Brand New Dems?

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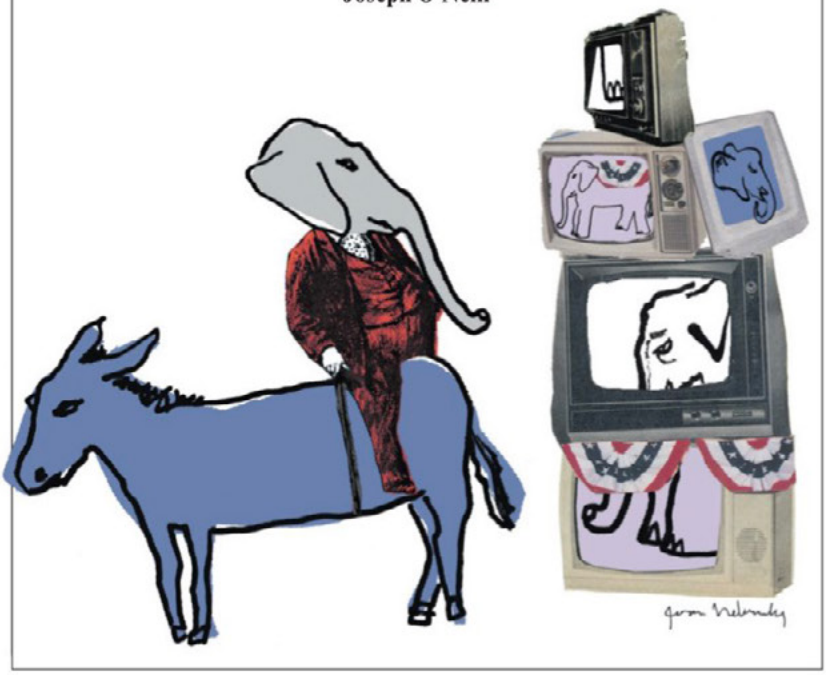

In November, when the worst of the coronavirus pandemic may be behind us, Americans will decide whether a Democrat, Joe Biden, or a Republican, Donald Trump, should be trusted to lead the country into a highly uncertain future. Most people have already made up their minds. But even in a time of partisan polarization, there persists a small demographic of persuadables—the low-information, temperamentally apolitical, ideologically squishy voters who are responsible for fluctuations in presidential approval polls. The perceptions of these voters is the subject of an intense public relations battle between Democrats and Republicans.

You might think that Biden has the upper hand. Surely it cannot be hard to persuade Americans to accept two essential propositions: that Trump and his Republican allies have gravely mishandled the coronavirus pandemic, causing untold death and hardship that could have been avoided; and that Biden, not the corrupt and clueless Trump, should be trusted to lead the economic recovery. Surely the chickens will come home to roost. The problem is that they won't, unless they're rounded up and forced into their coop. Republicans have long been better at this kind of work than Democrats. This is because Democrats are terrible at "messaging."

"Messaging" refers to two separate but interrelated matters. The first is campaign messaging. That's a short-term effort. Its goal is to win the election at hand. Campaign messages rely on TV ads (to win over persuadables in battleground markets) and social media (to excite the base and infiltrate your opponent's information community). They are largely the responsibility of the candidate, and they are most effective when they define the stakes of the election in accordance with the candidate's strengths.

Biden, to the extent that he is visible at all, is terrible at campaign messaging. He doesn't connect well with his supporters, many of whom minimize their exposure to him for fear of demoralization. Nor does he connect well with persuadable independents. With more than 60,000 American pandemic deaths to date and nearly 30 million jobs lost or furloughed, Biden could frame the election around the critical concerns of ordinary Americans. Nope. In April he devoted two of his biggest ads to defending himself against Trump's accusations that he is dangerously soft on China and its role in the pandemic. Republican strategists, terrified of substantive electioneering, have decided that Trump's best bet is precisely to lure Biden into an esoteric, anachronistic, and xenophobic fight about who will stand up to China. Biden has taken the bait. Even by the standards of easily rattled Democratic politicians, his is a remarkably rapid surrender of rhetorical ground.

