



## Forget ‘Conventional Wisdom’: There Are No More Moderates

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November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018

It happens after every election. National press voices sift through results, toss around hot takes, and within a news cycle or two, the disease called conventional wisdom is pandemic again.

Listening the other night to talking heads like CNN’s Jake Tapper yammer on about how “candidate recruitment” and “veterans” are big takeaways for Democrats going forward triggered years of campaign-cliché flashbacks.

The big takeaway was that Trump got creamed in the suburbs, where he lost the confidence of “suburban moderates,” especially women. Trumpism is moving into the hills, we’ve been told, and Democrats seized big new territory in the suburbs, which should be everyone’s focus going forward.

The *New York Times* meanwhile said the results were a “vindication of the party’s more moderate wing,” and that Democratic winners “largely hailed from the political center.”

NBC said the results were a “gut punch for progressives,” although at the bottom of the piece it noted that high-profile incumbents who “tacked aggressively to the center” also lost – like Claire McCaskill and Joe Donnelly. The *Washington Post*’s Jennifer Rubin concluded, “It’s a good idea to go with a moderate,” and avoid a “fire-breathing progressive.”

If any of this sounds familiar, it’s because it’s basically the same post-mortem we get all the time: Democrats must move to the center, capture the suburbs, and embrace a less policy-specific, more personal-profile-based approach to politics, often pushing candidates with military records.

Meanwhile, after every loss, Republicans insist that moving to the center hurt them (“Conservatives join Trump in blaming moderates for House loss,” was a typical red-audience headline this week).

After Mitt Romney lost in 2012, Rush Limbaugh was one of the first to pooh-pooh the notion that lack of minority enthusiasm had triggered the defeat. The problem, Rush said, was “white voters stayed home” because they “didn’t think the Republican Party was conservative enough.”

This pattern repeats itself over and over. Democrats keep trying to run as non-specifically as possible, while from Bush to the Tea Party to Trump, the Republicans who fly their freak flag the highest win the day.

What is a “moderate,” exactly? Nearly every election cycle, the press comes up with a neat catch-phrase that purports to describe this person. The moderate is said to live in the suburbs and can be captured without offering much on the policy front. Implicitly, this voter is white.

You’ll notice there are a lot of articles about NASCAR dads and soccer moms, and fewer about the inner-city voters, who don’t get a catchy nickname. Why? Because the unspoken consensus is that such voters can be taken for granted.

So the focus is always on the suburbs. The press conception of this place seems based on a creepy mixture of *My Three Sons* and *Roseanne*. Pundits imagine a land where people drive boring cars, dislike smart talk, embrace sports and military uniforms, care more about looks and resumes than policy, and are generally scared of shit — especially “extreme” ideas.

Soccer moms were touted as the key “swing” bloc in 1996. Reporters had a lot of fun describing them. You can play a drinking game just by searching for “soccer moms” articles and trying to guess what brand of minivan the reporter mentions first.

After 1996, “soccer moms” joined “NASCAR dads” as cultural shorthand for one of a number of cliché demographics with whom national reporters rarely interacted. Most of what passes for conventional wisdom in campaign coverage is based on the idea that successful politicians have to be acceptable to such basically fictional representations of the American voter.

This is how we got John Kerry to run against George Bush. Conventional wisdom in 2003-2004 held that while we were at war, Democrats needed to nominate someone with combat experience, both as a juxtaposition against Bush’s draft-dodging past and to immunize the blue party against “soft on defense” charges. Flyover voters would respect the uniform, we were told.

Kerry headed into that summer running an ad that highlighted his military service, showed him in fatigues, or posing with his arm around John McCain. The ad boasted about how he’d broken with his party to support a balanced budget. He was no down-the-line Democrat, not this guy. He was almost Republican!

Once Kerry became the nominee, though, Republicans easily blew up Kerry’s supposed strength with the lurid Swift Boat campaign — it’s amazing how that stuff works with weak candidates, but sleaze campaigns like the Bill Ayers or Jeremiah Wright business bounce off the likes of Barack Obama.

