrats have averaged an 18-point edge among young adults overall (though some data on the youngest of that group suggests recent slippage).

Meanwhile, over that same period, seniors have become more Republican. But no group depends more than the aged on federal expenditures that the GOP is determined to slash. Routinely, Republicans criticize Obama and the Democrats for failing to cut Medicare and Social Security and the next day run TV ads warning seniors that Obama and the Democrats are cutting Medicare and Social Security. That gambit may work when Republicans are out of power, but if they have to govern, they will need to choose between the ideological and demographic parts of their base.

In the next few elections, the Democrats’ three curses may prevent them from reaping the full advantages of generational and demographic change. But in creating a political future, it is better to be cursed with youth than blessed with age. With a little courage, Democrats should eventually be able to turn their rising prospects into a governing majority. ■