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The 2020 U.S. Presidential Race: Mobilize the Base or Persuade Swing Voters?

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The 2020 U.S. Presidential Race:
Mobilize the Base or Persuade Swing Voters?

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Thank you to all who tolerate my constant injection of Politics into everyday conversation. It is much appreciated.

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__Introduction__

Turnout vs. Persuasion

Following Donald Trump's unprecedented upset victory in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, political strategists, pundits, and pollsters alike confronted the same confounding question: How did we get it all wrong? After all, Trump defied every principle of 'good politics,' and yet he managed to achieve the largest electoral college victory for a Republican candidate since George H.W. Bush in 1988. What's more, the Republican nominee rejected the findings of his own party's national committee, which, just three years earlier, had insisted that future nominees broaden the coalition and reach out to minorities and young voters. Instead, Trump relied almost entirely on an appeal to his right-wing base, composed largely of older, white voters. Even more surprising, he earned the support of approximately 7.5 million voters who supported former President Obama in the 2008 and 2012 elections. (Sides et. al, 2018)[1]

In response, the Democratic Party confronted the failure not only of its Presidential candidate, but of its general election strategy. Despite the progressive elements of the party platform, Secretary Clinton primarily focused on a persuasion strategy, which involved targeting of undecided voters, moderate Republicans dissatisfied with their party's candidate, and conservative Democrats who were concerned about Mrs. Clinton's background. While the campaign engaged in a turnout effort, the principal messaging/policy proposals relied on a center-left, moderate approach, including a pledge for comprehensive immigration reform, modest tax increases on the super-rich, and improvements to the Affordable Care Act. (Cohn,

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[1] Sides, John, Tesler, Michael, Vavrek, Lynn. (2018). *Identity Crisis.* London: Princeton University Press: 177.

2019)[2] In many ways, the Clinton team's political strategy resembled that of previous

Democratic Presidential candidates in the mold of Barack Obama and Bill Clinton. As the 2020

general election approaches, pollsters and strategists, especially those affiliated with the

Democratic Party, have yet to reach a consensus as to the optimal election strategy.

As it currently stands, there are two primary schools of thought about the Democratic

election strategy among political scientists and strategists, both of which are often framed as

mutually exclusive. According to one theory, the Democratic candidate/campaign should

prioritize persuasion and target undecided voters to garner their support. While proponents of

this strategy acknowledge the danger of taking Democratic votes for granted, they believe,

especially in the swing states, that an appeal to these voters will ultimately win the day. Policies

such as the expansion of the Affordable Care Act and modest income tax increases on the

wealthy are examples of policies that are often designed to garner support among undecided

voters. The alternate theory relies instead on mobilizing/energizing the racially and culturally

diverse, progressive base of the party. Policies such as Medicare-For-All, the Green New Deal,

and the wealth tax can be considered proposals that largely appeal to the Democratic Party's

liberal base. Proponents of this view insist that low turnout, especially in the African American

community, is a function of Democratic carelessness and an insistence that the support of these

voters is guaranteed, and therefore does not need to be earned.

I wanted to find a thesis topic that allowed me to merge my passion for American

politics with prognostication. I also wanted to explore a project that was relevant to current

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[2] Cohn, Nate. (2019). "A Sliver of the Electorate Could Decide 2020. Here's What These Voters Want." *The New York Times.*

events, and therefore could be adjusted in the moment. With that in mind, I decided to conduct

research that would shed light on the following questions:

(1) Should the Democratic nominee prioritize turnout of his/her own base, or focus
instead on persuading undecided/moderate Republican voters?
(2) Since question 1 assumes mutual exclusivity, is there a way to reconcile the two
general election strategies without compromising policies?
(3) If the optimal election strategy involves some combination of turnout and persuasion,
which issues should be more prominent, and why?

Although, as the old political adage tells us, elections have consequences, the 2020

presidential election holds special significance in an era of vastly expanding executive power.

Following the lead of FDR, recent Presidents have sought to broaden their authority by creating

new federal bureaucracies, circumventing the legislative branch via executive order, and

politicizing the judiciary.(Hall, 2018)[3] Congressional dysfunction, combined with a decrease in

judicial intervention, has accelerated this trend such that Presidents have felt more comfortable

taking unilateral, sweeping action.   The next Commander in Chief will have the power to

inflame/deescalate an international trade war, reshape the judiciary for the next quarter-century,

and approve unilateral military action.

The election results will also have profound implications for the long-term viability of the

respective political strategies. If an established, relatively centrist candidate, like former Vice

President Biden, wins the nomination and goes on to defeat President Trump, the persuasion

strategy and the conventional wisdom may be revived. Conversely, if a progressive candidate

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[3] Hall, Andrew, B., Thompson, Daniel, M. (2018). "Who Punishes Extreme Nominees?
Candidate Ideology and Turning Out the Base in U.S. Elections." *American Political Science
Review*: 7.

such as Senator Sanders is victorious in the general election, the persuasion strategy may be rejected for future campaigns.

In part one of my thesis, I will conduct a political and economic analysis of the persuasion strategy, which will entail a literature review and a presentation of the theories/arguments in support of it. Economic theories of games, public choice, and the median voter will inform the analysis. The Median Voter Theorem, developed in the 1950s, has been applied in the political arena by numerous Democratic candidates, including Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and Hillary Clinton, with varying degrees of success. When combined with game theory, which also involves strategy optimization, the economic analysis becomes more comprehensive. Solutions to this game will include considerations of the relative probabilities of each strategy and the likelihood that Trump implements his dominant strategy, which has and continues to be, an appeal to his most loyal supporters.

In part two, I will examine the base strategy again through the lens of Politics and Economics. Although there is little historical evidence of an effective base strategy, at least in Presidential elections, I will nonetheless present the strongest arguments in its favor. The economic analysis will involve a discussion of public choice theory, because it serves as a counterpoint to the median voter theorem. According to this theory, voting is irrational because the two major candidates are so close ideologically that the daily life of an individual voter is unlikely to change, regardless of the outcome.

Part three of my thesis will entail a reconciliation of the two diverging election strategies and a general messaging framework based on specific campaign issues, i.e. healthcare and immigration. Although the advocates of both persuasion and base appeal often argue that the

two are mutually exclusive, there may be a way to employ the strategies in different contexts with respect to different policies.   In the end, regardless of the nominee, Democrats will face a stern test against a formidable incumbent President.

Finally, I will engage in a normative overview of both political strategies, exploring the implications of precedent following the 2020 election. If base appeal becomes the norm, undecided/centrist voters may become isolated and less influential. Conversely, if the persuasion strategy is viewed as decisive in a potential Democratic victory, progressives may once again fail to identify with the party.

Part One
The Persuasion Strategy

Before engaging in an analysis of the two competing election strategies, definitions of key terms are in order. Firstly, swing voters will be defined as those who are registered and do not express a preference for either President Trump or the future Democratic nominee as of November 2019. They are not to be conflated with 'independent' voters, the latter of whom often identify as undecided, but in practice tend to vote in a consistently partisan manner.(Bitecofer, 2018)[4] The primary subsets of swing voters include, but are not limited to: Obama-Trump voters, who cast their ballot for Obama in 2008/2012 and then for Trump in 2016(~7.5 million or ~1/8 Obama 2012 voters), Romney-Protest voters, who supported Romney in 2012 and then backed a third party/write-in candidate in 2016(~2 million), and Romney-Clinton voters(2.5 million) who voted for Romney in 2012 and Clinton in 2016.(Brodie, 2019)[5] In a joint survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Cook Political Report, just under 8 percent of registered voters nationwide fall into this category.

In the context of the 2020 Democratic Primaries, the leading candidates, namely former Vice President Biden, Senators Sanders, Warren, and former mayor Pete Buttigieg draw support from a variety of competing factions within and outside of the party's base. Warren and Buttigieg, for instance, draw their support largely from college educated white voters, most of whom are over the age of 40. Conversely, Sanders relies on voters between the ages of 18-35,

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[4] Bitecofer, R. (2018). *The Unprecedented 2016 Presidential Election,* London: Palgrave Macmillan: 144-147.

[5] Brodie, M., Cook, C., Kirzinger, A., Walter, A. (2019). "Da ta Note: A Look At Swing Voters Leading Up To The 2020 Election" *Kaiser Family Foundation.*

many of whom do not hold a college degree. Vice President Biden's base is composed of older

voters, over 35 percent of whom are African American. (Morris, 2019)[6] With that said, there is

considerable overlap between supporters of Warren and Sanders. An overwhelming majority, 76

percent, identify as liberal or strongly liberal, and therefore can be considered members of the

base, including voters who support progressive policies, such as Medicare for All, but did not

turn out for Clinton in 2016. Among Buttigieg and Biden voters, 60 percent identify as

'moderate,' and tend to prefer incremental, rather than sweeping change. As such,

Warren/Sanders can be considered representatives of the progressive wing of the party, and

therefore advocates of prioritizing turnout, while Biden/Buttigieg can be considered advocates of

the persuasion strategy. Although it doesn't necessarily follow that moderate candidates adopt

the persuasion strategy, every Democratic presidential candidate since 2000 with a 'center-left'

platform similar to that of Secretary Clinton has prioritized appeals to the median voter.(Morris,

2019)[7] This phenomenon is best explained by observing the personal profiles of such

candidates, almost all of whom represent(ed) the 'Democratic establishment,' with strong ties to

party leaders and a career in politics. Since the consensus of established Democratic party

leaders in the last 6 presidential elections has been to prioritize persuasion over base turnout,

moderate/establishment candidates generally adhere to this philosophy. (Collingwood, 2019)[8]

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[6] Morris, Elliott, G. (2019). "Would Donald Trump be President if All Americans Actually Voted? *The Economist*: 3.

[7] Morris, Elliott, G. (2019). "Would Donald Trump be President if All Americans Actually Voted? *The Economist*: 5.

[8] Collingwood, L., Reny, T. T., Valenzuela, A. (2018). "Vote Switching in the 2016 Election: How Racial and Immigration Attitudes, Not Economics, Explain Shifts in White Voting." Forthcoming in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Spring).

With that said, the scope of the ensuing analysis will be constrained to encompass only battleground/toss-up states, which are most likely to tip the balance in the Electoral College. The general consensus among pollsters and political scientists is that the swing states in the 2020 general election are as follows: Arizona, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Florida, and New Hampshire.[9] According to the KFF-Cook survey referenced earlier, approximately 1/6 swing state voters are undecided as of November 2019, and that fraction rises to 1/4 in the so-called blue wall states, including Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, as displayed below in figure 1.

