

# the to-do list

## 33 strategies to quash fake news and boost wins for Democratic candidates

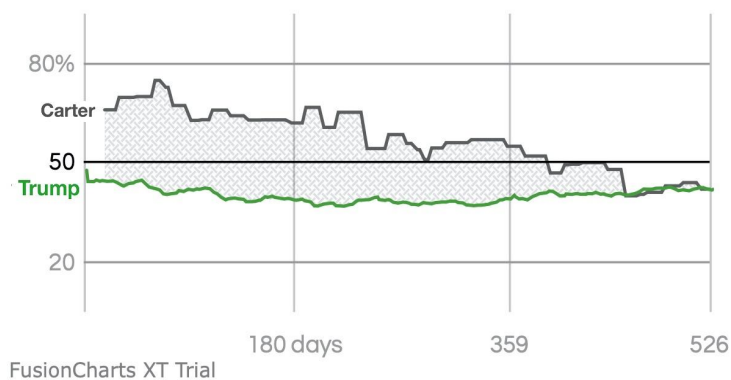
On *FiveThirtyEight* you can [track how American Presidents have fared](#) since the rise of Fox News and other polarizing media outlets. The decreasing popularity of Democratic presidents from Johnson to Obama inversely corresponds to the rise of cable news and alternative news narratives. **The site's graphics give us a clue beyond gerrymandering as to why Dems have had to work so hard lately for every win.**

The strangest phenomenon on those charts is Trump's approval record. During his tenure his numbers hovered within a 10 point range — like a broken EKG machine — at around 43%;

the same percentage of Americans [who say they trust Fox News](#). Ordinarily, presidential job approval scores go up and down as much as 50 points in response to a leader's successes or stumbles. Not Trump's. Nothing he did as president seemed to make a dent. His popularity was, and still is, protected by a marriage of self promotion and conservative media.

Presidents used to routinely see high ratings in the 70s and 80s. There hasn't been a Democrat in the White House with

### Jimmy Carter 1977-81



anything close to a 75% approval rating since Jimmy Carter — yep, Carter — because a growing segment of the population has morphed into an almost immovable block of [resistance toward Democratic candidates](#) and initiatives. It's not just dark money and redistricting that's holding Dems back — it's also entrenched public opinion.

**There's been a lot of talk about the fake news problem — but not much talk about how to fix it.** Fortunately there are a number of tweaks and remedies that can help tame the information landscape. Savvy public relations strategies, legal action, presidential directives, and an inclusive message can bring truth back into style again and level the playing field for Democrats. To get the conversation started, **here's a to-do list:**

*(Don't have time to read it all? Just read the bolded type —it's the List itself.)*

## fix the law

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It seems inevitable that navigating the slippery slope between defending free speech and curbing abuses will be front and center in the coming years. Many countries have already started **creating statutes for online expression**. Looking at how Europe has addressed these issues in the 2020 **Digital Services Act (DSA) may be a good place to start** a discussion in the US. The DSA provides a framework for the removal of illegal content, guarantees both corporate transparency and personal privacy, and includes an enforcement arm.

Currently American digital platforms fall under **Section 230** of the *Communications Decency Act*, (legislation both Trump and Biden have suggested jettisoning). It's a double edged sword — the Act protects freedom of speech online, offering the digital communication environment more freedoms than print media — even if the speech is dangerous or damaging. A hundred years ago, the Supreme Court case *Schenck v. United States* found that freedom of speech did not protect expressions that posed a “**clear and present danger**” like shouting “*Fire!*” in a crowded theater. A century later, we face the danger that a tsunami of fake news can drown out the truth — jeopardizing an aspect of our first amendment right — the ability to hear essential information when there is real danger (like COVID). With Biden in office, there's a good chance we'll see **a revision of our Communications Decency Act that incorporates elements of the ground-work started in Europe**. In addition, legislation that codifies standards of honesty in political advertising and reporting can help shield us from getting *swiftboated* in the future. Facebook and Twitter have made strides in developing software that identifies, labels and removes content abuses. Washington may need to be involved in developing this technology (possibly funding R&D to create open source code), so that the software is universally available and the language is consistent throughout digital platforms — for example: content labeled “*disputed*” is not as accurate as “*factually false*,” if, in fact, the content really is *false*. There's also a need to address **algorithmic amplification** of extreme content, deep fakes, and curated news feeds from news aggregators like megga influencer *Newsbreak* — who play an oversized role in deciding what news content we see.

