

Gaslit Nation

Gaslit Nation Featurette: Every District

Andrea Chalupa

[Theme Music]

Andrea Chalupa: Alright! So this is a Gaslit Nation special. We're very excited to be speaking with Every District. Why don't you two go ahead and introduce yourselves and what you do.

Nicole Hobbes: Great! Hi. I'm Nicole Hobbs, and I am one of the co-founders of Every District, and I also serve as our Executive Director.

Drew Morrison: I'm Drew Morrison, the other co-founder, and I'm our Political Director, so I work on the numbers and the strategy, while Nicole works on managing the affairs of Every District and keeping us moving day after day.

Andrea Chalupa: Great. So we're having this discussion with a just a few days left before the election, and we made time to talk to you, Every District, because we feel what you're doing is so important, and you're really talking the longview on strengthening America's democracy by putting the focus on the states. So no matter what happens on November 06 in the 2018 midterms, but let's say Democrats don't win anything [Laughs]. And we, we, and America remains at a one-party rule, then the entire

focus has to be on—it should be, regardless—on local politics, electing local leaders who are progressive and fighting for, you know, combating climate change, and a fair living wage, and human rights and dignity, in every single district in your state. The Republicans have been incredibly good about this, Karl Rove wrote a Wall Street Journal op-ed laying this out as this the GOP strategy for this far-right takeover, and they've been so successful at it, that the Republicans are incredibly close now, they have enough red states governments under their control, that they could even call a constitutional convention and have a far-right editing of our Constitution, and really put the prison walls up on our democracy. So what you're doing is essential work, and we're so happy to make time for you and really remind people we need to stay engaged and take the longview.

Drew Morrison: Yeah, that's absolutely correct. How we build back the party is by working at the state level. And why is that the case? So many of the issues that we care about are actually resolved at the state level, particularly when Congress and Washington are so dysfunctional. Things that we care about like gerrymandering start at the state. Voting rights, voter ID laws and all of the things we're seeing across the states where Republicans are seeking to suppress the vote. That is decided at the state level. So we have to engage to make sure that the rules of our democracy really respect each voter. We have to start at the state. Issues we care about, like education, like Medicaid expansion, all of those things happen at the state level. And the fact of the matter is, right now there are only eight states where Democrats control both the

governorship and both chambers of the legislature. That's referred to among political wonks as a trifecta. So there are only eight states where Democrats at the local level control the policy conversation. If we want to continue to push this country in the democratic and progressive direction, then we need to get more control of the state legislatures. And for us that's not just 2018. We have races coming up in 2019 in Virginia, Mississippi, and elsewhere that are very important. And then 2020 there's another batch. So this is an every year process to build back control of the state level.

Andrea Chalupa: And so what is your strategy to do this?

Drew Morrison: So we basically believe that one of the most important things that Democrats can do is change how they do fundraising. We all the fundraising emails that are about you giving as much as possible in time for the latest election, and there's hardly a thank you when you do. And so fundraising becomes a bit of an extractive process, as opposed to a grassroots-driven, organizing process. And so what we've done is we've built a database of every state legislative district across the country, and you can now go online on our website to see some of the most competitive state legislative races across the country. Our link everydistrict.us. If you go on, you can see those states in dark blue. Click on them and see some of the most competitive districts in your backyard. And from there, we allow you to raise money and to give money to state legislative candidates in five states. And unlike a lot of organizations, when you donate

to those candidates, those dollars go directly into their bank accounts. It's not held in some PAC somewhere, it is given directly to the candidates so they can deploy immediately. So we believe in a transparent, grassroots and person-to-person driven approach. A large portion of our dollars are raised by what we call "fundraising champions," people who decide "I'm going to get up there and raise money to support these candidates that I'm interested in." So it's really about changing fundraising from an extractive, top-down process to a grassroots process. We can support the candidates who need the dollars most, and build up our own interest and support and energy around the practice of fundraising.

Andrea Chalupa: OK. So your website identifies competitive local races that people can give \$5, \$10 to, and across the board, all those little donations add up, and it's that grassroots engine that is the answer to sort of all the super-PACs and the—and the hell that was wrought by *Citizens United*.

[Laughs]

Drew Morrison: Exactly. It's about really rebuilding that power. To give you an example of what that does when it's people driven: we worked in Virginia in 2017 with a core group of 20 donors who were able to create 300 donors from their networks. And that group of fundraising champion donors, after the 2017 election—you know, whenever I've been involved with a fundraising campaign for a non-profit or for a candidate, as soon as the election

is over, everybody wants to go away, focus on something else. Instead, in Virginia what you're seeing are people are engaging in this grassroots fundraising for the 2019 state legislative elections already. And so when we turn the fundraising process on its head, it becomes, becomes something that's exciting and energizing, and, exactly, you can combat big money through energy and a commitment of really strong grassroots volunteers.

