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# Why good messaging won't save Democrats

Dan Pfeiffer on the Democratic brand and how to revive it.

By Sean Illing | @seanilling | sean.illing@vox.com | Jan 31, 2022, 10:10am EST



What's wrong with the Democratic brand?

To be sure, the country has lots of problems right now. There's inflation, a supply chain crisis, and a pandemic that just won't go away. And on top of all that, Democrats have seen huge chunks of their agenda stall out in Congress. The party in power will always pay a price for that kind of instability.

Still, the Biden administration has done quite a lot for ordinary Americans, like passing a \$1.9 trillion rescue package, sending \$1,400 checks to basically every American, and enacting a landmark child benefit that even inspired **memes**.

So why has **party preference shifted** in the past year from a 9-point Democratic advantage to a 5-point Republican advantage? That's the biggest swing in a calendar year since Gallup started tracking it, which is a little surprising even when you account for all the unforced errors from the White House.

I reached out to Dan Pfeiffer, who served as White House communications director for President Barack Obama and now is a co-host of the podcast **Pod Save America**, for the latest episode of **Vox Conversations**. Pfeiffer's a sharp political observer, but he's also spent a lot of time thinking about something he calls the **"Democratic messaging deficit."**

His main point is that Democrats are struggling to define themselves and get their message to voters because the media environment is stacked against them in fundamental ways. So even if Democrats pass a great policy that improves the lives of millions of Americans, it doesn't matter if they can't get people to connect the dots. And if he's right about that (and I think he is), this is an enormous challenge for the party.

We talk about the stakes of this problem, if policy realities actually matter anymore, why he believes the left has to build its own media ecosystem, and what he thinks the Democratic Party can learn from their missteps in 2021.

Below is an excerpt, edited for length and clarity. As always, there's much more in the full podcast, so subscribe to *Vox Conversations* on **Apple Podcasts**, **Google Podcasts**, **Spotify**, **Stitcher**, or wherever you listen to podcasts.



# Pod Save the Democrats

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## Sean Illing

It's not a giant mystery, but let's start with the obvious: Why is the Democratic brand so weak right now?

## Dan Pfeiffer

You don't need a political science degree or a master pollster to see what's going on. Things are not great. People are **pissed off**, and Democrats are in charge. I mean, that was the problem in the **Virginia gubernatorial election**, and that's the problem nationally. People are incredibly exhausted and frustrated.

I also think too many people for too long underweighted **the political impact of inflation**, or maybe thought it would be more transitory. But it is very real, and people are very upset about it. And we're in charge. And all of the conversation and coverage for the last year has been about Democrats. There's been almost nothing about Republicans. It's about fights between Democrats. Can we get Joe Manchin to do this? Can we get Kyrsten Sinema to do that? What is Joe Biden doing?

## Sean Illing

Why do you think the Democrats' message is falling flat? Things are bad and Democrats have definitely had a ton of setbacks, but they have also gotten plenty done. Why is none of that getting through?

## Dan Pfeiffer

The biggest problem is that most Democrats continue to believe the best way we're going to communicate, or maybe the only way to communicate our message, is through traditional press. We're going to tell the New York Times, we're going to tell CNN, we're going to tell the Richmond Times-Dispatch, and they're going to communicate that to the public. That model hasn't worked for a very long time.

We're in a world where Facebook dominates, where right-wing propaganda and disinformation dominates. The idea that anyone other than the most plugged-in news junkies are going to have any real information about what's happening is just folly.

Our party tends to think the press will do our job for us. We think they're going to communicate our message. But it's our responsibility to get the message, or the news, from Joe Biden's lips or Nancy Pelosi's lips to the voters' ears. And that's not going to happen organically. It has to happen through paid advertising, through social content we generate, through progressive media, and there has been very little effort to adjust our communication strategy.

We didn't have to do this in the Trump years because Trump dominated the conversation and he made the case against himself all the time, and that was sufficient to win elections.