2. Potential landmark cases brought by businesses and private parties have already got fake news broadcasters on the run. In 2021, **Dominion Voting Systems** threatened to bring defamation suits against Fox, Newsmax and OAN for suggesting (792 times) that Dominion voting machines converted votes to Democrats in swing states. (Swing-state counties that used Dominion machines mostly voted for Trump.) **The lawsuit threat got Fox, Newsmax et al to immediately back down and stop spreading the false claims**. In a humorously telling exchange one Newsmax host ran off set when his interviewee wouldn't stop repeating **the false narrative**. Smartmatic's 2021 **defamation lawsuit** against Fox got the network to dump popular host Lou Dobbs. Dominion is going forward with its suits and taking Fox, Newsmax and OAN each to court for \$4.6 billion cumulatively.

In 2020 a [lawsuit](#) alleging that Fox News increased COVID cases by spreading misleading information went to court in Washington state. Although the case didn't go anywhere, Fox dropped its hoax narrative and anti-mask rhetoric. More lawsuits are anticipated targeting actions like Newsmax's email to its subscribers asserting that "*the WORST thing you could do is get a vaccine when it becomes available*" because "*vaccines are one of the biggest health scares of our lifetime — a scam perpetuated among the American people.*"

If even the threat of a lawsuit can get media giants to clean up their speech, is there a possibility that **a string of legal actions could change the general rhetoric of broadcasters who peddle misinformation?** Technology can now track fake news super-spreaders: researchers found that just [33 posts](#) alleging election illegitimacy were responsible for over 13 million interactions. If we adopt some EU-style regulations it might stave off the kind of libelous, [dangerous speech](#) that is too common now, like the threats Brad Raffensperger, Georgia's Secretary of State, experienced in the wake of Trump's false accusations.

**3. Legal fights are underway to hold misinformation spreaders liable** for their actions. *Integrity First for America* and *Protect Democracy* (run by former Obama administration lawyers) have been leading the fight and taking lawbreakers to court. But a few non-profit law firms cannot stave off the waves of disinformation bombarding us. More funds to support these groups and others' legal battles to protect news communication integrity are needed.

**4.** During his tenure, [McConnell blocked](#) just about every piece of **legislation written to protect the U.S. from cyber attacks and Russian election hacking**. This may be a good time to bring some of those bills to the Senate floor.

### **They're cheating. We know they're cheating. Here's what we can do about it:**

The current information environment isn't simply the natural outgrowth of tech innovation and commercial opportunity. The Heritage Foundation and its offshoot the Media Research Center crafted strategies that helped shape federal rules to advance a [conservative agenda](#). Long before fake news and internet trolls became a thing, conservative legislators [gutted FCC regulations](#) that required measures for fairness in broadcasting and protected us from the possibility of partisan [power brokers](#) amassing media monopolies. The FCC eliminated the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, which had required broadcasters to present both sides of controversial issues of public importance. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 removed limits on the number of radio stations a corporation could own. In 2003–2004 rulings **the FCC did away with antitrust protections for television, newspapers and other media** — giving Sinclair, Salem, and Rupert Murdoch etc. the green light to buy up over five thousand news outlets and turn them into a unified voice of [misinformation](#). The Right now controls such a large segment of American viewer and readership (especially in rural areas), that in [some regions](#), real, fact-based news is hard to find. Those changes have paved the way for our [propagandistic](#) news environment and the state of American politics today.

5. It's possible that one seemingly almost inconsequential move by Biden could have the most far-reaching effect of his presidency in terms of protecting a working US democracy: it's the **appointment of a strong FCC Chair and commissioners who can protect us by modernizing and restoring antitrust protections, implementing balanced reporting guidelines, and maintaining net neutrality**. These actions can keep conservative players from **gaming the system**. Biden has named Jessica Rosenworcel as chair and nominated Gigi Sohn as commissioner — Sohn's confirmation has been held up. **If Sohn is confirmed there'll be enough votes to begin reining in media monopolies and bad behavior.**

6. and 7. The FTC can rid **dark money** from our election process by creating **funding disclosure requirements**. Biden's appointment, **FTC Chair Lina Khan**, has already moved to strengthen and streamline the FTC's **corporate misconduct rules** and has been holding public comment sessions that may create the basis for reform. There is also talk of the **FTC establishing a new federal regulatory body responsible for overseeing Big Tech**. Restoring and creating new institutional guardrails can go a long way toward taking some of the outsized political influence away from giant corporations and backroom funders.

## reach across the divide: to the rustbelt and beyond

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For sixty years Democrats held nearly uninterrupted majorities in both Houses of Congress. That ended in 1994. Since then Dems have **lost over 700** state legislative seats and, as Biden says, we're battling for the soul of the country. As more rural areas have turned red — it's become increasingly difficult to win a Senate majority or garner the needed Electoral College votes to win the White House. **In 2020, Democrats won the Presidency and control of Congress with a margin of only 90,000 votes** — total, even though Biden won the popular vote by 7 million and Dems collectively won **4.6 million** more House votes. That the GOP came that close to controlling all of Washington (with far fewer votes) shows just one of the structural disadvantages that Dems face. The GOP, a party known for focusing on *short-term gains*, has been using a long-game strategy to beat the Left, and it's working.