Figure 1
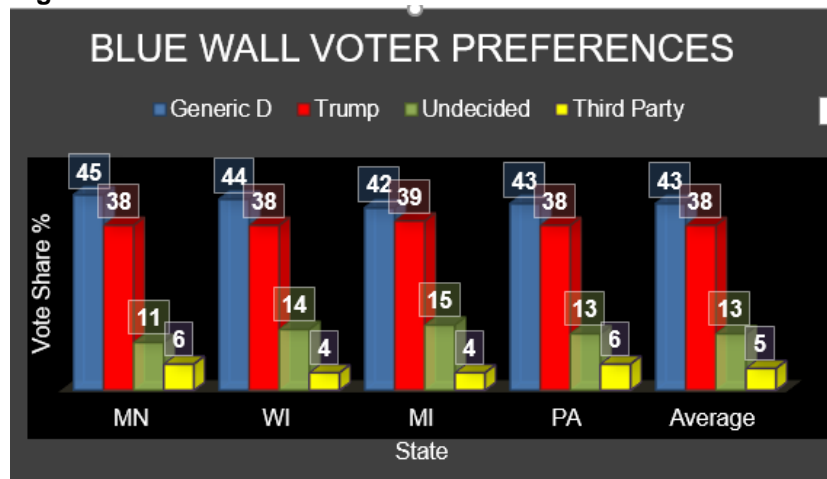
Ultimately, success will depend on the degree to which the disparate cohorts of voters can be either persuaded or energized to support the Democratic nominee come November.

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[9] Schaffner, Brian F. (2018). "Understanding White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: The Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism." *Political Science Quarterly.*

Chapter One
1.1 Political Analysis

'Conventional,' 'default,' 'safe,' 'rational'. Among pollsters, and political scientists alike the above descriptors are most often used to characterize the persuasion strategy. With the notable exception of George McGovern's 1972 and Donald Trump's 2016 campaigns, the elusive 'middle of the road voters' are typically a top priority for Presidential nominees, irrespective of party. After all, the base of each party is often reliably partisan, and therefore it is only logical to direct most resources to the small sliver of truly undecided voters. In the 2020 election cycle, the supposed advantages of this campaign strategy are as follows: the appeal of feasible, incremental policy proposals, the widespread prevalence of moderate Democratic voters, who outnumber their progressive counterparts, and the relatively low risk of increased turnout among the opposing party's base.

As a general rule, policies that improve, rather than disrupt the status quo, garner broader support than policies involving systematic overhaul. For instance, Mayor Buttigieg's 'Medicare for All Who Want it" is an example of a policy that is a significant departure from the Affordable Care Act, but that does not necessitate the abolishment of private health insurance. According to several large-scale surveys of registered voters in the four aforementioned 'blue wall' or 'rust belt' states, a public option, or a phasing in of single-payer health care, enjoys 62 percent support.(Ghitza, 6)[10] Sanders' proposal, which, by most estimates, would carry a price tag of $30-40 trillion, is supported by just 40 percent of these voters, once they are told about the potential tax increases entailed. Given this disparity in approval of the two policies, it would appear that the Democratic nominee should be cautious and adopt a more modest health care

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[10] Ghitza, Y. (2019). "Analyzing the Catalist Voter Registration Database." *Medium* (March): 6.

policy. On energy, just 39 percent of voters in Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, and

Pennsylvania approved Senator Sanders' energy platform, which includes a ban on hydraulic

fracturing, the primary method of producing natural gas.(Easley, 4)[11] According to Amy Walter,

national editor of the Cook Political Report, there remains a disconnect between progressive

preferences and electability: "It goes to the heart of the debate that we're seeing within the

Democratic Party right now, which is the appetite among progressives and the left for an agenda

that remains unpalatable to swing voters in the states that determine the Electoral

College."(Cohn, 2020)[12] On the whole, although some progressive principles, such as 'tackling

income inequality' and treating healthcare as a 'right and not a privilege', remain popular among

undecided voters, specific policies, including those mentioned earlier, are often perceived as

unrealistic and/or infeasible.

Secondly, proponents of the persuasion strategy contend that, because of recent

asymmetric polarization, radical, revolutionary policies like Medicare-for-All run the risk of

alienating a large subset of Democratic voters. According to recent political science research,

asymmetric polarization is a phenomenon by which the Republican Party has moved farther to

the right than the Democratic Party has left. What's more, the means of polarization between the

two parties is also distinct, given that Republicans tend to be more homogeneous, both

demographically and ideologically. According to Grossman et. al, "Republicans in the electorate

consistently express more admiration for politicians who 'stick to their principles,' while

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[11] Easley, C. (2019). "The Swing Voters in 3 Key States Democrats Must Persuade in 2020."
Morning Consult: 4.

[12] Cohn, Nate. (2020). "Huge Turnout is Expected in 2020. But Which Party Would Benefit?"
The New York Times.

Democrats favor those who 'make compromises…'most Republicans consistently voice a desire for their party to become more conservative while a majority of Democrats prefer that the Democratic Party become more moderate."(Grossman, 2015)[13] Research from Achen et. al also points out the asymmetry of the two political parties: " there is mounting evidence that the increasing distance between the two parties is primarily a consequence of the Republican Party's 35-year march to the right….We should be careful not to equate the two parties' roles in contemporary political polarization: the data are clear that this is a Republican-led phenomenon where very conservative Republicans have replaced moderate Republicans and Southern Democrats."(Achen, 2016)[14] Data from the current election cycle confirms the strength of the moderate contingent, as Iowa exit polls showed that 56 percent of Democrats identify as 'moderate,' while the remaining 44 percent of Democratic caucus-goers identified as 'liberal.'

Finally, the persuasion strategy is often preferred by Presidential campaign teams because it is thought to suppress base turnout from the opposing party. As the theory generally goes, aligning candidate policies to match preferences of undecided voters, and therefore policies that are more closely aligned with members of the opposing party will prevent substantial backlash. As such, many strategists are hesitant to adopt a strategy that relies primarily on turning out one's own base, as there is little empirical research to suggest the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. Three years ago, Hall et. al. conducted a comprehensive analysis of U.S. House elections, which demonstrated substantial evidence that nominees with more extreme positions

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[13] Grossman, M. & Hopkins, D. (2015). "Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats." *American Political Science Association* (March) 13(1): 119-139.

[14]Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. (2016). "Democracy for Realists." Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

underperformed those who adopted the persuasion strategy: "Extremist candidates do worse, because...they fail to galvanize their own base and instead encourage the opposing party's base to turn out more, on average...we estimate that nominating an extremist instead of a moderate causes a party's voters to constitute a ten percentage-point smaller turnout in the general election...the estimates range from −6 to −10 percentage points."(Hall, 2018)[15] Although Hall's conclusions cannot necessarily predict outcomes in Presidential elections, they suggest that prioritizing base turnout would be a risky proposition.

In the context of 2020, advocates for the persuasion strategy, most notably former Vice President Biden, contend that adopting more moderate policies and catering to swing voters is critical, especially in the industrial Midwest. In an analysis conducted by Nate Cohn, a data scientist at the *New York Times,* Obama-Trump voters, who are generally seen as 'up-for-grabs,' given their mixed political voting history, accounted for approximately 70 percent of Clinton's electoral defeat.(Cohn, 2019)[16] This cohort makes up between 40 and 60 percent of voters who defected from the Democratic ticket in 2016. In a hypothetical head-to-head match-up with President Trump, proponents of the persuasion strategy contend that moderation is synonymous with electability. In order to assess the merit of this assertion, a case study of Wisconsin voters was conducted. According to the analysis, of the approximately 238,000 Wisconsin voters who backed President Obama in 2012 and did not support Secretary Clinton in 2016, 209,000

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[15] Hall, Andrew, B., Thompson, Daniel, M. (2018). "Who Punishes Extreme Nominees? Candidate Ideology and Turning Out the Base in U.S. Elections." *American Political Science Review*: 7.

[16] Cohn, Nate. (2019). "Nonvoters Are a Source of Hope for Democrats. But Maybe a False Hope." *The New York Times.*

switched to Trump. Even when the 59,000 Romney-Clinton voters are factored in, Clinton

suffered a net loss of 150,000 votes among voters who switched parties, which accounted for 63

percent of all votes lost from 2012. If she had been able to persuade just 22,748(15%) of the

defected voters to support her, she would have surpassed Trump. Despite her moderate agenda,

Secretary Clinton was unable to persuade a majority of undecided swing state voters, including

many Obama-Trump voters, to support her candidacy. Reasons for this failure include certain

uncontrollable factors, such as systemic sexism, but also controllable factors, including the

emphasis on issues of identity, including immigration. For 2020 candidates in the 'centrist lane,'

the Wisconsin general election strategy will likely involve the following:

1. Gaining back **Obama-Trump** vote (20 percent or +30,000),
2. Gaining back **Obama-Protest** vote (10 percent or +2,800)
3. Gaining back **Obama-nonvoters** (10 percent or +11,200)
4. Losing **Romney-Clinton** voters (20 percent or -11,800)
5. Losing **Romney-Protest** vote (50 percent or -35,000)
6. Losing **No-Show-Trump** vote (100 percent or -15,000)
7. Gaining general nonvoters (5.2 percent of **registered but not likely** voters (+10,300) or
   1.1 percent of **eligible but not registered or likely** (+10,300))

These estimates of support for a generic Democratic candidate with moderate policy

positions were obtained by reviewing the American National Election Survey and Cooperative

Congressional Election Survey databases.(Huber, 2019)[17] In essence, the strategy relies largely

on reassuring undecided voters, especially Obama-Trump voters, that they can expect a

reasonable, moderate governing style, closer to former President Obama than Bernie Sanders.

Despite findings from the academic literature that predict success for the persuasion strategy, its

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[17] Huber, Gregory, A., Orr, Lilla, V. (2019). "The Policy Basis of Measured Partisan Animosity in the United States." Forthcoming in *American Journal of Political Science.*

effectiveness is yet to be determined in an election against an incumbent candidate who relies primarily on base support.

Chapter Two
1.2 Economic Analysis

Having established the political upside associated with the persuasion strategy, it is important to consider the economic perspective. To do so, this chapter will include an analysis of the Median Voter Theorem (MVT), behavioral/neoclassical game theory, and the Overton Window as economic mechanisms underlying the conventional political strategy.

