The Democratic Party’s 50-State Strategy: Reinvigorating an Apathetic Electorate

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The role of the electorate has long been manipulated by the national political parties in the United States into different electoral sects, creating a division between those states defined as “battleground” states and those overlooked as “fly-over” states. As a result, those left in the ideological minority were disempowered in their ability to affect government and issue politics on a national level. As national party politics became narrower and more focused, party identification dropped and voter participation slumped. In the past four years, the Democratic Party has pledged an end to this fragmented approach to politics by implementing a new approach spearheaded by Howard Dean’s “50-State Strategy.” This paper evaluates the approach of the 50-State Strategy by examining how it deals with the contemporary problems of the electorate and assessing its effectiveness as an election strategy for a national political party.

The contemporary role of the electorate has been strained by a mentality of apathy due to the segmentation of ideologies in different regions in the United States. The dominance of one political principle over another in these specific regions has damaged the participation of those in the ideological minority, creating a gap between individuals who feel their vote is counted, and those who do not. The responsibility of the national political parties in dividing the country into these electoral sections based on entrenched philosophies is evident. From the liberal northeast to the deeply conservative south, the national parties’ actions have created a dichotomy between the states targeted for each election and those that are largely ignored as “fly-over” states. The result is a division among regions, states, and voting demographics that leaves those in the minority disempowered to make a difference in government and politics.

The national parties’ strategies have created a disconnect among the general public towards politics, relying on tactics that continue to alienate voters. Far from being effective, voters are instead backlash against the actions of the national parties, and constituents are becoming less inclined to identify with a political party. Fifty years ago, 47 percent of voters identified with the Democrats and 28 percent with the Republicans, while just 23 percent were independents. In the year 2000, however, those numbers were almost reversed, with 40 percent of American voters describing themselves as independents, 34 percent as Democrats, and 24 percent as Republicans (Avlon, 2004). Given the developing trend of voters treating issues individually instead of associating issues with a specific party and the electorate’s general discontent with the outcomes of recent elections, research into a change in strategy is needed in order to reinvigorate the relevancy of the national political party.

The Democratic Party’s “50-State Strategy” aspires to be the panacea for the ills that have long plagued apathetic voters, offering a re-structuring of the Democratic Party based on grassroots, bottom-up campaigning and strategy. This paper seeks to access the feasibility of the 50-State Strategy as a revolutionary approach to reforming the election strategy of a national party. In doing so, this paper will examine the current problems of traditional electoral strategy facing both major national parties by examining the historical development of the “50-State-Strategy,” its primary components and what particular obstacle each component seeks to overcome, and the measure of its success by examining historical and contemporary trends found in elections from 2000 to 2008. Overall, this paper will show how the Democratic 50-State Strategy allows for the development of a new type of politics to deal with traditional difficulties associated with getting the vote out; one that empowers the individual to vote and believe that their vote counts, regardless of where they live and what they believe in. The main focus of the paper will argue for the viability of the 50-State Strategy in being an effective approach to reforming election strategy and for winning future elections.

Competing in 50-States: A New Idea?

Perhaps the most contentious issue surrounding the 50-State Strategy is the label that is often associated with it: “controversial.” Although counterintuitive to traditionally accepted norms of election strategy, long-time analyst of “red-state” politics and contributing writer to The Nation magazine Bob
Moser (2007) wrote, “The [Democratic National Committee’s] fifty-state project is relatively inexpensive, compared with the costs of the thirty-second TV ad blitzes the party has increasingly relied on to target voters in Ohio and Florida. Salaries for the state parties run to about $8 million annually, considerably less than 10 percent of the DNC’s budget and downright humble compared with what the GOP and its affiliates spend for similar party work.” The grassroots approach that the 50-State Strategy employs is not a new idea either. In fact, Abraham Lincoln had envisioned a similar strategy for the Republican Party. Lincoln sought the same streamlined organization that the 50-State Strategy hopes to encompass, saying “The Whole State must be so well organized that every one of our voters can be brought to the polls. So divide the whole county into small districts and appoint in each a committee. Make a perfect list of the voters and ascertain with certainty for whom they will vote…” (Angle, 1990). Despite not being a new idea, there are three fundamental impairments that have contributed to the indifference of the voter in the electoral process, obstacles that a 50-state strategy must address in order to be successful. First is the need to make all states relevant again in the electoral process. A 50-state strategy must eliminate the ideology of targeted states vs. “fly-over” states in order to be triumphant along all fifty state fronts. Second, reforming the public’s perspective of a corrupt electoral system is a must if people are to overcome a nihilistic mentality when determining whether or not to vote. Finally, it is a necessity to modernize election strategy to keep up with the pace of contemporary technology and culture in order to stay a relevant part of the average voter’s life.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE 50-STATE STRATEGY**

