

'Localizing' Biden Platform Seen as Key to Democratic Victories in 2024

November 30, 2023 **by Dan McCue**



NewDEAL Leaders panel on the political outlook for 2024. The panel was moderated by Symone Sanders Townsend, host of “Symone” on MSNBC. The panelists were Canton, North Carolina, Mayor Zeb Smathers; Kate deGruyter, of the D.C. nonprofit Third Way; Aileen Cardona-Arroyo, of Hart Research, where she runs the NBC polling team; political influencer Olivia Julianna; and Democratic strategist Adam Parkhomenko. (Photo by Dan McCue)

WASHINGTON — Democrats hoping to draw lessons from this year’s off-years to apply in 2024 would do well to try to localize the president’s national platform while also continuing to embrace the abortion issue, which still appears to be working for the party.

That was the consensus of the speakers at the 2024 political outlook session of the recent NewDEAL Leaders conference here in Washington.

The panel, moderated by Symone Sanders Townsend, host of “Symone” on MSNBC and the national press secretary for independent Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential campaign, kicked off the two-day event at the Dupont Circle Hotel.

The panelists were Canton, North Carolina, Mayor Zeb Smathers; Kate deGruyter, of the D.C. nonprofit Third Way; Aileen Cardona-Arroyo, of Hart Research, where she runs the NBC polling team; political influencer Olivia Julianna; and Democratic strategist Adam Parkhomenko.

Sanders Townsend opened the discussion noting that while President Biden hasn’t done well in a series of recent polls, Democrats on the whole did quite well in contests across the country earlier this month, winning important victories in Kentucky, Ohio and Virginia, among other states.

“A lot of this had to do specifically with the issue of abortion,” Sanders Townsend said. “But I would also argue that the outcome of these elections were a result of Democrats across the country running on the Biden agenda, but stayed away from some of the Biden language in talking about it.”

“I think Symone hit the nail on the head,” said Parkhomenko, who was a member of Donna Brazile’s transition team when she served as acting chair of the Democratic National Committee in 2016.

She later made him the DNC’s national field director for the general election that year.

“The way you win locally is to rely on the message that works for you locally,” he said.

"I mean, if you go into Arkansas, the message that works for you in one part of the state may not work for you in another," Parkhomenko said. "The same thing goes for other states. In Virginia, for instance, Northern Virginia is very different from other parts of the state.

"So I think that the ability to take the successes that we're having nationally and turn them into things that are understood as benefits in local communities is key," he said.

"The other thing I'd say is that going into elections, we need to be a little more confident," Parkhomenko continued. "We always hear things like, 'The Democrats are wetting the bed over this election' and so forth, and I think we've got a lot to be proud of and to run on.

Symone Sanders Townsend (Photo by Dan McCue)

"Now, we don't want to be complacent, but at the same time, it's okay to acknowledge we're doing great," he said, "I mean, we went into this year's election thinking we were going to lose terribly, and exactly the opposite happened.

"Personally, I think we should run like we are the party of patriots that carry the American flag and are doing these incredible things, while the other party is smearing feces at the Capitol and beating cops with flagpoles and the like.

“But at the same time, I want to go back and emphasize that the work being done on a local level is critical,” he said, adding, “It has been said that the best ideas don’t always come out of Washington.

“Well, I don’t think the best ideas really ever come out of Washington unless someone great has been elected to serve there,” Parkhomenko said.

Sanders Townsend then moved on to polls.

The latest Gallup poll shows that Biden has a job approval rating hovering at about 37%, tying his personal low, with disapproval at 59%.

Approval ratings of the president’s handling of health care (40%) and the situation in Ukraine (38%) are similar to his overall rating, while fewer, 32% each, approve of his handling of the economy, foreign affairs and the situation between the Israelis and Palestinians.

Meanwhile, a New York Times–Siena College poll released earlier this month showed former President Donald Trump leading Biden in five of the six most important battleground states.

According to the poll, Trump leads Biden by 11 percentage points in Nevada, six in Georgia, five in each Arizona and Michigan, and four in Pennsylvania.