Trump was able to spook Biden in part because of the second kind of messaging—party branding. This kind of messaging occurs day-in, day-out, regardless of whether there's an election imminent, and it never stops. Its aim is to make party designation a durable asset for candidates—not only for presidential elections but for the countless other elections that color the political map red or blue. Republicans are good at party branding. Democrats are not, to put it mildly, and thereby cede deep structural advantages to the GOP.

Biden was afraid to look weak on China because Americans have a built-in view of the GOP as the party that does a better job of handling national security. This perception—a six-point advantage in recent polls—makes a significant difference when elections are decided by one or two points. It's not only Trump who will invoke the Yellow Peril. In a messaging memo that recently came to light, Republican Senate candidates are forcefully advised to "attack China" in relation to the coronavirus crisis. These candidates, too, are exploiting a partisan brand advantage on "national security"—a concept with powerful connotations of strength, patriotism, and fear of the other.

How on earth is that advantage possible? The Republican administration of George W. Bush failed to prevent the September 11 attacks, ignoring warnings about the danger posed by al-Qaeda. Then, under false pretenses, it started a war of regime change in Iraq that resulted in the rise of ISIS, the near-destruction of Syria, and a refugee crisis that shook the global political order. The current Republican administration has rapidly undermined NATO; poisoned relations with Ukrainian, South Korean, and Kurdish allies; worsened the climate crisis; and fostered the authoritarian interests of Russia, Iran, Syria, Turkey, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia at the expense of America's long-established relationships and strategic goals. As for the GOP–Russia scandal ("Trump–Russia" is an inadequate term) and the undue influence of a hostile Russian leader over a Republican president who is obviously temperamentally unfit to be the commander-in-chief—the damage caused and the world-historical risks created are scarcely amenable to conventional description.

Bill Clinton's administration, meanwhile, expanded the NATO alliance while staying on good terms with Russia; forced the Haitian junta to step down; halted genocidal Serbian expansionism; helped bring peace to Ireland; and started no wars. Barack Obama started no wars, killed Osama bin Laden, established the United States Cyber Command, and made effective nuclear weapons deals with Russia and Iran. He did involve the US in a calamitous military intervention in Libya, but that did not result in a long-term military engagement. The Obama-Biden administration dealt effectively with two pandemics, and its National Security Council produced a sixty-nine-page playbook to prepare the Trump administration for future pandemics. Over the course of sixteen years the only real threat to American domestic security created by a Democratic president was, ironically, the Obama administration's decision to do little as the Republican Party entered into a de facto (and ongoing) electoral alliance with Russia.

So how has the GOP emerged with a superior national-security reputation? The answer has to do with brand. The concept has long been embraced by the corporate world. Here's David Ogilvy, the famous adman, in his classic *Ogilvy on Advertising* (1983), which was written about a quarter-century before mass use of the Internet:

> Why do some people choose Jack Daniel's, while others choose Grand Dad or Taylor? Have they tried all three and compared the taste? Don't make me laugh. The reality is that these three brands have different *images* which appeal to different kinds of people.

Images, or symbolic attributes, and their cultural and emotional associations determine the value and meaning that we attach to a product and its maker. In *The Brand Gap* (2005), Marty Neumeier writes that when assessing a product consumers rely heavily on their "gut feelings." They unconsciously ask themselves:

> What kind of people buy it? Which "tribe" will I be joining if I buy it? . . . And finally, who makes it? Because if I can trust the maker, I can buy it now and worry about it later. The degree of trust I feel towards the product, rather than an assessment of its features and benefits, will determine whether I'll buy this product or that product.

