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The Progressive Playbook: How These Candidates Pulled Off Their Upsets

Among the surprises this primary season were several high-profile upsets from the left. The Times asked some of the strategists and candidates behind these wins to break them down.

Image



Ayanna Pressley defeated a 10-term incumbent to become a Democratic Congressional candidate in Massachusetts this month. Credit Credit Kayana Szymczak for The New York Times

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By [Astead W. Herndon](#) and [Kevin Roose](#)

- Sept. 15, 2018
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It has become a familiar pattern this primary season. The day after a surprising victory by a progressive underdog — say [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York](#), [Andrew Gillum of Florida](#), [Jahana Hayes in Connecticut](#), [Wesley Bell in Missouri](#) or [Ayanna Pressley in Massachusetts](#) — national audiences rush to meet the latest Democrat who defied expectations.

Separately, every race has had its own challenges, but taken together, the group represents a sea change in the Democratic Party, which has repeatedly this primary season, seen [its voters embrace candidates](#) who are younger, more progressive and more diverse than the party’s establishment has been.

Certainly, Republicans have had their surprises. But “insurgency” on the conservative side has often meant the candidate most like President Trump in this primary season, particularly in races where Mr. Trump has [offered his all-powerful endorsement](#) on Twitter.

The New York Times spoke with the strategists, campaign managers and candidates at the front lines of progressive insurgent victories, in search of common threads that defined successful campaigns this election cycle.

Here they are:

Step 1: Have the right candidate in the right district

Image



Wesley Bell, a member of the Ferguson city council, defeated a 25-year incumbent in his race for the Democratic nomination for St. Louis County prosecutor. Credit Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

A progressive candidate in a district full of moderate voters can overcome some ideological differences, and bring new voters into the process, through personality. A candidate's life experience needs to reflect those of the voters she needs to convince, the group of experts said.

Before Ms. Pressley defeated a 10-term incumbent in Massachusetts' Seventh Congressional District, she emphasized the unequal distribution of wealth in the Boston-area district that mirrored [her own life](#): she grew up poor in Chicago, but attended a wealthy private school on the city's North Side.

Mr. Bell was a city councilor from Ferguson, Mo., who campaigned on a platform of [criminal justice reform](#) to unseat a long-serving county prosecutor. He said progressive candidates need to "take the temperature of the room" and honestly determine the appetite for change.

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“There has to be the right coalition — it has to be the right message, it has to be the right candidate,” he said.

The “right” candidate is particularly important in building coalitions for statewide races, the experts said. Progressive candidates like Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan and [Cynthia Nixon in New York](#) failed to draw support outside of urban centers. In Delaware, two days after Ms. Pressley’s victory, Kerri Harris had hoped to unseat an incumbent senator but secured only 35 percent of the vote.

Step 2: Take Advice from Silicon Valley: Test. Iterate. Repeat.

A nimble, grass-roots campaign must also be responsive to voter feedback, the experts said. Whether it’s listening to the advice of on-the-ground organizers, or tailoring digital messages to response patterns, the advantage of a nontraditional campaign should be its ability to quickly adjust.

“The whole point of digital is you can test what messages are working,” said Jessica Alter, the co-founder of Tech for Campaigns, a group of more than 8,000 tech workers [who are volunteering](#) to use their digital skills to help elect progressive candidates in November.

Testing different messages on small groups of Facebook users before launching a large-scale ad campaign, for example, could reveal that voters in a candidate’s district prefer positive ads to negative ads. Or, it could identify a national issue — say, immigration reform or marijuana legalization — that stirs up passions among a candidate’s target voter groups and might be a good subject to include in a stump speech. Testing messages online can even work for old-fashioned print advertising.

“If you’re going to spend \$20,000 on direct mail, maybe spend \$700 and test it on Facebook in a targeted way first,” she said.

Newer tools aren’t an automatic path to victory, of course. And social media popularity doesn’t always translate to votes. In New York, Ms. Nixon dominated the conversation on Twitter, but she was handily defeated by incumbent Governor Andrew Cuomo, whose campaign quietly spent more than \$2 million on digital advertising, with a heavy focus on Facebook.

Ms. Pressley’s campaign convened a weekly feedback circle of community leaders, local activists and volunteers. Sarah Groh, Ms. Pressley’s 29-year-old

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campaign manager, said the advisers allowed the team to notice where their opponent was making gains. When the group felt some of the incumbent’s messages were beginning to take hold in the later stages of the race, they decided that Ms. Pressley should record another video ad, focused on delivering her final message to voters in an easy-to-digest fashion.