Since it came to prominence in the 1950s, the Median Voter Model has served as the primary economic rationale for employing an election strategy that relies on appeals to the middle, or median voter. According to an analysis by Hall et.al, The theorem assumes that all voters use the same, one-dimensional criteria for decision, which involves placing candidates on a spectrum, e.g. from left to right. Secondly, the theorem assumes a turnout rate of 100 percent, and that voters have an incentive to support candidates that most closely align with their preferences. Given these assumptions, candidates of both major parties have historically campaigned on platforms that are supported by a majority of voters. In Presidential elections, Democratic and Republican nominees typically adopt more extreme positions to win their respective primaries, and then pivot to the general election by softening their partisan positions. (Hall, 2018)[18]

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[18] Hall, Andrew, B., Thompson, Daniel, M. (2018). "Who Punishes Extreme Nominees? Candidate Ideology and Turning Out the Base in U.S. Elections." *American Political Science Review*: 10-12.

Although the MVT has traditionally served as the primary economic rationale for persuasion over turnout, recent political developments have challenged its viability. For one, political scientists and economists are concerned that stickiness, or the disconnect between voter and candidate preferences, may undermine the relevance of MVT. In several election cycles, most notably 2012, Republican voters' views on key issues, e.g. immigration, were significantly out of step with those of their party nominee. What's more, the MVT fails to account for an even more prevalent form of stickiness, in which voters make their decisions based on factors other than policy/ideological preferences. This phenomenon will undoubtedly play a significant role in the age of a President who enjoys significantly more support for many of his policies than his overall job performance. According to a CNN Poll conducted in February 2020, nearly ⅔ of voters approve of President Trump's handling of the economy, while just 43 percent approve of his overall performance. (McElwee, 2020)[19]
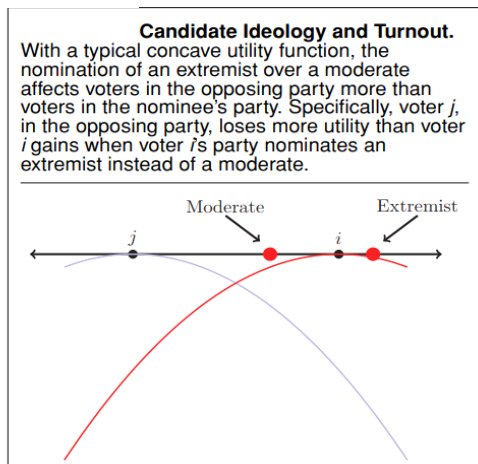
Given the questionable relevance of MVT in the current election, several scholars, most notably Dr. Andrew Hall of Stanford University, have proposed alternative economic theories in support of the persuasion campaign strategy. In Hall's utility model, voters have concave utility over policy positions, which means that there is a direct relationship between a candidate's policy positions and voting preference. Now imagine a typical voter in each party considering turning out when the Republicans nominate a moderate versus when they nominate an extremist. Figure 2 presents the situation graphically. The figure considers a base voter in each party where voter j represents a Democrat and voter i is a Republican. Each voter is placed at his/her optimal point on the ideological/political spectrum. Imagine that the Republican party nominates

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[19] McElwee, Sean, Schaffner, Brian F. (2020). "How Democrats Can Win Back Obama-Trump Defectors." *The New York Times.*

either a moderate Republican candidate (labeled on the plot as the moderate) or an extremist (also labeled on the plot). As shown, voter i is closer to the extremist than the moderate. However, voter j loses more utility than voter i gains when we consider the switch from the moderate to the extremist. Voter j's utility function makes this clear because it gets steeper as we get further from voter j's optimal point, and because candidates in the other party are by default farther away from j than they are from i, voters in the opposing party are likely to be more angry at an extremist nominee than the party's own base is pleased by one. If this fear drives voter turnout, then extremists will galvanize voters in the opposing party more than those in their own party's base.

FIGURE 2

Candidate Ideology and Turnout.
With a typical concave utility function, the nomination of an extremist over a moderate affects voters in the opposing party more than voters in the nominee's party. Specifically, voter *j*, in the opposing party, loses more utility than voter *i* gains when voter *i*'s party nominates an extremist instead of a moderate.

In addition to the MVT and its iterations, game theory can also serve as a useful tool of analysis. For the purposes of this paper, Presidential elections will be characterized as zero-sum, mixed strategy, 2-stage games, whereby the first and second stages represent the primary and general election campaigns respectively. According to the rules of the game, the Democratic candidate selects a strategy based on President Trump's choice to prioritize turnout, as opposed to persuasion.

Behavioral game theory, in particular the concept of limited strategic thinking, is also applicable to the 2020 general election. In the 1940s, John Maynard Keynes, developed a model, known to economists as the 'beauty contest,' in which respondents select the images of people they think the average person deems most attractive. As Keynes points out, participants do not base their decisions solely or even primarily on their own views: "It is not a case of choosing those [faces] that, to the best of one's judgment, are really the prettiest, nor even those that

average opinion genuinely...We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be."(Loewenstein, 2003)[20] In the context of a political competition, voters' choices will largely rely on perceptions of other voters' preferences. Given this assumption, voters will choose the dominant strategy, or the strategy for which the payoff is higher than that of the alternative strategy, for any choice by other players' strategy. Even if the payoffs are unknown, voters should choose a dominant strategy over a dominated one. With that said, if a voter overestimates the sophistication of other voters' strategy, they will be making a suboptimal choice. Ultimately, the goal is to be one step in reasoning ahead of others, but no further. In the context of 2020, imagine a hypothetical scenario in which a progressive candidate, likely Senator Sanders, emerges as the Democratic nominee. As a consequence of limited strategic thinking, a 'soft' Trump supporter, or someone who voted for Trump in 2016 but disapproves of his job performance, may end up voting for the President anyway in a general election because he/she expects Democratic voters to support Sanders. Because the voter perceives Sanders as a greater threat to their views, he/she may feel compelled to vote in favor of Trump, especially if most Democratic voters are expected to support Sanders. In other words, this soft Trump supporter is voting primarily based on the preferences of potential Sanders voters.

Lastly, the persuasion strategy can also be justified by an economic concept called the 'Overton Window.' According to the theory, there is a spectrum of policies representing every plausible position, from the most extreme to most centrist on a given issue. In essence, the Overton Window represents the portion of the policy spectrum within the realm of the politically

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[20] Loewenstein, George, O'Donohue, Ted, Rabin, Matthew. (2003). "Projection Bias In Predicting Future Utility." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118(4): 1209-1248.

viable, or feasible depending on the time. Irrespective of enthusiasm, only policy proposals within the window will be successful. Because politicians are limited, at least to an extent, by the preferences of their constituents, their success hinges on their ability to 'bring home the bacon,' or achieve tangible benefits for their district/state. Therefore, it follows that unrealistic, unfeasible policy proposals are unlikely to benefit the candidate/politician supporting them. For instance, while Senator Sanders' pledge to initiate a 'political revolution,' by implementing sweeping, structural change may inspire voters, his success will ultimately be determined by his/her ability to implement, rather than propose, such policies.(Rabin, 1998)[21] The Overton Window is particularly useful for discussing the perception of economic policies, i.e. tax increases/cuts because voters often base their assessments of a candidate's economic policies on the extent to which they can be successfully implemented in a hypothetical Presidency. In the previous Presidential election, while a strong majority of voters approved of Clintons' proposal to increase the minimum wage to $15, most did not perceive it as a feasible solution and therefore the issue was not a salient issue in the election. (Sides, 2018)[22] This example highlights the importance of the Overton Window in constraining the scope of policies to include only those that can stand potentially enjoy Congressional support. Campaign proposals that fall outside this window are often discounted by wary voters who do not expect the policy to become reality in the post-election world.

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[21] Rabin, Matthew. (1998). "Psychology and Economics." *Journal of Economic Literature* 36(1): 11-46.

[22] Sides, John, Tesler, Michael, Vavrek, Lynn. (2018). *Identity Crisis.* London: Princeton University Press: 127-128.

Part Two
The Base Strategy

As the old political adage tells us: "Republicans fall in line; Democrats fall in love." While this cliché is often used by pundits and strategists to make gross generalizations about the voting tendencies of Democratic and Republican voters, there is at least some evidence to suggest that Democrats are slightly pickier about their Presidential nominees, at least relative to their Republican counterparts. In the previous 11 Presidential elections without a Democratic incumbent at the top of the ticket, 'established' Democratic nominees, or those with significant Washington experience and the support of most party leaders, such as former Secretaries Clinton and Kerry, contrary to expectations, have lost. Conversely, Democratic nominees regarded as relative outsiders/newcomers who energized the base and substantially increased Democratic turnout, such as former Presidents Carter, Clinton, and Obama, have gone on to defeat their Republican opponents and earn at least one term in office.

As far as definitions are concerned, 'the base' signifies the progressive, staunchly liberal contingent of Democratic voters who hardly, if ever, support or consider supporting Republican candidates. Although the term can apply to Democratic voters at large, for the purposes of this analysis it is more useful to focus specifically on the progressive contingent of the party who consistently hold Democratic positions, but do not turn out consistently. Therefore, these voters are emphasized primarily by progressive candidates because they represent a younger, more diverse cohort aligned with the party's views, but not always its candidates. Subsets of this group include but are not limited to: Obama-nonvoters, who cast their ballot for Obama in 2008 and/or 2012 and then did not vote in 2016(4.4 million), Obama-protest voters, who supported Obama in 2008 and/or 2012 and subsequently backed a third-party or write-in candidate in 2016(~1

million), registered, but not likely voters and eligible, but not registered or likely voters who identify with the Democratic Party.(Easley, 2019)[23] These voters constitute just approximately 4 percent of the national electorate.

While it is virtually impossible to isolate the significance of the base strategy from these election results, there is at least some indication that, at least among Democrats, turnout is critical, and often harder to achieve, than on the Republican side. As mentioned earlier, the Democratic Party consists of a diverse coalition, racially, socioeconomically, and politically. As such, galvanizing support from every aspect of the base is difficult, especially in an election cycle as chaotic as 2020. With that said, there are factors unique to this election that favor a strategy reliant on base turnout. Unlike in previous reelection campaigns, the incumbent is employing a strategy almost entirely based on mobilizing voters within his party. Therefore, the most critical assumption underlying the persuasion strategy is challenged because the Democratic opponent is him/herself prioritizing turnout over persuasion. Even so, as Dr. Rachel Bitecofer points out in her book *The Unprecedented 2016 Election*, focusing on turnout is akin to "flipping giant paradigms of electoral theory upside down."(Bitecofer, 2016)[24]

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[23] Easley, C. (2019). "The Swing Voters in 3 Key States Democrats Must Persuade in 2020." *Morning Consult*: 6.