How did you feel about being offered the insights of Ogilvy and Neumeier? Were you impressed by their corporate credentials, or did you think it dubious or déclassé to take seriously the pronouncements of businessmen writing books to be consumed over the course of a transatlantic flight? Either way, you were responding to their brands as constituted in your perception. Here's a very different writer, Walter Benjamin:

> What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.

The fiery pool matters. Image matters. Political parties are not exempt from this reality. Like manufacturers of whiskey or wristwatches, they're making promises about how the future will turn out if you buy what they're selling. Just as you don't understand how a wristwatch works, you may not be able to understand or evaluate the technicalities or merits of a particular promise. Voters who are especially informed about the Green New Deal might not have a grasp of modern monetary theory. Almost nobody with a strong opinion about NAFTA could identify the optimal tariff formula or how to measure export supply elasticities. You have little choice but to trust the promisor—which means choosing which politician, or party, you will trust. To a significant degree that choice will be based, as trust always is, on your gut feeling. It's hard to say exactly what gut feelings are, but everyone from Pierre Bourdieu to Sean Hannity to Roland Barthes agrees that they're real and that they're socially conditioned.

The irony is that essentially Marxist insights into culture—into the operations of cultural capital and coded meaning—have been best understood and deployed by the right. This has been consequential. Let's take perceptions of economic competence. Every Republican administration from Reagan onward has overseen a recession, and every Democratic administration has overseen a strong recovery and an economic boom. Do Americans trust Democrats more to do a good job with the economy? On the contrary: the GOP enjoys a durable advantage, recently at eight points. The pandemic may agitate sentiments and approval numbers, but even in the chaotic era of President Trump, Americans irrationally trust in the GOP's longstanding image as the party of practical, "fiscally conserva-

tive" businessmen who know how to run things efficiently and profitably.

The concept of brand is increasingly accepted in academic circles as a productive way to think about politics and politicians. But there are still, according to professors Christopher Pich and Bruce I. Newman in the *Journal of Political Marketing*,

> very few pragmatic models—frameworks that can be used by political brands to assess their identity, image, reputation or position that will ultimately support the development of strategy and political brand management.

In other words, there are no branding handbooks for political operatives in the way there are for businesspeople. There are books about effective political language—for example, the GOP consultant Frank Luntz's *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (2007)—but these largely focus on messaging for campaigns, not on the question of how to build a lasting party brand. Corporations have long understood the importance of managing the social and cultural meaning of their products. They don't think of a brand as an analytic tool but as an actual thing—an intangible asset, capable of being valued by accountants, that can make or break a company's fortunes. The stakes are no different for political parties.

What are Democrats doing about this? Very little, so far as one can tell. For years, their party-branding strategy, to the extent that one existed at all, has been to rely on the personal qualities of the president, or the quadrennial presidential nominee, to confer brand value on the party's other candidates: the "coattails" effect. Even someone as charismatic and competent as President Obama couldn't make that work after the 2008 election. When the White House is occupied by a Republican, Democratic branding is left even more to chance. A miscellany of liberal personages (the likes of Nancy Pelosi, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Chuck Schumer, Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, John Lewis) serve as the faces of the party while they pursue their differing political and messaging agendas. From the point of view of branding, the Democratic Party is a mess.

Republicans, by contrast, understand the importance of party branding. They understand that favorable generic perceptions are crucial to the success of their candidates. As a result they are highly disciplined and highly aggressive communicators who notoriously stick to their partisan "talking points." When Obama was president, the economy was always a "disaster." When Trump became president, the same economy was instantly touted as an "amazing" triumph. This cohesion had an effect: within a month of Trump's moving into the White House, Americans held their most positive opinion of the US economy in a decade.

One response to this might be: Never mind. The important thing is to beat Trump in November, and the party brand, even if it's embodied by Biden, is strong enough for that purpose. Is it, though? Americans are desperate for work and income, and that desperation will only grow. On April 23, a Morning Consult/Politico poll found that, on the questions of whom Americans trust to handle the economy and jobs, Trump led Biden by nine and seven points, respectively. Trump was more trusted by five points to handle the economic recovery after the pandemic. Even if the GOP continues to screw things up and Democrats continue to legislate and govern sensibly, there is every chance that the GOP will emerge from the current upheaval with its economic reputation intact.

