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The Midwest's broken blue wall
by Julie Kelly

Regardless of who wins the Democratic nomination for president one year from now, the party's deep pockets already are prepping the groundwork to make sure that history—or *her*story, if you will—does not repeat itself in 2020. The Democratic presidential candidate's path to the White House doesn't run along the Acela Corridor or the Pacific Coast Highway, but rather across Interstate 94 in the upper midsection of the country. Democrats learned this the hard way in 2016.

For all her excuses—Russian social media bots, former FBI Director James Comey, traitorous married white women—Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election for one reason: She failed to carry the Midwest, including the crucial states of Michigan and Wisconsin.

Her refusal to shake the weathered hands of working-class whites in those two states, and in Pennsylvania, prior to the election, cost her the presidency. Even though her intentional snub of three must-win states now is a running

joke among the political commentariat, it no doubt will haunt Clinton campaign strategists, and the candidate herself, for perpetuity. Her candidacy will be remembered as a cautionary tale rather than an historical event.

But it wasn't just Clinton's unbridled hubris and political miscalculation that caused the Midwest's blue wall to unexpectedly crumble on November 8, 2016. Donald Trump, the brash Manhattan billionaire with no ties to the Heartland, at the same time connected with the voters whom Clinton decided to ignore. Subsequently, he did something in 2016 that no Republican presidential candidate had been able to do since the glory days of Madonna and Michael J. Fox: nearly running the electoral table in the Midwest.

Trump was the first Republican since 1988 to win the state of Michigan; to put that in political context, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the shadow speaker of the House of Representatives, hadn't even been born yet. The last Republican to win the state of Wisconsin was Ronald Reagan in 1984.

Although Trump's margin of victory in both states was slim, that doesn't tell the full story. Barack Obama trounced Mitt Romney in Michigan and Wisconsin, even though Romney's running mate, the former Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, was a popular Badger State native. Trump amassed 160,000 more votes in Michigan than Romney won in 2012. The only Midwestern state that Clinton won comfortably was her home state of Illinois. She scraped by in Minnesota, beating Trump by roughly forty thousand votes, four years after Barack Obama beat Mitt Romney there by nearly one-quarter of a million votes.

So, Democrats already are preparing to make sure that electoral nightmare doesn't recur in 2020. Earlier this year, Priorities USA, a super-PAC populated with Obama and Clinton loyalists, announced it would spend $100 million in an "early engagement" program to start shoring up Democratic voters for the 2020 election. Two of the four states targeted in the first phase of the program are Michigan and Wisconsin.

The acknowledgement that any Democratic presidential candidate automatically is in trouble against President Trump in Midwestern states considered a lock for more than three decades represents a stunning reversal of fortune for the party. Of the 206 so-called "pivot counties"—areas that twice elected Obama but flipped to elect Trump in 2016—a majority are located in the Midwest: Trump beat Clinton by at least twenty percentage points in three Michigan counties, seven Minnesota counties, eight Wisconsin counties, and fourteen Iowa counties. It wasn't even close.

And there's more bad news about the Midwest for the twenty or so Democrats running for president. Democrats already seems resigned to lose both Ohio and Iowa, two states that Barack Obama won twice. Despite a massive turnout for Democrats in the Buckeye State in the 2018 midterm election, Republicans still won every constitutional office and only lost five statehouse seats. "It's not in our initial spending plans," Josh Schwerin, a spokesman for Priorities USA, said about Ohio. "It is in the states to watch and see if an investment is worth making."

President Trump now seems well positioned to win the Midwest again next year—but it wasn't supposed to be this way. Democrats were certain that Trump wouldn't even survive his first term. If he did, by some miracle, run

for reelection, Republicans would rush to support a more genteel, more acceptable candidate to challenge him in the primary. If a primary opponent didn't materialize, Democrats would be well-positioned to defeat the massively unpopular president in a landslide. But spending tens of millions of dollars in Michigan and Wisconsin a full eighteen months before the general election while abandoning Ohio and Iowa? That certainly was never in the Democrats' original 2020 victory plan.

Further, a corrupt scheme manufactured by the Obama Justice Department, his CIA, and probably the White House itself, about how the Trump campaign illegally conspired with the Kremlin to sway the election in his favor, was supposed to permanently cripple Trump's presidency. Special Counsel Robert Mueller was supposed to haul Trump out of the Oval Office in handcuffs.

Trump's alleged mental instability, dictator worship, shady business dealings, corrupt personal lawyer, porn star dalliances, and child-caging policies were supposed to result in a massive public uprising against the forty-fifth president. The stock market was supposed to crash; our strongest allies were supposed to abandon the United States; trade wars were supposed to devastate American farmers and manufacturers. North Korea was supposed to start a nuclear war. White supremacists were supposed to take over the streets of Washington, D.C., while Steve Bannon passed out tiki torches and Steven Miller personally kidnapped Guatemalan housekeepers out of Kalorama mansions to send them back home.

