



COMMENTARY

What Democrats should have learned from the midterms: It's time to fight for justice

Democrats have an opportunity to seize the moral high ground as the party of justice. Will they take it?

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A variety of campaign yard signs are displayed outside the Rydal Elementary School West polling location before Democratic Gubernatorial candidate Josh Shapiro arrived to cast his ballot on November 8, 2022 in Rydal, Pennsylvania. (Mark Makela/Getty Images)

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America's democracy crisis is also a moral crisis, and its fundamental questions are also moral questions.

Will women have control over their own bodies? Will an increasingly diverse society be governed by white minority rule? Will votes actually be counted fairly or will they be nullified if they support the "wrong" candidate or party — meaning anyone other than Republicans? Will White Christian nationalists be able to impose their will on society as a whole, with no regard for the Constitution?

Will America surrender to plutocracy and its extreme wealth and income inequality, or will the country instead become a social democracy where people on both sides of the color line have a reasonable chance at intergenerational upward mobility and the "American dream"? Will our democracy fulfill its promise at last, or degenerate into a system of "competitive authoritarianism" modeled on Russia or Hungary?

These questions, among others, serve to remind us that the struggle to protect, renew and expand American democracy has a fundamental moral dimension. As such, the true nature of the challenge becomes clearer. Fascism and other illiberal politics prey on "midnight in the moral order," to borrow a phrase from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Clear, precise and direct moral language allows us to pierce that darkness.

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In a [previous essay for Salon](#), I argued that a "refusal or reluctance to discuss Trumpism, neofascism, racial authoritarianism and other such ideologies and beliefs" in such plain language enables those forces "to mainstream their toxic policies and ideas" by claiming to stand for "free speech":

Entirely too many liberals and progressives are overly willing to give such malign actors a platform or to engage them in "debate," which only legitimates their toxic and dangerous ideas.

To this point, Republicans and "conservatives" with the assistance of the compliant news media, have successfully branded themselves as the guardians of "values" and "morality." That was always an absurd claim, and today it is obscene. ...The choice before us is clear enough: Avoiding the moral high ground, in an excess of delicacy or a desire for "dialogue," is to invite disaster.

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Scholar and cultural critic [Henry A. Giroux](#), in a recent essay at CounterPunch, observes that among so-called conservatives, "moral, social, and ethical considerations have become objects of intense disdain, elevating a culture of cruelty and violence to unthinkable heights."

In a related essay at The Washington Post, [Perry Bacon Jr.](#) explores the lessons Democrats should have learned from the 2022 midterms:

The election results from 2018, 2020 and this year ... have clearly shown that Democrats can win by casting Republicans as a party of bigotry, intolerance and radicalism. They should embrace that approach — and give up on strategies that Democrats wish would work but don't. ...

"It's been evident since at least 2017 that the largest force in American politics isn't any economic coalition but a broad popular front in defense of liberal values like tolerance, democracy and cultural pluralism," said Will Stancil, a policy researcher at the University of Minnesota who has written about how the increasing racial diversity of the suburbs benefits Democrats. "Rather than standing for any particular policy platform, this majority stands against Trump-driven reactionary politics." ...

There's a third strategy staring Democrats right in the face. It's what's worked the past three cycles — whenever they've been willing to lean into it: Affirmatively running as the pro-tolerance, anti-Trumpism party — as some Democrats did, including Biden, right before the election. That approach both galvanizes the Democratic Party base and also wins over people who voted Republican in the past but are turned off by today's version of the party.

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Bacon quotes several experts who suggest that many Americans became convinced "that the GOP was the party of extremists," quoting Tom Bonier of the political data firm TargetSmart:

Instead of droning on about infrastructure, Democrats can spend the next two years declaring bluntly that a vote for any Republican candidate, no matter how moderate, is still a vote for a party that bans abortions, treats transgender Americans as second-class citizens, makes it harder for Black people and those in urban areas to vote, dumps undocumented immigrants off in left-leaning areas without any consideration of their well-being, bans the works of Black and LGBTQ authors from public schools — and questions election results, particularly those from heavily Black areas, when they lose.

"We need to keep leaning, 100 percent, into the attacks on freedoms, the attacks on democracy. That is a strategy that works," said Jenifer Fernandez Ancona, vice president of the left-leaning group Way to Win.

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Beyond that, public opinion polls consistently show that the American public supports a range of progressive policies, including expanding the social safety net, protecting women's reproductive rights, providing affordable health care, enacting reasonable gun control policies, improving infrastructure, ensuring that the richest Americans and big corporations pay their fair share of taxes, and addressing the global climate crisis.

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Contrary to the lazy "common sense" narrative usually offered by the political class, the American people are no longer "center-right" in terms of political values and beliefs, if they ever were. As [Eric Levitz wrote in 2017](#) for the New York Times, the premise "that American voters are hostile to progressive economics and have punished the (increasingly left-wing) Democratic Party accordingly" is based on "ideological conviction, not empirical evidence":

In truth, the Republican Party's dominance has little to do with the American electorate's "center-right" ideology. We know this for two simple reasons: First, the vast majority of that electorate has no ideology, whatsoever. And second, when polled on discrete policy questions, Americans consistently express majoritarian support for a left-of-center economic agenda.

