

**INTERVIEWER:** In special elections held last Tuesday, democratic victories from Virginia to Washington State, and from Maine to Georgia, seemed to signal a change in mood and a desire for something other than fear and loathing.

We sat down with Tom Perez, the chair of the Democratic National Committee and former Secretary of Labor, and Denis McDonough, former chief of staff for President Obama, and talked about millennials, public service, and organizing the party.

All this time you're spending with millennials is interesting to me, and even though things admittedly feel slightly more-- well, for some of us-- slightly more hopeful since Tuesday night, it's kind of an ugly time to be in American politics. And I wonder if you are trying to persuade them to become politically active, how you're doing that given the past year?

**TOM PEREZ:** It's an undeniably challenging time, but it's challenging times that call for engagement. November the 9th of last year, we had two choices. We could crawl in a corner and get in the fetal position, or we could fight back. I chose to fight back, and when I go to campuses everywhere, I say the same thing, and I see the same thing. And I'll give you one concrete example.

We just had an election in Virginia, and we had 60 college campuses, college Dems, calling in doing phone banking for the four weeks leading up to the election, including folks here at Brown. The next generation understands that they have to engage. They're the most altruistic generation I think in American history, and when we lead with our values like they're doing, that's how we succeed. So I'm always inspired when I go to college campuses and see the activism.

**DENIS MCDONOUGH:** I did not anticipate enjoying teaching as much as I enjoyed it. I went and tried it last semester, that is to say spring of 2017, in South Bend, and tried it out and I was much more energized and excited about it than I anticipated. Well, one of the reasons is what Tom said, which is that it's very difficult to not be taken by the optimism, and the energy, and the enthusiasm of students.

**INTERVIEWER:** On both sides.

**DENIS** On both sides.

**MCDONOUGH:**

**INTERVIEWER:** Whatever their politics.

**DENIS**

**MCDONOUGH:**

Correct. What they're doing is a fundamentally hopeful exercise, right? They're spending a lot of money to invest in knowledge, on a belief that that investment's going to give them new opportunity. That's a fundamentally hopeful exercise, and it's great to be part of it. That's one. But the other part of it, and this is point two, that I've witnessed is that we need to remind ourselves that facts, and wisdom, and knowledge matter.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**DENIS**

**MCDONOUGH:**

Right now, more than ever. No better place to be reminded of that than institutions like Notre Dame, and St. John's University in Minnesota, and Brown. So I spend a lot of time talking about the fact that President Obama used to tell us that he likes to talk to people who know stuff. He liked to meet with Secretary Perez because secretary Perez is a facts guy. He can get his politics, and his opinions, wherever he wants, but the president was looking for facts.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you haven't seen too much of an erosion of faith in facts among that generation?

**DENIS**

**MCDONOUGH:**

On the contrary, I see a huge hunger for it. I see it in my own kids, and I see it in each of these interactions I've had with students on these campuses.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's encouraging. Do they remind of you when you were 20?

**DENIS**

**MCDONOUGH:**

I wish these students reminded me of myself. There's no way. I mean, now that I say this to my kids all the time, I said it to my daughter on the flight up here today, which is that the way that she's pushing into the world as a high school junior is something I wish I would have aspired to do. That's one.

Two is I think the other thing that I find remarkable in these visits, and in our kids' lives, is these are problem solving students, all right? Right now, we have a president and political leadership in the country that too often wants to swim in the problems, and that's not been what has marked great leaders in this country.

What's marked great leaders is the fact that they're problem solvers. Anybody can identify an issue, spot problems and differences, challenges. The beauty is in the prescriptions.

**INTERVIEWER:** Not the wallowing.

**DENIS** To address them. Not the wallowing.

**MCDONOUGH:**

**INTERVIEWER:** When you both were growing up, did you ever dream that this would be how your lives turned out? That you would go into politics, and play these important roles?

