

Schumer's 'Better Deal' aims to recreate Dems' 'New Deal' magic

Schumer touts middle class economic plan to woo back Trump voters



Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of N.Y., speaks to reporters on Capitol Hill in Washington, Friday, July 28, 2017, after the Republican-controlled Senate was unable to fulfill their political promise to repeal and replace "Obamacare." (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite) ORG XMIT: DCSA107

Washington

The Monday-morning quarterbacks in the historical and punditry worlds will forever dissect how Hillary Clinton snapped defeat from the jaws of victory in the 2016 election.

In fact, Clinton herself dips her feet in these waters in her upcoming book on the campaign, appropriately titled "What Happened."

But for Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, a major part of the diagnosis is clear:

Insufficient attention to what he calls a "bold, sharp-edged" economic message aimed at convincing blue-collar voters that it's the Democrats – not Donald Trump – who have their backs.

Last week, amid the thunder claps on Capitol Hill over health care, Schumer and fellow Democratic stalwarts traveled to sleepy Berryville, Va., in the heart of Trump country to deliver their "Better Deal."

The "Better Deal" is a cornucopia of easy-to-digest policy prescriptions, much of it familiar Democratic terrain: Raising wages, big investments in job training, vigorous antitrust enforcement to break up price-gouging monopolies, and lowering prescription drug costs.

In the rollout, Schumer scrupulously avoided mention of the name of his former fellow senator from New York. But he did point the finger at lackluster pursuit of economic goals that could help lift up blue-collar families.

"In the last two elections, Democrats, including in the Senate, failed to articulate a strong, bold economic program for the middle class and those working hard to get there," he wrote in an op-ed last week in the New York Times. "We also failed to communicate our values to show that we were on the side of working people, not the special interests. We will not repeat the same mistake."

"Better Deal" harkens back to the "New Deal," the 1930s-vintage program of President Franklin D. Roosevelt to put America back to work (and provide old-age Social Security) in the darkest days of the Great Depression.

It is also a marketing device to get blue-collar people who voted for Trump to think about which party has been their true champion.



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Democratic South is now GOP country.

But coming at a time when the president appears under siege over support of an unpopular (and so far failed) GOP health care bill and the Trump-Russia investigation, Schumer's "Better Deal" could indeed find fertile ground.

"One thing that's changed is the equation: Trump is no longer a candidate, he's the president," said Morgan Hook, head of the Albany office of the consulting firm SKDKnickerbocker, which is working for Democratic candidates in races against Republican incumbent Reps. John Faso, R-Kinderhook, and Elise Stefanik, R-Willsboro. "Democrats don't have to respond to tirades. But they can respond to failed policies."

Still the questions remain: How did the Democrats, the champions of labor from the 1930s onward, get rejected by the workers whose lives they claim to have uplifted in decades gone by? And are words and speeches enough to turn the tide in 2018 and beyond?

Although Bill Clinton's two successful presidential campaigns in the 1990s sprang from the famous phrase "it's the economy, stupid!" Hillary Clinton's effort in 2016 came off as more of a series of constituency rallies in which blue-collar concerns represented one more box to check. Clinton was "more classroom and academic in her approach," said Rep. Paul Tonko, D-Amsterdam. "It was that marketing strategy that was lacking, the quick phrases, though she had the academic details down."

Democratic criticisms of the Clinton 2016 campaign are "not implicit or explicit, so much as they are unavoidable to some," said Harvey Schantz, a political scientist at SUNY Plattsburgh.

In the rust belt counties of upstate New York that went decisively for Trump, local Democrats say Schumer's platform coupled with Republican missteps in Washington

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Democratic Party in Montgomery County. "Somehow we lost the ability to connect that message to people who need to hear it. I think there was maybe a little too much focus on social issues instead of economic ones."

"A lot of people think we're all ultra-liberals, spend, spend, spend, but that's not the case," said Ed Jasewicz, Democratic chairman in Fulton County.

Whatever her strategy on economic issues, Clinton might not have been able to cut through the negatives that Republicans have been serving up since her days as first lady in the 1990s. "The attitude was 'anybody but Hillary,' to be honest," said Jasewicz.

Schumer has assiduously avoided any notion that to win over working-class voters, Democrats must de-emphasize identity politics – courting liberal interest groups including the LGBT community, women concerned about pay equity and other such issues, and minorities.

Rather, aides say, he follows a "walk-and-chew-gum" approach that focuses on different issues at different times.

One LGBT advocate said he isn't worried.

"Economic issues are LGBT issues," said Gabriel Blau, co-founder of Equality New York. "We as a community welcome an economic message. I think Sen. Schumer has stood by the LGBT community, and we are grateful."

But, he added, "we push him every time we think he needs a little push."

"Schumer has no reason to be critical of Clinton (because) the Democratic Party's drift towards a focus on cultural issues predates" her candidacy, Schantz said.



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chairman Ed Cox, referring to blue-collar voters. "It's too ingrained a problem in the Democratic Party itself to cover up with words."

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