

TO: Interested Parties  
FR: Gretchen Barton, Research Director, Future Majority  
DT: January 23, 2022  
RE: Essay on What Americans Need Right Now

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There's something that happens in lakes once a year – where everything in the lake literally turns over – the bottom of the lake goes to the top, the top to the bottom, and everything is cloudy and murky in between. Looking at this moment in American history, I believe we're at a similar point where everything feels upside down and messy – social norms are changing, technology is spinning us off our axes, and people are facing down the very real challenge of climate change, COVID and rising costs.

At Future Majority, we've been spending each and every day listening to Americans about not just what they feel, but how and why they think and feel (and vote) as they do through weekly polls, deep dive metaphor elicitation interviews and online ethnographies. From this research, it's become abundantly clear that Democrats have some key weaknesses that have been exploited by Republicans this past year, and must be attended to quickly in order to enter 2022 with the strongest possible footing. What I see are some deeper needs in the electorate that we, the Democrats, are not speaking to with any cultural fluency. These deeper needs are voters having a sense of control/agency, being part of a positive legacy, and needing to be acknowledged as good.

This past year, I asked Americans about the future for generations to come - what they saw coming, what they hoped for, and what would threaten that future. And when I did, it became abundantly clear that Americans are freaked out about the future (which Democrats are associated with) - they're very afraid of robots taking their jobs, they're concerned about technology taking over their lives and losing touch with what matters, and they're concerned that irreparable damage has been caused to the earth and their own future prospects, so much so that they have no power over fixing the problems they face. **In short, Americans have a sense of very little, if any, personal agency in creating the future they want for themselves.** Government for them is not a source of agency. Where voters do feel a sense of power and control over their lives and the future are: 1) corporations, where as consumers they can call out or call up a corporation and get an actual response (hello, Twitter Cancel Culture!), 2) in cultivating their communities (this looks like bringing pie to their neighbors, gardening and making nice because if they can get their communities right, in their minds, they can make a better future), and lastly, 3) in controlling their kids, ensuring that their kids will be prepared for what they believe will be an inevitably tougher future than the one where we're living today.

In this research, there also emerged a key theme which I call Wisdom through the Generations, which is about being part of a positive legacy. This is the idea that there is a sacred passing down of wisdom from the past into the future, that our ancestors have led the way for us and that we will carry forward what they have taught us and keep the line going. **It's about legacy, and it's about the deep psychological need people have of knowing or believing that they come from something that matters.** That they're not descendants of shitty people and that they themselves matter. You see this idea of legacy, the need to feel like one comes from something that matters and that one is heading somewhere where one has a role in the future, playing out across American culture today. You see this with Beyonce and [her Lion King Gift album](#), referencing the legacy Black America holds in descending from African royalty. You also see this with Americans today fiercely holding the stories of WW2 in their hearts, talking about how America took down the Nazis and claiming the mantle of that legacy for themselves. And you also see this with America's fascination with the band, [Celtic Woman](#), who give white Americans a way to create an idealized past for themselves, an artificial legacy, where they vicariously, struggled, just as the Irish did, and where everything now is cheery and bright and lovely.

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Beyond the need to feel like one comes from something that matters is the need to be acknowledged as innately good. The need to feel and be told that you are a good person.

This need continually shows up in all our swing state studies. **Voters talk about how they are good citizens, how they follow the rules, pay their taxes, do what's right and they want the government to recognize that. It is what we call, "the good boy, good girl" dynamic and it is critically important for Democrats to get right.** Rev. Rob Lee, descendant of General Robert E Lee, shared with us that, "when [he is] at the pulpit, [he is] called to tell [his] parishioners that they are good and have goodness in them." He went on to say that Evangelicals, many of whom voted for Trump, are told by the church that they are *absolutely nothing* without God, and that this creates fertile ground for a figure like Trump who says to them, 'no, you are not nothing, you are good and you matter.' It is one of many reasons they follow and are loyal to him.

**This past year, the notion of CRT - not the actuality of it - challenged all three of these needs - agency and control, legacy, and identity - and hurt Democrats because Democrats do not currently meet these needs for their potential voters.** This is deep emotional stuff that can't be explained away by telling their voters they're wrong, and if Democrats want to win in 2022, they need to learn to speak to these needs on a deep level and fast. While CRT was a lightning rod this past year, Republicans can and very likely will find new ways to attack Democrats tugging on these same emotional threads.

## So how do Democrats fix this?

First, Democrats need to be working hard to restore voters' sense of control and agency by ensuring that their concerns are heard, affirmed, and acted upon. Democrats need to find ways to acknowledge that **everyone's story matters**. Our country has been through a lot recently and this must be acknowledged. Candidates need to deeply listen and absorb voters' desires, and adopt appropriate policy prescriptions that directly address their needs. Governments should be just as responsive to their constituents' concerns as corporations are to their customers.

Second, Democrats **must convey that the American story is about being brave enough to get and do better with each new generation**. We've found that voters want to view our country's history positively and as moving towards something better that we all take part in - together. And **voters today can and should be part of that heroic narrative where everyone has a role in creating a better future – it's not about politicians acting alone to lead America during tough times**.

And third, **Democrats need to acknowledge the efforts of the American people** - the good things they're doing, whether it be taking care of their kids during COVID, showing up to work every day, paying their taxes, just being a good neighbor or working to stop the pandemic by wearing a mask, getting a shot, taking extra care of themselves and others. We are where we are, for better and for worse, because of what Americans have been doing, and the positive work needs to be acknowledged.

We can and must better connect with our country as it is, not as we imagine it to be, in order to create an America we all can believe in. Our task is to win the future, and we are the heroes that can make that happen.