In order to better understand the approach of the 50-State Strategy in achieving the three fundamental reforms stated above, it is first important to understand the different elements that led to its development and implementation. Howard Dean ran for chair of the Democratic National Committee on the platform of a “50-state strategy” as a means of “rebuilding the Democratic Party after their latest national electoral defeat” (Kamarck, 2006, p. 1). DNC members who were inspired by Dean’s rhetoric ultimately pooled together enough votes to get him elected chairman of the party. In examining a renewed design for the Democratic National Committee structure, Dean looked back to the 2000 and 2004 elections to see not only what the Democrats had done wrong, but also at what the Republicans had done right. Terry McAuliffe, the DNC chairman who Dean replaced, was the first to admit Republican superiority by offering praise to the Bush campaign for their win in the 2004 presidential election before a gathering of Democratic leaders in Florida. “They were smart,” McAuliffe said. “They came into our neighborhoods. They came into Democratic areas with very specific targeted messages to take Democratic voters away from us” (Dionne Jr., 2004). Similarly impressed with the Republicans’ ability to utilize consumer-based social marketing techniques to target voters, Dean understood where Democrats had made their mistakes. “He spotted another kink in the Democratic works,” says strategist Donna Brazile, Al Gore’s 2000 campaign manager. “Republicans start the campaign the day after an election, win or lose. They don’t wait to have a nominee before they start putting together a battle plan. Same on down the line, state and local. Democrats have started the day the nominee is selected, which is just bass-ackwards. We haven’t had a party; we’ve had candidates and campaigns” (Moser, 2007). As a result, Dean set out to emulate a large part of his 50-State Strategy after the political mind of an infamous rival: Karl Rove.

Perhaps ironically, the electoral strategy Dean framed the 50-State Strategy around came into existence when the Republican National Committee converged to create a grassroots electoral strategy in order to combat a perceived “Democratic turnout advantage.” In January of 2001, the RNC created what has become Karl Rove’s “72-Hour Strategy,” named aptly for the campaigning done in the final three days before an election. Rove’s Strategy focused on seven key areas: (1) Increasing person-to-person contacts, (2) Registering new voters, (3) Growing the party by targeting traditionally underperforming GOP minority groups, (4) Increasing the activities of coalitions generally associated to the Republican Party (Right-to-Life foundations are an example), (5) Improving voter identification and voter targeting, (6) Enhancing early and absentee voting programs, and (7) An aggressive get-out-the-vote program for the final 72-hours before an election. After preliminary trials in the special elections of 2001, the RNC implemented the 72-Hour Strategy as part of its 2002 midterm election push. With a vast volunteer force numbering over 130,000 spread over 39 states and working one week a piece, the raw numbers signaled the GOP’s success. In 2000, the Democrats held a “3-point party identification advantage” among voters, but were eclipsed in 2002 when the Republicans had a 4-point lead. Likewise, Senate and gubernatorial races showed that on average, the GOP candidates surpassed pre-election poll forecasts by 3.2 points (+2.9 in the Senate, +3.4 in gubernatorial races). Religious conservatives rose in participation from 14 percent of the 2000 electorate to 18 percent of the 2002 electorate, whereas union members who regularly voted Democratic fell from 26 percent in 2000 to 21 percent in 2002 (Shaw, 2004).

The Republicans would ultimately hold on to the momentum gained from the 2002 midterm elections to win the 2004 presidential election. Howard Dean (2004) described his fascination with the campaign strategy of the Republicans for the 2004 elections on Meet the Press, saying, “As I said earlier, we ran the best grassroots campaign that I’ve seen in my lifetime. They ran a better one. Why? Because we sent 14,000 people into Ohio from elsewhere. They had 14,000 from Ohio talking to their neighbors and that’s how you win in rural states and in rural America. If we don’t do
those things, we aren’t going to win. We have to learn to do those things.” Taking that mentality into his chairmanship of the DNC, he went to work to shape his 50-State Strategy into a winning formula for the Democratic Party.