Nicole Hobbs: And to comment on the big money part of this, what we saw in Virginia last year, with the 15 candidates who won their House of Delegate races, was not all of them out-raised their Republican opponents. Some of them actually were very much so out-raised by their Republican incumbents they were running against. But the small dollars added up so that these candidates could run strong campaigns, get their message out, do the fieldwork that needed to be done to make sure that they could communicate their message to voters, and that was enough. And that's what we've been working on this year, with 62 candidates that we've endorsed, is to make sure that even if they aren't able to outspend their Republican opponents, or the Republican incumbent that they're running against that's sitting on a pile of cash, is to make sure that they can get to that level of viability to run a good, strong campaign that can win.

Andrea Chalupa: Interesting, OK. So why—so, again and again, we're still seeing research that it's not how much money you have, that's not a determining factor of victory—certainly it helps, of course—but we've seen some really

deep pocketed races lose, so it's a lot more—what are you seeing that really made the difference, for instance, in Virginia in 2017 in those races, if not money?

Drew Morrison: If not money, candidate quality. One thing that we think gets lost in the conversations is that we've had some really good candidates at the state legislative level who can really say to their potentially future constituents, "You want to vote for me because I have a connection to this community." And when we go out to do our questionnaire for the candidates that we endorse and support, the first question we ask is, "Why should someone in this district vote for you?" And what we've seen in 2017 and now in 2018 are people who had strong ties to their communities, who are small business owners, who are school teachers, who have served in the military and then come back and served in their community, and really the people who are leading the way, and that candidate quality, which transcends particular ideology or, you know, their ability to raise as much as money as Republican mega-donors, is really the way that people are able to energize and excite voters on the ground. And we think continuing to focus on supporting candidates who can excite people is a really smart path forward.

Andrea Chalupa: OK, fantastic. And so, what about this midterm? Like, what do you have going for November 06?

Drew Morrison: Great. We are supporting 62 candidates across five states. The five states are Arizona, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. We chose those five

states because they represent both states within the Sun Belt region that the Democrats are trying to grow into, as well as in the Midwest that we used to think was part of some “blue wall,” that Democrats had a lock on, and then we saw what happened in 2016. But in all five states, Democrats do not control either chamber of the state legislature. So whether we’re trying to build back or grow into these states, there’s no way to do that unless we build a solid group of Democratic legislators and Democratic policymaking at the state level. And these are states that don’t just take one or two victories in order to flip the chamber. They’re going to take really as many of these 62 as possible to win. But it’s really states where we think we can make the change, and why it—where it’s so important to Democrats as they seek to rebuild, to take control and really show what the Democratic alternative is to state-level governing.

Andrea Chalupa: Great. And again, with the excitement in Virginia, the big, the big blue sweep in Virginia in 2017, we saw a lot of these local races having a bottom-up ballot effect. They’re helping the bigger races drive out the vote. So this is like a really energizing force when you, when you work on the local grassroots level, the bigger races stand to benefit.

Nicole Hobbs: Absolutely. I think that’s something that doesn’t get enough coverage, is how last year in Virginia, it really was these competitive House of Delegate races that helped the top of the ticket and helped Governor Ralph Northam get elected. And I think for too long,

Democrats have focused on the top of the ticket and said, “We have a strong top of the ticket, those gains will trickle down to candidates further down the ballot.” But that hasn’t been the case. I mean, we lost almost a thousand state legislative seats in the Obama era. So having a strong candidate at the top of the ticket there didn’t help us. And so, I think you’re exactly right: we have to flip the script, and fund and make sure that these local candidates have the resources they need to organizing in their communities, not only for them, being on the ballot, but for candidates at the top of the ticket. And then the states—the five states that we’re working in, there a lot of competitive races further up the ticket, where we think these strong local campaigns, who are mobilizing people in their communities, can be helpful to these candidates, and we will be tracking this all on Election Night to see how the results play out.

Andrea Chalupa: So why were Democrats asleep—what do you think are some of the, the factors that contributed to Democrats losing so many local seats across the country?

Drew Morrison: I think that there’s roughly two macro reasons. The first is that there really was a sort of a, a federal attention of the leadership of the Democratic Party and also a lot of the grassroots donors and supporters—and it’s still something we haven’t totally gotten through—you know, right now we know about the great federal candidates who have raised lots and lots of money, and the Democrats are out-raising at the Congressional and

Senate level, but at the state legislative level, in the states that we're working in and in other states across the country, Republicans are still substantially out-raising Democrats. So there's this sort of federal national level policymaking bias I think we as Democrats have because we want to see broad-based, sweeping, progressive change that can help everyone, and that lends itself to a federal focus, but it has this challenging downstream effect, because we have such a state-based political system. I think the other thing that's true is that on average, the party that is out of control in Washington tends to do well in the states—you know, we did well in the states in 2006 and 2008—and what happens is that you lose that grassroots and progressive energy when you are in power sometimes. And what we really want to do in changing how fundraising is done, is say, "You know, we have great years in 2018, 2019, 2020, and if we can win back the presidency, odds are that 2022 would be a really bad year for Democrats at the state level." But if we've changed the way the people are engaged and activated in the political process, then we can overcome any backlash and have a stronger base of Democratic support.

Andrea Chalupa: That's really interesting. And so—it's amazing that you, you don't need a lot of money to flip seats on the local level in states.