Even if Biden prevails, it cannot be assumed that cherished goals—on economic recovery, on health care, the climate, taxes, social justice—will be more or less achievable by him, that Republicans will acknowledge the progress made, and that perceptions of the Democratic Party will correspondingly flourish. It is sometimes suggested that the moment of reckoning will finally arrive for the Republican Party—that its corrupt, incompetent, and lawless extremism, combined with unfavorable demographic and cultural shifts, will cause the party to implode. Here's the problem: none of that will happen. It is the Democratic Party that faces a loss of credibility and the risk of implosion—even if Trump is defeated.

Our democracy doesn't work anymore. The Republican Party is intent on illiberal one-party rule and it doesn't tolerate Democrats exercising power, even if it would benefit the American people. If, as seems likely, Republicans hold the Senate, a President Biden will struggle to pass any significant piece of legislation or make any significant judicial appointment, especially to the Supreme Court. He will struggle to pass legislation to fix the economy or deal with the effects of the pandemic. Politically, his major job will be, first, to ensure that the Republicans, and not the "Do Nothing Democrats," are blamed for what will be a historically impotent administration; and second, to encourage a very frustrated, economically damaged Democratic base to keep faith with the party and make one more push to flip the Senate in the 2022 midterms. That won't be easy. Moreover, as Michael Tomasky has pointed out, even if Democrats gain control of the White House and both chambers of Congress, ideological factionalism could threaten the viability of the party.*

Either way, a crisis of trust—of brand—lies ahead for the Democratic Party. Democrats need to start thinking about this now if they want to succeed in the 2022 midterms and beyond. Good branding strategy isn't salvation, of course. It must form part of a broader scheme for chronic winning that involves sustained grassroots organizing. But the more goodwill a party enjoys in the eyes of the public and of its base, the easier grassroots organizing will be. Political scientists often say that elections are determined not by campaigns so much as by "fundamentals"—the economy, incumbency, demographics, voting rules, and so forth. The comparative brand strength of the political parties is an intangible fundamental. The challenge, for the Democratic Party, is to turn the (D) designation into a resilient asset and the (R) designation into a resilient liability. What can Democrats do to make something like that happen?

A winning Democratic Party brand strategy would have two parts: a strategy for increasing trust in the party, and a strategy for diminishing trust in the GOP. Let's deal with the latter first.

For years, it has been pretty clear what (R) purports to stand for. The GOP website states, with characteristically proprietorial and accusatory undertones, "VALUES: Our country should value the traditions of family, life, religious liberty, and hard work." Although the overall favorability of the GOP has since 1992 tended to lag behind that of Democrats, Republicans have led Democrats for about ten years in the matter of keeping the country safe and prosperous. Democrats, meanwhile, are viewed more favorably on health care, the environment, diversity, and education. You could say that people prefer Democrats in general but trust Republicans more with their most essential concerns. Whatever the truth of poll results, the Republican Party's brand has been strong enough to enable it to more or less dominate the federal government, including the Supreme Court, for the last twenty years. Its ascendancy at the state level has been even more pronounced.

There is, however, a chink of light for Democrats. Perceptions of the GOP have become closely convergent with perceptions of its leader, Trump. "Trump" is a weak, brittle brand.