What have they been up to? REDMAPing (Republican gerrymandering), shrinking union membership, suppressing votes, presenting a skewed version of reality on Fox and other news outlets, and blocking Democratic legislative success. Meanwhile the Democratic Party's lack of substantive action to address economic hardship in rural areas has compelled voters to question **who's really looking out for them**.

8. Dems have been MIA. Small towns are drying up, giant agribusiness is moving in, wages are stagnating, and automation and cheap labor elsewhere is siphoning off blue-collar jobs. No wonder two thirds of rural America voted to "Make America Great Again." But Trump wasn't the messiah the heartland had hoped for. His trade war was **harmful** to agricultural communities, causing bankruptcies and suicide rates to jump, and we lost nearly a quarter of **US coal jobs**

during Trump's tenure. But Midwesterners haven't felt that Dems have served the region much better. Wisconsin farmer [Bill Hogseth](#) wrote in [Politico](#) that *"There is an overwhelming sense that there is no future here...**The pain and struggle in my community is real, yet rural people do not feel it is taken seriously by the Democratic Party.**"*

Hogseth suggests trust can be rebuilt if the Dems make good on promises. So that farmers can get a fair price — **antitrust enforcement is essential**, along with **"policies to manage oversupply in commodity markets."** Dems need to **"challenge the anticompetitive practices of the gigantic agribusiness firms that squeeze our communities, ... enforce the Packers and Stockyard Act, and Country of Origin Labeling."** A similarly dedicated approach addressing the collapse of the coal industry with Green New Deal opportunities has the potential to bring new life to stricken communities across the nation. The [Infrastructure Law Rural Playbook](#) will help bridge the gap and give rural Americans a leg up. **Letting rural towns know that Democrats have worked to bring funding and jobs to their communities is key.**

## Can they hear us?

9. Ever take a long drive out on the interstate with the radio on and notice how different the station choices are out there? It feels like a different world. There's Talk Radio, Country, and Christian programming, but there isn't a lot of actual news coverage to be had. Conservative media giants now own much of the local airspace. iHeart and Cumulus own 1,300 radio stations, Salem Media owns 3,100, and Sinclair Broadcasting has bought up more than 500 independent television channels. In addition, the demise of more than 1,800 American newspapers has made it more difficult for [rural communities to stay informed](#). Salem, Sinclair, Cumulus and others have sought to put a thumb on the scale — tipping public opinion to the right. All of these changes, plus the communication void left by a declining organized labor movement, have made it hard for Dems to connect with rural America.

**48 million Americans listen to AM talk radio each week, and 91% of Talk Radio is conservative;** by comparison NPR's *All Things Considered* reaches 15 million. Expanding Public Radio station broadcast range, including Spanish content in hispanic communities, establishing and funding new stations in underserved areas, and providing free news programming to smaller stations can **counterbalance the conservative monopoly on rural radio.**

**"While You Weren't Watching Christian Radio Grew into a Goliath"** is the title of InsideRadio.com's [summary of radio trends](#). There are 3,139 religious format FM stations in the U.S. (compared to 947 NPR news broadcasting stations). Religious radio stations are exempt from a local station requirement — allowing them to build massive networks of transmitters that cover much larger territory than would otherwise be permitted. Many ministries and local churches buy block programming from conservative radio giant Salem Media. Salem's president David Santrella says *"News/talk is a fantastic complement to Christian talk. The results of the 2016 Presidential election tell you that there is a quiet but powerful force that's willing to mobilize for a cause they believe in...And our lineup of hosts does a terrific job in rallying those listeners for conservative causes."* In addition, Trump's Executive Order 13798 halted the enforcement of

consequences for ministers [preaching politics from the pulpit](#). 78% of White Evangelical voters supported Trump in 2020. That's around 30 million votes. The combination of conservative media ownership and special exemptions has helped to turn rural communities red.

We can **enforce separation of church and state by strengthening the Johnson Amendment** and creating legislation to **break up media monopolies**. The Center for American Progress [recommends rescinding Trump's executive order 13798](#). And who says Christianity has to be conservative? In parts of the country where truth is competing with 'truthiness' and losing, moderate churches are an untapped resource. The strengthening of liaisons with faith institutions helped turn Georgia blue in 2020. **Moderate or left-leaning alternatives to rural America's ubiquitous Christian-Right radio content** would be a helpful counterweight. We can work with campaigns like [Faith in Public Life](#), [Poor People's Campaign](#), and [Vote Common Good](#) — who's billboard campaign [His Words Matter](#) suggested to Christian voters that the things President Donald Trump has said on the campaign trail and in office “*stand in opposition to the words of Jesus Christ.*” The White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships can help with this effort.

