How Wildly Soft Coverage Keeps Democrats Oblivious to the Real Political Environment

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You can see all kinds of little signs of a strengthening GOP wave approaching — the governor’s races that Phil Murphy, the Senate races that Rick Scott wins, the Florida Atlantic University survey showing Ron DeSantis up by 11 percentage points over Charlie Crist, the InsiderAdvantage poll showing the Pennsylvania Senate race tied.

If the Democrats feel blindsided by the results in November, it will be partially because the crowded media environment means there’s always someone willing to say Democratic candidates are looking shaky, that the GOP wave might not materialize, that “it’s time to take Democrats’ chances in the House seriously,” as Nate Cohn of The New York Times wrote less than three weeks ago. Democrats can always convince themselves that they’re doing better than they are, because there’s almost always some media voice out there reassuring them that their candidates are more popular than they really are.

Campaign journalism, or at least good campaign journalism, should not consist of looking around for any data point that suggests the guy you like could win, and spotlighting and emphasizing that. You can do that, but that point you’re not analyzing, assessing, or reporting, you’re just wish-casting. You’re actually leaving your readers, viewers, or listeners less informed than they were before.

My favorite recent example of wide-eyed optimism for a Democratic candidate comes from the San Antonio Express, a self-described nonprofit, nonprofit local news site, which characterized the outlook for Beto O’Rourke like this:

…but what status quo GOP lawmakers have to contend with in November is a charismatic Democratic nominee for governor (who has shown he can make things interesting even in deep-red Texas), single-issue voters energized by the sudden loss of abortion rights and — perhaps most critically — a series of flubs Abbott has made in recent years, the failure of his power grid and Operation Lone Star to name a few.

Oh, and O’Rourke seems to be heavily courting young (perhaps first-time) voters by habitually popping up at concerts. A few weeks ago O’Rourke took in pop star Harry Styles’ Austin show and earned what sounded like an endorsement from the British singer, though many of his adoring fans probably aren’t of voting age yet.

A former musician himself, O’Rourke handed country singer Kacey Musgraves a beer onstage at the Austin City Limits Music Festival, a not-so-subtle signal to the Texas artist’s audience to get out and vote. I witnessed a few displays of support for Beto myself when I attended the festival last weekend, and more than a few obsequities directed at the current governor.

Oh, the Democratic candidate was popular, and the Republican candidate was unpopular, at a music festival in Austin, you say? In Travis County, whose in 2018 Democrat Lupe Valdez best Republican Greg Abbott by nearly a two-to-one margin? Stop the presses, a Democrat never wins among that crowd!

(I’m sitting here in Virginia, and you’re a Texas news source; why am I the one telling you what part of the state is a Democratic stronghold?)

Oh, and this morning, the latest University of Texas/Texas Politics Project poll finds Governor Greg Abbott leading Democratic challenger Beto O’Rourke in the gubernatorial race, 54 percent to 43 percent, among Texas likely to vote in the 2022 election.