For a start, it's short-term. "The party of Trump," however potent, is transitory. When Trump leaves the scene, the GOP will find itself stuck with an identity and raison d'être that will have lost its basic logic. (It's true that dynastic fantasies abound, but neither Don Jr. nor Ivanka Trump has their father's unique appeal and dominance.) Second, Trumpism has made explicit the GOP's hatred of, rather than disagreement with, people who oppose it. Of course, partisan disparagement has long been a Republican tactic. The word "liberal" became such an effective term of abuse that by the 1990s even many liberals were embarrassed by it. Belittlement signals solidarity to the base, conveys the impression of Democrats as weaklings and illegitimates, and tacitly asserts the über-legitimacy of Republican ideology and interests. But before 2016 the ideological viciousness of the GOP—its abhorrence of minorities, of "coastal elites," of the poor—was obscured by a certain corporate deportment, talk of "compassionate conservatism," and fables of market forces. Trump has changed that. The Republican Party is now visibly and authentically aligned with racism, vulgarity, sexism, and brutality. That may excite its base, but a lot of Americans don't like it. That's a big problem for the GOP, which has long based its marketing on "values."

The most vulnerable part of the Trump–GOP brand, however, may not be how Republicans comport themselves but what they do when in power. The much-touted great economy has crashed—and in any case it was essentially the Obama economy plus greatly increased deficits, plunging industrial production, trade chaos, and enormous farming bailouts. Our national security is shockingly compromised by the corrupt influence of foreign despots and the disastrous federal and gubernatorial mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic. Our energy policy is owned by fossil fuel interests. To cap it all, the Republican Party is bent on undermining the American commitment to the rule of law and fair elections. Registered voters approved of Senator Mitt Romney's impeachment vote to convict Trump by eleven points.

The current Republican "product" is historically terrible. At this moment of liberal outrage and GOP brand instability, Democrats have an extraordinary opportunity to cement in the minds of Americans that Democrats can be trusted to govern and Republicans cannot.

The United States doesn't have an electoral system, such as proportional representation, in which lots of parties compete for power. (It isn't, as Neumeier puts it in his 2007 book *Zag*, a "cluttered" market.) Our system is dominated, pretty much always and everywhere, by two parties. In this sense it's comparable to corporate sectors in which two competitors have an enormous market share and as a consequence engage in hostile, or comparative, marketing. (See, for example, Coke vs. Pepsi, DISH vs. DirecTV, Miller Lite vs. Bud Light.) They do it because each brand can increase its market share only at the expense of the other. The same logic applies to Democrats and Republicans.

Republicans make it their business to wage a permanent war of partisan defamation. It has been very effective. Recall what happened to the Democrats after they took over from the tremendously unpopular Republican administration of George W. Bush: they got destroyed in the 2010 midterms even though they had introduced a historic health care expansion, restored financial stability, saved the auto industry, and turned the economy around. It was bizarre—as if the tenant who'd wrecked a property and hadn't paid his rent had persuaded the landlord to let him back in and evict the exemplary new tenant who'd just fixed the place up. It happened because the Republicans consistently held the Democratic administration responsible for the effects of the Republican Recession (as it could have been, but never was, called) and because Democrats declined to market their accomplishments in partisan terms, presumably betting that their accomplishments would be self-evident to the fair-minded, supposedly post-racial American voter.

This morbid dynamic—Republicans break things, Democrats fix them, Republicans win even more power—won't change unless Democrats commit to doing what Republicans do: systematically diminishing the standing and credibility of the other party.

A negative brand strategy would involve, first, a master narrative; and second, messages that express and amplify the master narrative. Pepsi's narrative is that its cola tastes better than Coke's. The "Pepsi Challenge" ads are its messages.

The Democratic story about the GOP would be designed for a particular audience. The audience isn't the Democratic base, which already has a strongly negative perception of the GOP. Nor can it be the Republican

*See Michael Tomasky, "The Party Cannot Hold," *The New York Review*, March 26, 2020.

base, whose gut feelings are fixed. The audience for negative branding is squishy voters who occasionally check the (R) box, which they associate with competence and patriotism. Currently, that audience may be smaller than usual, but it is crucial. We're talking, as always, about winning at the margins and winning for years. Democrats want marginal Republican voters to feel that they can't trust the Republican Party—not anymore. There's something off about those guys.