**10. Could feeling excluded and ignored be turning voters red?** Researcher [Arlie Hochschild](#) wanted to understand our country's divisions. The author of *Strangers in Their Own Land* interviewed Louisiana Tea Party members. She found that voters' choices were motivated by a perception that the system was unfair, that progressive policies had pushed women and minorities to the front of the line, while hardworking rural whites were written off. They felt disrespected, scorned by a '*biased*' press, and depicted by Hollywood in stereotyped caricatures: liberal elites “*wagging a moral finger at them*” without any understanding of what it might be like to walk in their shoes.

When you think of Hollywood's portrayals of Southerners, the Bible Belt, rural America, and low income white people — do positive images come to mind? *Not really, right?* Could conservatives' label for us as “*liberal elites*” be describing the way we might be making them feel — like marginalized outsiders? Maybe Trump's big appeal to rural whites has been the sense of belonging — a gold-plated Manhattanite has invited them to the party and deigned to champion their causes. The same appeal might hold true for Fox News's welcoming message to conservatives: while a Hollywood-centric worldview might alienate rural America both by [omission and moral smugness](#), there's a world of inclusion offered to white Americans of every economic class at Fox News.

The producers of the *Roseanne* sitcom wrote Roseanne Barr off the show after she fell down the Q-hole and started spouting racist conspiracy theories, but before she was fired the ratings were sky-high. They were boosted by an *All in the Family* premise of opposing political viewpoints under one roof. **The content was relevant and presented conservative working class people respectfully. There's room for more of this kind of representation on television** — in fact, it's a missed opportunity: built-in drama and a broad audience base.

**11. We're losing some of the folks who need us most: those with limited education and lack of job opportunities.** The [red/blue split](#) has continued to widen along education lines. Twenty years ago the white, non-college educated vote was evenly divided between the two political parties, in 2020, 59% voted red and 33% voted blue — [a 26-point Republican advantage](#). Just 36% of registered voters have a four-year college degree today. Expanding on Biden's loan forgiveness with **free college tuition, replicating the strategies of countries like Finland (who've figured out the education equation), and early childhood learning programs** like [Baby College](#) are an investment in helping Americans make [informed](#) voting choices in the future.

**12. In the heartland, unions have been key to educating blue-collar voters as to which party represents their best interests.** Since the 1970s, labor union membership has dropped over 50%, and before the 2016 election, the swing states of Wisconsin and Michigan passed anti-union legislation called *Right To Work* bills, further shrinking membership. To give you a sense of what's possible: 70% of Swedes belong to a union, by contrast, 10.8% of Americans are union members.

The House has passed **the PRO Act**, the union protection legislation is waiting for the Senate. State Dems can also support working class Americans across the country by **pushing back on *Right To Work* bills** and other anti-labor legislation, and by supporting union organizing efforts like those of Amazon workers. Dems can support new union leadership like D. Taylor, president of UNITE HERE, and Christian Smalls, president of the Amazon Labor Union, who are galvanizing the movement.

## take charge

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Keeping up with the changes to communication media is a little like chasing greased peas around on a plate — it feels like the situation is a little out of control. The spread of disinformation has happened so fast that we've been reacting, instead of acting. **To coordinate a response to the spread of propagandistic news, management is needed. Here are three possibilities:**

**13.** The expansion of media technology has generated corresponding federal government offices and departments that now include the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, the State Department's Disinfo Cloud technology group, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, the Artificial Intelligence and Technology Office, the National Security Agency, the HS and FBI Cyber divisions, and the US Digital Corps, not to mention the White House's own communications and digital strategy teams. **A Media Technology Department can serve as an umbrella to help coordinate crossover efforts** — including a focus on strategies to reverse the spread of propaganda and malicious disinformation.

14. The establishment of a **think tank** like the [Center For American Progress](#) — that focuses specifically on overcoming communication media issues on the Left, could help anticipate, organize, and strategize efforts to meet the challenges of the expanding cyber universe. Some firms like SKDK, Blue State, AKPD, and Precision have been developing targeted strategies for clients along these lines.

15. The DNC established a *Trump War Room* with a rapid response team to counter false narratives and increase the DNC's digital presence. With the ebb and flow of political cycles, most of that original staff has moved on. **A stable, full-time operation is needed to track and quickly counter false stories.** Possibly one of the leading progressive PR firms can contract with the DNC to cover the broad scope involved. Part of the task will be matching efforts and staying ahead of the [Conservative Partnership Institute](#) (a powerful MEGA messaging force), the GOP's PR entity the [Media Research Center](#), and media disinformation superspreaders.

