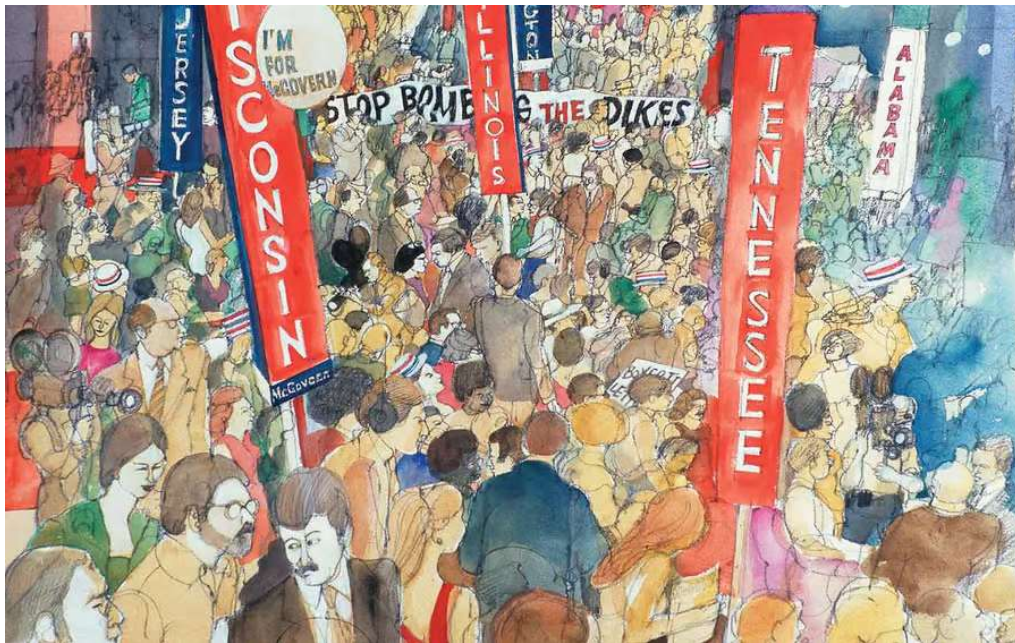


# A Big Tent

*The contradictory past and uncertain future of the Democratic Party.*

By Nicholas Lemann

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1972 Democratic National Convention. (Franklin McMahon / Getty Images)

In 2002, John Judis and Ruy Teixeira published *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. In it, they argued that natural demographic trends would make the long-term dominance of the Democratic Party almost inevitable, a prediction that proved immensely comforting to American liberals. Judis and Teixeira assumed that the Democrats could maintain their enormous majorities among minority

voters. That, along with other evidently irreversible trends, like the expansion of higher education, the mass entry of women into the workforce, and the spread of secular, tolerant cultural norms, could be understood as pushing politics in a Democratic direction.

Judis and Teixeira's title was a play on that of Kevin Phillips's 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority*. Phillips, then a junior aide in Richard Nixon's presidential campaign, perceived that the superpowered Democratic coalition that Franklin Roosevelt had put together was now vulnerable to Republican poaching. White Southerners, once solidly Democratic, had been defecting for some time, and the enactment of the major civil rights laws of the 1960s could only hasten this trend. Urban white Catholics outside the South were similarly ripe for seduction. Phillips, hailed as a Republican visionary, eventually became a dissident in his own party, producing a series of books and articles attacking Ronald Reagan and the two Presidents Bush for being too friendly to the rich and powerful and too unconcerned with the home-front costs of globalization. But purely as a forecaster, Phillips was right on the money. The white South is now the rock-solid base of the Republican Party, and much of non-college-educated white America outside of the South has also switched parties.

