

POLITICS

Democrats Are Freaking Out About Pro-Trump Messaging To Occasional Black Voters

"We haven't yet found the right language that makes the community feel as if we understand where they're coming from and what's actually happening to them," a DNC official said.

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Democrats Are Freaking Out About Pro-Trump Messaging

Supporters of President Donald Trump wait to listen to him during the launch of Black Voices for Trump, Nov. 8 in Atlanta.

Evan Vucci / AP

WASHINGTON — Democrats are getting increasingly worried that black Americans with an uneven voting history may tune out Democratic candidates in 2020, as fringe messaging campaigns and

disinformation breed cynicism over what the party has done for black Americans.

Democratic National Committee sources told BuzzFeed News the party is tracking a new set of loosely organized online movements that officials believe are trying to steer black voters away from the party or from voting altogether. The groups are varied in their approach, but share a common thread of deep suspicion of the Democratic Party and an apparent determination to seize upon the hypersensitive political moment in a country with a deeply troubled racial past.

The party is paying particular attention to the American Descendants of Slavery, or ADOS, a group that believes reparations should be paid solely to Americans who can trace their lineage back to people who were themselves enslaved (the group had previously been under suspicion being made up of bots); Blexit, a new outfit led by young black conservatives arguing a vote for Donald Trump is a vote against widespread immigration and abortion standing in the way of black middle class family values; and Foundational Black Americans, an ADOS rival founded by independent filmmaker Tariq Nasheed.

The groups want black voters to “freely think” about the impact of decadeslong loyalty to the Democratic Party, even as black leaders have been at war with the party for years over resources and inclusion.

Democrats often repeat the refrain that the party would never take black voters for granted. Inside the party, though, political advisers think it’s likelier than not that most marginal voters (Obama voters who skipped the midterms) and sporadic voters (those who are harder to persuade) have had at least some exposure to an anti-Democratic Party message. In some cases, party officials said, black Americans’ dim view of the job Democrats have done governing in recent decades is colored by a grim economic outlook and uncertainty about the future.

The new anti-Democratic groups want to appeal to black Americans with a populist message rooted in ethnic, cultural, and economic identity they say is untethered to the “Democratic plantation” mentality, a political trope first used by black Republicans in the 1960s.

In interviews, black Democrats said the party itself is partly to blame: Party leaders had failed to further understand the voters who had boosted them at the polls.

DNC operatives are taking the challenge seriously and are now working on several black outreach efforts, including Seat at the Table, which is catered toward black women, and the Chop It Up tour, which is designed to engage black men. National Democrats say they want to equip voters with a clear sense of what Democrats have delivered for black people, especially under Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, said Cyrus Garrett, the DNC’s African American political director.

Garrett said there was not a “forceful enough answer” to the question of what black Americans had to lose in 2016.

“We already know that [our] platform is aligned with what they need, but we need a way to communicate that more so that when people ask them what the Democrats have done, they can easily talk about it,” Garrett said. “But we haven't yet found the right language that makes the community feel as if we understand where they're coming from and what's actually happening to them. A lot of it is just listening to just listening to how they say it.”

The DNC’s security team is also actively preparing pushback against disinformation targeted at black voters. Bob Lord, the DNC’s chief security officer who was brought on to strengthen the party’s cybersecurity infrastructure after the DNC was hacked, decried the “inauthentic behavior” of “bad actors” who aim to “mislead” black voters and “dissuade them from participating” in the 2020 election.

“The security team at the DNC is aware of these threats and constantly working to monitor inauthentic behavior so that we can alert our candidates and platforms, and help maintain the integrity of our elections process,” Lord said.

The 2016 election marked a turning point for disinformation aimed at black Americans.

The Senate Intelligence Committee released a report in October detailing how Russian trolls “masquerading as Americans” through the Internet Research Agency used social media to wage an information warfare campaign designed to spread “disinformation and societal division” in the US during the 2016 elections. The report said “no single group of Americans was targeted by IRA information operatives more than African-Americans,” and that race and other “related issues were the preferred target” of the information warfare.

Brandon Gassaway, the DNC’s national press secretary, said campaigns are fundamentally different now. “I think 2004 is when we crossed that new frontier, but 2016 began the phase of disinformation now [at a] level of sophistication that has risen to a point where it’s being used to mislead black people in particular.”

"Targeted disinformation online is very real, and it will take a different approach this cycle for us to combat that — and communicate our message," he said.

Trump’s reelection campaign strategy indicates that black men will be a major target next year. Last month, Trump headlined the launch of Black Voices for Trump at an event where speaker after speaker said that Democrats have prioritized immigrant families over citizens and that the black community had a “very limited time to change that trajectory.”

That narrative is running up against a counter-narrative on the left. In the Democratic presidential primary, candidates have expressed wide support of HR 40, a bill that would charge a commission with the gargantuan task of parsing slavery's impact on America and recommending possible "remedies." The bill is sponsored by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas, who is a lifelong Democrat.

The rapper and activist Talib Kweli, who has been an ardent critic of ADOS and Blexit and clashed at times with their leaders over the course of the past year, said he applauded the DNC's recognition of their threat.

"My parents came from a generation where black people voted Democratic, and my generation was sort of the first to be, like, 'hold on, why are we automatically giving these people our power? There are progressive, pro-black compassionate black people that agree, you know, with the basic premise that the Democrats have taken black folks for granted. And Blexit and ADOS are able to take advantage of where Democrats have failed and push an anti-black or pro-GOP agenda," he said. Asked why he had decided to put his name on the line as an activist to oppose the groups publicly, he said, "I'm confused as to why we're not all doing that."

Other black activists are also warning how pro-Trump groups or malicious actors can use black Americans' history to move them away from Democrats. "We know we have a very messed up story," Shireen Mitchell, who founded the group Stop Online Violence Against Women, told BuzzFeed News. "Victimization and trauma is being used by bad actors and some people in politics want to talk about it and some people don't."

Na'ilah Amaru, a Democratic strategist and consultant, said it should come as no surprise that the new groups seem to be catching on. "My frustration as an operative who works in grassroots organizing is the DNC and the Democratic Party talking about policies at a very high

level, and we lose the opportunity to talk about what values those policies are rooted in,” Amaru said. “People who don’t breathe and eat politics don’t give a damn about 30,000-foot level of public policy. They just want to know how it’s going to help them. And at the most fundamental level, the Democratic Party has struggled with answering that question.”

The DNC has grown accustomed to a black electorate that saw not voting as unfathomable and has to adjust to a new generation that doesn’t think it should vote for Democrats just because prior generations did.

What the anti-liberal groups are trying to do is tap into a visceral emotion, and, Amaru said, “the DNC has yet to understand how effective that can be” when stripped to its essence: people are responding to emotion fueled by their circumstances and those of the people around them — and online.

“They’re really just thinking at a base level, ‘This person is frustrated and angry, and I am frustrated and angry.’”



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