

How Class Realignment Broke the Democrats

Column: The Democratic 'sanity bubble' is a shield against popular support

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On Thursday, *Politico* published two helpful reminders of the Democrats' existence. Both stories reinforced the idea that, despite the ongoing tumult in the Republican Party, it is actually the Democratic Party that has been most disrupted by the realignment of American politics along class lines. Not that the Democrats, or Washingtonians in general, seem aware of this fact.

The first [article](#), by Donna Brazile, described a secret arrangement by which Hillary Clinton exercised control over the Democratic National Committee months before voting began in the Democratic presidential primary. "The agreement—signed by Amy Dacey, the former CEO of the DNC, and Robby Mook with a copy to Marc Elias—specified that in exchange for raising money and investing in the DNC, Hillary would control the party's finances, strategy, and all the money raised," Brazile wrote. The fix was in, as early as August 2015. Or at least it seemed to be. What Clinton and the DNC brass did not anticipate was the phenomenon of Bernie Sanders, whose spirited challenge to Clinton was fueled by small dollar contributions from voters who could not afford to book her for a speech.

It's the second [article](#), though, that really captured my heart. Edward-Isaac Dove reported on this week's [first meeting](#) of the Obama Foundation in Chicago. Now, Dove is a journalist for a mainstream publication and, unlike Brazile, he has no particular animus against the subjects of his article. But one cannot finish his piece without feeling that the Democrats, having lost the White House and Congress, do not have the slightest clue what they are doing.

The summit Dove describes is a parody of a group therapy session for the liberal gentry, a cutaway scene from *Veep* minus Selina Meyer. "There was a morning meditation and yoga session, and an evening concert with Chance the Rapper and The National," he wrote. Lucky ducks. He noticed a chalkboard where attendees were free to write down their hopes. "Samples: 'We speak better and listen,' 'Americans will see each other'; 'my nephews will escape toxic masculinity.'" One speaker asked the crowd, "Is there space among the woke for the still-waking?" (Not on college campuses.)

The same speaker also mentioned something called the "starfish illusion." Pretty psychedelic. I had to look it [up](#).

Even the former president seemed aware of the absurdity of the proceedings. "Obama spent two feel-good but amorphous days making pop-in appearances at sessions and watching with bemusement, first as people didn't realize he was in the room, then at the wave of squeals and applause that swept over as they realized he was there," Dovere continues. "José Andres was at the hotel bar. Prince Harry was on stage, in jeans." Mateo Renzi, the former Italian prime minister, was present as well. Lin-Manuel Miranda free-styled. At the pop-up bookstore you could buy Ta-Nehisi Coates's latest, along with *Man's Search for Meaning*. Someone told Dovere that he had entered "the sanity bubble."

The sanity bubble! What a perfect label for the environs of the self-satisfied and righteous, the elegantly appointed ballrooms where the high and mighty, silhouetted in magenta up-lighting, nod reverentially at clichés mouthed by the latest faddish "thought leader," before tucking into, say, a caprese salad with arugula and pesto, followed by spinach and gorgonzola tortelloni with caramelized pears and bleu cheese cream. Within the sanity bubble life is pleasant, comfortable, and agreeable, its niceties and pleasures and fixed ideas interrupted by only the maelstrom of political and economic change outside.

I live in the bubble. Always have, even if I have come to disagree with what my college professors would call the "hegemonic discourse" of postmodern liberalism, and to gag at the vanity and solipsism of many of my fellow residents. But never, especially after the 2016 campaign, would I mistake the confines of the bubble for the whole of reality. That is the mistake Hillary Clinton made when she decided that she could win the presidency without the support of a white working class mangled by economic stagnation, family breakdown, and drug addiction. And it is the same mistake the Democrats at the Obama Foundation and on Capitol Hill are making now, in real time, as they wrap themselves in the illusions that growing minority populations will carry them ineluctably to power, and that identity politics is somehow an electoral winner.

As racially and sexually diverse as the crowd at the Obama Foundation summit may have been, everyone at the breakout session on "Who Narrates the World?" had, I'd wager, the following in common: a college or postgraduate degree, the mark of distinction and privilege and wealth in our society today. Yet most Americans do not possess such credentials, and live very different existences from those who do. Recently I asked an elections expert to describe the modern analogue to the "Dayton Housewife," the prototypical swing voter of the late '60s and '70s behind the presidencies of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. My friend told me the median voter is a believing Catholic woman with children who works part time, attends Mass sporadically, dropped out of college, lives in a household earning between \$50,000 and \$65,000 a year, votes in general election years, and resides in the Columbus exurbs.

Do you suppose that our hypothetical Westerville mom would write on a chalkboard that she hopes her son will be rescued from "toxic masculinity"? Or cares in the slightest about José Andres? She probably voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 because he talked a good game, has a nice family, and sympathized with the challenges of working people. But then Obama's second term brought no real improvement in her prospects, and a lot of ancillary cultural and social upheaval besides. Developments that Clinton promised to accelerate, while reassuring the public that the economic picture had brightened itself.

"Obama and Clinton," writes [Stan Greenberg](#), "lived in a cosmopolitan and professional America that wasn't very angry about the state of the country, even if many of the groups in the Clinton coalition were struggling and angry." But Bernie Sanders, and later Donald Trump, *was* angry, and offered alternatives that, however flawed, at least seemed to acknowledge the crisis. So the Obama coalition fell apart. And as long as Democrats prefer the safety of the sanity bubble to the realities of America in 2017, that coalition is not likely to be put back together anytime soon.