Judis and Teixeira's prediction seemed to be sublimely borne out with the 2008 election, when Barack Obama won the presidency and the Democrats took control of both houses of Congress. But beginning with the emergence of the Tea Party movement in 2009 and the Democrats' shellacking in the 2010 midterms, it has become clear that the Republican Party isn't dead yet, particularly in light of the built-in advantage that the Constitutional structure of the Electoral

College and the Senate give it. Donald Trump won the presidency very narrowly in 2016, but he did so in ways that seemed to threaten the long-term health of the Democratic coalition, because he appealed so strongly to working-class white voters. Judis and Teixeira still dream of replicating the unbeatable politics of the New Deal: a broad multiracial coalition of the working and middle classes, attracted by the assurance that their party will protect them from the extremes of market capitalism. But now, to judge by their recent writings, they have become skeptical that such a coalition is obtainable in the Democratic Party—at least while it continues to sacrifice its natural majority on the altar of neoliberal economics and cultural politics. Word on the street is that they are now at work on a new book: *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?*



At least some elements of the Republican Party are wrestling with their own version of the same fundamental questions. Can the party reorient itself toward the working people that the Democrats have lost without descending into Trumpian madness? More broadly, in a country with two venerable and often evenly matched political parties, is it possible that

either of them—or any imaginable new party—could build itself to majority status on the basis of a promise to make capitalism work better for ordinary people? Or is there too much racism, plutocracy, and anti-democratic scheming embedded in American life these days to make anything approaching a politics in which the good guys regularly win possible? Michael Kazin's *What It Took to Win: A History of the Democratic Party* is a good place to look for the answers. It would be inconceivable to Kazin that the Democrats aren't the party one would want to win, but there's enough in his book inter alia about the Republicans and a handful of short-lived third parties to consider the additional possibility that a party other than the Democrats could perform the function that Kazin would like the Democrats to perform.

**A**t the center of Kazin's history is the close historical relationship between egalitarian politics and what we'd now call white nationalism. A convenient synecdoche for this dilemma is Andrew Jackson: When Obama was president, he launched a process to remove Jackson's likeness from the \$20 bill and replace it with Harriet Tubman's. When Trump took office, he installed a portrait of Jackson in the Oval Office, placed so as to appear in the background of any photograph of Trump working at his desk. For most of the Democratic Party's long history, Jackson was regarded as probably the most important of its founding figures, the person responsible for turning it into a mass-participation organization that brought ordinary people into the American political system for the first time. But Jackson was also a Southern slaveholder and a brutal warrior against Native America. He often spoke in language we'd now associate with someone like Bernie Sanders, as in his judgment that the Second Bank of the United States represented the "prostitution of our Government to the advancement of the

few at the expense of the many.” But in the same message, he railed against “foreigners” and “aliens,” and he had no problem with domestic political actors more to his liking getting rich with the government’s help. Jackson was hardly alone among prominent Democrats in his impurity by contemporary standards. For a very long time, “what it took to win” was for the party to include in its coalition the historical precursors of Trump voters.

Kazin’s early chapters are populated by white men of relatively modest means who were anti-Black, anti-Indian, anti-immigrant, and hostile to urban elites. They deeply mistrusted the federal government, because they were sure it would inevitably serve the interests of rich bankers of the kind that Jackson battled on their behalf. Most saw politics as a struggle to get the government to meet their economic needs, not as a moral or reformist crusade. They were indifferent to what the better sort of people thought of as vote stealing and other forms of corruption, as long as the party was on their side. Bucktails, Know-Nothings, Copperheads, anti-abolitionists, slavery expanders, Confederates, murderous New York City draft rioters, Tammany Hall crooks, Klansmen, evangelicals—all of these were loyal Democrats. One of the virtues of Kazin’s book is that it makes the current framing of the Democrats’ future in terms of a struggle between progressives and moderates seem stale and beside the point. It would be more useful to say that any successful majority party in the United States must necessarily bring together widely disparate elements into a workable, and necessarily unstable, common cause. Anyone who thinks that an essentially Mugwumpish majority party—clean, high-minded, and broadly humanitarian—is possible is longing for something the Democrats, in their sustained periods of electoral success, have never been.