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Democrats have an opportunity to expand and strengthen their base by speaking clearly to how economic justice and democracy are inexorably linked in the moral struggle against the Republican fascists and their plutocratic agenda. In a recent essay at Common Dreams, the [Rev. Dr. William J Barber II](#) and the [Rev. Jonathan Wilson-Heartgrove](#) argue that the Democrats' greatest potential gains lie in "uniting people around an economy that works for all of us":

Without doubt, defending democracy and a Constitutional right to privacy and choice for women were strong motivating factors for Democratic voters. Many Democrats who held onto House seats could not have won without an increase in turn-out among voters under 30, who favored Democrats by 28 points, and reported abortion rights as a strong motivating factor. But another low-propensity voter demographic — people who earn less than \$30,000 a year — also favored Democrats by 12 points. In an election cycle where Republicans tried to blame inflation on the Democratic President and run on "the economy," Democrats won by a landslide among those who've felt the impact of inflation most acutely. ...

According to research conducted by the Poor People's Campaign after the 2020 election, these poor and low-income voters are the sleeping giant in American politics. Their participation in elections has consistently been 20 percentage points lower than their wealthier neighbors, leaving lots of room to grow the base for Democrats among a demographic they already win. When asked, the number one reason poor and low-income people who have not voted give for sitting out elections is that no politicians are speaking directly to their issues.

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A governing majority for Democrats, the two reverends write, will only be possible if they "build on the lessons learned in this cycle and invest in a strong economic message that can unite a cross section of Americans and inspire poor and low-income people to vote for candidates who see them."

With opportunity also comes peril. The Republicans have successfully manipulated the justifiable anger felt by many white Americans, across class lines, toward an economic and political system that has betrayed the concerns and needs of most people. In a recent essay at The Lever, **David Sirota** warns that "laughing at the GOP's fake populists ... ignores a significant and dangerous trend":

Democrats' genuflections to their corporate donors — whether **breaking a strike**, authorizing **corporate giveaways**, or **stalling a \$15 minimum wage** — have been handing conservatives myriad opportunities to court working-class voters.

And lately, polling data show those voters have been responding.

Since the 2018 midterm elections, Republicans have gained seven points among voters whose annual income is below \$50,000, according to **exit polls**.

In this year's midterm elections, those surveys show the GOP won a plurality of all voters whose income is below \$100,000 — also a seven-point gain since the last midterm. Republicans also won **42 percent** of union households.

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Democrats have lost the majority of "white working class" voters, but are also seeing erosion among Black and brown voters in the same class cohort:

"There is an impressively large decline in the Democrats' margin among nonwhite working class voters between 2018 and 2022," noted poll analyst Ruy

Teixeira. "In 2018, Democrats carried this group by 57 points. By 2022, that margin was down to 34 points, a stunning 23 point decline. This was even larger than the fall among white working class voters where the Democrats' deficit ballooned from 20 points in 2018 to 35 points in 2022."

In a downwardly mobile country whose affluent class is shrinking and whose working class is growing, these numbers are bad news for Democrats and good news for Republicans. ... It's also why conservatives recently launched a new think tank to try to devise policies and messages that court the working class. All of them are dreaming of a realignment in which the GOP wins big as a conservative working-class party.

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Many Americans are waking from the fascist fever dream, and voted in the midterms to slow or stop the Republican assault on democracy and freedom. Republicans failed to win the sweeping victories they expected, which leaves them vulnerable to counterattack. Yet at the moment, the Democratic Party's leaders (and too many of its voters) are consolidating their forces and indulging in a premature victory celebration. It is far too early in this struggle to coast on inertia or play defense.

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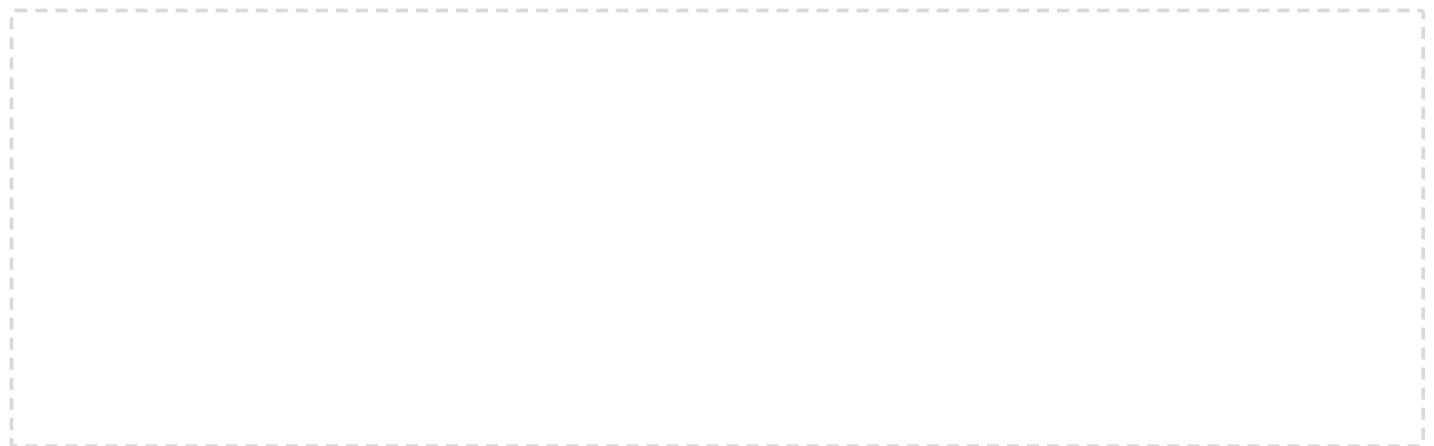
Chauncey DeVega is a senior politics writer for Salon. His essays can also be found at [Chaunceydevega.com](https://chaunceydevega.com). He also hosts a weekly podcast, [The Chauncey DeVega Show](#). Chauncey can be followed on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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