CONVERTING VOTER SKEPTICISM INTO RENEWED MOTIVATION: THE STATE PARTNERSHIP PROJECT

The need to reject traditional ideas about specific states as being unwinnable is an important foundation from which a 50-state strategy must grow. Traditional Democratic election strategies have not been reflective of the grassroots mindset and the harms that have resulted is quite evident. Wayne Holland, the Democratic State Chair of Utah, described the plight of Democrats in one of the most overwhelmingly Republican states in America, saying, “Democrats have become outsiders who do things to us, not insiders who do things for us. The fifty-state strategy is one way to turn it around” (Moser, 2007). Indeed one of the tasks that Dean’s 50-State Strategy had to take on was the ability to infuse a sense of optimism back into the voter, by making every state relevant again. Doing so meant reconstructing the framework of strategy on multiple levels. Voters need to understand the connection between winning local elections to winning state elections and ultimately the effect that both local and state have on winning national elections. Understanding this connection will make the electoral process less of a mystery to the voter, and eventually will minimize the reaction of feeling “cheated” from the results of a national election. Such a task would be accomplished by building an infrastructure focusing on a bottom-up approach starting with local elections.

Howard Dean followed the Republican 72-Hour Strategy closely in developing the groundwork for that specific type of infrastructure. In order to best make all states relevant in the election process again, Dean adapted a grassroots approach, with the resulting venture becoming the State Partnership Project. The goal of the State Partnership Project was to develop a relationship between the DNC and the state parties. In doing so, the DNC assisted in funding and logistics to connect local candidates with the state party and to develop a grassroots, precinct-based program that was organized and accountable to the state party. Down the line, the efforts made on the state and local level would lead back to the national party as part of their work for the 50-State Strategy (Democratic National Committee, 2007). The heart of the State Partnership Project is at the person-to-person level, where the Democrats were previously out-organized by the Republican 72-Hour Strategy in 2002 and 2004. The DNC focused their attention on the importance of canvassing as a means of personal contact. They were reflecting not only on their recent electoral failures, but also on information gained from studies that analyzed the importance of face-to-face contact. One such study found a statistical significance in “differentiating between personal and impersonal modes of political contact,” concluding that “face-to-face interaction dramati-
Refocusing Perceptions of a Corrupt System: The Need for Voter Protection

Building upon the concept of infusing optimism back into the voter, reform must also address the need for voter protection in order to ensure that everyone’s vote counts. The result of the 2000 presidential election dealt a startling blow to the American voter. Overlooking contentious arguments concerning which candidate should have won, the more important concept arose from the need to improve the process of voting in a way that best protected the vote of every individual. The 2000 elections “exposed a wide range of weaknesses with the American system of elections. Many of the weaknesses had been known for years by election administrators, but they had been unsuccessful at drawing sufficient attention to them to [address] the needed changes. [As a result], in October 2002, Congress enacted the Help America Vote Act.” (Fischer & Coleman, 2007, p. 1). The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) became the subject of much scrutiny itself, because of the revisions the Act brought with it. HAVA brought needed reform to the electoral system, but nevertheless provided a new need for voter protection to properly administer that reform. Any successful election strategy must adapt to the revisions brought on by HAVA, but a 50-State Strategy must be especially vigilant of the changes if it is to successfully navigate reform through the diverse election laws of fifty different states.

Electronic voting and the provisional ballot provided the most concerns for voters as the national parties addressed an electoral system that was perceived as being corrupt. The passage of HAVA inspired many incentives to replace punch-card and lever machines with the authorization of $3.9 billion for states to invest in newer forms of polling equipment. Companies such as Diebold, Sequoia and Hart, and ES&S were insistently pushing touch-screen machines (Thompson, 2008). While integrating the new equipment freed polling places of the arduous paper processes that plagued elections before, the integration of touch-screen technology ultimately caused a slew of new problems dealing with electronic shortcomings. In its inaugural run in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, complaints were filed about 143 machines being broken. More than 200 voter-card encoders, the important tool that creates the electronic cards voters use for the machines, went missing. In addition, a majority of the elderly poll workers, which regularly make up most of the poll workers, had a hard time dealing with the technological aspects of the new voting system. An audit of that election would reveal that 72.5% of the paper trail copies did not match the digital tallies on the memory cards of the machines that were audited (Thompson, 2008).