[24] Bitecofer, Rachel. (2019). "2018 Midterms & Mobilizing the Base." *Wason Center for Public Policy.*

Chapter One
2.1 Political Analysis

'Radical,' 'risky,' 'untested.' Among, pollsters, pundits, and political scientists alike the above descriptors are most often used to characterize a strategy aimed to increase turnout, without much consideration of swing voters. To this date, Donald Trump remains the only successful case study for the base strategy. Trump's eight most recent predecessors, including Presidents Bush and Obama, relied largely on persuasion/targeting swing voters, including the most sought-after voting cohort: late-deciders. Since 2016, however, leading members of the Democratic Party's progressive wing, namely Representative Ocasio-Cortez and Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, have argued for a radical rethinking of national politics. According to the Sanders campaign and progressive organizations like Justice Democrats, turnout of registered but not likely Democratic voters is alone sufficient to overcome losses among more mainstream, centrist voters without a partisan leaning. The supposed advantages of base mobilization are: decreased reliance on the shrinking cohort of swing voters, increased turnout among the Democratic base, which could offset the loss of undecided voters, and increasing Democratic Party polarization, which increases the value of solidifying support among left-wing voters.

This year's election may be the first in which the Democratic candidate can afford to neglect swing voters. Over the last quarter-century, the share of voters who identify as 'unaffiliated' or 'independent' has increased, while the share of undecided voters has shrunk, because most people who identify themselves as Independents admit to leaning toward a party when they are pressed. According to political scientist Rachel Bitecofer, "the "true" portion of the electorate that insists they do not align with a party is somewhere between 8% and 12% of

the electorate."(Bitecofer, 2018)[25] In the battleground states identified in Part One, voters

without a preference in the 2020 Presidential election comprise approximately 15 percent of the

electorate. While this proportion is substantial, as far as raw numbers are concerned, registered,

unlikely Democratic voters vastly outnumber their swing counterparts. The Sanders campaign

and proponents of the base strategy, including Dr. Bitecofer, argue that it is easier to energize

unlikely voters with progressive views than it is to persuade likely, but undecided voters. While

this theory is yet to be tested in a national election, there is at least some supporting evidence.

For one, Obama-Trump voters, the largest segment of presumably swing voters, have

stongly Republican policy preferences; a majority support building a wall along the southern

border and more than 70 percent are all but certain to support President Trump in

2020.(Schaffner, 2018)[26] Among other cohorts of undecided voters, including those who

supported Romney in 2012 and Clinton in 2016, progressive policies, such as single-payer

healthcare, will have little to no effect. Political Scientists Bartel and Achen point out that over

time, engaged citizens may construct policy preferences and ideologies that rationalize their

choices, but those issues are seldom fundamental: "The electoral penalty for candidates taking

extreme positions is quite modest because voters in the political center do not reliably support

the candidates closest to them on the issues."(Achen, 2019)[27] Therefore, the Democratic

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[25] Bitecofer, R. (2018). *The Unprecedented 2016 Presidential Election,* London: Palgrave Macmillan: 141-186.

[26] Schaffner, Brian F. (2018). "Understanding White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: The Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism." *Political Science Quarterly.*

[27] Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. (2016). "Democracy for Realists." Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

candidate does not stand to gain voters in the middle by espousing moderate policies, and swing voters who do vote based on policy represent an extremely thin slice of the electorate.

Having established the case against the persuasion strategy, it is important to consider the upsides of prioritizing turnout. Once again, although precedent remains thin, advocates of the base strategy are confident given 2016 results. In the general election, turnout in Wisconsin fell 3 percent overall, with 6 percent of Obama 2012 voters defecting either to a third party or write-in candidate. Nearly 90 percent of the drop-off in turnout is attributable to Obama-nonvoters, many of whom who did not back Clinton in the Democratic primary. Of the approximately 112,000(4% of electorate) Obama voters who did not vote in 2016, Clinton would have needed just 22,748(20%) of them to win the state. (Gest, 146)[28]

More specifically, turnout decreases had a strong racial component. As noted earlier, the turnout rate in Wisconsin for the 2016 general election dropped by 3 percent, while African American turnout fell by nearly 20 percent. In every battleground state excluding Ohio, declines in African American turnout were alone sufficient to flip the states from Democratic in 2012 to Republican in 2016. Nationwide black turnout dropped nearly 5 points from 2016 to 2012, which resulted in black voters shrinking as a percentage of the electorate, from 13 to 11.9 percent.(Levitz, 2018)[29] According to a simulation conducted by the Center for American Progress, which measured the impact of turnout changes by racial group in the last two elections, Trump would have lost Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Florida, and North Carolina if

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[28] Gest, Justin. (2016). *The New Minority: White Working-Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality*. New York: Oxford University Press: 145-147.

[29] Levitz, Eric. (2017). "New 2016 Autopsies: It Was Obama-Trump Voters, in the Rust Belt." *New York Magazine.*

African American turnout had remained constant from 2012 to 2016. The results of this

simulation are displayed in figures 3* and 4 below (Griffin, 2018)[30]:

FIGURE 3

Dem Margin Results	MI	WI	PA	FL	NC
Actual Margin	-0.2	-0.8	-0.7	-1.2	-3.7
2012 African American Turnout & Margin	+1.3	+1	+0.4	+0.1	+0.8
2012 Non-college White Margin	+5.5	+6.5	+3.5	+0.1	-1
2012 Latinx Margin	0	-0.6	-0.6	-0.1	-3.5

FIGURE 4
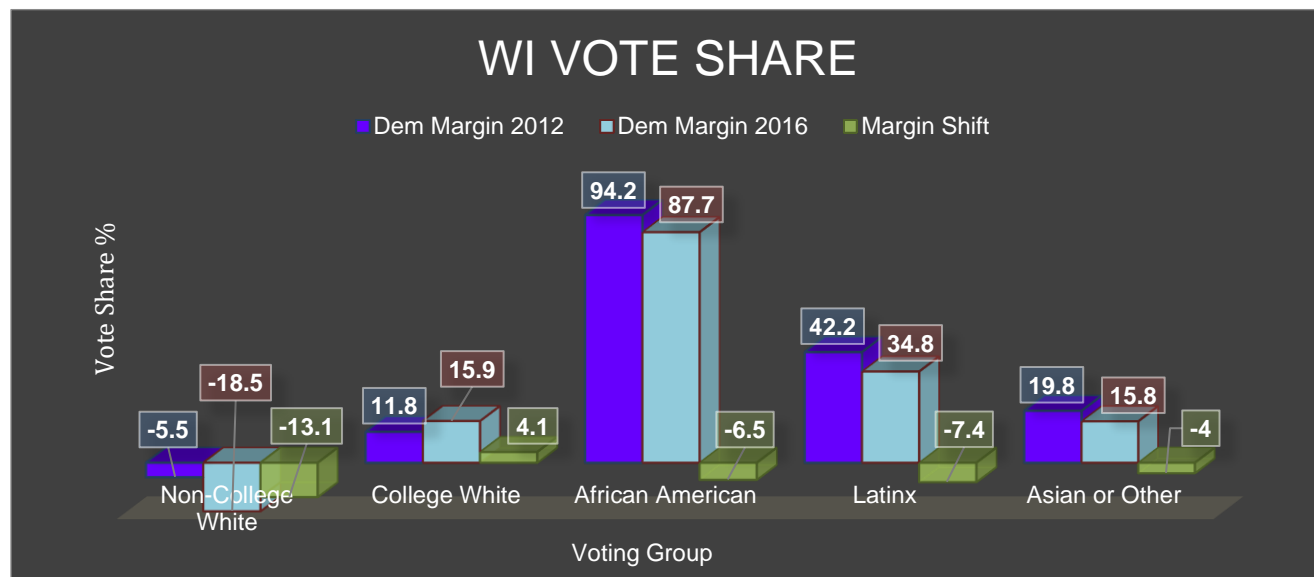
Although the largest discrepancies are observed for whites without a college education,

turnout in the African American community would have changed the outcome of the election, all

else being equal.   Nevertheless, demonstrating the importance of turnout is not sufficient to

prove the superiority of the base strategy over its rival. In order to do so, there must be an

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*Highlited/Bold results indicate different result with increased turnout or support from a given voting group

[30] Griffin, Rob, Halpin, John, Teixeira, Ruy. (2017). "Voter Trends in 2016." *Center for American Progress.*

established link between advocating for progressive policies and substantial increases in
Democratic turnout, especially among African Americans.

In the current political moment, there is at least some evidence that Democratic voters
would be more receptive to progressive policies than in previous years. According to exit polls
from the Iowa Caucuses and New Hampshire Primary, approximately 45 percent of registered
Democratic voters describe themselves as 'liberal' or 'very liberal.' Among voters under 30, this
figure jumps to nearly 70 percent.(Cohn, 2020)[31] Moreover, elected Democrats are beginning to
reflect this trend towards more progressive policies; as of August 2019, 16 out of 47 Senators
have publicly voiced their support for single-payer healthcare; just five years ago, not one
Democratic Senator supported the proposal. Public support for big government policies,
including increased regulation and higher taxes, has reached the highest level on record in one of
the most prominent aggregate surveys of American public opinion. James Stimson, a political
scientist at the University of North Carolina, released the findings of his annual study of U.S.
voters. As his findings demonstrate, "The annual estimate for 2018 is the most liberal ever
recorded in the 68-year history of Mood...Just slightly higher than the previous high point of
1961." (McElwee, 2018)[32]

Not only are Democratic voters shifting left, but there is a growing intolerance for more
moderate/centrist policy positions. According to several national polls, just ½ Sanders
supporters, of whom 90 percent considered themselves liberal, pledged to support the eventual
Democratic nominee. In 2016, although Sanders voters did not defect in unusually high rates

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[31] Cohn, Nate. (2020). "Huge Turnout is Expected in 2020. But Which Party Would Benefit?"
The New York Times.

