

# Democrats are engaged in a ‘new politics of evasion’ that could cost them in 2024, new study says

Trump and the GOP represent a danger to democracy, the study says. Democrats must win in 2024, but first they have to reorient on cultural issues and question whether there really is a progressive majority emerging in the country.

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Three decades ago, Democratic policy analysts William A. Galston and Elaine Kamarck published a bracing critique of their party, warning against a “politics of evasion” that they said ignored electoral reality and hindered changes needed to reverse the results of three losing presidential races in which the party had won a combined total of just 173 electoral votes.

Now the authors are back, with a [fresh analysis of their party](#). This time it comes in the wake of President Biden’s victory over former president Donald Trump in 2020, but it is an even starker warning about the future than the one they issued in 1989 after Michael Dukakis’s landslide electoral college loss to George H. W. Bush.

“A Democratic loss in the 2024 presidential election may well have catastrophic consequences for the country,” they write, arguing that the Trump-led Republican Party presents the most serious threat to American democracy in modern times. The Democrats’ first duty, they argue, should be to protect democracy by winning in 2024; everything else should be subordinated to that objective.

But they argue that the Democrats are not positioned to achieve that objective, that, instead, the party is “in the grip of myths that block progress toward victory” and that too many Democrats are engaged in a “new politics of evasion, the refusal to confront the unyielding arithmetic of electoral success.”

“Too many Democrats have evaded this truth and its implications for the party’s agenda and strategy,” the authors add. “They have been led astray by three persistent myths: that ‘people of color’ think and act in the same way; that economics always trumps culture; and that a progressive majority is emerging.”

Galston and Kamarck served in the Clinton administration, and Kamarck is a long-standing member of the Democratic National Committee. Both are scholars at the Brookings Institution, and their new study is published on the website of the Progressive Policy Institute, where they are contributing authors.

Their analysis is a centrist critique of a party that they fear has moved too far to the left and in the process increasingly has lost touch with the swing voters who still have the power to decide elections. Its publication comes a week after voters in San Francisco recalled three members of the local school board in a battle that underscored the limits of left-wing politics even in such a liberal city and an outcome that set off alarms inside the party.

Galston and Kamarck argue that in an age of close elections (five of the past six were decided by five points or fewer), mobilizing base voters is not enough to assure success. “Even though deepening partisanship has reduced the number of swing voters, the narrow margins of our recent national elections have made these voters more important than ever,” they write. “This reality will dominate national politics until one party breaks the deadlock of the past three decades and creates a decisive national majority.”

The authors are especially pointed in their analysis of Democrats’ vulnerabilities on cultural issues. They argue that too many Democrats continue to believe that economic issues “are the ‘real’ issues and that cultural issues are mostly diversions invented by their adversaries for political purposes.” But for many voters, cultural and religious issues are more important than economic issues, and for those voters, those issues “reflect their deepest convictions and shape their identity.”

Trump’s appeals on cultural issues, and his anti-immigrant and nationalist posture moved voters in states with a higher-than-average percentage of White working-class voters, especially Ohio and Iowa, to the point that they are now difficult for Democrats to win presidentially. “And it has made the upper Midwest fiercely competitive, a face-off that is likely to persist until the battle lines between the parties are redrawn,” the study says.

Democrats, they argue, must balance appeals to their base voters with a message that also appeals to enough working-class voters to win elections. In 2020, Biden was able to do that, but Galston and Kamarck argue that Democrats “must not blind Democrats to the fact that these voters often have found Republicans’ cultural claims more persuasive than the Democrats’ economic arguments.”

Galston and Kamarck have joined what is a rising debate within the Democratic Party about the road ahead, and while they offer recommendations from their centrist perspective, others see economic issues as still the core of the party’s message and agenda.

One of those is the pollster Stan Greenberg, who did groundbreaking analysis of White working-class voters in Michigan’s Macomb County in the 1980s and served as Bill Clinton’s pollster in the 1992 campaign. Greenberg is every bit as apocalyptic about the threat posed by Trump and the GOP. He argues in an analysis published in the American Prospect that Democrats are in trouble with working-class voters of all kinds. “Today, the Democrats’ working-class problem isn’t limited to white workers,” he writes. “The party is also losing support from working-class Blacks and Hispanics.”

He says that this trajectory away from the Democrats can be reversed, but adds, “There is no room for error. There is no room for fools. There is no time for strategists who look down on or rule out voters who fail a purist civics test. There is also no room for sensibilities that keep us from clearly understanding our options.”

But he diverges from Galston and Kamarck in his prescription for dealing with the problem. His answer is for Democrats to embrace a more populist economic message, focusing on the power of big corporations and a Democratic agenda designed to change that status quo. That, he says, will produce dividends with working-class voters no matter their ethnicity or color.

“If Democrats are to stop hemorrhaging their working-class support and achieve the kinds of gains that they did in 2018, they have to embrace a message of change,” he writes.

In their analysis of voters of color, Galston and Kamarck give special attention to Hispanics, a diverse community all its own and one that has shown signs of drifting away from the Democratic Party. Hispanic support for Democratic nominees dropped from 71 percent in 2012 to 66 percent in 2016 to 59 percent in 2020.

“Democrats,” they write, “must consider the possibility that Hispanics will turn out to be the Italians of the 21st century — family oriented, religious, patriotic, striving to succeed in their adopted country and supportive of public policies that expand economic opportunity without dictating results.” They note that ultimately, “Italians became Republicans. Democrats must rethink their approach if they hope to retain majority support among Hispanics.”

They also use the case of Hispanic voters to make a larger point. “The phrase ‘people of color’ assembles highly diverse groups under a single banner. The belief that they will march together depends on assumptions that are questionable at best.”

The authors also try to debunk the idea that there is an emerging progressive majority in the country, citing data that suggests voters are closer to Biden’s center-left positions than to the liberal views of Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) or Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.). Nowhere, they argue, is this idea stronger than “in the sphere of culture.”

The authors note that Republicans have made “unprincipled but effective use of Democrats’ vulnerabilities on social and cultural issues, especially those with racial overtones” since the 1960s. But they also say they believe that Democrats live in a “bubble defined by education, income and geography” and Republicans often have exploited progressive “overreach” on issues such as crime, immigration and education as wedges that put the party at odds with many swing voters.

“This pattern will not end until the Democrats break out of the mindset that dominates deep blue areas,” become familiar with the other parts of the country and develop policies that “a majority of Americans can embrace,” they say. While today’s cultural issues are different from those of three decades ago, Democrats will “remain on the defensive” until they embrace and articulate policies that can attract majority support and pursue those policies at a pace with which that majority is comfortable.

Greenberg makes a related but different point about presumptions of a Democratic-dominated future. President Barack Obama, he writes, “embodied the forces making America a multiracial nation, and many Democrats — and Republicans — came to assume that those trends would ultimately make the Democrats politically and culturally ascendant. But it didn’t turn out that way, and it may not.”

In 2020, both Biden and Trump produced a surge of voters. Biden won in large part because he was able to capture more of the swing voters than Hillary Clinton did in 2016. But Galston and Kamarck note that in his second year as president, Biden has lost ground with the very voters who made the difference. “The erosion of support for Biden has been greatest among not-strong Democrats and independents leaning Democratic, groups in which conservative[s] and moderates outnumber liberals.”

Thirty-three years ago, Bill Clinton digested the critique offered by Galston and Kamarck and the implications of the research by Greenberg to retool the Democratic Party's message and eventually to capture the White House. Today, Democrats face a different America and a different set of problems, with the stakes for 2024 demonstrably greater.

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