In addition, reform sought by HAVA through provisional ballots caused problems of their own. A provisional ballot is a separate ballot that is set aside along with relevant information about the voter so that election officials can determine whether the person is eligible to vote. The purpose of these ballots were to address the problems of individuals who were not listed as registered at the time they came to the polling place to vote. HAVA provisions required that “any voter not listed as registered must be offered and permitted to cast a provisional ballot” (Fischer & Coleman, 2007, p. 7). While the provisional ballot offered a seemingly logical approach to advancing the opportunity of voters, states failed to take their purpose seriously in its first use in the 2004 elections. Enforcement of provisions by Congress was lax, and numerous states did not plan for provisional balloting up until shortly before the election, resulting in frequent and widespread problems in the days following the election. Poll workers were confused as to their purpose, making the provisional ballots unavailable at some polling places as they refused to allow eligible voters to cast them (Weiser, 2006). The inability to properly enforce the use of provisional ballots inevitably disenfranchised a substantial number of voters as a result.

Howard Dean adopted reforms built into the electoral process by HAVA through the establishment of a voter protection program as part of the 50-State Strategy. Part of the focus of the program was aimed at fixing the problems caused by touch-screen technology and provisional ballots by utilizing the 50-State Strategy in two ways: first by using DNC resources to ensure that state and local governments enforce the regulations mandated by HAVA before elections happen, and secondly, using the organization of the State Partnership Project to make sure poll workers are properly trained to deal with the new regulations on the day of elections. The DNC kept these two standards in mind when it created its election protection project.

The voter protection program of the 50-State Strategy has four fundamental goals: ensure that all eligible voters are able to vote and know that their votes are being counted; integrate voter protection into state party operations and programs; promote and protect the vote through reforms in voting procedures and election administration; and monitor state legislation, rulemakings, and development of policy around election administration (DNC, 2007). In highlighting the importance of the role of local and state governments in facilitating the voter protection process, the DNC conducted a national local survey on election protection. The rationale behind the survey was to obtain critical data on the state and local level with the intention of identifying specific weaknesses that could disenfranchise voters. The survey analyzed data from 692 jurisdictions in 43 states, and the results of the analysis, while confidential, started a conversation in the national party on how best to approach voter protection for 2008. By identifying specific patterns and aberrations in the datasets, the DNC identified specific regions of concern and properly channel the resources to force local and state governments to respond before the errors cause problems on the day of the election. Such assertions have been proven empirically in dealing with provisional ballots. The existence of statewide databases generally correlated with a lower incidence of provisional ballots: according to an Election Assistance Commission survey, voters were less than half as
likely to cast provisional ballots in states with databases (1.21% of ballots cast in polling places) than in those without (2.86%) (Weiser, 2006).

In discussing the reach of voter protection, there is still a need to prepare an adequate response on the day of the election. Dean prepared the 50-State Strategy for the ability to react to unexpected problems that might have foiled even the best laid pre-election protections. While the State Partnership Project was developed as a tool to increase voter turnout through grassroots campaigning, it was also a useful instrument in protecting the vote on the day of the election. By employing loyal constituents to help with the administrative aspects of the election, volunteers and lawyers representing the disenfranchised will have a stronger voice, considering that they are members of the community themselves, and know the election laws better than individuals coming in from outside the state. Additionally, the State Partnership Project placed an emphasis on training locals to become well-informed poll workers capable of dealing with problems in a proper manner. Efforts to get-out-the-vote are irrelevant if voters are incapable of overcoming the possible human error of an incompetent poll worker. By establishing an election protection program into the 50-State Strategy that preserved the integrity of the vote before, during, and after an election, the proper changes would be implemented to dispel public perceptions of a corrupt electoral system, inspiring more people to vote.