## hold fake news agitators and powerbrokers accountable

We've learned that criticizing unethical politicians and news outlets doesn't stop bad behavior. At times it's had the [opposite effect](#) — we've seen it rally [support for Trump](#) and the GOP, and alienate their supporters away from Dems and [mainstream](#) media. There's no incentive for Fox and the GOP to respond to criticism if it doesn't impact their audience share, electability or policies. **Focusing instead on the folks who hold the purse strings and have something to lose has proved more effective.**

16. **Taking advertisers to task for supporting irresponsible or divisive news programming has impact.** Advertisers drop ad buys when confronted by the public. The groups Sleeping Giants, the Anti-Defamation League, Color of Change, and Media Matters have been successfully leading the charge. The recent [Stop Hate for Profit](#) campaign is an example — it convinced over 400 advertisers to boycott Facebook's laissez-faire approach to hate speech and fake news, threatening the media giant with [billions in losses](#).

17. More effective than complaining about the misdeeds of amorphous giant corporations and broadcast networks is calling out specific leaders who run or own the organizations, and backroom funders and enablers. Even a media mogul doesn't want to be at a gathering where the conversation turns to a full page ad that reads "*Rupert Murdoch has blood on his hands*" or "*Rebekah Mercer is spreading hate.*" [MeidasTouch](#) and The Lincoln Project have been using this strategy — reminding the public and the unethical leaders of their [misconduct](#).

**By focusing on and holding chief offenders accountable in ways that get attention like full-page ads in papers and billboards, hashtags, and advertiser pressure campaigns, we can rein in bad behavior.** Unscrupulous primetime hosts often actually help publicize criticism because they are in essence gossip and controversy-focused entertainers — that's the achilles' heel of



spin-snipers like Beck and Carlson — they can't resist a fight. Ultimately, they'll help publicize criticism if it's a juicy story. And when [ad buyers](#) abandon ship, even media darlings fall.

## use the Fox PR machine

**Since his excommunication from Twitter and Facebook, Trump's been working to create a new media and broadcast entity** — this February the *Trump Media Technology Group* (TMTG), launched *TRUTH Social* (an alternative to twitter), and has raised \$1 billion from private investors to expand into additional media platforms. As Trump's former Lawyer, Michael Cohen predicted, Trump's plan is to monetize the venture with a paid subscription service featuring videos, news and podcasts. Apple is carrying the downloadable app for *TRUTH Social* on its app store.

Trump with a network, or back on Twitter? Could we have a pyromaniac with a blowtorch instead, please? **When Twitter kicked Trump off its platform and suspended 70,000 accounts linked to conspiracy-saturated QAnon, it cut off Trump's means of communication with 88 million followers and blunted his power.** Updating FCC rules and Section 230 of the *Communications Decency Act* can also safeguard the US from what could easily become a propaganda machine for Trump.

18. You may wonder what Fox News has been up to since the election and the assault on the Capitol. After acknowledging Biden's win and gently distancing from Trump, Fox's ratings slipped to [third place](#). Since the drop, **Fox has doubled down on its us-versus-them content and has regained its position as the #1 cable news source.** Perhaps future competition from Trump's [TMTG broadcast network](#) would motivate Fox to move closer to the political center to capture a larger audience share, but right now the network is pushing its distorted narrative — ensuring an angry and divided nation, a bulwark of resistance to everything Biden tries to do, and a dangerous environment for the upcoming election cycle.

The Left has a countermove that can help reverse the outcome: **Dems can tap Fox News's direct line to 43% of the country by using the Pete Buttigieg playbook.** In a year and half — seeming to come from out of nowhere — Buttigieg rose to the top rung of [presidential contenders](#) and into the Biden administration. How did he get there? By having fantastic communication skills, understanding how to speak to the middle of the country, and by not shying away from Fox. Fox is like a one-stop shopping destination — it's where almost half of the nation's voters are, and it's a great launching pad for reunifying the nation. If Biden wants to shore up support for his initiatives he can do it by [reaching out to Fox's audience](#). By regularly giving interviews to major outlets, including Fox's Bret Baier (Chris Wallace's replacement), Dems can reach low-information voters and sway public opinion. Biden's message to alienated conservatives is tailor-made for Fox's audience — he *actually* has good friends on both sides of the aisle and working class roots. Imagine the effect on Fox's viewers' reality bubble if likable Dems start

doing regular guest interviews. We know that public [opinion shifts](#) and when people see and hear others who are unfamiliar to them — that’s how gay marriage acceptance [gained steam](#). Dems can *pull a Buttigieg*.

## **bolster the brand & the farm team**

**The core of the Republican Party may be decaying and splitting in half like an overripe watermelon — but the Left’s got problems too.** The Democratic Party is no longer the [inclusive big tent](#) that used to count on blue-collar workers, youth, heartland moderates, and progressives for support. The brand, if you will, has taken a hit.