There's your master narrative, by the way: Republicans can't be trusted anymore. "Anymore" is important, because your audience may have a history or culture of trusting them. The nature of your audience also dictates that your messaging can't consist of trashing the other side. That would backfire. Your messaging goal is simply to make your audience feel uncomfortable about what (R) now stands for.

Here's a case study. On the morning of January 12, the Republican president published a tweet in which he called the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, "Crazy Nancy." That day, George Stephanopoulos asked Pelosi to comment. She replied, "It's Sunday morning, I'd like to talk about some more pleasant subjects than the erratic nature of this president of the United States. But he has to know that every knock from him is a boost." Later she added:

> So again, I don't like to spend too much time on his crazy tweets, because everything he says is a projection. When he calls someone crazy he knows that *he* is. Everything he says you can just translate it back to who he is. Let's be optimistic about the future, a future that will not have Donald Trump in the White House one way or another.

Pretty good, right? Now imagine if Pelosi had said something like this:

> It's very unfortunate. It's what the Republican Party has turned into. I'm not sure what has happened to them. It's very sad for our country. A lot of folks used to look up to people in the Republican Party, used to trust them to do what was right for Americans—to do their job. But that's all changed. Their values have changed radically. Americans are asking, "What's happened to the Republican Party?" I can't answer that. But I can tell you one thing: Americans will have their say in November.

Pelosi's actual response was impressive: it showed her to be a calm, dignified grownup, and it favorably differentiated her from Trump. But going after Trump by name and criticizing his personal attributes has little value so far as partisan branding goes: in fact, by positioning Democrats as the alternative to *Trump*, by positioning Trump and not the GOP as the problem, Pelosi absorbed the provisionality of the Trump brand into her own party's brand. The imaginary Pelosi response, by contrast, would tell the brand story: Americans can't trust the *Republican Party* anymore. What's relevant about the president's misconduct is that it's *Republican* misconduct. Americans are right to be worried about the *Republican Party*.

It would be a problem for GOP strategists if every time Trump tweets, Democrats from across the ideological spectrum respond in unison, in a tone that's more in sorrow than anger, that the Republican Party has lost its values. Nor would this messaging tactic be confined to presidential tweets. Republican politicians say and do horrible things every day. With a clearly understood negative brand strategy, Democratic officials would be able to plug into their basic narrative in response to every new datum of right-wing viciousness or incompetence. Hundreds of gun extremists are occupying Richmond, Virginia, on Martin Luther King Day? Easy: "I have lots of conservative friends. They're all asking, 'What has happened to the Republican Party?'"

This communication structure is applicable to the biggest issues, too. Take the impeachment trial:

> The Republican president was caught red-handed trying to sabotage the election. Now Republican senators have sabotaged the impeachment trial. Americans see what's happening. They get that Republicans will do anything to hold onto power. They're asking themselves: Can Republicans be trusted with power?

There's more to be said, yes—and indeed if you're a Democrat on Twitter and you're communicating with your base, it is your duty to reflect what your base is thinking and feeling. But when squishy conservatives are listening and watching—almost 40 percent of Republicans get their information from sources other than Fox News—they must hear the same message again and again and again.

In addition to the basic narrative, you adopt two subnarratives that weaken the GOP's most consequential brand advantages with your audience: national security/patriotism, and the economy. Democrats should have one, maximum two, repeatable messages that incidentally take ownership of the "America" concept—let's say, "Republicans always crash the American economy" and "This new Republican Party can't be trusted to keep the country safe." In *Words That Work*, Luntz shows how such messages must be approached with great care: Does "crash" or "wreck" work better? Is it more effective to talk about "our national security" than "keeping the country safe"? Just imagine the hole the GOP would now find itself in if these narratives were already in place.