**Modernizing Election Strategy**

One of the important principles HAVA inspired was the need to modernize the electoral process. The rise of the information age came with the availability of powerful resources, such as the internet. These technological advancements must be utilized in order for election strategies to be effective at addressing the contemporary voter's culture and values. Voting must feel like a substantial part of a person's life, and integrating modern technology into voting is one way in which this can be accomplished. For example, 35% of the voting audience for the popular television show "American Idol" believed that casting a vote for the program counted “more than or as much as” voting in a presidential election (Leib, 2006). The ease in which an individual can cast a vote for their favorite “American Idol” is an indication of how technology effects the way in which individuals are motivated to act. As technology makes the everyday tasks of individuals easier to accomplish, the idea of participating in a political process that uses outdated polling technology and obsolete campaign media channels seems more and more undesirable. Part of the reason that follows this idea is found in people's reliance on technology. “It’s still fairly new territory for candidates,” says Peter Greenberger, who heads the political advertising team at Google. “People spend as much time online as they do watching television” (Levy, 2007). This is significant because campaign TV commercials are easily ignored due to digital video recorders that allow people to skip over commercials entirely with a click of a button.

New techniques found on the internet can overcome this type of challenge because new media channels, such as search engine web ads, are unavoidable because they rely on user input to display the proper ad relating to what was typed into the web. For example, typing “Democrats” would result in web ads relating to Democrats as the result of the user typing it in. Howard Dean (2004) realized the need to modernize election strategy to reflect current technology and culture, describing the need for reform in a speech at George Washington University: “Politics is at its best when we create and inspire a sense of community. The tools that were pioneered in my campaign — like blogs, and meetups, and streaming video — are just a start. We must use all of the power and potential of technology as part of an aggressive outreach to meet and include voters, to work with the state parties, and to influence media coverage”. The 50-State Strategy capitalized on that idea to employ technology in a couple of unique and innovative ways.

One of the ground-breaking uses of technology was inspired by events that had transpired during a campaign leading up to the 2006 midterm elections. Virginia Senator George Allen was running for reelection during a campaign rally, Allen discovered that a volunteer of Webb's was in the crowd. On videotape, Allen repeatedly berated the volunteer with a racial epithet, calling him “macaca.” “This fellow here, over here with the yellow shirt, macaca, or whatever his name is. He's with my opponent. He's following us around everywhere. And it's just great, let's give a welcome to macaca, here. Welcome to America and the real world of Virginia” (Craig & Shear, 2006). Ultimately, the “macaca” remark made race an issue in the contest between Allen and Webb when the video of Allen's remarks was posted on digital video websites such as YouTube. Allen failed to recapture the Senate seat, losing to Webb in a close election.

Following the general principle of the 50-State Strategy of diffusing power from the national party into support for local and state party campaigns, the DNC launched FlipperTV, a program designed to capitalize on the digital video revolution brought on by YouTube. The function of FlipperTV was to compile all the videos from Democratic volunteers and trackers who have been filming Republican candidates at their events, and put all the raw material into the hands of the American voters to hold candidates responsible for their actions and comments (DNC, 2007). Potential voters can use the materials posted in any way that they would like, as well as be able to post their own videos of Republican candidates to the FlipperTV website. By making use of the digital video technology, Dean's 50-State Strategy was not only expanding the potential number of media channels to campaign in, but was also involving the prospective voters in the campaign process.
Additionally, another fresh use of technology by the 50-State Strategy was how it used the internet to spur a much needed boost in fundraising through web contributions. Howard Dean had shown the power behind internet contributions in his own bid for president in 2004 when the energy from internet contributors in 2003 helped him come from behind in the race for the Democratic nomination. Dean capitalized on the experience well by raising an impressive $40 million to use for his campaign (Kamarck, 2006, p. 2), and he hoped to replicate such results for the Democratic National Committee, speaking in favor of diversifying the manner in which the DNC raised funds. Dean (2004) stated, “The destination of the Democratic Party requires that it be financially viable, able to raise money not only from big donors but small contributors, not only through dinners and telephone solicitations and direct mail, but also through the Internet and person-to-person outreach.”

Ultimately, Dean’s rhetoric proved successful, raising $142.6 million in “hard money” dollars for the DNC, nearly tripling the $59.7 million in 2001. The significance of the increase in fundraising was evident not only in the amount, but also from the source (Kamarck, 2006, p. 1). Since there are restrictions on soft money contributions for national parties, it is important to establish a base of small donors. Howard Dean’s approach of utilizing the internet allowed him an easy organizational tool to marshal a large number of small-time contributors in order to rake in large amounts of money. Its effectiveness made it ideal for building a resource foundation for the 50-State Strategy, whose wider strategic approach would benefit from a larger establishment of funds, and is being replicated by individual candidates in their campaigns to collect money for their war chests. Given the importance of technology in allowing new media conduits to campaign in, and providing a foundation for 21st century campaign fundraising, the 50-State Strategy is taking the right course in adopting technology into the electoral process in order to stay a relevant part of the voter’s lifestyle.