Biden holds a three-point advantage over Trump in Wisconsin. Combined, Trump leads Biden 48%–45% across those states.

“Historically,” said Hart Research’s Cardona–Arroyo, such results would be considered the death knell for state and local Democratic candidates.

“This year what’s been unique is that the presidential polls have not been a good indicator of what would happen on the state and local level,” she said.

“So what I think we’ll see in 2024 is more of that. ... Local candidates who connect with voters by concentrating on local issues and telling their own stories,” she said.

Inevitably, this led to some discussion of the so-called “third-party threat” when it comes to 2024.

“I think the danger of third parties in 2024 is that they are going to divide the anti-Trump coalition,” said deGruyter, of Third Way, the centrist think tank.

“I think there are obviously a lot of folks who are really excited about the achievements that the Biden administration has delivered,” she said. “But key parts of our coalition include folks who are more anti-Trump than they are necessarily pro Biden.”

She went on to posit that right now it seems that there are more “soft partisans” in what she described as the Democratic coalition than in the Trump coalition.

“So our concern with third parties is they’re going after exactly the voters that Democrats are going to need in order to prevent a second Trump presidency — and we are very concerned about that,” she said.

Third Way has been particularly critical of New Labels, a national campaign to run an alternative presidential candidate if Biden and Trump are the two major party candidates.

Well funded, the nascent party is already on the ballot in 12 states, including three major battlegrounds — Arizona, Nevada and North Carolina.

The organization
refuses to disclose
who its financial
backers are, but
Mother Jones
published an
expose earlier this
year based on
what it said was a
list of 36 wealthy
contributors and
corporate high-
rollers who wrote
big checks to No Labels in the past year.

Kate deGruyter, of the D.C. nonprofit Third
Way (Photo by Dan McCue)

The roster included past and present chief executives of major companies, including Loews Corporation, Fluor, Abry Partners, SailPoint, and Fortress Investment Group.

At present, the speculation is Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., who has announced he is forgoing a reelection bid for the Senate next year, is the leading contender for the group's presidential nomination.

"Our hope is that Sen. Manchin will take a very close look at what the impact of this ticket would be," deGruyter said.

In a statement provided to The Well News earlier this month, a spokeswoman for No Labels said, "Sen. Joe Manchin is a tireless voice for America's commonsense majority and a longtime ally of the No Labels movement.

"The Senate will lose a great leader when he leaves, but we commend Sen. Manchin for stepping up to lead a long overdue national conversation about solving America's biggest

challenges, including inflation, an insecure border, out-of-control debt and growing threats from abroad,” she said.

She added: “Regarding our No Labels Unity presidential ticket, we are gathering input from our members across the country to understand the kind of leaders they would like to see in the White House. As we have said from the beginning, we will make a decision by early 2024 about whether we will nominate a Unity presidential ticket and who will be on it.”

According to deGruyter, No Labels has been telling people that it plans to pick a Republican to head its ticket because its research has shown if it chooses a Democrat, Trump will win every single battleground state except for Nevada.

“So that would be the potential outcome of Sen. Manchin choosing to run,” she said. “It would do exactly what we have been warning, which is it would hand Trump a reelection.

“We need the support of about 60% of moderate voters in order to win elections — that’s part of a winning Democratic coalition,” she added. “And those are exactly the voters that might be tempted to vote third party if they are given an opportunity.”

Sanders Townsend followed up by asking why potential third-party candidates are getting so much attention this election cycle.

“For one thing, there are simply more candidates that are running under a third-party banner,” deGruyter said. “So that’s a big piece of it.

“And they are making the argument that there is a new and historic level of openness for voters to consider a third party,”

she continued.

“The problem with that claim is that the metric they’re relying on isn’t all that reliable.

“Basically, they’re basing their assertion on the answer to the question, ‘How open might you be

Aileen Cardona-Arroyo, of Hart Research.

(Photo by Dan McCue)

to considering voting for a third-party candidate?’ The problem with that is considering a third-party candidate is actually a lot different proposition than actually pulling the lever for them in the voting booth.