If Democrats start repeating direct statements that weaken trust in the GOP, these ideas would also influence media coverage of the latest news. It's a common, and accurate, complaint that the mainstream media (which a lot of squishy voters watch) fail to acknowledge the Republican threat to our democracy. But the media takes its cues from the parties. When Republicans talk nonstop about Benghazi, that fabricated issue becomes a mediated reality. Conversely, if Democrats fail to assert, explicitly and repeatedly, that the Republican Party *as such* is unfit for power, how can it expect TV journalists to broach the issue?

When, at some point in the future, the GOP tries to distance itself from Trumpism, Democrats should already have affixed in people's minds that the GOP, not Trump, is the problem. What Democrats cannot do, at any point, is help the GOP rehabilitate its own brand. That sounds crazy—why would a party do that?—but Joe Biden appears intent on precisely this course of action. Currently there is an almost complete absence of will within the Democratic Party to *strategically* diminish the GOP's reputation.

This lack of will has several strands. First, there are powerful senior Democrats—Senator Dianne Feinstein, for example, and Representative Richard Neal—who came of age when backslapping cross-party legislative compromise was normal, and for whom negative partisan branding would be an alien and disagreeable concept. Second, many Democratic politicians have risen primarily because they are good at fundraising, not because they are talented partisan communicators—Senator Chuck Schumer, for example. They would struggle with negative messaging even if they supported the concept and could set aside tacit loyalties to corporate or special-interest donors. Third, there are the younger, more leftist members whose idealism and ambition make the Democratic establishment, rather than the GOP, the target of their efforts.

Fourth, and fundamentally, the Democratic brand has long involved a refusal to engage in hostile partisan rhetoric, the better to convey a high-minded focus on facts and policies.

The republic, however, finds itself in extremis. The Democratic base expects its elected politicians to do something—specifically, whatever it takes to win elections. Disciplined messaging has never been the forte of Democrats, it's true. But that's no longer acceptable.

What is to be done? Very simply, we need to see a negative branding operation complete with strategists, writers, and messengers. The only organization that appears equipped to manage this is the Democratic National Committee. The nearest thing it has to a branding operation is its War Room. Its communications strategy—Trump is the villain—is confirmed by a quick scroll through @DNCWarRoom's tweets: almost every tweet mentions Trump and how awful he is. The audience is clearly the Democratic base. The intention is to let them know that the DNC shares their outrage. This presumably helps with fundraising and with 2020 electioneering. But it doesn't advance the DNC's medium- or long-term goals, because the actual villain is the GOP. The War Room is acting like a Battle Room—trying to conquer the nearest hill. Democrats need to conquer the land.

Whether it's located in-house or outsourced or a mixture of both, a permanent negative branding campaign is feasible. Much thornier is the question of how to brand the Democratic Party itself. While it may be desirable for the DNC to organize an anti-GOP branding operation, a similar initiative directed at shaping perceptions of the Democratic Party would almost certainly be met with suspicion and rejection. The DNC has its own brand issues: a lot of Democrats don't trust it and, not unrelatedly, they don't trust the Democratic Party. How can that be changed?

A brand strategy for the Democratic Party must reckon with three audiences: squishy Republicans and squishy Democrats; the party base; and those on the left, often younger voters, who vote (D) reluctantly or not at all. The complexity of the market is aggravated by an irremediable structural problem. Large portions of the party's supporters have little in common with one another—socially, racially, culturally, economically, ideologically. In the marketing world, this problem is called audience fragmentation. If you're trying to create a coherent party identity, the diversity of voters that the Democratic Party so commendably attracts is daunting.

Logic suggests that the Democratic brand could be a Janus brand. That is, it would offer one face to the audience of apolitical types (including the media), and another face to the party faithful. This isn't ideal, but it's what the GOP did until Trump took over. It presented a façade of reassuring "adults" to the world at large and, by its media proxies (Fox News, talk radio, etc.) and by dog-whistling, it communicated something much more tribal and extreme to its base. That's going to be difficult for the Democratic Party to replicate. Democrats, because they are fragmented, have diverse sources of political information and diverse priorities. As for dog-whistling, that only works if you've already gained the trust of your supporters—if they already believe that you'll deliver for them when you have power. ("Promises Made, Promises Kept" is a current GOP slogan.) That level of trust simply doesn't exist among supporters of the Democratic Party, wherever they may be situated in the "big tent." The party's brand is too weak.