OBSTACLES AND CRITICISMS: CAN THE 50-STATE STRATEGY WIN ELECTIONS?

Although this paper has argued to this point that the 50-State Strategy is a logical approach in reforming the electoral system from its currently stagnant state to win future elections, there are some valid obstacles that need to be addressed in the discussion concerning the practicality of the 50-State Strategy. Ultimately, only empirical results will determine whether the 50-State Strategy can overcome these criticisms, as skeptics will always exist until it can be determined that Dean’s strategy can win elections. Particularly in the conversation of fundraising, resource management is one fundamental dilemma that detractors are particularly critical about in tackling Howard Dean and his 50-State Strategy. It was mentioned earlier that Dean had raised $40 million dollars during his own run for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, but a person knowledgeable about politics can attest to the fact that Howard Dean was not the eventual nominee. It turned out that Dean had blown through most of the $40 million he raised without establishing an existent political machine in the important early states of New Hampshire and Iowa (Kamarck, 2006, p. 1). As a result, there was no surprise when well-known Washington insiders within the Democratic Party were worried about Dean squandering DNC resources in ways that would never pay off. In March of 2006, Democratic congressional leaders Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid met with Dean in order to challenge him on his funding priorities. The DNC chairman had been putting his 50-State-Strategy into full motion by placing funding in the hands of state parties in notoriously Republican territories instead of targeting states with critical races in the coming election (Balz & Cillizza, 2006). A quandary was created as a result between the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) wishing to set priorities on DNC spending and the 50-State Strategy’s goal of distributing funding in an equitable manner.

In determining whether funding organization objections by critics are valid, an examination of voter turnout comparing the effect of money spent and investment in organizational infrastructure is needed in order to resolve which factor was more significant. Elaine C. Kamarck, a Harvard public-policy lecturer, published a paper organizing voter turnout data from the 2006 midterm elections in order to decide specifically which aspect had a more direct effect. In her study, Kamarck arranged the electoral districts targeted by the 50-State Strategy according to the amount of money the DCCC contributed to the Democratic candidate in those districts. The results were favorable to the 50-State Strategy. In districts where the DCCC contributed more than $100,000 in its own money, there was an average increase in the Democratic vote of 8.75% from the 2002 midterm elections to the 2006 midterm elections. At the same time, in districts where the DCCC contributed less than $100,000, there was an average increase in the Democratic vote of 7.9%, garnering less than a 1% difference between the two categories. While Kamarck’s study never explicitly states what the DCCC money was spent on, one could imagine it would be on the traditional electoral strategy of ad blitzes instead of grassroots organization, given the previously discussed disputes between the DCCC and the DNC.

While money is an important factor of success in politics, Kamarck’s study proves that funding organization is cheaper, and has nearly the same effect in comparison to pouring in money late in the electoral season to fund advertising for candidates. In addition, Kamarck’s study is more specific in defining a difference between DCCC contributions greater than $100,000 but less than $200,000 (with an average increase of 13% in voter turnout) and contributions that were greater than $200,000 (with an average increase of only 4.5% in voter turnout) (Kamarck, 2006). Although the first results
show that money spent on last minute ad blitzes and pre-planned organization play a nearly equal role in turnout, these results suggest that there is a point where money has diminishing returns in politics. Combined with the understanding that spending money on campaigns is a short-term investment, if money on ads and money on organization have an equitable effect on voter turnout, then investing in organization is the more logical approach, as the infrastructure that is established will have long-term returns. Consequently, while traditionalists in politics have a valid reason to be concerned about the resource management of the 50-State Strategy, these concerns seem to be unfounded. In establishing the important inroads in reforming the current electoral system, the 50-State Strategy proves to be a worthwhile investment that genuinely worked in both the 2006 and 2008 elections. In 2006, the Democrats unseated 6 Republican incumbents in the Senate, including seats the Democrats never expected to win. Two of these key races included Jim Webb’s victory over George Allen by less than 10,000 votes, and the other was Claire McCaskill’s victory over James Talent for the incumbent’s Missouri Senate seat (CNN, 2007). In the House, the Democrats picked up 31 seats, claiming the seats of 30 Republicans and 1 independent (CNN, 2007). 2008 offered a similar one-sided victory for the Democrats, with the Democrats picking up another 7 seats in the Senate and another 21 in the House (Real Clear Politics, 2008).