“The perfect example is actually one they point to to make their case: Ross Perot and his independent run for president in 1992,” she said. “Perot did generate a lot of excitement. If you look back in 1992, something like 59% of voters told a CBS pollster they would prefer to have an option to the candidate of the two political parties.

“So did we have a third-party presidency? No,” deGruyter said. “When the votes were actually counted, his total was 40% lower than the poll suggested. So we have to understand that third parties may poll higher in the spring, but they’ve always cratered once it gets time to head to the polls. The result is, they end up acting as nothing more than spoilers.”

With that, Smathers, who represents a historic mill town of about 4,200 people located 17 miles west of Asheville, North

Carolina, was asked how Democrats can make in-roads with the rural community.

The question has broader implications in North Carolina than in some other states because it is one of 11 that will choose new governors in 2024.

“The first step is you have to listen to the people in these communities,” he said. “If they’re your friends or members of your family, that’s relatively easy to do, but if they’re not ... and they have a world view that’s a little bit different than your own, you still need to listen to them,” Smathers said.

“I think we have done a bad job, not listening and pushing people away,” he continued. “If you listen to someone, you’ll find out why they believe certain things they do and it’ll give you — or us as a party — an opportunity to offer some balance to those beliefs.

“By listening to someone, you’re inadvertently showing them that you respect them and you care for them,” he said.

Smathers went on to talk about some of the hardships his town has experienced in recent years. In 2021, massive flash floods inundated the town, killing six people while washing away the town hall, police station, fire department and the high school football stadium.

Then, last spring, the town’s iconic paper was shuttered after its owner, Pactiv Evergreen, a packaging company, decided to close it after 115 years in business.

“A decision made on Wall Street left 1,100 people without jobs within a matter of hours,” Smathers said. “That shows you a lack of respect. And these people need to be respected.

“Time and time
again we’ve
watched these
decisions being
made ... and these
people, my
people, are more
than just
numbers on a
spreadsheet on
Wall Street. These
people matter —
their successes,
their setbacks ...
and we have to
tell their stories.

North Carolina Mayor Zeb Smathers and
Democratic strategist Adam Parkhomenko.
(Photo by Dan McCue)

“And we need to approach them one on one, and with intent [to] reach for those higher angels,” Smathers said.

Turning to the elections held earlier this month, Smathers said Republicans — “or what’s left of the Republican Party” — lost because “decency won out.”

“We all know, even with all the ups and downs we experience, that there are people out there that will vote for us because they still believe good people from diverse backgrounds can make a difference,” he said.

“We haven’t lost that yet. We have lost a lot of things in this country. But we haven’t lost the ability to think that good people are out there that can come together and make that difference,” he continued.

Being a small town mayor, Smathers said he knows that if someone's trash isn't picked up, they don't care if the person in charge is a Democrat or a Republican.

"All they want to know is why hasn't my trash been picked up?" he said. "You respect them by getting things done and listening and respecting them for who they are.

"President Obama knew this," Smathers continued. "He knew the power of hope that better days are ahead. When I'm holding a millworker's hand or pulling someone from the waters of a flood, and they look at me and say, 'What do we do now?' As a public official, I don't have those answers, but I do know that you have to find a way to give them hope that better days are ahead. And these are rough and challenging days.

"We are in the hope business, ladies and gentlemen. People are looking for that from us," he said. "And that's what you need to communicate. We've lost that in this country. We've lost the big idea. We've lost bringing people together in a way that is authentic 'us' in our communities, rather than being something that people told them they are.

"And I think a key thing for anybody looking for electoral success with our rural communities, the best advice I can give you is, be your true self ... because if you're gonna be damned, be damned for who you truly are. That stands out now more than ever."

Sounding almost more like a preacher than a politician, Smathers observed, "We live in such a superficial world ... one defined by social media and smoke and mirrors and spin.

"But we know the difference. And these people in these communities know the difference," he said. "They're so used to being sold a bill of goods that when the real thing comes along

and you are who you are, it stands out. And that is how you make the difference. And that is how you have buy-in. And once you have the buy-in, they will be there, at the ballot box, putting your name in as their choice.”

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