**19.** It’s estimated that the impact of the [youth vote in 2020](#) — especially the overwhelming support for Biden by young people of color, was decisive in key races across the country. According to AP VoteCast the under-30 electorate in Georgia gave Biden an 19-point edge with 187,000 votes. But, here’s the thing — young voters aren’t in love with the Democratic Party. **44% of millennials (ages 23–38) are registered as Independents.** In 2016, Bernie Sanders won more of the under 30 vote [than Clinton and Trump](#) combined. Peter Hammy, host of *Good Luck America*, *Snapchat’s* series covering Washington for Gen Zers explains that young people “are very skeptical of politics and much more disassociated with political parties than older generations.” So the youth votes that were crucial to Biden in 2020 may be MIA next election.

The disaffected under 35 crowd who grew up under the shadow of 9/11, the climate crisis, school shootings, and a widening economic gap doesn’t have time for ‘*too little, too late*’ governing. Many of them see the Democratic Party as [out of touch](#) — the purview of geriatric liberals and ineffective compromisers. Like past television mainstay *PBS NewsHour*, the party itself isn’t [attracting a young demographic](#) these days. Along with millennial cynicism, there’s [a rift](#) between establishment Democrats and the progressive wing that was exacerbated by DNC election duplicity in 2016, corporate affiliations, and Russian propaganda.

Candidates like Stacy Abrams, AOC, Beto O’Rourke and Jonathan Nez have the kind of big ideas and charisma that can generate enthusiastic support from young voters and keep the party viable — we’ve seen how they energized first time and millennial voters in recent elections. **This new generation of leaders is our Farm Team. They could use more opportunities to shine in party leadership roles— more at bats, as well as our thanks.** Ignoring them risks alienating our future base, and that’s [been happening lately](#).

**20.** More than half of the Latinos in the US are blue collar workers — they’re employed in hospitality, construction, food and other service occupations. In 2020 polling, 80% of Hispanics said the economy was a top issue. **For many hispanics raising the minimum wage would be life-changing — an overwhelming 79% favor raising it to \$15.** Latino voter numbers are growing — their [allegiance](#) to the Democratic Party isn’t a slam-dunk. Texas and Florida’s 2020 election results demonstrated that Dems need to do more for the 27 million eligible Latino voters in the US. Latino voters are key to winning legislative seats in four of the swing states

and election wins in general — yet Hispanic candidates and issues have not always [been treated as a priority](#) by Dems in Presidential elections. During his presidential run, Bernie Sanders' message and consistent outreach to Hispanic communities was rewarded by his big win in Nevada and by racking up delegates on [Super Tuesday](#). Sanders' **genuine emphasis on helping American workers, hiring hispanic campaign staff, and collaborating with groups like Latino Victory Project**, Voto Latino, UnidosUS, and Jolt Action connected with Hispanic voters.

**21. The Native American vote flipped Arizona blue and was key to victory in Wisconsin — setting Dems up to take the White House.** The [Nevada Native Vote Project](#), the [Rural Utah Project](#), and [Four Directions](#) are among the groups who brought home the wins and are changing politics across the country. Supporting tribes with legislation, and thanking and funding Native American organizers who put their heart and soul into the big turnouts is both smart and just. **Biden and Harris's Plan For Tribal Nations and an Agenda For The Indian American Community can jumpstart the process.** Biden's appointment of tribal leader Deb Haaland to head the U.S. Department of the Interior was a move of deeply meaningful symmetry and historical significance that placed a First Nations woman in charge of our national lands.

## refresh the brand

**22. The Democratic Party brand is defined not by what we say — but by what we do.** In recent years Dems have been hamstrung by close majorities or lack of them — caught in a catch 22 — because you can't attract voters without a meaningful track record. Thankfully the pattern changed this year with the passage of a succession of important bills. To **publicize the recent victories** the DNC has announced a seven-figure ad buy, and environmental groups have launched a \$10 million [campaign](#) touting the positive impacts of the climate legislation. The promotional pushes are savvy because conservative organizations have already started their negative [spin campaigns](#). With dark money groups like the Federalist Society's *Marble Freedom Trust* attracting big handouts (like a \$1.6 billion donation from a single benefactor last year), and the GOP's unofficial publicity arm, Fox News twisting the facts, it's essential that the Left **get ahead of the narrative through PR and advertising**. That might mean that the **DNC and progressive super PACS spend more money on squashing spin, reclaiming what Democrats stand for, and promoting achievements**.

**An expanded DNC may be needed.** The digital revolution has facilitated an explosion of progressive groups and volunteer enthusiasm. Indivisible, MoveOn and the Democracy Alliance are helping to organize our collective energy and ideas. The DNC has events and volunteer options on its website, but the chance to join in and **spearhead efforts with other leading orgs** is waiting and could help unify party factions.