At the same time that Kamarck’s study disproves the concerns of Washington insiders, her paper is important in refuting a different criticism of the Democratic 50-State Strategy. There were various other factors that played into the success of the Democrats in 2006 and 2008: factors that critics claim take most of the credit for the gains the Democratic Party made in the midterm elections. The argument that seems to be the strongest is the idea that President Bush’s general unpopularity was causing the Republican ticket to falter. There is no doubt that Bush’s low popularity rating was a factor in the elections, but was it such a factor that it made the efforts of the 50-State Strategy irrelevant? Kamarck’s study examined this particular question in investigating the results of the 2006 midterm elections. She compared the change in Democratic vote from 2002 to 2006 in all contested districts (390 total) and compared it to the change in Democratic vote in districts which the DNC had paid organizers working with the state party for over a year. Such a comparison was possible because the 50-State Strategy was being tested in only 35 districts at that time. The results showed that in all the contested districts (which included the ones with DNC organizers), the average increase in Democratic vote was 4.7%. In singling out the districts with DNC organizers, the average increase in Democratic vote was 9.8% (Kamarck, 2006, p. 6). The outcomes indicate that while the forces outside the control of the party had a significant effect in increasing voter turnout, the effort put in by the 50-State Strategy had an effect that not only reproduced the same results of those outside forces, but did so with an additional margin.

Ultimately, the 2006 midterm elections were an important step in putting to rest the major legitimate concerns of detractors in criticizing the Democratic 50-State Strategy. In reviewing the results, it can be determined that the organizational infrastructure that the 50-State Strategy provides is ultimately a more valuable investment for long-term success than setting spending priorities for short-term winnable targets. Additionally, the 50-State Strategy benefits from addressing the needs of voters on a basic level to guarantee victories, instead of relying on advantages gained from current events. In overcoming these two factors, the 50-State Strategy continues to enjoy success. During off-year elections in 2007, the Democratic Party continued to pick up gains under the auspices of the 50-State Strategy, winning key elections in both Kentucky and Virginia (Mark & Kraushaar, 2007). These wins speak volumes about the 50-State Strategy as the victories bolster confidence in the ability to look at traditionally Republican states for support during the 2008 presidential elections. Tom Herman (2007), chairman of the Berks County, Pennsylvania Democratic Committee, personally thanked the DNC for electoral wins in Pennsylvania, saying “The catalyst for this unity has actually been the Democratic National Committee, which is being steered by Howard Dean using the 50 state precinct building plan”. Winning in these local elections would ultimately be vital in establishing the proper infrastructure to prepare for the 2008 presidential elections.

The result of the 2008 election was significant in both its margin of victory and the particular states that accounted for that victory. The 7 additional Senate seats and the 21 additional House seats were significant enough, but winning the presidency by capturing 365 electoral college votes to 173 was a significant difference from the 2004 presidential election result of 286-252 (CNN, 2008). There are many factors that could account for the significant margin of victory for Barack Obama over John McCain in 2008, including Obama’s enigmatic ability to inspire his supporters, and President Bush’s continual sinking popularity. There is no way for this paper to prove exclusively that the infrastructure of the 50-State Strategy was the significant factor behind Senator Obama’s historic victory over Senator McCain, but at the very least it can prove that Barrack Obama’s campaign enjoyed the effectiveness of following the 50-State Strategy’s format.