Drew Morrison: That's exactly right, and you're talking about really between \$50 to \$500,000, you're talking about 95 percent of the competitive races in the country [that] are raising within that window. You can see on the federal

level just how much money is being raised for these individual Congressional and Senate seats. So from our standpoint, the ability for grassroots donors, particularly when they're working to activate their friends, to become the real drivers of the success of candidates, it's so exciting. You know, if you give \$100 to a candidate, and then you're able to get 10 to 20 of your friends to give the same, you're one of the largest bundlers that that state legislative candidate has. And so there's ability for average people to really play a large role in changing who has power in the states. And that really excites us, and it's a real big opportunity. It also means that the people who are running at the state legislative level can still be average people who live in their community and care about their community, whereas it's gotten very challenging for middle-class people to run for even higher office. So it's a really democratizing opportunity because there's still reasonable campaign finance levels at the state level.

Andrea Chalupa: And that's where all of it is done, in healthcare to [unintelligible], to union rights, to protecting tap water, and fighting climate change—it's really the states that hold the power. And it's so important to keep that mind as we recover from this far-right takeover and, and, and rebuild our country to be a stronger, progressive union. And what's always fascinating to me is how poll after poll shows that America is far liberal than our federal government shows, and that's really because of our archaic voting laws on the federal level, the Electoral College and, and, and so forth. So what you're presenting to people is a great equalizer, it's a great way to take back power, and it's a great way to protect lives, so many lives

that are—like healthcare, everything's on the line right now. And so I thank you both so much for what you're doing. And what are—like what are your dreams for our country in terms of, like, what is your, your bigger vision in terms of how you see this growing for you at Every District? How many more states do you want to be in?

Drew Morrison: Our name is aspirational. We think that we can build a platform to support every state legislative district across the country. In 2019, we're really excited in not only being engaged in Virginia, where we were able to be a big part of what happened in 2017, but also in a state like Mississippi. You know, a state where 50 years ago, Freedom Summer was built around people going down to Mississippi to give a real voice to the people who lived there during the era Jim Crow. We're in an era of voter suppression again. We're in an era where we need to fight for every state, in order to try to build as much progressive and Democratic policymaking power as we can. So our goal is for Democrats to be able to compete in every state legislature across the country, and we want to build a platform so that people in every district, across the country, can help drive that change.

Andrea Chalupa: And so what are some practical steps people listening to this now can do to help you?

Nicole Hobbs: So, first, go to our website, everydistrict.us. We are only a few days away from Election Day, but as Drew talked about earlier, given the way our platform is set up, such that donations go directly to our candidates, you

can still make a donation and have that have an impact. Right now, we are raising money for the 20 of our candidates that we've identified [to be] in need of the most support before Election Day. So these are 20 candidates who we feel confident can win, but need help to close the gap with their Republican opponents. And the second you should do is go out and knock some doors or make some phone calls. If you have not already committed to do so this weekend, you can—we love Mobilize, they've built a really great platform that makes it easy to connect with volunteer opportunities in your community. And the final thing is, if you haven't voted already, make sure you go and vote on Election Day, whether you live in a deep red state or a dark blue state, or a purple state, voting, making your voice heard, is so important.

Andrea Chalupa: Absolutely. And make sure you have a plan to vote and that you've read ahead of time on the ballot measures. Make sure you vote your entire ballot, and it just takes a few minutes just to read up on it. Read your local newspaper if you're lucky and you still have a local newspaper, and just educate yourselves before you go in the ballot box. Just make a plan to educate yourself and make a plan to vote. It makes a big difference, locally.

Nicole Hobbs: Definitely. And I'll give a shoutout to our friends at BallotReady. They have a really incredible resource, that if you put in your address, it will show you literally everything on your ballot with some helpful explainers, especially about the ballot questions.

Andrea Chalupa: BallotReady? I'll be checking that out before I go vote here in Brooklyn. Alright, well thank you both so much, and we encourage everyone to check out everydistrict.us. They have very big dreams for our country beyond the midterms, and I'm so grateful to talk to you and what you're doing. It's going to make a big difference for our future.

Nicole Hobbs: Thank you. We were happy to join today.

Drew Morrison: Thanks for having us.

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[Theme Music]

Andrea Chalupa: Gaslit Nation is produced by Andrea Chalupa and Sarah Kendzior. If you like what we do, live us a review on iTunes. It helps us reach more listeners. And check our Patreon. It helps keep us going. Our editor for this was Karlyn Daigle. Original music in Gaslit Nation is produced by David Whitehead, Martin Visenberg, Nick Farr, Demian Arriaga, and Karlyn Daigle. Our phenomenal logo was designed by the genius that is Hamish Smith at the New York-based design firm Order. Thank you so much, Hamish. And our supporters on Patreon at the Producer level, who help make all of this possible are: Stephanie Roskaboltz, Timothy Michael Wilson, Ari LaGuardia, Ethan Mann, Peter Case, Janet Cox, and Marshall Rhonda White, Andrea Gianaveich, Melissa Hayden, Jennifer Slavic. Thank you so much, we can't do this without you.

