

MAGAZINE

SOAPBOX

**Opinion | To Overcome the Republicans' Culture War, Democrats Need to Punch Up, Not Down**

Rather than veer to the right, the party should embrace an inclusive populism.



President Biden speaks to a crowd at a truck assembly plant about the importance of manufacturing in the U.S. and supplying jobs to American workers, last July in Macungie, Pa. | Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

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Opinion by LEAH HUNT-HENDRIX  
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**T**he mood among Democrats these days is dire, with growing fear that a toxic mix of culture war attacks and spiking inflation will doom their congressional majorities in November. Republicans have weaponized “defund the police” and critical race theory to divide the public on racial issues; increasingly, they’re targeting LGBTQ Americans.

In response, some Democrats and like-minded commentators have urged the party to veer to the right. The [Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee](#) has urged lawmakers to denounce “amnesty” for immigrants and tout their support for police. *Slate* columnist Jordan Weissmann suggested that “[maybe Democrats need to offer some serious concessions on culture war issues.](#)” And [political scientist Ruy Teixeira recently wrote](#), “All the political signals are screaming: Democrats must move to the center.”

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This is a terrible approach, not just morally but politically. The idea that criticizing the people whose energy and dedication helps power Democratic victories will somehow yield political benefits for Democrats is both wrong and self-defeating. Any successful strategy must unify all elements of the party’s coalition. Notably, Democrats are not just suffering from low approval ratings among independents; they are also registering low ratings among key elements of the base, such as young people and people of color. They face a [double-digit enthusiasm gap](#) compared to Republicans. Punching down at core constituencies within the party is virtually guaranteed to depress turnout and lead to deep losses in November. In fact, many swing-district Democrats tried a

strategy of promoting their centrist bona fides above all else in 2020 and it led to major losses.

[A study by Way to Win](#), a network of progressive political donors that I helped start and which has moved over \$200 million to grassroots efforts, media, candidates and research since 2018, found that in 2020, congressional Democrats spent three times more than Republicans on television ads touting bipartisanship. By contrast, Republicans went on offense, spending upwards of 10 times more than Democrats on ads with the words “extremist” and “radical.” The result? Democrats lost 12 seats in a cycle where they were projected to gain as many as 15. While Democrats handled the GOP with kid gloves, Republicans told a clear story with a clear villain, and it paid off.

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The reason the Democratic Party keeps losing is not because some communities are speaking out against the violence they experience at the hands of the police or the immigration system. The reason Democrats lose is because they don't tell an effective story of who they are, what they're up against and what they are fighting for. Democrats can't ignore the culture war being waged against them. But they need a different way to counter it. What's needed is an inclusive populism that acknowledges how precarious life has become for far too many, even as those at the top are doing better than ever.

When Republicans go after Democrats as too “woke,” what they're really doing is painting the party as too elite. Democrats, the GOP attack goes, are so far removed from the daily concerns of working people that they are more interested in “virtue-signaling” than kitchen table issues. And indeed, Republicans are hard at work to convey this message because they know it's a

winning one. “Wokeness was cooked up by college professors, then boosted by corporations,” [states a strategy memo](#) by the Republican Study Committee, which goes on to describe Democrats’ agenda as “shaped entirely by corporate interests and radical, elite cultural mores.”

This is cynical but savvy messaging, and it points to a real problem for Democrats. The party’s biggest problem is not the effort to pursue racial justice, but the fact that Democrats are seen as — and are — out of touch with workers and people who are struggling to make ends meet.

Party leaders must confront this elitist image head-on. Instead of continuing down a path where Democrats address themselves to the mythical median voter, as some vocal pundits advise, while doing little to change the material conditions for the millions of Americans who are suffering, the party should embrace an inclusive style of populism that punches up at elites instead of down at activists. That means demanding the wealthy and corporations pay their fair share and the rules of the game get unrugged. Democrats can then emphasize what it is that ties us all together — the fight for every individual to live a life with dignity.

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This brand of populism appeals both to Democrats’ base of low wage workers and to many of the voters the party needs to persuade; it can serve as a bridge to grow the coalition. A recent [Pew survey](#) finds that 11 percent of the American public can be considered “Populist Right,” or voters who lean right on social issues but left on economics. Among this group, 75 percent think big corporations make too much profit, while over half think the federal government should raise taxes on households making more than \$400,000 per

year. This is a broadly popular agenda, and it should be the top priority of the Democratic Party. Some of President Joe Biden's domestic proposals would go a long way toward executing it, but he's been stymied too often by so-called centrists in his own party such as Rep. Josh Gottheimer and Sens. Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema.

Democrats can use this inclusive populist narrative to respond to voters' [top issue: inflation](#). As [Lindsay Owens of Groundwork Collaborative](#) has noted, corporate CEOs have repeatedly stated that they are using reports of inflation in some sectors of the economy as an excuse to raise prices on consumer goods. And Americans have an intuitive sense that they are being treated unfairly. According to a [recent poll](#), three-quarters of Democrats and a majority of Republicans believe corporations are opportunistically raising prices under cover of inflation.

Democrats should also focus on issues that deliver concrete benefits to working Americans, and which motivate their voters to show up to the polls. Canceling student debt would disproportionately benefit Americans at the [lower end of the economic scale](#); meanwhile failing to act will likely lead to a fall-off in turnout. According to a recent [poll](#), 40 percent of Black voters and 37 percent of all Democratic voters say they might stay home in 2022 without debt cancellation.

The benefit of keeping the Democratic coalition united behind an inclusive, populist message was made crystal clear in Georgia in 2020. During the Georgia runoffs, where my organization supported grassroots groups such as the New Georgia Project, Democrats Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff presented a multiracial, multigenerational duo with a plan to send relief checks to families. Warnock and Ossoff did not shy away from naming villains and tagging their opponents as agents of corporate greed. At one point, Ossoff labeled the two Republican candidates, Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, "[the Bonnie and Clyde of corruption in American politics](#)."

The difference between the way these two Democrats ran compared to many others in the party was noteworthy. “Democrats in Georgia’s high-stakes runoff election Tuesday are doing what their counterparts in other competitive Senate races didn’t do: They’re leaning in to a populist economic message,” [NBC News reported](#) at the time. Today, Democrats have Warnock and Ossoff to thank for control of the Senate.

If Democrats want to succeed in November, they need to tell a story about how to secure broadly shared prosperity and justice for all. That requires calling out those who are working against this vision for the sake of private profit and personal gain — not shunting aside some of the most vulnerable, and loyal, members of the party.

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