Howard Dean was the first to congratulate Barrack Obama on his ability to overcome the traditional mode of election strategies in winning the election, saying, “He’s changed all the rules — not just with the use of the Internet and the fundraising — but he’s changed the rules in terms of how you ask people for their vote, and who you ask for your vote.” In following Dean’s foundational argument for grassroots organizing and fundraising, in addition to utilizing technology by using the Internet and capitalizing on the expanding mobile phone community, Obama was able to utilize a 10 million name e-mail list and a 3.1 million person donor list (Liasson, 2008). In terms of fundraising alone, Obama’s cam-
campaign raised more than $600 million dollars; more than “all the candidates combined raised in the open 2000 presidential race” and “on track to top the joint sum raised by President Bush and John F. Kerry in 2004.” Perhaps more importantly, an enormous sum of the money (about $200 million) had come in sums of “less than $200,” coming from mostly “retirees” and “young people.” The result is significant because Obama, during the campaign, had banned donations from lobbyists, most likely being able to support his campaign on Dean’s structure alone (Cummings, 2008). Voter protection favored Obama as well, with the results of the previous 2006 and 2007 election victories allowing the Democrats to be in control of key administrative positions in five states: Iowa, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico and Ohio, places where “the difference between victory and defeat in the 2004 presidential election was no more than 120,000 votes in any one of them” (Zenilman, 2008). In the five states, Democrats controlled the secretary of state positions, allowing them a more beneficial standpoint in terms of enforcing and interpreting the elections laws, specifically in terms of upholding the important reforms found in HAVA as well as local state election laws. As a result, although other significant factors like Bush’s unpopularity and Obama’s own contrasting popularity played a role in the 2008 presidential elections, the framework that Howard Dean laid out in the 50-State Strategy remained an important factor in the landslide victory that resulted.

CONCLUSION: 50-STATE STRATEGY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE

This paper has shown the value behind the 50-state strategy in reforming an electoral system that has been perceived as inadequate, corrupt, and defunct. In establishing the State Partnership Project to advocate grassroots, bottom-up campaigning, the 50-state strategy has laid the foundation to eliminate the ideology of targeted states vs. “fly-over” states, maintaining competitiveness in critical districts while establishing inroads to winning elections in territories often overlooked as being unwinnable. Secondly, in integrating a comprehensive voter protection program into the 50-State Strategy, the Democratic Party has put local and state governments on the path to upholding the highest standards set forth by Congress in the Help America Vote Act of 2002, while creating an organizational template to reform the public’s perspective of a corrupt electoral system by eliminating obstacles that prevent voters from voting on the day of elections. Finally, the 50-State Strategy has modernized an extremely outdated electoral system by finding new and innovative ways to stay current with technology, a necessity in staying relevant in the average voter’s life and in fundraising for the national party.

In discussing the various positive reforms that Howard Dean’s 50-State Strategy makes, it is important to understand that these revisions do not come at the cost of winning elections. This paper has shown that despite the genuine concerns of invoking such drastic changes in the election strategies of a major national party, the 50-State Strategy is empirically proven to be well-equipped to handle the problems facing the traditional electoral process, while maximizing the amount of voters that turn out to cast their votes. An interesting observation can be made on the subject of empiricism, when the comparison is made between the Democratic 50-State Strategy and the Republican 72-Hour Strategy that inspired it. In the 2002 midterm elections, the Republicans were able to make substantial gains by mobilizing their 72-Hour Strategy into a push to get-out-the-vote. The achievements the Republicans were able to ultimately make in 2002 would be a strong indicator of the outcome in winning the presidency in 2004. Similarly, the Democrats were able to win back the majority in Congress by winning an unexpected amount of seats through the utilization the 50-State Strategy in a formula for success. If a pattern can be drawn from the conclusion of the momentum gained by the Republicans in winning the midterm elections in the manner they did to winning the presidency in 2004, it would follow that the momentous win that the Democrats garnered in 2006 would be a strong indicator of the outcome in the 2008 presidential elections with Barack Obama’s enormous margin of victory.

The importance of the 50-State Strategy does not lie in the ability of one national party to dominate the other, however. The significance of Howard Dean’s prized strategy is found in the framework that is established for national parties in the future. Perhaps the effectiveness of the 50-State Strategy may very well fade in the future as its Republican predecessor did, but the precedents that were set by the strategy will long remain. No longer will voters be satisfied with anything less than the full support of their national party through an integrated election system that focuses on all voters, regardless of their geographic position in the United States. Both the Democratic and Republican Parties will need to continue to promote the ideals set forth by the 50-State Strategy in order to be successful in the future. In the wise words of Howard Dean (2004), “There is another destination beyond strong finances, outreach, and campaigns. That destination is a better, stronger, smarter, safer, healthier America. An America where we don’t turn our back on our own people. That’s the America we can only build with conviction”.

REFERENCES