Establishment Republicans warned that Trump would destroy the GOP and lead to devastating losses up until he was finally removed from office in a landslide in 2020—if he somehow managed to evade impeachment, arrest, or the nuthouse. The party's hierarchy predicted doom if Trump was the nominee and ultimately elected president. "I believe Donald Trump would be an absolute disaster for the Republican party, destroy conservatism as we know it, we would get wiped out," bemoaned Senator Lindsey Graham in March 2016. Some crusty stalwarts such as George Will left the party.

But none of the most calamitous scenarios have been realized. Despite losing the House of Representatives in 2018, Republicans picked up two Senate seats. Nine of out ten Republicans approve of Trump's job performance. No legitimate Republican primary challenger has yet to emerge, and Lindsey Graham has been converted into a presidential booster and confidante.

The Trump economy—fueled by tax cuts and unprecedented deregulation—continues to notch record numbers. The unemployment rate is at a fifty-year low, overall economic growth is at a pace most experts claimed would never occur, and new job creation blows by expectations month after month. Trump is tackling unfair international trade agreements that mostly harmed agriculture and manufacturing sectors in the Midwest after decades of neglect while exposing the folly of Republicans' devotion to imaginary "free trade" principles.

The president's standing in the Midwest now is arguably stronger than when he nearly swept the region in 2016. Polling shows Trump's job approval rating in the Midwest is in the mid-forties, and his overall favorability rating

is highest in the Midwest. Trump's approval rating in the region is roughly the same as Obama's was during the same point in his presidency, according to Gallup tracking polls.

The working class, the nearly 70 percent of Americans without a college degree who have been ignored and even ridiculed by both political parties, is flourishing. Five of the top ten cities enjoying the greatest job opportunities for lower-wage workers are in the Midwest. "A majority of the metro areas with the highest shares of opportunity employment are located in the Midwest . . . after adjusting for cost-of-living differences, median annual earnings tend to be relatively high in that region," according to an April 2019 study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland.

Finding enough workers "is a problem playing out in many parts of the Midwest, a region with lower unemployment and higher job-opening rates than the rest of the country," according to an April 2018 *Wall Street Journal*report, citing hiring challenges by employers in Iowa, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Southwestern Ohio, solid Trump country, is in the midst of a warehousing boom. The construction industry is thriving nationwide, but the Midwest is leading the pack.

The administration's attempts to secure the southern border are gaining popularity in the Midwest. According to a recent *Washington Post*poll, 40 percent of Midwesterners say Trump's approach to illegal immigration will make them more likely to support him in 2020, compared to 36 percent who say they are less likely. Further, 83 percent of Midwesterners called the situation at the Mexican border a crisis or a serious problem. It will take

some smooth convincing by the Democratic presidential candidate to not only disabuse Midwesterners of their views, but to assure them that open borders are best for families in Racine and Grand Rapids.

Trump continues to court Midwestern voters, filling public venues from Ohio to Minnesota about once a month with enthusiastic crowds. Since Election Day, the president has hosted two dozen events in the Midwest. His patriotic, plain, even salty, language connects with Midwesterners in a way that perhaps other Americans might find jingoistic or distasteful.

His first stop after winning the White House was Ohio, a state he won by eight points. "We had people running our country who didn't know what the hell they were doing," he told the packed crowd in Cincinnati on December 1, 2016. "We're going to defend the American worker. They forgot about the American worker. They forgot that it was the American worker who truly built our country. We are not going to forget, believe me."

At a rally in Wisconsin on April 27, Trump had a story of fulfilled promises to tell his Midwestern brethren. "Together we are building a new chapter of American greatness," he assured the Green Bay crowd. "One founded on the idea that all citizens are entitled to live in safety, prosperity and peace. This is an exciting time in our country." Trump touted his effort to reorganize failed trade pacts. "After decades of calamitous trade deals that stripped away our wealth and our jobs, took away our dignity, when great companies would leave the United States for another country, because of stupid taxes, because of stupid regulations. But now the choices are going to be other states."

Democrats face another headwind off the Great Lakes: Flagging union membership and waning political support from union rank-and-file. "One reason [why membership is down] is right-to-work laws in states like Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin that let workers opt out of unions," according to an April 2019 *Wall Street Journal*editorial. "After Wisconsin enacted right to work in 2015, the union share of the state workforce fell 30%." The union bosses might still help pad the campaign coffers of Democratic candidates, but union workers are the muscle behind the party, knocking on doors, registering voters, and filling union halls for campaign events. Last summer's Supreme Court decision to halt the compulsory collection of dues from public-sector employees will undoubtedly diminish the buying power of these once-influential union donors.

But Trump's biggest advantage in the Midwest is of the Democratic Party's own making: A national party and presidential field populated by left-wing lunatics.