**K**azin argues that throughout American history, the most successful periods for the Democrats have been when the party was a champion of “moral capitalism”—that is, when it advocated for a politics that would serve as a counterweight to the injuries inflicted by a pure market system. Moral capitalism, in his account, has taken different forms at different times. During the early 19th century, the Democrats saw themselves as a party of farmers and other smallholders, highly interested in issues of land, credit, and currency. As industrialization and urbanization got under way and began attracting a mass immigration of the poor, these new Americans joined the party’s base through urban ethnic machines that were built on the same fundamental principles of patronage that Jackson and Martin Van Buren had established in the 1830s. Somehow, the urban, mainly Catholic working class coexisted with the party’s previous rural, nativist, and xenophobic base, centered around a unifying promise that, as Kazin puts it, the Democrats would deliver “economic security and political power to [the] plebeian majority.” Being a party of the somewhat downtrodden in no way made the Democrats a party of the truly oppressed; they were always dominant in the South and were never opposed to slavery—nor, after the Civil War, were they supportive of Reconstruction. High-minded, educated reformers and people attuned to racial justice were usually Republicans. *The Nation*, founded in 1865, was generally Republican during its early decades.

The Compromise of 1877, which ended Reconstruction and opened the way to Jim Crow, also ushered in an age of American politics that was primarily about industrial capitalism rather than slavery and race. The Democrats had a pro-business wing, exemplified by Grover Cleveland, but in Kazin’s telling it was never able to create a workable majority,

partly because the Republicans were oriented toward the same constituency. The harbingers of the party's successful future were rather found in those responding to the growing economic inequality of the era—an odd collection of economically populist figures, from William Jennings Bryan, the party's thrice-unsuccessful presidential nominee, to Bryan's intermittent ally Henry George, the single-tax visionary, to the racist (even by Southern standards) South Carolina governor and senator "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, whose name is on the first piece of federal campaign reform legislation. It took some time for the party to go from tapping into these energies to coalescing around a more coherent economic policy.

The eventual consolidation of the Democratic Party's economic platform was the result of the growing labor movement, which is clearly Kazin's favorite element in the Democratic coalition, plus the political engagement and eventual empowerment of women and the party's switch from opposing to supporting enhanced central government power as the only realistic way to promote economic justice. Progressive-era intellectuals like Walter Lippmann and Herbert Croly had started out as Republicans whose hero was Theodore Roosevelt, but they became Democrats as they realized that the Republicans were the party of business and the Democrats the party of controlling business. Initiatives like the income tax and the advent of federal regulatory agencies sealed the alignment between the Progressives and the Democrats.

**T**he Democrats' most glorious period was the New Deal, which brought them not only the presidency but also massive majorities in both houses of Congress that voted in the beginnings of a true American welfare state. The

imperatives of depression and war, along with Franklin Roosevelt's political genius, enabled the party to hold together a vast and varied coalition. Roosevelt persuaded most Black Americans who could vote to give up their historical loyalty to the Republican Party, without alienating the segregationist South. The Democrats had the support of rural farmers, immigrant-descended urban workers, and social-movement radicals; of tough, practical bosses, Ivy League professors, and first-wave feminists; of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.

Most important of all, in Kazin's view, was organized labor, which was then growing rapidly, thanks to friendly federal legislation, to its maximum level of membership and power. In 1932, the Democratic platform didn't even mention labor unions; by 1936, that would have been inconceivable, because of the immense strengthening effect on the party of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which made unionization much easier. As labor's ranks swelled—there were 3 million union members in 1933, and 15 million, representing 35 percent of wage earners, in 1945—it put its muscle behind progressive legislation. (The Democrats' need to retain the loyalty of the South, however, meant that many Black workers were excluded from the New Deal's social compact.) Such was the centrality of unions to the party that, as Kazin reminds us, through the 1960s, Democratic presidential campaigns officially began with a Labor Day rally in Detroit's Cadillac Square, attended by hundreds of thousands of people.

In retrospect, one can see the cracks appearing in the Democratic edifice not long after Roosevelt's death. Strom Thurmond's segregationist breakaway party carried four Deep South states in the 1948 election; Harry Truman was



the first Democratic candidate to lose the Solid South. By 1964 Barry Goldwater, while getting crushed nationally, had moved five Southern states into the Republican column. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 signaled a determination on the part of Republicans and business interests to roll back the labor movement's gains. Kazin is particularly annoyed by the Democrats' entrancement, in the face of these developments, with Adlai Stevenson as their standard-bearer throughout the 1950s. He sees Stevenson's rise as evidence of the growing influence in the party of prosperous, educated liberals—the kind of people who, in the late 19th century, would have been Republican and who, in the mid-20th century, liked Stevenson's cultivated manner and weren't troubled by his evident lack of interest in a robust, working-class-oriented economic policy.