The video [racked up](#) 170,000 views on Twitter.

Step 3: Don’t assume you know who the voters are

Image

Jahana Hayes, a progressive Connecticut Democrat, won a landslide victory in her August primary. Credit John Woike/Hartford Courant, via Associated Press

For these organizers, many of whom are taking principles from the activism world and applying them to electoral politics, a true grass-roots campaign means leaving no voter ignored — no matter the traditional wisdom. It also means splitting time between voters who are traditionally more likely to turn out in a primary (which trend older and whiter than a general election electorate) and “low-likelihood” voters (particularly minorities and younger voters). It’s a strategy that may rankle even the most supportive establishment consultants., who have often seen television as one benchmark of a candidate’s viability.

Jahana Hayes, a progressive Connecticut Democrat and former “Teacher of the Year” who [won a landslide victory in her August](#) Congressional primary, said she was driven by a sense of morality rather than horse-race politics.

“You have to be willing to lose,” she said.

“Everyone says, ‘You’re not taking the right path,’ but I was just very firm that I don’t want to just step into someone else’s footprints: I want to create new footprints,” Ms. Hayes said.

Top campaign aides for Stacey Abrams’ historic gubernatorial bid in Georgia said a grass-roots strategy can work in larger voting pools, but it takes additional resources, too. Ms. Abrams’ campaign, which [romped to victory by more than 50 points in May](#), reached out to 150,000 voters on Primary Day and about half a

million voters over the four-day “get-out-the-vote” period during the campaign’s final stretch.

Step 4: Go ahead and embrace the left

Abolish ICE. No corporate PAC money. Medicare for all.

As national Democrats wrangle with incremental, politically pragmatic solutions to policy problems such as immigration and health care, progressive Democrats are offering bold, sweeping proposals.

“One of the things that we feel strongly about is that candidates run an unapologetically progressive campaign and speak authentically about the issues that they actually care about connect with voters,” said Maurice Mitchell, national director for the Working Families Party.

Mr. Mitchell cited the success of down-ballot progressives in the New York Democratic primary this week, even as Ms. Nixon’s gubernatorial campaign failed. [Six Democratic insurgents knocked off more centrist Democratic incumbents behind uncompromising leftist messaging](#)

The bold policy proposals gave liberals a progressive version of the Tea Party wave in the Republican Party — the angry, uncompromising conservative surge that consumed the party after President Obama’s election. It is also a rebuttal to the idea that progressive Democrats are simply against President Trump.

Ms. Groh, Ms. Pressley’s campaign manager, came to the campaign without any experience in traditional electoral races, but experience in issue-based grass-roots campaigns.

Ms. Groh said she believed voters craved a “level of authenticity,” and innovative policy solutions, delivered by the right messenger, can check that box.

Step 5: Redefine voter outreach

Image

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York defeated the fourth ranking Democrat in Congress in a primary in June. Credit Gabriela Bhaskar for The New York Times

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Ms. Hayes, Ms. Pressley and Ms. Ocasio-Cortez all won their congressional races without buying a traditional television advertisement. Instead, each created highly shareable, viral-focused campaign ads [tailor made for social media](#). The ads focused more on the candidate’s biography than policy issues, and used slick cinematography.

Ms. Pressley’s campaign manager said ignoring television was the source of internal campaign battles, but the move allowed them to invest an additional \$130,000 in field organizers. It also allowed the campaign to spend money on targeted media — including an advertisement on Spanish-language television and outreach on several ethnic media outlets in Boston.

Josi Nielsen, the Missouri political strategist who managed Mr. Bell’s election, said the campaign advertised in community newspapers, which have a small but deeply engaged audience.

“If the message resonates, the challenge is reaching enough people,” Ms. Nielsen said.

This year’s insurgent candidates have also looked to another, new not-so-secret weapon: text messages. Several relied on peer-to-peer texting apps like Hustle and Relay to reach huge numbers of voters directly on their cellphones.

Ms. Pressley’s team started using Hustle on August 9, initially for event building and volunteer recruitment.

The campaign communicated with 4,800 volunteer prospects through the service — 25 percent of them replied to the texts, and close to 8 percent of those texted committed to help.

During the campaign’s final days, the campaign initiated conversations with 26,500 voters, reaching out with over 41,000 messages in total.

“Hustle is a game changer for grass-roots organizing and fund-raising. It allowed us to connect with so many different parts of the district and was an important piece in our path to victory,” said Gina Christo, Ms. Pressley’s campaign finance director.

Get caught up on the major themes of the 2018 midterm elections

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