**23.** The Trump presidency spoke to conservatives' hopes — pinned on a tradition-based mythology of America. During his tenure, we watched antiquated ideologies like white race exceptionalism, and authoritarian-style leadership bring us to a crisis point. To build a house united we'll need to **take on the outmoded beliefs and groups that have held our democracy hostage** on issues like racism, gun violence, and the aspects of unchecked capitalism that are

toxic to democracy. Our hesitancy has tarnished the brand. By facing the underlying issues of our times, the Democratic Party can remain vital. Because there haven't been enough votes in Congress, state-level legislation has been helping to push these goals forward. Informational public-service-type ads can help sway public opinion. **Ranked-choice voting is having a moment and has the potential to seat non-obstructionist lawmakers**, which could conceivably loosen the logjam in the future.

24. In a recent New York Times Op-ed, Stacy Abrams and Lauren Groh-Wargo shared tips on [How to Turn Your Red State Blue](#): “Historically, the Democratic Party has failed to **cultivate Black, Latino, Asian-American and Native American staff members to work in campaign roles outside of the area of field operations.**” Political organizer [Tram Nguyen's New Virginia Majority](#) successes in Virginia are based on creating a cross-cultural coalition. The wins demonstrate the importance of including everyone in all aspects of political work.

### modernize the messaging

**The Right and the Left communicate differently.** The Right uses preemptive public relations tactics like branding and a shared script of talking points to get out in front of legislative debates and influence public opinion in favor of GOP policies. The Left puts more reliance on fact-based logic to sell initiatives to the nation. The [differing PR approaches](#) to sway the debate on the Affordable Care Act demonstrate how Dems often lose control of the message: The Obama Administration's big push focused on the number of uninsured Americans and those with pre-existing conditions who would be helped. The GOP used nickname-type branding and a [campaign of scare tactics](#): “Death Panels,” “Socialized Medicine,” “sky-rocketing costs.” Conservative Senate and House Reps, talk radio hosts, Fox News, and publications like *The National Review* and *Townhall* repeated the coordinated message. **Once the ACA was in place Democrats moved on and the narrative was hijacked by the Right**, who turned an historic achievement into a liability for Dems in the 2010 elections. If [43% of the public](#) is listening to Fox News, they may never hear the reasons progressive policies and candidates deserve their support, so we need to **repeatedly emphasize that many of the things that make America great are rooted in Democratic Party policies.**

25. **We won't get steamrolled if we start the narrative.** Dems can protect progressive laws and legislative progress with smart **advertising that celebrates successes and highlights the differences between the two parties.** With the ACA, the country needed to hear the success stories: “*I got the oxygen I needed.*” “*Obamacare saved my daughter's life.*” “*The Democratic Party looked out for us!*” The DNC has been doing more of this — like a [billboard campaign](#) high-lighting Trump's botched COVID response.

26. **GOP PR strategies are generated by think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and Media Research Center.** The MRC was launched to “[neutralize the liberal agenda within the so-called objective press](#)” by supplying right-leaning news content and talking heads to broadcasters and by providing daily E-briefs and action items to legislators around the country. The MAGA movement has the [Conservative Partnership Institute](#), which offers everything candidates on

the far-Right could ask for including podcast production, and in-house super PACs. **Dems need a communications/strategy arm to match the Media Research Center and the Conservative Partnership Institute.** The DNC currently offers support to candidates and party branding, and the Center For American Progress provides policy advice, but Dems don't have the same kind of aggressive public relations/marketing strategy center that the Right does.

**27.** Biden eclipsed Obama's 2008 record for [most presidential votes](#) by 11 million. **The vast goodwill that sent Biden to the White House can be tapped** for more than neighborhood canvassing and money. We can ask for crowd-sourced advertising, ideas, and outreach — a motivated and politically aligned public will oblige.

The DNC can establish **an outside the Washington bubble, nationwide advisory team** of (a couple hundred) insightful folks who can be polled digitally to take the temperature of their region in real time—so that Dems can receive an on-the-ground reading of the nation and innovative suggestions that will expand our understanding and options for action.

**28.** **Trump's use of twitter initiated a sea change** so focusing on prepared speeches as a primary tool to sell policy may be out of step with the times, and a missed opportunity. **To ease a divided country into unified thinking, a two-part strategy of speeches in tandem with relaxed interview sessions** could introduce policies and the reasoning behind them. A gentle conversation explaining why getting a vaccine saves lives might be more convincing than a speech or directive. (For example, a Biden chat with Oprah, or Jorge Ramos on Univision, or a conversation on [SRN News](#) could reach a wider demographic of Americans.)