Kazin doesn't dispute the standard view that Lyndon Johnson's successful efforts, following the Democratic landslide of 1964, to pass federal legislation that finally dismantled the formal Jim Crow system ended the Democrats' ability to continue being a liberal party that maintained the loyalty of segregationists. But he also points out that the Democratic presidential nominees after Johnson, beginning with George McGovern in 1972, repeated Stevenson's fundamental error of often forgetting that the party's success required an economic message mainly aimed at people at or below the median income.

In the 1976 election, Jimmy Carter became the last Democratic presidential nominee to get more than 40 percent of the white vote. The Democrats reacted to the loss of their white base not by moving left again but by embracing a pro-business, limited-government stance, exemplified by Bill Clinton's declaration, in his second

inaugural address, that “the era of big government is over.” Meanwhile, the labor movement’s influence continued to erode, along with its membership numbers. Economic inequality, disruption, and discontent increased, without the party recognizing that these should be its central concerns. As Kazin puts it, “During a period of economic growth whose benefits went disproportionately to the rich, Democrats had nothing to offer the average family whose income did not increase at all.” It took Sanders’s campaigns in 2016 and 2020 to make the Democrats see how powerful the economic aspect that had been missing from their pitch could be. In the early days of his presidency, Joe Biden—not previously an economic populist—demonstrated that he got the message that the party had retreated too far on government economic intervention. He proposed a far more ambitious program than his immediate Democratic predecessors had, much of which seems unlikely to pass.

Kazin’s sympathies are obviously with the left wing of the party; you won’t get any plea from him for the Democrats to move back to the center and position themselves as the party of an educated, relatively prosperous, diverse metropolitan professional class. He would like to see the impressive energies that were on display in the Women’s Marches and the Black Lives Matter protests during Trump’s presidency evolve into a majoritarian national program. But as he observes, “the newest American left...rallied around no single issue that united its parts and inspired its growth” and didn’t offer an economic program for the party to embrace. As of 2020, “Democrats still had trouble articulating with force and clarity what kind of economy they believed in and how it would benefit most people who worked for somebody else and struggled to remain in a middle class whose shrinking politicians bemoaned.”

**S**o what should happen now? One of the lessons of the historical long view that Kazin has given us is that a majority party in a country as vast and diverse as ours must necessarily be messy and impure. It can't possibly unify around a single set of principles; it also doesn't have the luxury of not including elements that others within its coalition may find barely tolerable. The main way the Democrats accomplished this for a very long time—from the 1830s until the 1960s—was by being both the economically liberal party and the white racist party; indeed, many pieces of historic progressive legislation bear the names of Southern segregationists. Even if the party can no longer live with that central contradiction, there will inevitably be many others. Also, people vote and participate actively in politics out of a wide range of motivations; all of the mobilizing energy that Kazin praises can't be efficiently redirected toward an economic program. In the United States, any successful mass party must make itself home to many noneconomic causes, even if it develops the kind of economic program Kazin longs for the Democrats to have.

If it were possible to generate a consensus within the party that putting economic issues at center stage is essential, that would hardly settle everything. Even during the New Deal, Roosevelt's economic advisers, along with their allies in the political world, squabbled relentlessly. And such quarrels would be even more intense today, because the Democrats have, to an unimaginably greater extent than in FDR's day, become a party of business. They regularly match or beat the Republicans in political fundraising, even from mega-donors, and they command the dominant loyalty of the technology sector (which is militantly anti-union) and at least the partial loyalty of finance. The idea of taxation and economic regulation at anywhere near New Deal levels is no longer

discussable in mainstream Democratic politics. Despite a good deal of new activity, unions have continued to shrink as a percentage of the labor force, especially in the private sector. For the party to go in the direction Kazin favors would almost certainly entail an LBJ-like willingness to alienate what has become a core element in its coalition.