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*“THE KEY DIFFERENCE IS THAT REPUBLICAN DONORS VIEW THEIR MEDIA OPERATIONS MORE AS POLITICAL INVESTMENTS THAN AS PROFIT ENGINES”*

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### **Sean Illing**

I know this may sound like a ridiculous question, but I don't think it is. Does policy still matter on a purely political level? I mean, I get that inflation is bad, that the pandemic sucks, but Democrats have actually done a lot for everyday Americans, like passing a \$1.9 trillion rescue package and sending \$1,400 checks to households across the country. But it doesn't seem to matter.

### **Dan Pfeiffer**

That is just the killer indictment of the idea that doing popular stuff is a good political strategy. I mean, Biden mailed money to people and his approval rating didn't move. It's a truly stunning thing we all have to grapple with.

But of course I think the answer is that policy matters. Having unpopular policy is really bad. The Republicans suffered greatly in 2018 from trying to repeal the Affordable Care Act and passing the Trump tax bill, which I think was at its time the **least popular piece of legislation passed** in polling history. So having good policy is better than having bad policy. But it's not a sufficient way to win elections.

I think there's also a belief among too many of us that's somewhat condescending. Democrats believe ourselves to be the party of the working class. We're the party that supports raising the minimum wage. We want to protect Social Security and Medicare. We want to expand the child tax credit.

And what do Republicans do when they get in power? They want to kick people off their health care and use that money to pay for tax cuts for the rich. Yet they continue to dominate among white working-class voters. And they've made some **inroads** with Black and Latino working-class voters. There's this condescending view that if only these working-class voters had any idea what was in their interest, they would support us, as opposed to understanding that people's political decisions are much more complex than that. They're about identity, and culture, and what their support for what either party says about them.

There is something much more emotional about politics. Our message needs to be more emotional appeals from a position of identity. And identity doesn't necessarily mean race and gender. The point is that it's not enough to say, "If you vote for us, we will give you X, and X will be good for you." It's more complex than that.

### **Sean Illing**

The other side of this conversation is even more internal to the Democratic Party and what they can and can't do in the current media environment. You've called it the "Democratic messaging deficit." Can you explain?

### **Dan Pfeiffer**

The Republicans have spent decades building up a massive, ideologically based media apparatus. We think about it as Fox News, but it's not just Fox News. It is Breitbart, Gateway Pundit, and Daily Caller. And then there's talk radio, which has been around for a long time and is still incredibly powerful in a lot of places. And then there's an entire Facebook-centric digital army led by the likes of Ben Shapiro and Dan Bongino that dictates the four corners of the political conversation and drowns out Democratic messaging. They have a giant army and we have just a couple people shooting spitballs to try to keep up, and we're getting clobbered on it.

### **Sean Illing**

That's kind of the whole game right there, isn't it?

### **Dan Pfeiffer**

Democrats can still win elections in that environment. I know that because we just did it in 2020, and in 2018. But we are competing with one hand tied behind our back when we do it. And it becomes incredibly difficult when we are in power. You have this massive apparatus communicating this negative message, this version of reality at scale, to tens of millions of people. And they are doing it with the exact optimized political message for Republicans.

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*“THERE’S THIS CONDESCENDING VIEW THAT IF ONLY THESE WORKING-CLASS VOTERS HAD ANY IDEA WHAT WAS IN THEIR INTEREST, THEY WOULD SUPPORT US”*

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### **Sean Illing**

My view — and maybe this is controversial — is that the majority of people don’t really have fixed or coherent political beliefs. If that’s true, then what really matters is issue salience. People fixate on whatever issues are ascendant at any given moment, and if those issues are, say, immigration or race, that’s very bad for Democrats. (That’s David Shor’s **argument**, which I happen to think is persuasive.) If the issues are health care, Social Security, or whatever, that’s probably good for the Democrats.