In his second term, President Obama began making time for more social media appearances: visits with Jerry Seinfeld, Marc Maron, Between Two Ferns, and making more clickable content like mic drops and grooving to Janelle Monáe. Just as Michelle had done throughout her stint in Washington, he **used the larger public forum more often to soft sell policies and highlight his strengths**, and his numbers went up.

**29.** Ex GOP strategists, the Lincoln Project and the Republican Accountability Project know how to talk to the Right. What they did in the lead up to the 2020 election was savvy. Their **political ads connected the dots for voters by stringing together clips** of Trump and GOP inanity — reminding voters who and what they would be voting for. Our advertising needs to fill in the gaps — **to counterbalance misinformation. A 'highlight' reel of the Trump years would be an effective part of the national ad campaign strategy.**

## protect journalism

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**Investigative journalism and newspapers are disappearing**, digital media algorithms are [amplifying extreme content](#), fact-free news is rampant, and curated news feeds from aggregators like [News Break](#) have the potential to filter the news narrative across the globe.

**30.** If advertising losses are threatening the viability of newspapers and investigative journalism, if we're losing the kind of coverage that democracies depend on to keep voters informed, expose wrongdoing, and synthesize the important issues of the day — then the solution lies in **finding new ways to pay for the service. Funding can come from taxing social media giants who've siphoned off the advertising dollars that used to flow to newspapers.** Maryland recently started taxing digital ad revenue ([big tech is fighting it](#)), what happens next could be pivotal. [The American Journalism Project](#), [the Knight Foundation](#) and [the Texas Tribune](#) are also focused on solutions. [Google News Initiative](#) launched [StoryShare](#) — an AP experiment that helps local newsrooms quickly share information, and the City University of New York's journalism school facilitated a program that connected \$10 million in city advertising revenue with local news outlets — a strategy that could be replicated in other cities.

**31.** In 1980, fifty companies controlled most of American media. Today, **90% of US media is owned by just six corporate giants.** A handful of media tycoons and multinational corporations own the vast majority of news and cable outlets across the globe. Stewardship over most of the information environment rests in the hands of a few corporate leaders — some of whom are well known like Zuckerberg, Murdoch, Bezos, and now Musk.

The EU's new [Digital Markets Act](#), or DMA, includes [antitrust legislation](#) written to rein in the power of the largest tech corporations and ensure more competition in the marketplace. European regulators have already handed a landmark ruling to [Google](#). That the EU was able to recalibrate the way some corporate business is done is a big deal. **The DMA lays a path to diversifying monopolistic media.**

### **innovative news formats**

**32.** The smarties at *Crooked Media / Pod Save America* saw the writing on the wall — **Podcasts are the new radio** — and understood their power to energize the under-forty crowd. Crooked is jumpstarting a farm team of progressive young activists and voters — and they're making the Democratic Party hip again, one podcast at a time.

**33.** Video journalism content is hot. Two trends, user generated content (UGC), and citizen journalism have the potential to popularize a return to fact-based news by focusing on first-person reporting. Ted Turner's original vision for CNN was a 24 hour international news format using local correspondents with firsthand knowledge of regional issues to provide on-the-ground coverage. His plan proved to be relevant, hugely successful, and expensive to maintain. A more cost-effective online version of Turner's idea is now possible in a **YouTube-style format for news.** Citizen journalist uploads featuring footage of breaking stories, and interviews and insights on regional news events — curated by an editorial news staff — has the potential to bring truthful reporting back to center stage. This trend is already starting to gain traction: see the Guardian's [The Rise of Citizen Journalism](#).

## So here we are

The world has subtly and profoundly changed. The media landscape has shifted, and with it the playing field for American politics. In the ephemeral world of airwaves and cyberspace, we're just now recognizing the magnitude of the changes and their impact on public opinion.

When Trump came to power, Americans from every sector mobilized. Those actions created key Democratic wins. Now, a strategy of targeted actions across a wide range of communication-related fields can collectively douse the disinformation firestorm that threatens the country. Adopting an approach that includes changes to the law, developing a useful relationship with Fox, connecting to a broader base of voters in rural areas, holding spin-snipers and powerbrokers accountable, funding investigative journalism, creating a strategy center to tackle the fake news frontier, and working to represent the broad range of voters on the left, can bring integrity back to news coverage, support progressive candidates, and ensure a long life for American democracy.

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### **The To-Do List was produced by [articulturedesignfarm.com](http://articulturedesignfarm.com)**

- The To-Do List series is available at <https://medium.com/@karenslobod>
- A downloadable PDF of the complete list with hyperlinks can be found at: [articulturedesignfarm.com/dems](http://articulturedesignfarm.com/dems)
- Karen Slobod is co-founder of Articulture, a design and communications company. She has provided branding and strategy for Democratic candidates and party organizations in Montana. She recently helped the state health department make Covid information more easily accessible.