Moreover, the press quickly cooked up new conventional wisdom: suburban “soccer moms” had become “security moms.” As such the campaign now hinged once again upon white suburban women, who this time were painted as very scared of *trrrrists* and determined to vote for Bush because of a “lioness factor” driving them to protect their kids.

This insanely insulting “security mom” thing took hold in about 10 minutes. It was based on nothing, but in a snap everyone was covering it: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *CBS*, *NPR*, *The Times UK*, *BBC*, *The Chicago Tribune*, everyone.

This nonsense caused the last month of the 2004 race to be dominated by questions about whether or not Kerry had a problem with female voters. But evidence suggests he ultimately won the female vote, losing instead thanks to male voters overwhelmingly picking Bush.

Conventional wisdom on national security issues may have cost Democrats that election. In the years preceding it was said Democrats couldn't oppose the Iraq war because of their "traditional vulnerability on national security issues" (this despite the fact that Democrats started wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Serbia).

These political considerations are what prompted "moderate" Democrats like Kerry and Hillary Clinton to vote for the lunatic war, which in 2002-2003 had seemed like a political winner for George Bush.

But by election night, 2004, public opinion had begun to turn against Bush's war. In fact, it was by then probably his biggest electoral weakness, as even the conservative Cato Institute noted after the election.

Had the Democrats just stopped playing guessing games in search of their hackneyed idea of what mythical suburban "swing" voters cared about and simply done the right thing — opposed a wrong war — they'd have had a better shot of hitting what turned out to be Bush's real weakness. Also, not that *this* matters, they might have saved a few hundred thousand lives.

Even after the Kerry fiasco, Democrats kept pushing out the same idea. Rahm Emmanuel, as head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in 2006, launched an effort to recruit veterans as candidates to "erase the Republican advantage on national security."

The Iraq war by then had already been declining in public popularity for two years; the country was just two years away from electing Barack Obama, who blew off heated accusations of being "soft on defense" and crushed John McCain by 11 points. Yet there was still this myth that Democrats had to keep trying to look tougher and tougher.

At the start of the 2008 race, conventional wisdom had Obama far back of Hillary Clinton. The few national pundits who conceded that Obama might have a chance usually insisted that the race would turn on something other than policy.

"How competitive the Democratic contest becomes could turn on the question of whether voters are significantly more interested in a fresh face or in a candidate they see as projecting strong leadership," is how the *Washington Post* put it, with its usual un-subtle messaging.

The point is, conventional wisdom is pretty much always wrong, and often spectacularly so. Invented media storylines too often dominate elections. The worst was probably the infamous "beer standard," i.e. America always picking the candidate it most wants to have a beer with (*Slate* last time, in a headline it would probably like to forget, declared "There has never been a better candidate to have a beer with than Trump").

Voters are not skittish, brainless creatures afraid of strong policy proposals. That more accurately describes the politicians and corporate donors who are invested in things staying as they are. Most actual people are living on the edge financially, are angry, and will take policy help from anywhere they can get it.

Polls today show Americans in large majorities now support expanded Social Security, drug re-importation, single-payer health care, free college, and they want Medicare to be able to negotiate lower drug prices. These positions would do well if any party threw its support behind them.

But conventional wisdom, once again, will likely insist heading into 2020 that something other than policy will matter, when it comes to picking candidates. CNN earlier this year, quoting polls and consultants, actually said that “in the era of Trump, where uniqueness is prized,” Democrats should search for “candidates with distinct backgrounds.”

I’d be very afraid of what Washington’s idea of a “candidate with a distinct background” looks like in the age of Trump.

Tuesday was a big night. There were some amazing results, including the historic Amendment 4 in Florida, re-enfranchising over a million felons.

But there were worrying signs as well. America is in a heated culture war. Something as dangerous as Trumpism isn’t going to be defeated by catch-phrases and political marketing tricks. The best bet is big ideas, and no matter what the talking heads on cable say, moving to the center — again — probably won’t cut it.