[32] McElwee, Sean. (2018). "How Democrats Can Mobilize Millions of Non-Voters." *The Nation.*

nationally(compared to defection rates from losing Democratic primary candidates), defections occurred disproportionately in the most critical states. As Dr. Bitecofer points out in her aforementioned book, the mean defection rate, or rate of third-party support, in Clinton states was 5.19% of the electorate, while in states that supported Sanders the mean is almost double: 9.04%. The high levels of defection found in states that supported Sanders in the primary, including those that are swing states, suggest that Bernie Sanders voters were more likely to defect than other voters. Therefore, in Bitecofer's words, "… Given the high levels of partisan polarization in the American electorate, base mobilization strategies may be more effective than strategies that seek to expand a party's appeal. Although persuasion politics isn't dead, it is on life support. In the polarized era, it's all about that base."(Bitecofer, 2018)[33] Looking ahead to 2020, another case study was conducted to test the hypothetical outcome of Sanders' base strategy in Wisconsin:

1. Gain back **Obama-Trump vote** (15 percent or +22,500)
2. Gain back **Obama-Protest vote** (25 percent or +7,000)
3. Gain back **Obama-nonvoters** (33 percent or +37,000)
4. Lose **Romney-Clinton voters** (80 percent or -47,200)
5. Lose **Romney-Protest vote** (50 percent or -35,000)
6. Lose **Romney-No Show vote** (100 percent or -13,000)
7. Lose **No-Show-Trump vote** (100 percent or -30,000)
8. Gain **General Nonvoters** (26.2 percent of registered but not likely voters (+52,500) or 5.6 percent of eligible but not registered or likely (+52,500))

As illustrated above, Sanders would have to rely not only on increases in turnout, which may be offset by increases in Republican turnout, but on both registered, but not likely voters(i.e. Obama 2008-nonvoters), and a small fraction of unregistered, unlikely, eligible voters.

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[33] Bitecofer, R. (2018). *The Unprecedented 2016 Presidential Election,* London: Palgrave Macmillan: 141-186.

According to the Pew Research Center, unregistered, unlikely, eligible voters are disproportionately non-white, non-college educated, and low-income. Roughly a third (34%) of nonvoters are younger than 30 and most (70%) are under 50; among likely voters, just 10% are younger than 30 and only 39% are under 50.   What's more, 43% of those who are not likely to cast ballots this November are Hispanic, African American or other racial and ethnic minorities, roughly double the percentage among likely voters (22%), and just 46% have completed at least some postsecondary education.(Pew, 2014)[34] This data indicates that eligible, but not registered or likely voters, even if their views are aligned with the Democratic Party platform, will be difficult to mobilize given their demographic makeup. As such, a Democratic Presidential candidate may have to put greater emphasis on turning out members of this voting bloc.

According to Nate Cohn, a data analyst at *The New York Times*, "The potential for Democrats is obvious. But in general, polls comparing the adult and registered voter populations...exaggerate the opportunity available to Democrats because they include noncitizens, who aren't eligible to vote."(Cohn, 2020)[35] He goes on to say that "The major Democratic advantage among nonvoters, their ethnic diversity, would do little for Democrats in the Midwest, where the population is more white and where nonvoters are likelier to be working-class whites who appear to view the president relatively favorably. Democrats would gain more in the diverse but often less competitive states."   In the end, Sanders and other advocates of the

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[34] "The Party of Nonvoters." (2014). *Pew Research Center.*

[35] Cohn, Nate. (2020). "Huge Turnout is Expected in 2020. But Which Party Would Benefit?" *The New York Times.*

base strategy must rely on nontraditional voters and attempt to form a winning coalition, much as President Obama did in 2008.

Chapter Two
2.2 Economic Analysis

Having established the political upside associated with the base strategy, it is important to consider the economic perspective. To do so, this chapter will include an analysis of Public Choice theory (a counterpoint to the Median Voter Theorem), Game Theory, and the Overton Window as economic mechanisms underlying the conventional political strategy. Although the base strategy is often perceived as risk-seeking, while the conventional persuasion strategy is regarded as risk-averse, in an election with unprecedented polarization, this may be a flawed premise.

Unlike the Median Voter Theorem, which assumes that voting is rational, Public Choice Theory states that it is in the voters' interest *not* to participate. In order to illustrate this theory, consider a cost-benefit analysis of voting and not voting made by an individual A, for whom the outcome holds some significance. On the benefit side, assume that R represents a positive monetary value accruing to the voter after a favorable election outcome. However, the final result, whether favorable or unfavorable, will occur with or without A's vote, unless the election is decided by one vote. Let P be the probability of all the other voters besides A being equally divided, which is likely to be an extremely small number. The expected benefit for A of voting is then the product of the benefit of a favorable result times the probability of the vote being tied without A's vote. On the cost side, individual A must consider the opportunity cost of voting, which may involve registering and/or waiting in line for several hours to cast a ballot. Moreover, there is a significant cost to obtaining information about the candidates, especially given that

voters are generally uninformed to begin with. In 2016, just 37 percent of registered voters could name either their U.S. Representative or Senator. With that said, the total cost of voting is C, and therefore rationality dictates that individual A votes if and only if RP>C.

In elections for political office candidates are usually driven to a centrist position so there is not likely to be a great deal of difference in the consequences for any voter of one candidate being elected rather than another. In other words, B probably will not be a large amount. Since P is likely to be a very small quantity the expected gain from voting is likely to be small. Therefore, low turnout is justified because voters are acting in their own rational interest. As Economists point out, this constitutes a serious market failure, which is not easily remedied by regulation. After all, regulation is not immune to the same problems because voters will be unable to distinguish a good regulation from a bad one, much as they often fail to distinguish a candidate who represents their economic interests. (Holcombe, 1989)[36]

Ultimately, the base strategy provides the only plausible remedy to the dilemma presented by Public Choice Theory. If a progressive candidate is nominated by the Democratic Party and faces off against another base candidate in Donald Trump, the benefits of voting may overtake the costs, because the respective contenders' ideology/policy preferences will diverge more than in a typical election. As such, individual A would choose to vote, if he/she is a rational actor, because the potential difference in his/her daily life will outweigh the costs associated with participating in the political process. While the election outcome will almost certainly be independent of individual A's vote, the wide gulf between candidates will counter the structural biases against voting. Given Sanders' history as an elected official, there is little

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[36] Holcombe, R. G. (1989). "The Median Voter Model in Public Choice Theory." *Public Choice* 61 (2): 115-125.

evidence to suggest he would follow the lead of his Democratic predecessors and pivot to the center; rather, he will likely focus on appeals to the progressive base, and in doing so generate increases in turnout.(Lenz, 2012)[37]

In addition to Public Choice Theory, behavioral game theory also serves as a useful tool of analysis. As with the persuasion strategy, limited strategic thinking plays a significant role when turnout becomes the priority. For instance, among progressive voters, particularly diehard Sanders supporters, many of whom did not vote in 2016, there may be an increased urgency to participate based on the preferences of other voters. In a recent Gallup poll, nearly 70 percent of registered Republican voters reported enthusiasm about voting in the upcoming election, as did 65 percent of registered Democrats.(Pew, 2019)[38] With this in mind, supporters of Senator Sanders will be energized but also aware that their enthusiasm is replicated for the opposing candidate; as such, they will be more likely to vote to ensure that Sanders prevails. In 2016, many Democratic voters underestimated support for Trump, and, when combined with Clinton's high unfavorable numbers, contributed to a slight decline in turnout.

Lastly, the base strategy can also be justified by applying an alternate interpretation of the Overton Window. Whereas advocates of the persuasion strategy would contend that the window of plausible policies is relatively constrained, recent changes in the electorate suggest otherwise. As early as 1982, Economist Milton Friedman expressed his view that the spectrum of policies is not constant, nor should it be, over time: "Our basic function is to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes

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[37] Lenz, Gabriel. (2012). "Follow the Leader? How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance." Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[38] "Political Independents: Who They Are, What They Think." (2019). *Pew Research Center.*

politically inevitable."(Ledyard, 1984)[39] In this excerpt, Friedman implies that policymakers should not necessarily restrict themselves to advocating only for solutions within the mainstream at a given moment. In 2020, there are indications that the Overton Window may be expanding to encompass progressive policies once dismissed as 'fringe' or 'radical.' In 2017, Sanders' signature measure, the Medicare for All Act, had no Senate co-sponsors in 2013, but four years later it had 16, along with 125 in the House. According to the Senator himself, "We have come a very, very long way in the American people now demanding legislation and concepts that just a few years ago were thought to be very radical." Among the current field of 2020 Democratic candidates, policies once thought to be outside the realm of the 'politically possible' are now widely accepted, including proposals like the Green New Deal and a minimum wage increase to $15/hour. Progressive policies are not only gaining support from within the Democratic Party, but they are earning recognition from Republicans. While the vast majority of conservative voters are opposed to single-payer healthcare and other policy alternatives, they seem to acknowledge the possibility that it could become law in the not too distant future.

With that said, there are economists who argue that the above theory is nothing more than wishful thinking. According to Loewenstein et. al, the more divided we become, the harder it is to locate the Overton Window, let alone move it...on the national level, there is no window. Instead of a consensus edging one way or another, we have a choice between two poles."(Loewenstein, 2003)[40] Moreover, "The Overton Window is ultimately a name for what

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[39] Ledyard, John, O. (1984). "The Pure-Theory of Two-Candidate Elections." *Public Choice* 44(January): 7-41.

[40] Loewenstein, George, O'Donohue, Ted, Rabin, Matthew. (2003). "Projection Bias In Predicting Future Utility." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118(4): 1209-1248.

we have lost, not an indication of where we are headed." In other words, Loewenstein and like-minded economists contend that a singular Overton Window cannot exist when the two major political parties have such divergent policy preferences. Although this is a valid argument, it fails to account for the increasing consensus among voters, irrespective of party, for specific liberal policies, including an assault weapons ban, increased marginal taxes on the wealthy, and campaign finance reform.