**TOM PEREZ:** I apologize for laughing. The answer is heck no. I mean, nobody can sit there and look you in the eye when they're 21 years old and say, someday I might be able to get to be a--

**INTERVIEWER:** Secretary of labor.

**TOM PEREZ:** A secretary of labor, or the Chief of Staff to the President of the United States. And it's the privilege of a lifetime, and with privileges like that come responsibilities. And frankly I think in both of the courses that I'm teaching here, and Dennis is doing at Notre Dame, our goal in the spirit of transparency is we want to inspire people to stay in public service.

It's an easy time right now in this cynical world in which we live to walk away from it and say this is someone else's business. Actually, what I would say, this is precisely the time to step in. And I'm always inspired when I'm here, because people are not intimidated by the chaos that we see in Washington.

**INTERVIEWER:** Would you encourage your children or support them if they decided to go into politics?

**DENIS** Well, yeah, I mean, absolutely. I grew up in Minnesota. And I had 10 brothers and sisters. And

**MCDONOUGH:** basically, I ended up in Washington by doing what I did my whole life, which is following around one of my brothers. I followed my brother Sean to Washington. And lo and behold ended up in these jobs.

The government is made up by the people of this country. And we need that to be the case. The Constitution demands that be the case. And millions and millions of our forebears have fought and died to ensure that that remain the case. So one of the things I'm talking about with students is to urge them to get into public service, because it is, as Tom said, your responsibility. And so if my kids choose to go that route, you know, God willing, that would be great. And the country needs it.

And that's the most uplifting thing in this last week. Which is, if you look at these individual candidates, you see some remarkable people. Last Friday I was able to call in to a group of

canvassers in Maine on Question 2. Question 2 was a referendum on whether Maine should expand Medicaid. And that question carried, and it carried handily. And I means 70,000 Mainers will get health care coverage. And that's because people were working, you know, knocking on doors.

Public service doesn't necessarily mean running for office, but if it does, that's great. It also means going out there and taking your god-given rights in this country and making sure they're exercised.

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, you are inspiring, I have to say. You're doing a good job.

**DENIS** Thank you.

**MCDONOUGH:**

**INTERVIEWER:** Given who you are, I have to ask about the Democratic Party. And how are we going to reconcile establishment Democrats and with more progressive Democrats? Is that the biggest challenge? And if so, what's the plan?

**TOM PEREZ:** This past election cycle illustrates the progress we've made as Democrats. In Virginia, I saw unity from a front row seat. The last weekend of the election season, I put 700 miles on my car. And I heard time and time again-- I had a half a dozen people come up to me and say, I supported Bernie in the Primary, and I see what you're doing to unite the party, and I support it-- we've got bigger fish to fry. We have a president who's the most dangerous president in American history. That's how we won Virginia-- we had unity, we had a unity of purpose, we understood what our values were, we had great candidates up and down the ticket, we organized, organized, organized, and we spoke to people.

And so I think as we move forward in unity, we have to understand that unity doesn't mean unanimity. It doesn't mean we agree with each other 100% of the time. We will always have differences. But as Barack Obama taught me firsthand, idealism and pragmatism can never be mutually exclusive.

**INTERVIEWER:** You're listening to *Trending Globally, Politics and Policy*. Our guests this week, Tom Perez and Denis McDonough.

Speaking of Obama, do you miss being at the White House? Do you miss that job?

**DENIS** I'll tell you what I miss. I miss the team, and I miss the esprit de corps, and I miss this

**MCDONOUGH:** remarkable group of people that dedicated a lot of time on behalf of the National interest, on behalf of the country, on behalf of things like immigration reform, and fighting climate, and the Paris accords, taking a fight to Al-Qaeda and bin Laden. So I miss that team.

But to be perfectly honest with you, I love the time that I'm getting with my family. I love the fact that I can spend time like this with Tom. No, I don't miss a job, but I do miss the team.