The most obvious way for the Democrats to successfully position themselves, across their many audiences, would be by passing a universally popular piece of legislation that is strongly and durably associated with the party, as Social Security once was. This would require a transformative initiative—on health care, say, or on green energy—that not only comes to fruition but is touted in partisan and popularizing terms. The Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) was flawed on both of these counts: it didn't contain the public option, which disappointed a lot of people; and, calamitously, Democratic politicians were embarrassed, fearful, and apologetic about a policy initiative that Republicans loudly objected to. This was irrational as well as spineless. Republicans loudly object to anything Democrats do.

But transformative legislation is never easy. There's always turbulent political opposition, and to overcome that you need supporters who stand by their party as well as party leaders who stand by their supporters. For Democrats, it's a catch-22: in order to do the big things that would get more people to trust the party, the party needs more people to trust it. Is there some way out of this impasse?

In *The Brand Flip* (2015), Neumeier summarizes recent thinking about branding. Formerly, he argues,

> the real power lay with the company and its leaders, who were seen as authority figures. Nowadays, customers reject that authority, and at the same time require a measure of control over the products they love. They no longer BUY brands. They

JOIN brands.... They're willing to roll up their sleeves and help out, not only by promoting the brand to their friends, but by contributing content, volunteering ideas, and even selling products or services.

The Bernie Sanders brand operates a bit like this: it encourages people to join and become active in a political tribe or "movement" (Sanders's preferred term) that doesn't wax and wane in accordance with the electoral calendar. But the movement is significantly powered by its members' emotional connection to a charismatic authority figure. From a party-branding point of view, that's weak. Moreover, Sanders, as an Independent, has made a career out of differentiating himself from Democrats, and he's seventy-eight years old. He can't, and won't, rescue their brand. His idea of a movement, however, could.

What Neumeier describes is called participation branding—making your most passionate customers integral to your marketing campaigns, typically by inviting them to publicize, on social media and in your ads, what your product means to them. The political equivalent of participation branding would involve empowering the grassroots to drive a party's agenda, actions, and identity. Something like this happened in the 2018 midterms. The self-organizing, digitally financed grassroots of the Democratic Party adopted a clear brand ("the Resistance"), a clear metonym ("blue"), a clear message ("Resist"), and a clear goal (a "Blue Wave"). The Democratic Party powers that be, chastened by the remarkably thorough failures of their 2010–2016 strategies, confined themselves to a supporting role. The result was a nationwide brand advantage for (D) candidates over (R) candidates, and a wave election.

The Democratic Party, at its strongest, has stood for ordinary people. There would be no more powerful, effective, and lasting way to restore trust in the party than to align its core identity with its practices. You do that by branding the party as the grassroots party, and you authenticate the brand by placing at the core of the party's operations the technical, financial, and moral support of diverse grassroots organizing groups. You don't interfere in primaries. You do support regionalism, variation, and an ethos of mutual respect. Montana Democrats, after all, may think differently from their counterparts in Massachusetts. In effect, the party ethos would be to validate, elevate, and sustain the passionate activism that represents its best bet for winning year after year.

It might be said that the party would lose control of its brand. The answer is that the party doesn't control its brand anyway, nor should it. This isn't a conceptual argument; it's a concrete one. It's based on the actual political landscape, populated by citizen-consumers who demand a meaningful political product. If the Democratic Party wants to be viewed as the party of ordinary Americans, it must embody that vision. The DNC website currently proclaims, "The Democratic Party elects leaders who fight for equality, justice, and opportunity for all." That should read, "Democrats are Americans who fight for equality, justice, and opportunity for all. The Democratic Party exists to give them power." □

—April 29, 2020