### **Dan Pfeiffer**

You’re exactly right that issue salience is dramatically important. Where Democrats have won presidential elections in recent years, like in 2012 and 2020, even with all the power of Republican right-wing media, they couldn’t really change the most salient issue. In 2012, it was the economy. In 2020, it was the pandemic. They could change how lots of people viewed the pandemic, and sort of bend reality about Trump’s response to it, but the election was going to be about the pandemic no matter what.

But if you look at 2016, there was no reason that immigration should have been a top issue. It was a top issue because Trump and right-wing media made it a top issue, because it benefited them. There was no border crisis. There was nothing. There was no precipitating event that made immigration more salient in 2016. It was because Republicans decided it was good for them, so they did it.

### **Sean Illing**

Given everything we’ve said, do you think Democrats can message their way out of this problem?

### **Dan Pfeiffer**

You can win an election in this environment. Like I said, we’ve done it before, we can do it again. But we need everything to go our way. In the long run or even in the medium term, the only real answer here is to build up a progressive media and a messaging operation that can compete with the right-wing one.

People have been screaming about this for a long time. It has to happen. There have been some good recent efforts. I’m proud to be a part of what **Crooked Media** has been doing for the last few

years. But there is still not a commitment from the top of the party, or the party's donor base, to solving this problem.

## **Sean Illing**

Help me understand how that's possible. You're in this world, you're having conversations with donors and party leaders. How is this message not getting through? How do they not see the need for action on this front?

## **Dan Pfeiffer**

There are a couple issues. One is generational. There's a younger set of Democrats who are much savvier about this and more focused on it. This is the consequence of having a party leadership that is much older. You have people who started their careers in the golden age of television, decades before the internet was invented, and it's not easy to get them to adjust to a new model.

The other thing is, I think we've spent too much time demonizing Fox News for its propaganda. There's this visceral reaction from a lot of people in our donor community. They don't want to be labeled propagandists in that way. Which is why you see Democratic billionaires buying the Atlantic and Time magazine and not trying to build a non-racist, more honest, better version of Breitbart, or a Democratic Fox News, or whatever that would look like.

Some of that is because Democratic progressive talk radio in the early part of the century, with **Air America**, didn't really work. For a certain set of donors, that was a formative experience. The key difference is that Republican donors view their media operations more as political investments than as profit engines. Pick a digital right-wing outlet that started in the last 10 years and there's a Republican billionaire behind it.

## **Sean Illing**

And it's been worth every damn penny for them.

## **Dan Pfeiffer**

Oh, yeah, look at their tax cuts.

## **Sean Illing**

What's the biggest thing Democrats can learn from what went wrong in 2021?

## **Dan Pfeiffer**

So if you look at the **gubernatorial election in Virginia**, the biggest problem with the [Terry] McAuliffe campaign was that it treated voters like idiots.

Glenn Youngkin was endorsed by Trump. He's adhered to a lot of Trump's views. He believed, or at least said he believed, the "**Big Lie.**" But there was nothing about him that made people think he was Trump. He was not an obvious MAGA candidate. And that was pretty obvious to voters. And when you go around calling him Glenn Trumpkin, or saying the night before the election that if Glenn Youngkin wins this race, Donald Trump will announce for president the next day, you're treating voters like idiots.

One of the takeaways from that election was that talking about Trump doesn't work — but in my view, that's the wrong takeaway. I don't think not talking about Trump is an option. He is the leader of the Republican Party. He is pushing them toward an open plot to steal the 2024 election. He is planning on running for president. He'll likely announce that a few months after the 2022 election, so we have to talk about him.

Obviously, the **California recall election** isn't a perfect model for the rest of the country, but I think there are some things to look at there about how to run. Gavin Newsom did just as well in 2021 as he did in 2018. It was almost the exact same margin in this apocalyptic year for Democrats as it was in a year that was perfect for Democrats. What I took from that is that we shouldn't call whatever candidate they put forward another Trump, but we should frame the Republicans as Trumpists. We should say that they are part of this dangerous movement that brought this coalition together to take the House, the Senate, and the White House.

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