**INTERVIEWER:** What are you each most proud of in the past, in your career, so far?

**DENIS** I'm most proud of I got to work for a president that took on big problems. Didn't wallow in

**MCDONOUGH:** them. Didn't simply identify them and try to make them somebody else's to solve, but recognized that he was put in there to take on big problems. And he did that. From economic recovery, and the heart of the greatest economic recession since the Great Depression, to our efforts against Al-Qaeda, to the Paris accords, and then, of course, the Affordable Care Act.

I think that I'm proud to have been a part of that. And I'm proud that we did that in a way that is uniformly recognized now to have been clean, straightforward, ethical, dignified. So I feel a lot of pride in that.

**INTERVIEWER:** What about you, Tom?

**TOM PEREZ:** There's a personal and a professional dimension to that question. I am starting my 12th year in a row of coaching at least one of my kids in sports. I have one kid left home, two in college. And so my caboose-- I'm coaching him in basketball. I coached my senior at Brown in basketball when she was in fourth grade until the eighth grade, et cetera. And nobody ever said on their deathbed, lamenting that they didn't get to enough meetings at the office.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's true.

**TOM PEREZ:** One of the things I admired about Denis so much is he had the most difficult job in Washington, DC, outside of the President of the United States. And he did it for 1,461 days. You know, he was out there on the coaching field.

He was out there at his kid's games. And President Obama understood that if his oldest had a field hockey game, then he had to be there. If his youngest had a basketball game or a swim meet, he had to be there. And he understood priority.

Professionally, what I'm most proud of is-- as President Obama said, I think, at the 2016

Convention, you've got to be in the arena. Democracy is not a spectator sport. I think we've learned that in abundance. It took a catastrophic incident for a lot of folks to learn it.

I've been proud of the fact that I've been able, I think, to make a difference in people's lives. Sometimes it was at a micro scale-- a case to prosecute white supremacists. And I still, to this day, remember sitting in the kitchen table-- not altogether different than the table we sit at with parents who lost their loved one because of the color of his skin. There's nothing more impactful at the end of the day than to be able to say, you know, I can't bring your son back, but we can at least bring some justice to bear.

You know, the last jobs I've had, what I loved the most was helping people at scale. Whether it was 2 million home health workers, who we were able to help get access to minimum wage and overtime protections, or that bricklayer who would walk into work breathing carcinogenic silica dust-- and we knew it was carcinogenic, but just didn't have leaders like President Obama who could muster the will to match the public policy with the science.

Sometimes in life you're playing defense. Sometimes in life you're playing offense. I like playing offense a lot more than I like playing defense. And I took this job, because when you elect Democrats you start playing offense.

**DENIS**  
**MCDONOUGH:** It's remarkable-- Op-Ed in this morning's *New York Times* by one of our former colleagues, Secretary Gates, on DACA-- Secretary Gates talked about the thousands and thousands of dreamers who are in the military serving today--

**INTERVIEWER:** You don't hear that very often.

**DENIS**  
**MCDONOUGH:** --including hundreds that he noted had made the, as he called it, the ultimate sacrifice during his time as Secretary. This is a bit of offense that we've got to get done.

**TOM PEREZ:** Lance Corporal Jose Gutierrez was born in Guatemala, and he came to this country when he was eight or nine-- when he was undocumented. He got his status adjusted. He was an orphan.

He enlisted in the United States Army. He was one of the first casualties in the most recent War In Iraq, and got his citizenship posthumously. Those are the faces of the people we're trying to help. And the people that inexplicably-- others are trying to send home.

The first responders in the recent hurricanes, who are dreamers working in local government.

I don't understand it. I mean, we're at our best when we exercise compassion. Compassion is not a four letter word. It's what makes us strong. It's a huge part of our strength and it has been compromised. And I think what we saw Tuesday-- and Republicans can ignore it at their peril-- is people understanding that, you know, if you blow out your neighbor's candle, it doesn't make your candle shine any brighter.

