



SENATOR CLAIRE MCCASKILL:
FORGET THE FRACTURES

BEN SARLE
MARCH, 2017

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A little over four years ago, Senator Claire McCaskill had just ‘shotgunned’ her first Miller High Life, the Champagne of Beers. She was in Kansas City, MO, and was fulfilling a promise to her daughters, Lily, and Maddie. The promise was that if her counterintuitive, Machiavellian campaign strategy paid off, successfully securing re-election to her highly contested seat in the Senate — she would celebrate with her daughters in this sacred Mid-West rite of passage.

Her \$1.7M donation to the campaign of the weaker of the two potential opponents, Todd Akin, in the 2012 Republican Primary did exactly what it was meant to do — bring forth a less viable candidate into the general election to face McCaskill, where McCaskill handily prevailed.

Even considering McCaskill’s political savvy as a candidate and tenacity as an elected official; for a true blue Democrat to be voted into the Senate seat twice in one of the deepest crimson red states was nothing short of miraculous.

Four years later, in November, 2016 — Donald Trump won Missouri by a massive 19 point margin over Hillary Clinton. As she starts to organize for her 2018 re-election campaign, it isn’t the tsunami of Republican sentiment that has flooded states like Missouri that may pose the biggest challenge, it’s rumors of an opponent to her left — a reflection of the increasing intra-Party polarization.

With the newly elected DNC chair, former Labor Secretary Tom Perez, the Democratic Party needs to figure out who and what it is again. Not merely strategy, but the fundamental role of the Party; and how to overcome growing rifts. Should the DNC be an objective facilitator of the democratic process and primaries? Or should its mission be to win at all costs? These two objectives seem to be at odds with each other in the current political landscape, neither of which were accomplished successfully in 2016.

“Both [Perez and Ellison] are focused on the priorities. They both understand that this is about beginning from scratch,” said McCaskill. “I don’t think either one of them is outside of the quote unquote [sic] establishment, but they have a real grassroots priority. So our party is going to be in pretty good shape.”

Since the DNC election, a DNC email campaign with Perez’s name on it raised a record \$TK/TK from the Democrats’ base, perhaps illustrating that it will in fact be in good shape, and the beginning of increasing party unity. Or perhaps not.

The 2016 election cycle exposed the significant rise in populism on both sides of the ticket — with Trump on the right, and Bernie Sanders galvanizing the substantial progressive slice of the electorate on the left.

“It’s important to remember that Bernie Sanders and his supporters agree with the vast majority of the Democratic Party, on the vast majority of the issues. So there really isn’t a division in our Party as such,” remarked McCaskill, who understands better than anyone that you can’t begin to handle your opponents until you have unity amongst your supporters.

But optimism is not without concern.

“What I worry most about is that in this moment of enthusiasm from our base, that we lose sight of the fact that our party is a big tent party,” said McCaskill. “Not just in terms of how you look and where you live and who you love and who you worship or not worship. It’s a big tent party in terms of everybody doesn’t have to have exactly the same view on everything. And I just hope we maintain that.”

Despite the rifts growing like mold within both the Republican and Democratic parties, the recent phenomenon occurring at local town halls across the country seems to be uniting constituencies in opposition to fundamentally un-American policies coming out of Washington, DC — with echoes of the Tea Party circa 2009/10.

“I remember distinctly doing town halls around the time that the Tea Party was really reaching it’s zenith,” McCaskill, who is no stranger to tumultuous town halls, described, “I was out there in Missouri, addressing gymnasiums, that were packed to the rafters full of people that were angry and emotional and didn’t have much trust in me and didn’t have much use for me.”

It is around that time when Democratic Party leaders dismissed this widespread vitriole as people who were bussed in, paid by the Koch brothers, coining the term ‘astroturf’ (as the fake version of grassroots organizing.) Sound familiar? With chaotic Republican town hall events happening across the country in recent weeks, there are many denouncing these protesters, such as Georgia Senator Perdue’s spokeswoman calling them “manufactured protests that are denying those that really need help.”

“I’m thinking ‘Hey, I’m warning ya... that’s a mistake. Trust me, they are real,’” McCaskill said of the recent denouncements from Republican party leaders. “This outbreak of passion and emotion and anger and frustration, that same set of facts were in place when the Tea Party began organically having a lot of people showing up for stuff.”

But this time, it is crowds on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum — true working class individuals who want to hold on to their health care, protect civil liberties, and make sure tax reforms aren’t rigged for the 1%.

The headlines may be grabbed by recent outbreaks of Democratic exuberance, and of course the largest demonstration in American history, the Women’s March. But winning elections in 2018 and beyond is a complex and daunting task for many Dems. In the eyes of a veteran Democrat like McCaskill, the answer lies on a state level

and getting back in touch with Democratic roots.

“If this last campaign taught us anything, it should teach us that we need to pay attention to the people who are willing to lend their time and their energy to our cause,” she said. McCaskill explained that it isn’t just putting the resources into TV commercials, or into the convention.

“Do the state parties have what they need to maintain a voter file? Do they have what they need to do the kind of recruitment they need? The state party in my state has never helped me. And I think new candidates are skeptical of that. They think ‘why isn’t the state party helping me?’”

McCaskill is referring to the approach that has been proven successful for Democratic victory in decades past, which is the bottom-up approach. “The state party has never been independently helpful to me. The only time they have been helpful to me is when I raised the money to use their structure for whatever reason to help win elections.”

It will remain to be seen for the next two years if Democrats can swing back the pendulum in 2018, re-orienting itself with strategies from better days, mending the rips within its base by overcoming 2016’s identity crisis, and perhaps even taking a chapter from the Tea Party’s playbook. But for McCaskill and other victory-minded Democratic leadership, now Democrats unite, and go forward.

“This purging for purity, I think is in the moment of our frustration, anger, fear and emotional upset over Donald Trump being President of the United States,” McCaskill concluded. “I hope we don’t lose sight of that.”

Whether she’s right or wrong, Democrats in 2018 will be shotgunning their Miller High Life’s to celebrate, or to forget.

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