

November doesn't need to be a nightmare for Democrats

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The Democratic Party [got a resounding wake-up call](#) from the voters of Massachusetts on Tuesday. But it's long been clear that 2010 would be a challenging election year for our party.

With few exceptions, the first off-year election in a new president's term has led to big gains for the minority party -- this was true for Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. After two election cycles in which Democrats won most of the close races and almost all of the big ones, Democrats have much more fragile turf to defend this year than usual. Add to that a historic economic crisis, stubborn unemployment and the pain that both have inflicted on millions of Americans, and you have a recipe for a white-knuckled ride for many of our candidates.

But not if Democrats do what the American people sent them to Washington to do.

In 2006 and 2008, voters sent an unmistakable message: We want decisive change. This was not just a change of political parties. Instead of a government that works for the entitled and special interests, a government that looks out for Wall Street, they wanted a government that works better for them, a government that plays the role it should to help foster the security of the middle class.

Many of last year's accomplishments are down payments on those principles.

We still have much to do before November, and time is running short. Every race has unique characteristics, but there are a few general things that Democrats can do to strengthen our hand.

-- *Pass a meaningful health insurance reform package without delay.* Americans' health and our nation's long-term fiscal health depend on it. I know that the short-term politics are bad. It's a good plan that's become a demonized caricature. But politically speaking, if we do not pass it, the GOP will continue attacking the plan as if we did anyway, and voters will have no ability to measure its upside. If we do pass it, dozens of protections and benefits take effect this year. Parents won't have to worry their children will be denied coverage just because they have a preexisting condition. Workers won't have to worry that their coverage will be dropped because they get sick. Seniors will feel relief from prescription costs. Only if the plan becomes law will the American people see that all the scary things Sarah Palin and others have predicted -- such as the so-called death panels -- were baseless. We own the bill and the health-care votes. We need to get some of the upside. (P.S.: Health care is a jobs creator.)

-- *We need to show that we not just are focused on jobs but also create them.* Even without a difficult fiscal situation, the government can have only so much direct impact on job creation, on top of the millions of jobs created by the president's early efforts to restart the economy. There are some terrific ideas that we can implement, from tax credits for small businesses to more incentives for green jobs, but full recovery will

happen only when the private sector begins hiring in earnest. That's why Democrats must create a strong foundation for long-term growth by addressing health care, energy and education reform. We must also show real leadership by passing some politically difficult measures to help stabilize the economy in the short term. Voters are always smarter than they are given credit for. We need to make our case on the economy and jobs -- and yes, we can remind voters where Republican policies led us -- and if we do, without apology and with force, it will have impact.

-- *Make sure voters understand what the [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#) did for the economy.* Rarely does a congressional vote or issue lend itself to this kind of powerful localization. If GOP challengers want to run ads criticizing the recovery act as wasteful, Democratic candidates should lift up the police officers, teachers and construction workers in their state or district, those who are protecting our communities, teaching our children and repairing our roads thanks to the Democrats' leadership. Highlight the small-business owners who have kept their doors open through projects funded by the act.

The recovery act has been stigmatized. We need to paint the real picture, in human terms, of what it meant in 2010. In future elections, it will be clear to all that instead of another Great Depression, Democrats broke the back of the recession with not a single Republican vote in the House. In the long run, this will haunt Republicans, especially since they made the mess.

-- *Don't accept any lectures on spending.* The GOP took us from a \$236 billion surplus when President Bush took office to a \$1.3 trillion deficit, with unpaid-for tax cuts for the wealthy, two wars and the Medicare

prescription drug program. Republicans' fiscal irresponsibility has never been matched in our country's history. We have potent talking points on health care, honest budgeting and cuts in previously sacrosanct programs. Republicans will try to win disingenuously by running as outsiders. We must make them own their record of disastrous economic policies, exploding deficits, and a failure to even attempt to solve our health care and energy challenges.

During the campaign, who will be whispering in Republican ears? Watching GOP leaders talking about health care the past few days, it was easy to imagine lobbyists and big health insurance executives leaning over their shoulders, urging death to health insurance reform. When it comes to cracking down on the banks and passing tough financial regulatory reform, GOP leaders will be dancing to the tune of Wall Street lobbyists and opposing tougher oversight, as if the financial crisis never happened. We need to lay it out plainly: If you put the GOP back in charge, lobbyists and huge corporate special interests will be back in the driver's seat. Workers and families will get run over, just like they did in the past decade.

-- *"Change" is not just about policies.* In 2006, Democrats promised to drain the swamp and won back Congress largely because the American people soured on corrupt Republican leadership. Many ethics reforms were put in place by the Democrats. But a recent [Gallup poll showed that a record 55 percent of Americans think members of Congress have low ethics](#), up from only 21 percent in 2000. In particular, we have to make sure the freshman and sophomore members of the House who won in part on transparency and reform issues can show they are delivering. The Republicans will suggest they have changed their spots, but the GOP

cannot hold a candle to us on reform issues. Let's make sure we own this space.

-- *Run great campaigns.* Many Democrats won congressional and statewide races in 2006 and 2008 with ideal conditions. Some races could have been won with mediocre campaigns. Not this year. Our campaigns can leave no stone unturned, from believing in the power of grass-roots volunteers and voter registration, to using technology and data innovatively, to raising money -- especially with big corporate interests now freed up to dump hundreds of millions of dollars to elect those who will do their bidding. Democratic candidates must do everything well. Each one must make sure that the first-time voters from 2008 living in your state or district -- more than 15 million nationwide -- are in their sights. Build a relationship with those voters, organize them and educate them. On Nov. 3, many races are sure to be decided by just a few thousand if not a few hundred votes. These voters can make the difference. We have to show them that their 2008 votes mattered, and passing health insurance reform is one way to start.

-- *No bed-wetting.* This will be a tough election for our party and for many Republican incumbents as well. Instead of fearing what may happen, let's prove that we have more than just the brains to govern -- that we have the guts to govern. Let's fight like hell, not because we want to preserve our status, but because we sincerely believe too many everyday Americans will continue to lose if Republicans and special interests win.

This country is at a crossroads. We are trying to boost the economy in the short term while also doing the long-term work on health care,

energy, education and financial reform that will lay a strong foundation for decades to come. Let's remember why we won in 2008 and deliver on what we promised. If Democrats will show the country we can lead when it's hard, we may not have perfect election results, but November will be nothing like the nightmare that talking heads have forecast.

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