Kazin sets up his discussion of the history of the Democrats' economic ideas by dividing them into two broad concerns: with "concentrated elite power" and with "the oppression of Americans in the workplace." The first, he says, dominated the party from Andrew Jackson's time until the Great Depression, the second from Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society—and since then there has been no dominant economic theme. I'd like to amend this scheme, because its simplicity stands in the way of useful discussions about what to do next. In Kazin's first phase, many of the economic battles in American politics can be best understood as struggles for advantage between interest groups, in which it's not readily clear which side represented the elite position: Was it tariffs or free trade? Nativism or immigration? Was preserving and expanding slavery the anti-elite position? In Kazin's second phase, a strain of equal or greater importance to workplace reform was the establishment of a welfare state apparatus, including Social Security, Medicare, funding to education, and various anti-poverty programs. While these had union support, they don't make for a perfect fit with labor's specific interests. Kazin also mentions briefly a form of "corporate capitalism," enacted by unionized, benefits-providing big corporations, that prevailed in the 1950s and combined economic elitism with a concern for workers' welfare. One often sees calls on corporations to embrace a social mission today.

Yet another element in the Democratic Party's economic story, especially recently, has been technical management by professional economists working in the White House, the Federal Reserve, and the executive branch's regulatory agencies. Their work usually takes place separate from the working-class battle over economic policy that Kazin would prefer. All of these approaches are still in operation, so it would be difficult simply to choose one and ditch the others.

Everybody is expecting to see a wipeout for the Democrats this fall. If there is one, it's worth remembering how many supposedly party-ending wipeouts we have seen before—in 1972, in 1984, in 1994, in 2002, in 2010, and so on. Both major parties have demonstrated a peculiar resilience. Still, as of now the Democrats' situation does look alarming if, like Kazin, you have a deep attachment to the idea that they are and should remain the party of the people, an institution fundamentally dedicated to seeking power so as to use it to help those who need some help. Gradually for decades, and then rapidly since the 2008 financial crisis, the Democrats have lost the loyalty of white Americans who are below the median income level and who live in rural America—that is, they have lost a large part of their original constituency.

They have remained competitive partly by persuading many affluent and educated metropolitan voters, who tend to be liberal on social issues and conservative on economic ones—a category that used to dominate the liberal wing of the Republican Party, when it had a liberal wing—to switch parties. The congressional districts with the highest median incomes now overwhelmingly send Democrats to Congress. Michael Podhorzer, an analyst at the AFL-CIO, calls this set of changes in who votes for which party “the Great Reversal.” This isn't just an American phenomenon; roughly the same dynamic is playing out all over the world.

The Democrats' core strength is with voters of color: About half of the congressional seats held by Democrats are in districts where these voters are in the majority. But this shouldn't be entirely comforting to the party. The electorate is likely to remain majority white for decades, and Latino and Asian voters have been defecting to the Republicans in the past few election cycles. Bernie Sanders did well among Latino voters during his presidential campaigns, which may indicate that a primarily economic program would shore up the Democrats' position with Latinos. One shouldn't conclude from that, however, that it would be easy to deracialize American politics, freeing it from racial prejudice on the one hand and racial solidarity on the other. There's no way to get people to become, en masse, impervious to racial and cultural signaling and to focus exclusively instead on their economic interests. (For example it's actually hard to explain, using Kazin's framework, how abortion rights could have come to the forefront of the politics of both major parties.) People are sufficiently complicated that they can and usually do operate politically at both levels—it's not as if noneconomic issues, once activated, operate as an on-off switch that shuts down all other concerns completely. The Republican Party, by its constant resort to cultural appeals, is signaling that it doesn't feel confident peddling the traditional elixir of tax cuts, balanced budgets, and deregulation to its constituents, because that's not an economic program that resonates with people who don't see much opportunity or prosperity in their lives.

As in the early 20th century, we are in the initial stages of transforming widespread discontent with the economic conditions of our time into the policies and politics that would address it successfully. This will be the work of a generation, and it will require many more tools than simply

strengthening the labor movement, though that would help. Kazin's book doesn't aim to define "moral capitalism" for the 21st century with any precision, though he does insist on it as the Democrats' proper defining cause. *What It Took to Win* ought to help start a conversation that goes far beyond the book's own scope, one that might lead to a clearer economic stance for the Democratic Party. At their best, the Democrats have been able to lead a series of redefinitions of the American political economy that have made it function in a far more broadly beneficial way than it has of late. They have a lot of work to do if the party is going to recapture that role—but if it doesn't, then somebody else might.

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