Part Three
A Third Way

"I don't think they're picking on me because I'm a woman, I think they're picking on me because I'm winning," At a news conference in November 2007, then-Senator Hillary Clinton made this statement in response to criticism that she was exploiting her gender for political gain. Similarly, Clinton's chief rival in the 2008 campaign, then-Senator Barack Obama adopted a similar tone, maintaining that: "If I don't win this race, it won't be because of my background, it will be because I have not shown to the American people a vision for where the country needs to go." Although Clinton won a majority of white voters in the primary, Obama prevailed in the general election, and in doing so outperformed two of his white Democratic predecessors among both non-college and college-educated whites. Following his reelection in 2012, albeit a tighter race, President Obama was deemed by many pundits and journalists to be a 'post-racial' candidate, who transcended identity. According to David Axelrod, a Senior Advisor to the President, Obama viewed himself as 'of' the black community, but not 'defined' by it. (Morris, 2019)[41]

Just four years later, Secretary Clinton employed a radically different approach in her campaign for President. Unlike 2008, the Clinton team chose to highlight issues of identity, namely gender and race, that had not featured prominently in past election cycles. As a general rule, the campaign adopted a base approach with respect to identity, and Secretary Clinton herself frequently reminded voters of her place in history: "If you think fighting for equal pay

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[41] Morris, Elliott, G. (2019). "Why a Left-Wing Nominee Would Hurt Democrats." *The Economist.*

and paid family leave is playing the woman card, then deal me in!"(McElwee, 2020)[42]

Conversely, on non-identity issues, such as climate change and gun control, the Clinton

campaign prioritized persuasion over turnout, adopting a more moderate tone. Despite efforts to

corral base voters with appeals to identity and reassure moderate Republicans/Independents of

her centrist positions on economics, Clinton failed to defeat an opponent with the worst

favorability ratings of any Presidential candidate in history. As Dr. Bitecofer points out, "under

their[Clinton team's] persuasion strategy Independents were not moved into the Democratic

column and that liberal defection alone cost Hillary Clinton more than 1.5 million votes

nationally as well as victories in the three Midwestern states that swung the Electoral College to

Donald Trump."(Bitecofer, 2018)[43] Given the high concentration of non-college educated white

voters in Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, many experts speculated that Clinton's

historic underperformance with this cohort ultimately cost her the election. In 2008, the first

African American Presidential nominee only lost by 15 points among this voting group; by 2016,

the Republican Party with Trump at the helm enjoyed a 24-point advantage.(McElwee, 2018)[44]

Although Clinton's loss was the product of a complex interplay of factors, including foreign

interference and personal missteps, evidence from the most prominent election surveys suggests

that her focus on identity politics and Trump's ability to counteract it effectively contributed

most to her defeat. Looking ahead to 2020, the optimal general election strategy for the eventual

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[42] McElwee, Sean, Schaffner, Brian F. (2020). "How Democrats Can Win Back Obama-Trump Defectors." *The New York Times.*

[43] Bitecofer, R. (2018). *The Unprecedented 2016 Presidential Election,* London: Palgrave Macmillan: 141-186.

[44] McElwee, Sean. (2018). "How Democrats Can Mobilize Millions of Non-Voters." *The Nation.*

Democratic nominee will involve a reconciliation between turnout and persuasion and a

significant shift away from issues of identity.

## Chapter One
3.1 Political Analysis

According to the preeminent political science journal *Political Science Quarterly,*

identity politics can be defined as: "a political approach and analysis based on people prioritizing

the concerns most relevant to their particular racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, social, cultural or

other *identity*, and forming exclusive political alliances with others of this group, instead of

engaging in more traditional, broad-based party politics."(Collingwood, 2018)[45] What's more,

identity is used as a tool to frame political claims, promote political ideologies, or stimulate and

orient social and political action, usually in a larger context of inequality or injustice to assert

group distinctiveness.

In many ways, the 2016 Presidential election was a referendum on race, gender, and

immigration. Throughout the campaign, then-candidate Trump unabashedly exploited white

identity politics by promoting the birther conspiracy, taking a hardline stance on immigration,

and adopting slogans, i.e. 'America First,' with a racially charged history. In doing so, Trump

operationalized voters' implicit prejudices and linked economic woes to demographic change.

Although a majority of journalists and pundits identified economic anxiety as the primary driver

of Trump's upset victory, data from the American National Election and VOTER surveys

suggests that the impact of economics was dwarfed by that of identity. As displayed below in

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[45] Collingwood, L., Reny, T. T., Valenzuela, A. (2018). "Vote Switching in the 2016 Election:
How Racial and Immigration Attitudes, Not Economics, Explain Shifts in White Voting."
Forthcoming in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Spring).

figure 5(where the x axis represents vote share for the Republican candidate), Trump

outperformed Romney among voters who attribute racial inequality to lack of effort, independent

of economic anxiety (Sides, 2018)[46]:

Figure 5
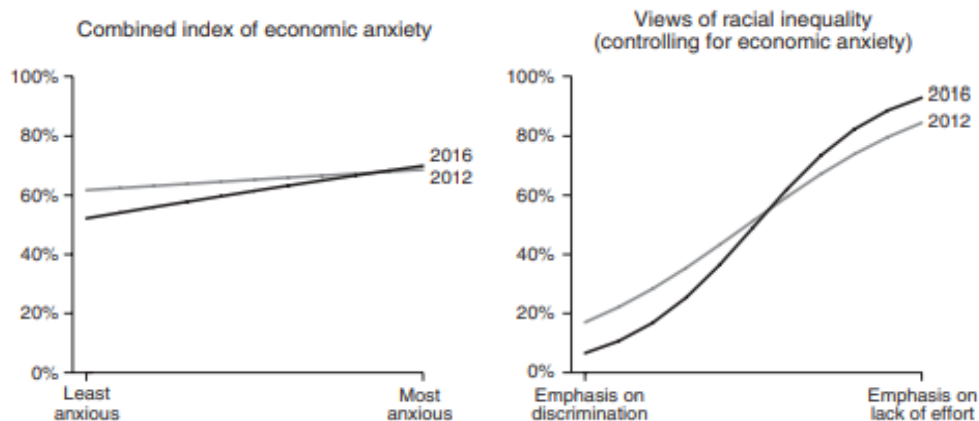
According to Sides et.al, author of the book *Identity Crisis*, the Trump campaign's focus

on identity-inflected issues, combined with Clinton and Trump's sharply divergent positions on

race and immigration heightened the salience of white identity. Once activated, racialized

economics, defined as "the belief that undeserving groups are getting ahead while your group is

left behind," took hold. Therefore, voters' attitudes on racial issues accounted for the

unprecedented divide between college and non-college educated white voters. Unlike in 2008

and 2012, many white voters who had been traditionally associated with the Democratic Party

switched allegiances in 2016 as identity politics took center stage. As Sides et.al point out,

polling indicates that significant proportions of white Obama voters aligned more with Trump on

issues of race and immigration: "49 percent of this cohort did not think that 'blacks have gotten

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[46] Sides, John, Tesler, Michael, Vavrek, Lynn. (2018). *Identity Crisis*. London: Princeton
University Press: 170-174

less than they deserve,' 39 percent did not believe that slavery and discrimination hindered the

economic advancement of blacks, and 28 percent blamed the economic disadvantages of blacks

on their own effort."(Sides, 2018)[47] Further findings from the 2016 ANES and VOTER surveys

also document the potency of Trump's identity-based strategy/platform, as illustrated below.

Figure 6

2016 ANES Pilot Study: Combined relationship between chance of supporting Trump and . . .
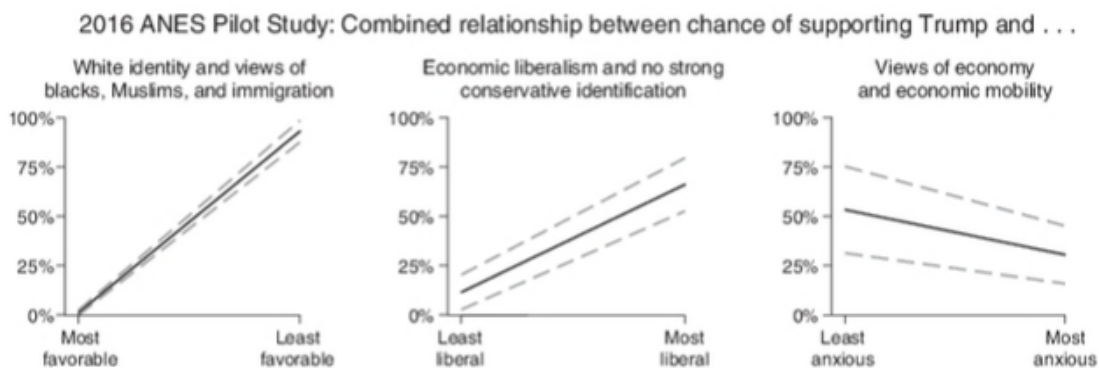
The combined relationship between Trump support and attitudes related to race, ethnicity, religion, liberalism, and economic anxiety.
This figure captures the relationship between support for Trump and the combination of various attitudes, holding other factors at their means. The dotted lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Once again, there is a notable association between support for Trump and voters'

attitudes on issues of identity, while no such relationship is observed for Trump support and

economic anxiety as a separate variable.   Above all else, data from 2016 should serve as a

warning to Democratic Presidential candidates who intend to follow Clinton's lead and embrace

a liberal version of identity politics. So long as President Trump remains the chief opponent in

2020, Democrats risk alienating non-college educated white voters who are highly concentrated

in critical battleground states.

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[47] Sides, John, Tesler, Michael, Vavrek, Lynn. (2018). *Identity Crisis.* London: Princeton University Press: 163-165.

