What Is the Democratic Party Base?

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As the midterm election approaches and Democratic strategists and politicians seek to limit the likely Republican victory, one of the major themes that will continue to emerge is that the Democrats need to mobilize their base. While the Republican base is being activated by Tea Party and other activists, the Democratic base has been discouraged by the relatively modest accomplishments of the Obama administration as well as the failure of the administration to do things which might excite the base and renew their enthusiasm for the president and his party.

This view, while not exactly profound, is somewhat obviously true. The problem confronting the Democratic Party, not just with regards to this election, is that it is not clear what that base is. For many, the Democratic base includes African Americans, Latinos, gays and lesbians, young voters, union members and women. These voters combine for about 70% of the electorate, so obviously they are not all the base. Base voters might be better identified as voters from these groups who support the Democratic Party. This, however, is both tautological and of little strategic value.

Having a better sense of who represents the party's base is important for strategist and for the party once it is in office. In 2008, for example, the only groups who voted for Obama by a margin of 2-1 or better, a good measure of a true demographic base, were African Americans (95%), Latinos (67%), voters under 29 years old (66%), Jews (78%), gays and lesbians (70%). Interestingly, union members only voted 60% for Obama, meaning that among white union members it was probably closer to 50%.

In 2004, which was a much closer race, only African Americans (88%), Jews (74%), and gays and lesbians (77%) supported John Kerry by a margin suggesting that they were part of the Democratic base, as support fell off among voters under 29 (46%) and Latinos (53%). Patterns in most recent elections have looked more like 2004 than 2008.

The Democratic Party's sense of itself and the reality of who votes for the party are somewhat different. The only ascriptive identity-based groups that reliably vote Democratic, at least at the national level, are Jews, gays and lesbians and African Americans. African Americans make up by far the biggest and most loyal of these groups, although there is some obvious overlap between the groups. Other groups such as Latinos, women, young voters and the like may, in most elections, trend Democratic, but they are not consistent parts of the demographic base. Some of these categories, such as youth and women as well as union members and lower income voters, cast a majority of votes for Democrat candidates, but this is, in many cases, largely due to the presence of African Americans in all these groups.

African Americans are the biggest and most loyal part of the Democratic base. Gays and lesbians are less numerous than African Americans, but are also an important part of the base. Jews are too few in number to have a comparable role in the party. The rest of the Democratic base is
ideological, not ascriptive, in nature. Progressives, or liberals, are the other major Democratic Party base. These voters may be motivated by anti-war sentiment, a desire for more progressive domestic politics, civil rights, the environment or other issues.

This creates a quandary for the leaders of the party because they have allowed liberal to become a bad word in American politics. Few Democratic leaders push back when Republicans make cracks about Chablis-sipping, Prius-driving liberals, thus allowing their base to be inaccurately portrayed as wealthy, elite and out of touch. Similar epithets are occasionally thrown around during Democratic primaries, although rarely with great success. It is not clear why the Party has allowed this situation to evolve. Social liberals and progressives who may, in fact, prefer wine to beer and believe in driving more fuel efficient cars contribute a great deal of money, vote Democratic far more solidly than, for example, white union members and are more numerous than one might think.

Unfortunately, this attitude has also been seen at the highest levels of the Obama administration, most strikingly by Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel who has referred to liberal activists as "f#%&ing retarded." Unfortunately, this does not seem to be just an isolated and unfortunate comment as White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs has made similarly disparaging remarks about the party's liberal activists. While it is possible to craft an argument as to why the administration has done so few things for the base, it is far less clear why so many senior administration officials feel compelled to make these kinds of nasty comments about one of their party's two biggest constituencies without whom the Obama presidency would never have been possible. More importantly, it is not smart politics. Confusing swing voters for the base and disparaging, often gratuitously, the base is not the path to electoral victory, but it seems to be the path down which the Democratic Party may again be going.