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, speaking of that, I think it takes more and more imagination, or a good memory, to imagine a future where members of the two parties in this country can engage civilly with each other and can be friends again. And, you know, we're so separate. Can you imagine a near future, hopefully, where people can peaceably disagree? Where things don't devolve into, sort of, slurs and reductive unkindnesses.

**DENIS** Yeah, absolutely I can. We used to see it every day in the government.

**MCDONOUGH:**

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think it can come back?

**DENIS** Yeah. I think it's there. When we were in The Situation Room, I didn't know what the Chairman

**MCDONOUGH:** of Joint Chief's political affiliation was, and I didn't really care. And our Secretary of Defense is a registered Republican. I don't really care.

**TOM PEREZ:** Ted Kennedy, one of his closest friends in the Senate, was Orrin Hatch. When Strom Thurmond was on his deathbed, who did he ask to do this eulogy? It was Joe Biden. That was the world in which we lived.

And by the way, we have a long history of bipartisanship in immigration, and it's seldom been a partisan issue, with Ronald Reagan in the '80s, Alan Simpson and Ted Kennedy in the '90s. And in 2014 it was a bipartisan coalition in the Senate. I think it got 64, 65 votes-- a solid majority.

**DENIS** I just want to pile on a name-- Tom Perriello. A remarkable guy. Challenged in that Primary--  
**MCDONOUGH:** the now, governor-elect of Virginia. Boy, that win on Tuesday night is every bit as much Tom Perriello's as it is, you know, governor-elect Northam's because of the race they ran, the focus on issues that matter to Virginians and Americans. And that's the spirit of public service that I think we all should aspire to.

**TOM PEREZ:** I couldn't agree more. I spent a lot of time with Tom on the Trail, and there wasn't a more fully-throated advocate for Ralph Northam than Tom Perriello.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wow.

**TOM PEREZ:** The challenge that we have here is we can't ever confuse amplitude with numerocity.

**INTERVIEWER:** Explain what you mean.

**TOM PEREZ:** It's very easy to be loud in opposition, but that doesn't mean you reflect the views of a lot of people. I saw it in Virginia with my own two eyes-- you know, people coming together. And for your listeners, the last time Democrats won this many seats in the House of Delegates in Virginia, was the late 19th century.

Of the 15 House of Delegates incumbents who lost their seats, all of them were men. 11 of the 15 coming in are women, including the first two Latinas, the first Vietnamese American, the first transgendered person, who, in a remarkable bit of delicious irony, defeated the gentleman who offered the transgender bill in the Virginia House of Delegates and refused to refer to her by her proper pronoun during the campaign.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wow.

**TOM PEREZ:** You do not deserve, sir, to be in the House of Delegates, and you're not, as of the next session. And I couldn't be happier, because Danica Roem was a spectacular candidate. And what it shows is that, you know what, as Democrats, we can lead with our values. And one of our values is respect and inclusion. We don't have to check that at the door to win.

**INTERVIEWER:** Here, here.

**TOM PEREZ:** Look what we did. It's a great example in Virginia of when you lead with your values, when you organize all year round, not just the sprint at the end, when you build relationships with voters, when you listen to voters-- listening is a lost art all-too-frequently in politics.

When we listen, we learn. And when we learn, we better represent our constituents. And that is why I feel in a world in which we are the subject of daily Twitter tantrums and others, I come to you with unrelenting optimism. Because the journey to form a more perfect union has seldom, if ever, been linear.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you both so much. We are out of time and I can't thank you enough for having come in to talk to us today.

**TOM PEREZ:** My pleasure.

**DENIS** Yeah, it was a lot of fun. Thanks for having us.

**MCDONOUGH:**

**INTERVIEWER:** This has been *Trending Globally, Politics and Policy*. If you enjoyed today's conversation, you can subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud, or Stitcher, or download us on your favorite podcasting app. If you like us, rate us, and help others who might enjoy the show find us. For more information, go to [watson.brown.edu](http://watson.brown.edu).