

Democrats Try to Crack Mystery of the Missing Voters

By GERALD F. SEIB



A popular theory of this year's midterm election holds that Democrats took a shellacking in part because big chunks of the party's core liberal base, discouraged at the path of the Obama administration, stayed home rather than show up to vote as they did in 2008.

It's an interesting narrative. It also doesn't appear to be entirely accurate.

While it's correct that some key parts of the Democratic coalition— young voters and African-Americans among them—didn't perform as they did in 2008, evidence emerging as the dust settles from this month's election suggests the bigger hole in the side of the Democratic ship came from moderates in the political center who didn't show up. (Those absences were in addition to the wave of independent swing voters also from the center who, exit polls showed, turned out but switched their votes to the Republicans.)

The case of the missing voters is important because how it is resolved will go a long way toward determining how Democrats respond to their midterm woes. If they conclude, as some argue, that the problem was an undermotivated liberal base, then the logical reaction would be a turn to the left and a staunch resistance to compromises with the Republicans who now control the House and hold expanded power in the Senate.

If, on the other hand, the conclusion is that the voters lost were

moderates who got aboard the Barack Obama Express in 2008 but missed the train at the station this time, then that would argue for a political and policy strategy designed to appeal to the center of the electorate. And that might suggest more willingness to seek compromises in the middle.

Let's look at some evidence. The latest Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll sifted out a group of voters who said they cast ballots in 2008 but didn't vote this year. They do tend to be a bit younger than the overall average of voters. And as a group they like Mr. Obama noticeably more than do voters as a whole, and they tend to identify themselves as Democrats, which suggests that, as suspected, many would have been Democratic voters had they shown up.

But they also were more likely to identify themselves as "not very strong Democrats" rather than "strong Democrats." And the largest share identified their ideology as moderate rather than liberal.

A more direct study of these 2010 no-shows was undertaken by Third Way, a think tank for moderate Democrats, and Lincoln Park Strategies, a Democratic polling firm. They surveyed 1,000 Obama voters who abandoned Democrats in 2010. Half of them were "switchers" who moved their votes to the Republicans this time, while the other half were "droppers" who simply dropped out of the voting this year.

That survey found that, while the droppers were a bit more liberal than 2010 voters as a whole, they were split in almost precise thirds into liberals, moderates and conservatives. Moreover, just 42% identified themselves as Democrats, while 40% were independents and 8% were Republicans. Almost a quarter of them voted for Republican George W. Bush in 2004.

Nor were the droppers largely minority voters, as the popular stereotype might suggest. Eight in 10 were white, while just 7% were African-American and 5% Latino.

In other words, those who stayed home don't, as a whole, fit the profile of a disgruntled liberal base. Instead, they lean toward a profile of a group of centrist voters who weren't motivated this time.

Indeed, as that would suggest, the droppers were pretty much split down the middle on whether their concern was that Mr. Obama and the Democrats didn't try to have government do more (45%), or whether they tried to have government do too much (39%).

"The Obama voters who stayed home in 2010 encompass more than the Democratic base," concludes the study of these voters. "And disappointment that Obama didn't go farther was not a major factor in their reasons for staying home."

Not surprisingly, the same study found that 2008 Obama voters who showed up this year but switched their votes to the Republicans were much more likely to say that they thought Democrats and the president tried to have government do too much. They were, in short, more conservative, and tended as a group to lean more Republican to begin with, than did those who simply stayed home.

The question for Democrats and Mr. Obama, of course, is whether they can get both groups, the switchers and droppers, moving back in their direction now.

The droppers should be easier to retrieve—though the process of doing so would have to begin with figuring out why they checked out in the first place.

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