

THE OPPOSITION

Do They Have Your Attention Now?

Democrats are finally beginning to appreciate the significance of the attention economy



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THERE IS AN OLD SAYING, likely apocryphal, that's attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte: "Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake."

This past week, the Democratic party has ignored this sage advice. They're not avoiding interrupting Donald Trump as his presidency becomes subsumed by the Jeffrey Epstein saga. Instead, they're interrupting routinely, gleefully, and in remarkable unison.

The Democratic National Committee has **launched a new X account** dedicated solely to reminding its followers that Trump has not released the Epstein files. Party leaders have waded into the "manosphere," going on Trump-curious shows like **Andrew Schulz's *Flagrant*** and talking with MAGA-aligned internet personalities such as **Tim Pool**. They've forced Republicans into **uncomfortable votes** aimed at releasing the Epstein documents and have **relentlessly posted** on social media about the convicted sex offender.

It's a remarkable change of posture for Democrats, many of whom, just a few years ago, bristled at the idea of engaging on Epstein-related questions—deeming the trollish conspiracies beneath the dignity of their office. And while much of the party's sudden eagerness to now talk about Epstein is driven by a desire to make Trump and the GOP squirm—and, frankly, by the legitimate questions that Trump's erratic response to the saga have raised—there is also a larger shift taking place that's worth noting.

Democrats are beginning to understand the dimensions and demands of the attention economy, in which the real currency in politics is not message discipline but message dominance. It's a noticeable shift from just a year ago, when there were real, internal debates in the party over whether leaders should engage on certain issues or put themselves in uncomfortable, heterodox media environments.

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The aggressive, opportunistic reaction to the Epstein fallout suggests that that debate is moving squarely in one direction: The party now believes that effective politics demands Democrats engage without reservation in the online content wars.

“Donald Trump won twice. The norms of not engaging in culture is short-sighted,” Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.), perhaps the most overtly pro-engagement Democrat in Congress, said in an interview with *The Bulwark*.

Khanna's comments came a day after he had **gone on the podcast *Flagrant*** to talk about Epstein. He wasn't the only one to make that trek. Former Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg has **also gone on *Flagrant*** (pre-current Epstein saga), as did former Obama advisers-turned podcast hosts Jon Favreau and Tommy Vietor, who did talk Epstein during their appearance in the same episode as Khanna.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), meanwhile, appeared on Joe Rogan's show earlier this summer and Texas state Rep. James Talarico, who has received national attention for his **viral TikTok videos**, also recently tapped an interview with the uber-popular podcast host. Khanna has also gone on Stephen A. Smith's podcast, as did Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro. California Gov. Gavin Newsom traveled over 2,000 miles to Nashville last week, where he sat down with Shawn Ryan for a **four-hour-long podcast interview**. And just about every member of Congress seems to have purchased pocket-sized microphones in the past few months that they can whip out on a whim to tape direct-to-camera TikTok videos and Instagram reels as they're running around the Hill (though Sen. Chris Murphy seems the most committed to it).

“You cannot deny the fact that Donald Trump has changed the playbook, and if Democrats can’t figure out how to get on board and learn from him and understand that tactics have changed dramatically over the last decade, then we’re going to continue to lose,” said Democratic strategist Adrienne Elrod. “I think [the Epstein case] is an example of how our tactics are changing.”

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THE BURGEONING BELIEF that the attention economy is a driving force in politics has become so dominant in Democratic circles, that a number of previously reluctant party officials have determined their political survival depends on it.

In an [interview with *The Bulwark*](#) last week, Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass said that part of the job now requires being more active online and engaging with newer types of media. She said that type of work now consumed more of her day than it once did, and was an important part of fighting back against online misinformation.

Even the stiffest politicians are trying to get in on the act. Former Gov. Andrew Cuomo relaunched his New York City mayoral bid on Tuesday, not with a traditional speech but with a Zohran Mamdani-style, direct-to-camera [video](#). (It didn’t really work for him, and the effort was widely [mocked](#).)

Democrats haven’t just focused their efforts on TikTok videos and podcast bookings, either. They’ve made conscious efforts to generate their own media moments. Some of this has centered on Epstein, including by forcing those

uncomfortable votes in Congress. But much of it has been geared toward pushing back on Trump's immigration policies.