Instead, the eventual Democratic nominee should employ a bifurcated messaging/campaign strategy, wherein he/she adopts the base strategy on issues most salient to the Democratic base, while adopting the persuasion strategy on issues most salient to undecided voters. Specifically, the nominee should embrace a progressive platform with respect to climate change, health care, tax reform, and gun control, issues that are disproportionately more important to Democratic base voters. Conversely, the Democratic candidate should prioritize persuasion with respect to race/gender, immigration, and national security, issues that are disproportionately more important to undecided and moderate Republican voters. The gulf in salience for each of these issues is illustrated in figure 8 below:

Figure 7

Percentage of Americans in each party who say the issue is a top policy priority in 2020
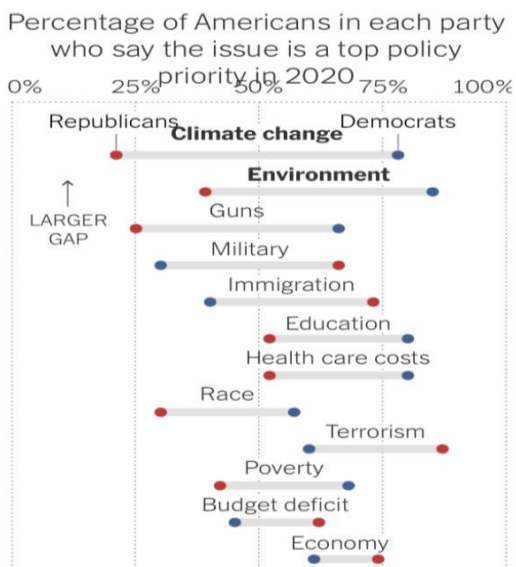
If the Democratic nominee intends to maximize his/her chances to unseat the incumbent President, he/she must appeal to both Obama-nonvoters, who largely represent the progressive wing of the party and Obama-Trump-Democratic voters(Obama-Trump voters who supported Democratic candidates in the 2018 midterms), who comprise 25 percent(~1.8 million) of all Obama-Trump voters.(McElwee, 2018)[48] According to the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, the results of which are displayed in figure 9, Obama-Trump-Democratic voters hold positions consistent with Democratic base voters(those who supported both Obama and Clinton) on gun control and climate change, but far more moderate or even right-wing positions on
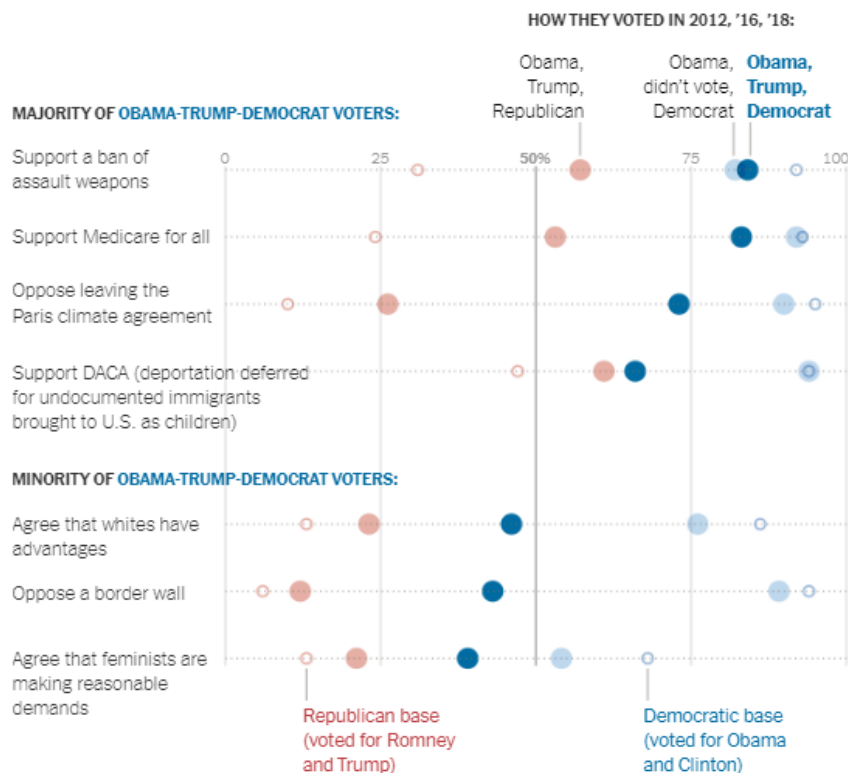
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[48] McElwee, Sean. (2018). "How Democrats Can Mobilize Millions of Non-Voters." *The Nation.*

identity-based issues such as immigration. Even among Obama-nonvoters, there is a wide

discrepancy in support for progressive policies between non-identity and identity issues. For

instance, an overwhelming majority, 85 percent of both Obama-nonvoters and Obama-Trump-

Democratic voters support Medicare-for-All, while just 45 percent of Obama-Trump-Democratic

voters agree that 'whites have advantages' or that 'feminists are making reasonable demands.'

Overall, with respect to key identity issues, Obama-Trump-Democratic voters diverge

dramatically from Obama-nonvoters and Democratic base voters, and are in fact more closely

aligned with Republican base voters. As political scientist Brian Schaffner points out: "The

story of Democratic success in winning back the House in 2018 seems to be driven by... the

ability to win back some cross-pressured members of the Obama coalition who voted for Trump

in 2016, while also remobilizing former Obama voters...progressive economic and climate views

unite these two coalitions, while the groups are more divided when it comes to racial justice and

gender equity."(Schaffner, 2020)[49]

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[49] Schaffner, Brian F. (2018). "Understanding White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: The Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism." *Political Science Quarterly.*

In a landmark study entitled "The 100 Million Project," researchers at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation surveyed a representative sample of 12,000 'chronic nonvoters' or eligible, but unregistered voters, or people who have voted only once in the past six elections. According to the survey, 100 million Americans, or 43 percent of eligible voters, fit this description. It found that non-voters are less educated, poorer, and more likely to be minorities, single and women. 62 percent do not have a college degree, and 20 to 25 percent make less than $50,000 annually; 65 percent are white. A majority, 51 percent, have a negative opinion of Trump, versus 40 percent positive. While non-voters skew center-left on some key issues like health care, they are slightly more conservative than the general population on immigration and racial issues. This cohort, which comprises a key component of Senator Sanders' election strategy, is open to progressive policies such as Medicare-for-All, which receives 60 percent support, but is in opposition to Sanders' pledge to decriminalize border crossings. (Amandi, 2020)[50]

Figure 8

HOW THEY VOTED IN 2012, '16, '18:

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[50] Amandi, Fernand, et. al. (2020). "The-100-Million Project: The Untold Story of American Non-voters." *Bendixen & Amandi International* (February).

Given that members of the Democratic base, undecided voters, and nonvoters are all more conservative on issues of identity, it follows that the 2020 Democratic nominee should adopt a persuasion strategy on such issues to maximize support. Based on polling data, the ideal candidate would adopt Obama's 2012 immigration policy platform, which includes a pathway to citizenship, protection for DACA recipients, increased border security, and criminalization of border crossings. More importantly, the candidate should, as much as possible, attempt to lower the salience of identity issues and pivot to discuss progressive policies on climate change and taxes, which have broad appeal. Both Obama-nonvoter-Democrats (92 percent) and Obama-Trump-Democrats (88 percent) support a $12 minimum wage and a millionaire's tax (92 percent and 79 percent)." (McElwee, 2020)[51]

Given these competing findings, both base and persuasion strategies can be employed in different contexts with respect to different policies. As it relates to base mobilization, the Democratic nominee should embrace Medicare-for-All, increased income taxes on the top 1 percent, a wealth tax, a gun registry, a ban on assault weapons, and the Green New Deal. As it relates to persuasion, the nominee should restrict messaging on immigration and minority discrimination, while supporting widely popular policies such as the continuation of protections for DACA recipients. This component of the strategy emphasizes messaging over policy. On national security, the Democratic candidate should adopt a pacifist-realist approach, whereby he/she pledges to prioritize diplomacy over military action and takes a firm stance against regime change. While no one candidate in the current 2020 field is perfectly positioned on all of the above issues, Senator Sanders and Vice President Joe Biden come closest to an ideal choice. As

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[51] McElwee, Sean, Schaffner, Brian F. (2020). "How Democrats Can Win Back Obama-Trump Defectors." *The New York Times.*

displayed in the figure 9 below, the two leading candidates in the Democratic primary are rated

on a -1.0 to 1.0 scale by issue, with 1.0 representing the most progressive stance possible, and -

1.0 denoting President Trump's position. 'Median Battleground' voters represent the average

position for the key voting blocs identified for both the base and persuasion strategies in the

swing states, including: Obama-Trump, Obama-Protest, Obama-nonvoters, Romney-Clinton,

Romney-Protest.* These ratings were calculated using data from the Kaiser/Pew Research

survey conducted in October 2019 and a comprehensive study of battleground voters completed

by the polling company Engagious.* (Thau, 2020)[52]

Figure 9

Issue	Biden	Sanders	Warren	Median Battleground	Target/Ideal Candidate
Health Care	0.5	**0.8**	0.8	0.3	0.7
Economy	0.5	**0.8**	0.7	0.5	0.7
Climate	0.7	**0.9**	0.8	0.5	0.8
Guns	**0.8**	0.7	**0.8**	0.6	0.8
Immigration	**0.5**	0.8	1.0	-0.3	0.2
Race/Gender	**0.4**	0.7	0.9	-0.3	0.2
National Security	**0.5**	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.5

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*Using data compiled from the joint KFF/Cook political survey, ANES, and the Catalist Voter Registration Database, voter views on the above issues were calculated and matched to the scale described above. The 'ideal' or 'target' value for the 2020 Democratic Presidential nominee represents the average voter rating, when applied to the scale, of the median battleground voter, or any voter falling into the 'swing' or 'base' categories described in Parts 1 and 2.

[52] Thau, Richard. (2019). "Election 2020 Voter Perceptions." *Engagious.*

As illustrated above, Sanders' positions, with the exception of gun control and immigration, are closely aligned with preferences for key battleground state voting cohorts. Vice President Biden is also a strong candidate given his comparatively moderate position on immigration. What's more, Biden has staked his candidacy on electability and has demonstrated strength among groups in the persuasion category, i.e. Obama-Trump and Romney-Clinton voters. On the flip side, Sanders has demonstrated support from base voter cohorts, especially Obama-nonvoters and Obama-Protest voters, who tend to hold more progressive positions even than the average Democratic Party voter. Senator Warren, on the other hand, has made identity politics a centerpiece of her campaign, constantly reminding voters that she would decriminalize border crossings if elected President. Although this policy is supported by nearly 50 percent of Democratic primary voters, it is wildly unpopular in battleground states. Senator Warren's economic policies, on the other hand, which include a wealth tax for individuals with assets over $50 million, do have broad appeal, but ultimately the controversial policies on immigration offset this potential benefit. As such, adopting a progressive position on immigration may be counterproductive, as it may disproportionately harm the Democratic nominee in the Rust Belt, where working-class whites are heavily concentrated.

Chapter Two
3.2 Economic Analysis

Despite the apparent disconnect between economic theories in support and in opposition of the persuasion strategy, there is significant overlap. For one, while the Median Voter Theorem is often applied universally to campaigns, it can be modified to apply in limited circumstances, with respect to specific issues. Furthermore, Public Choice Theory may also be relevant given that both major parties continue to diverge on policy, which may increase the weight of an individual vote. Finally, the Overton Window may be wider on issues of economics and healthcare but narrower on culturally sensitive issues, i.e. immigration.