The crop of candidates running for president on the Democratic side is the twenty-first-century version of a collection of college sophomores crammed into a phone booth making a collect call to the 1960s. Baby Boomer slogans such as Soak the Rich!, Free Stuff for All!, and Save the Earth! are making a comeback, largely thanks to the star power of a Millennial freshman congressperson (her term) from New York City.

The options for Democratic voters range from aging hippies (Bernie Sander) to two-time losers (Joe Biden) to out-of-work lawmakers (Beto O'Rourke, John Delaney) to unhinged megalomaniacs (Eric Swalwell, Kirsten Gillibrand, Elizabeth Warren, Cory Booker). Add to that a woman who

allegedly mistreats her staff (Amy Klobuchar) and a college town mayor with a thin resume (Pete Buttigieg) and you've got the makings of an electoral disaster in the Heartland.

None of the candidates appear to have a clue how to attract working class Midwesterners. Instead, the nearly two dozen Democrats are one-upping each other to see who would win a popularity contest in Silicon Valley or the Upper East Side rather than who can earn back votes from folks living in Benton Harbor or Wauwatosa.

The collective agenda for the Democrats going into 2020 looks like this: install federal tax rates upwards of 70 percent; enact a "Green New Deal" that would curtail the production of fossil fuels, impose crippling new taxes and regulations, and overhaul the economy as we know it; commit trillions of dollars to free college, free healthcare, reparations for African-Americans, and the forgiveness of college debt; open up the southern border, eliminate quotas on immigrants from other countries, and demonize ICE workers; alienate Israel and ignore alarming trends of anti-Semitism around the world; and allow anyone to vote, including illegal immigrants, convicted terrorists, and child killers. Oh, and speaking of child killers, the freedom to perform "post-birth abortions" (formerly known as murder) would be the law of the land.

In the meantime, anyone who objects to their agenda will automatically be branded a white supremacist, a homophobe, a racist, a sexist, or an Islamophobe. Regular Americans, particularly white working-class men, will be demonized under the false flag of equality. Their destructive approach will

get constant reinforcements from the more reprehensible Democrats in Congress, including Rep. Adam Schiff, Rep. Ilhan Omar, and Rep. Rashida Talib.

Some recognize that this extreme agenda and approach won't play in Peoria and are considering an unconventional election strategy that bypasses the Midwest. "There is a growing school of thought that Democrats should not spend so much time, money and psychic energy tailoring their message to a heavily white, rural and blue-collar part of the country when their coalition is increasingly made up of racial minorities and suburbanites," wrote Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns in a February 2019 *New York Times*piece that reported on the intra-party tension about which states Democrats need to woo in 2020. "Should Democrats redouble their efforts to win back the industrial heartland that effectively delivered the presidency to Donald J. Trump? Or should they turn their attention to more demographically promising Sun Belt states like Georgia and Arizona?"

Even if the Democrats capture Georgia and Arizona but still lose Wisconsin and Michigan, it will result in a plus-one net electoral vote for their candidate, still not enough to win. And if Wisconsin and Michigan go for Trump, it's safe to assume that Pennsylvania does, too. Minnesota also will be in play, for a potential loss of ten electoral votes for the Democratic candidate. A shocking pick up in either Texas or Florida would be the only way for the Democrats to prevail over a solid red tide (with the exception of Illinois) from Philadelphia to Minneapolis.

There's another risk for the Democrats in forsaking the Midwest in 2020: The chance to lose the House of Representatives. Eight of the most vulnerable congressional districts that Democrats snatched from Republicans last year are in the Midwest. (One more is in Pennsylvania). Republicans only need to win back eighteen seats to regain control of Congress. Without a vote-driving Senate contests in any Midwestern state, Republicans could focus their resources into winning these close congressional races while Democrats pursue vanity projects in Texas and North Carolina.

Of course, not everything looks rosy for the GOP in 2020. The national party infrastructure seems unable or unwilling to compete with the well-funded grassroots mobilization that Democrats showcased in 2018 to win the House. Republicans don't appear to have any legitimate strategy to challenge the egregious tactic of ballot harvesting, which led to the defeat of seven California Republican representatives last year and no doubt will be replicated in competitive states all over the country. The Republican National Committee is flush with cash, but there's plenty of uncertainty whether the money will wind up in the right races or wasted on grudges or pet candidates.

And Trump could harm his own reelection chances, too. An escalation of the trade war could dampen his support in the agriculture community, a misguided intervention in Venezuela would be inimical to Trump's "America First" pledge, and the continued failure to stop record numbers of Central American migrants from breaching our border could be exploited by Democrats as Trump's biggest unkept promise. But for now, Trump's

Midwestern base is thriving and the blue wall that once stretched along I-94 for Democratic presidential candidates since the late 1980s now seems to be a permanent pile of electoral rubble under the Trump era.

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