California Sen. Alex Padilla dominated headlines last month after he was **handcuffed** at a Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem news conference. A week later, New York City comptroller and then-mayoral candidate Brad Lander **was arrested** at an immigration court after he demanded to see judicial warrant for an immigrant whom federal officials were trying to detain. This past week, a group of House Democrats went to "Alligator Alcatraz" to draw attention to the detention camp that the president and Florida Republicans have been celebrating.

To a degree, being the opposition party has helped Democrats navigate the attention economy by virtue of simply having more opportunities to go on the attack or engage new media. But Democrats have also been assisted by the growth of sympathetic outlets in recent months. Podcasts and YouTube channels by creators like the MeidasTouch brothers, Brian Tyler Cohen, and **Adam Mockler** have thrived during the second Trump administration. **MeidasTouch** has at times beat out Joe Rogan on Apple's and Spotify's download charts (in fact, *The MeidasTouch Podcast* currently has the most podcast downloads and views this month, according to tracking data from **Podscribe**).

And some Democrats think there's room to go much further. When the Epstein files first emerged as a political issue for Trump earlier this month, party operatives said there was initially hesitation among some Democrats about engaging on the issue, fearing it would be a distraction from the cuts to Medicare and the impacts of the reconciliation bill. Those fears haven't manifested. But some in the party worry that Democrats' instinctive caution remains.

"It was a classic 'We're above this, we can't be for this,'" said Chuck Rocha, a Democratic strategist and former Sanders adviser. "We have to stop being the

party of overeducated pearl-graspers and start getting a little tougher.”

Donkey Business:

— The progressive organization MoveOn is launching a “**Won’t Back Down To** next month with a particular focus on Republican Reps. Juan Ciscomani and Don Schweikert in Arizona, as well as Don Bacon in Nebraska, who is retiring.

MoveOn—which has played a role in organizing some of more successful anti-Trump protests this year, including the “No Kings” rallies—gave me an early peek at their plans for the tour. They plan to kick it off on Sunday, August 3, in Phoenix Arizona with Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, Texas Rep. Jasmine Crockett, an Arizona Rep. Yassamin Ansari. MeidasTouch (the Dem-aligned new media outlet mentioned above) will be heavily featured at the event too, with plans to broadcast the rally live. Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren and Florida Rep. Maxwell Frost will headline the next stop on Saturday, August 23 in Bacon’s Omaha district.

— I am already starting to get anxious about how to cover the 2028 Democratic primary when there will inevitably be thirty candidates in the race, all of whom are regularly doing four-hour-long podcast interviews. *So. Much. Content.* *Lucki Politico* watched the entirety of Gov. Newsom’s Shawn Ryan interview and pulled out the highlights for us. This **exchange between the two on gun policy** was particularly interesting, especially when Ryan gifted the governor a Sig Sauer PXM1 pistol. “I respect this gift,” Newsom said.

— Speaking of podcasts, former DNC chair Jaime Harrison is **launching a new weekly show** on Thursday called *At Our Table*. Harrison released **excerpts** from an interview with Hunter Biden ahead of the launch, in which the younger Biden said that Democrats “lost the last election because we did not remain loyal to the

leader of the party.” Not exactly comments that were well received **by everyone** (anyone?) **in the party.**

My open tabs:

— **After a Mayor’s Mysterious Death, a Land Dispute Divides Republicans in Tennessee**

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— **“The River House Broke. We Rushed in the River.”**



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Gary 4d

Why is it that centrist democrats say stuff like "I'm happy to work with Republicans where we overlap but when asked about charismatic democrats (most of whom lean more left), they have to carefully disavow each item they disagree with. If media asks a centrist dem what they think of Zohran, the answer should be, "He's an exciting politician that is energizing the country and I think that energy is key to regaining power. I look forward to working with him where our policy preferences overlap obviously followed by specific 80 and 90% issues.

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Jacob Skowronek Jacob Skowronek 4d

♡ Liked by Jim Swift, Lauren Egan

Great article. Hopefully Democratic strategists will also seize on this instead of retreating into the staid, and familiar campaigns as we approach the midterms.

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