As mentioned earlier, the Median Voter Theorem presupposes agreement on the central issues dividing an electorate.   According to the data presented in part three of this analysis, the nature and extent of polarization on key issues is relatively well understood in 2020. As such, the eventual Democratic nominee can confidently appeal to the median voter on immigration, an issue with low salience to the base and higher salience for undecided and right-leaning voters. Doing so will maximize support among the majority of voters who support DACA and enhanced border security, while minimizing lost base votes. Given that President Trump has largely written off the persuasion strategy on virtually all issues, the Democratic nominee is poised to exploit this vulnerability.

The 'third way' strategy can also draw support from Public Choice Theory. Although a candidate adopting moderate positions on identity may not constitute a radical departure from the current Administration, progressive economic/healthcare policies would offset this effect. As such, a Democratic nominee would still be able to draw a sharp contrast with the incumbent while employing the bifurcated campaign strategy, thus presenting a clear choice for the voter.

Once the distinction between general election candidates becomes apparent, the individual voter

will be incentivized to turn out. (Fedderson, 2004)[53]

       With respect to the Overton Window, data from previous sections demonstrates that

policies outside of the 'mainstream' are palatable on most issues. For instance, the percentage of

registered voters in favor of increased taxes on the wealthy has steadily climbed from a low of 40

percent in 2000 to nearly 70 percent in 2019. (Alesina, 2017)[54] Conversely, the Overton

Window has remained narrow on identity issues, as a majority of white voters insist that whites

face more 'discrimination' than racial minorities in the United States. Given these competing

findings, it would appear that the Overton Window is fluid except with respect to identity issues.

Therefore, in order to maximize chances of victory, the Democratic nominee can comfortably

advocate for more 'radical' or forward-thinking policies with respect to economics and the

environment without the risk of significant backlash. According to David French of *The

National Review,* there is recent precedent for expanding the Overton Window's traditional

confines: "...along came Donald Trump. On key issues, he didn't just move the Overton

Window, he smashed it, scattered the shards, and rolled over them with a steamroller. On issues

like immigration, national security, and even the manner of political debate itself, there's no

window left."(French, 2017)[55] As French points out, the current Republican President is

evidence himself that the window of policies deemed 'mainstream' or acceptable to the average

voter can shift dramatically, even within the course of one election cycle.

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[53] Feddersen, Timothy, J. (2004). "Rational Choice Theory and the Paradox of Not Voting."
Journal of Economic Perspectives (Winter) 18(1); 99-112.

[54] Alesina, Alberto, Passarelli, Francesco. (2017). "Loss Aversion in Politics." *Harvard University Press* (February).

[55] French, David. (2017). "Expanding the Overton Window." *National Review.* (January).

Finally, as it relates to limited strategic thinking, the proposed strategy is most likely to align with voters' beliefs about other voters. As a litany of polls demonstrate, Democratic voters generally believe that electability is driven by identity politics. According to a 2019 survey conducted by YouGov, "60 percent of Democrats believe a candidate being white makes a difference. Similarly, 34 percent of Dems think that being nonwhite does not make a difference, with 23 percent unsure." (Ghitza, 2019)[56]

As the results of the poll demonstrate, Democrats are concerned about the identity of the candidate. A majority believe that other voters will be prejudiced, and therefore they may be more likely to vote for candidates like Vice President Biden, because they believe other voters will be more likely to reject a female or minority candidate. In June of last year, Gallup conducted a poll of likely, registered voters and found that less than 75 percent would consider supporting an LGBTQ candidate, and just 65 percent would support a candidate who identified as Muslim. Given the presence of the Bradley Effect, whereby voters often purport to be more socially accepting in opinion polls than they are in practice, these poll results are even more alarming. Above all else, they reveal that systematic prejudices remain widespread, and as such other voters take these biases into consideration when making their own decision. Because the data suggest not only systematic biases towards nonwhite or female candidates but awareness among comparatively unbiased voters, limited strategic thinking will further decrease the likelihood of electing a female or minority candidate, especially one that relies on identity politics. When the salience of identity issues increases, such candidates will face even greater electoral obstacles.

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[56] Ghitza, Y. (2019). "Analyzing the Catalist Voter Registration Database." *Medium* (March).

__Part Four__
Normative Implications & Conclusion

Regardless of the election outcome, there will be significant ramifications for each of the campaign strategies discussed in this analysis. On the one hand, if Senator Sanders emerges as the Democratic nominee and goes on to defeat President Trump, the turnout strategy may become more popular going forward. Such a victory would be the first of its kind on a national scale, and for the first time, political scientists and future campaigns would have a relevant precedent to study. Normatively, however, such an outcome may be undesirable because it will demonstrate that both major political parties are capable of electoral success at the expense of the median voter. In future campaigns, candidates seeking to employ the base strategy can do so with greater confidence, all while speaking to their own voters, rather than the electorate at large.

Given that U.S. political institutions are designed to promote cross-cutting coalitions and nonpartisanship, employing the base strategy may compound the recent trend of increasing political gridlock. As evidenced by the debt ceiling debacle of 2011, the 'fiscal cliff' of 2012, and the countless instances of Congressional dysfunction, polarization has paralyzed democratic system. The founders envisioned a system of constantly shifting factions/coalitions; partisanship and tribalism short-circuits this model. David French of the *National Review*, one of the country's most prominent conservative publications, highlights the dangers of pursuing base politics: "The shattering of the Overton Window reflects the shattering of the American consensus, and the result will likely be deeper polarization, and even less civility, with further strains on the ties that bind our nation together."(French, 2017)[57]   Although Senator Sanders' platform and brand of politics is a far cry from those of the incumbent President, his insistence

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[57] French, David. (2017). "Expanding the Overton Window." *National Review*. (January): 4.

on unrealistic policies, most of which are only popular among the progressive base, may exacerbate the political fissures in the body politic.

On the other hand, if former Vice President Biden rides a wave of anti-Trump sentiment to the White House, the normative implications of his victory may not be much more encouraging. If Biden decides to prioritize persuasion writ large, and pivots on several key issues, such as climate change in the general election, he will continue to normalize the politics of insincerity. Consistently, in poll after poll, across time, race and gender, the single most unpopular and discouraging trait identified by voters in politicians is their seemingly constant attempts to flip the script. As such, candidates are better served balancing base turnout with persuasion on an issue-by-issue basis. In the upcoming election, it is abundantly clear that, especially in critical states in the Industrial Midwest, issues of race and immigration do not play in the Democrats' favor. Conversely, on an issue like climate change, considered the second-most important issue among Democratic voters and the thirteenth-most important issue among Republicans, the nominee can feel free to 'swing for the fences' Balancing persuasion with turnout will not only be beneficial politically, but normatively, as it provides an opportunity for a nuanced, sophisticated approach. In an era of zero-sum, all-or-nothing, binary politics, adopting the 'third way' strategy will be a step towards progress and away from partisanship.

Although the final results of the Democratic Presidential Primary will be unknown for several months, the strategy employed by the Biden team is somewhat encouraging from a normative perspective. Following the March 10th primaries, when Vice President Biden assumed an all but insurmountable lead, his campaign began to modulate his platform in order to offer an olive branch to the progressive base. Although the changes, which include a pledge to lower the

Medicare eligibility age to 60, they are an indication that the Biden campaign intends to avoid the pitfalls of ignoring base voter preferences on highly salient issues.

With that said, numerous obstacles are impeding the implementation of such a campaign strategy, including the current state of the U.S. electoral system. As it currently stands, the electoral college rewards candidates who exclusively focus on the swing states and renders members of the minority party in each state irrelevant. After all, since it is possible to win a Presidential election with a mere plurality in every state, candidates are not incentivized to appeal to Republicans in California or Democrats in North Dakota. Rather, the system rewards uniform, highly rigid, staunchly partisan campaign platforms and candidates, to the detriment of the voters and the democratic process. Edward Foley, Professor of Law at Ohio State University, discusses the disconnect between the founders' vision of the Presidential election process and the current reality: "The Jeffersonians…argued strenuously that, according to fundamental principles of republican government, the chief executive must be the choice of the majority party. Senator John Taylor, a constitutional scholar…asserted that it 'never' is appropriate that 'a minor faction should acquire a power capable of defeating the majority in the election of President.'(Foley, 2019)[58] The 12th Amendment that he and the Jeffersonians proposed—in which electors each cast a single vote for president and then a separate vote for vice president—was designed to entrust power to the majority vote. In Foley's view, the "Jeffersonians would find [the current system] entirely objectionable insofar as it empowers a party and a candidate that lack a majority

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[58] Foley, Edward B. (2019). *Presidential Elections and Majority Rule.* Oxford University Press: 64-66.

of votes…even more objectionable if such a candidate achieved an Electoral College victory only as a result of these minority-vote wins in enough states." (Foley, 2019)[59]

In order to allow for more flexible policies and increase the diversity of campaign strategies, the electoral college must be reformed such that candidates are required to attain a majority. One possible solution involves rank-choice-runoff voting, whereby each voter ranks his/her preferred candidates in order of preference and, when results are tabulated, the top two candidates advance to a runoff to determine the winner. In 2016, then-candidate Trump won 7 swing states with less than 50 percent of the vote with a margin of victory under 3 percentage points. Sixteen years earlier, the election was decided by a margin of 0.05% in Florida. In his book published last December, Foley endorses the proposal to alter the means of electoral allocation: "There are many methods states can use to comply with this principle[of majority rule]…states could adopt the kind of 'instant runoff voting' procedure…Voters can rank their preferences among multiple candidates, so that a computer can tally which of the top two finalists receives a majority once all lower-ranked candidates are eliminated."(Foley, 2019)[60]

If rank-choice voting were applied nationally, a Presidential candidate would no longer be able to win outright without receiving at least 50 percent of the vote in the final stage. These reforms, unlike the proposed elimination of the electoral college, are more likely to achieve bipartisan appeal and make progress towards a system that affirms the principle of 'one voice, one vote.' In the end, this system would enable the employment of the third way strategy, which

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[59] Foley, Edward B. (2019). *Presidential Elections and Majority Rule.* Oxford University Press: 41.

[60] Foley, Edward B. (2019). *Presidential Elections and Majority Rule.* Oxford University Press: 42.

respects the views of voters from different backgrounds, political persuasions, and values, while

retaining the core message of the Presidential candidate.

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