

eat the rich populism

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By Timothy Shenk

Mr. Shenk is a historian of modern American politics and has written extensively about the fight for control of the Democratic Party.

This essay is the first installment in a series on the thinkers, upstarts and ideologues battling for control of the Democratic Party.

For close to a year, Democrats have been locked in debate over their path out of the wilderness. In party retreats and private Slack channels, along with testy exchanges on social media and strategic leaks to reporters, Democratic insiders have wrestled over the mistakes of the Biden administration and the shortcomings of the Harris campaign.

The stakes of those arguments have risen even higher in the wake of Charlie Kirk's assassination, with the White House intensifying its crackdown on dissent, and MAGA leaders declaring holy war against the left.

But an air of denial — and, more recently, panic — has pervaded the discussion about what comes next. It's easy to say drastic reform is needed, but there's no agreement on what this should look like. In practice, the party establishment is doing what party establishments always do: counting on the other side to self-destruct so it can squeak back into power while changing as little as possible.

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The strategy would be a lot more defensible if Democrats could write off Trumpism as a fever that was bound to break with time. But the evidence of the past few years points in the opposite direction — shrinking populations in blue states, an alarming drop in Democratic voter registration, dire math for retaking the Senate and crushing majorities who say the party is out of touch. Worst of all is the ongoing rightward shift in the working class, a challenge that goes beyond winning elections to strike at the heart of what it means to be a Democrat.

A few campaigns have bucked those trends. The problem for Democrats is that the best examples come from candidates running against the Democratic Party.

Consider Dan Osborn, a 50-year-old industrial mechanic and Navy veteran who is making [his second bid](#) for the Senate in Nebraska as an independent. In 2024, while Donald Trump demolished Kamala Harris by 20 points, Mr. Osborn lost by just seven. According to the analytics website Split Ticket, this was the strongest performance relative to the partisan fundamentals of any Senate candidate.

What was Mr. Osborn's secret? He's a sometimes fumbling speaker, and he didn't put together a world-beating ground game or dominate social media. But he was a credible spokesman for a message that resonated with voters in Nebraska — a blistering assault on economic elites, a moderate stance on cultural issues and the rejection of politics as usual.

Now think about the biggest story of the 2025 election season, Zohran Mamdani's [come-from-nowhere victory](#) in the New York City mayoral primary. From the start, Mr. Mamdani positioned himself as a fresh face confronting a dysfunctional system on behalf of ordinary New Yorkers struggling to pay their bills. He's the happy class warrior blessed with Andrew Cuomo as his foil, a convenient stand-in for a corrupt and clueless establishment.

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Yes, Mr. Mamdani is a 30-something democratic socialist with the kind of Twitter archive that opposition researchers dream about. But he waged a disciplined primary campaign that kept a relentless focus on

the top concerns for New Yorkers — the cost of living — while backpedaling on polarizing issues like defund the police.

Mr. Mamdani and Mr. Osborn might not seem like they have much, or anything, in common — one the child of an award-winning director and an Ivy League professor, the other a college dropout turned labor leader. But they both tapped into the roiling populist energies that have rocked the country since the financial crisis.

It's a simple recipe, really: a scorching economic message delivered by political outsiders standing up to the powerful. The villains in this narrative — and it's essential to have villains — are the elites at the top of a broken system. Neither Mr. Mamdani nor Mr. Osborn dwelled on cultural issues; instead, they concentrated on subjects like increasing wages and affording a home. Although their signature positions have strong public backing, their platforms are more than just a grab bag of whatever does best in the polls. They tell a story that reframes the debate, enlisting voters in a battle between the many and the few, with stakes that reach into everyday life.

This isn't a progressive version of Trumpism, but it speaks to some of the frustrations that have made the president the dominant force in American life. The paradox is that stealing a page from MAGA is the best way to break its stranglehold on politics. Democrats must replace their reflexive opposition to President Trump with a positive vision for improving the lives of working people.

Right now it would be easy to dismiss the Osborn and Mamdani campaigns as scattered revolts against the status quo, flickers of protest that will burn themselves out before long. But in the right hands, these grass-roots rebellions could become the basis for a new progressive majority.

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From prairie populists to democratic socialists, a strategy for remaking the Democratic Party is coming together — a coalition of moderates and progressives leaning into economic populism while leaving room to maneuver in the culture war. They say things that make Democratic elites cringe, like “freeze the rent” or “[build the wall](#).” Some of them can't even imagine becoming Democrats. And that's exactly why they could be the future of the party.

To understand Mr. Osborn's appeal — and the challenge facing Democrats — it helps to think about a middle-aged white guy flipping the bird. He appears in one of Mr. Osborn's 2024 ads. “This finger is voting for Trump,” he says while [pointing to his index finger](#). Then he breaks into a wide smile as he moves one digit over to the middle. “And this one,” he says, “is for sending Washington a message with Dan Osborn.”

There's no mistaking Mr. Osborn for a typical Democrat. He regularly appears in shirtsleeves and jeans on the campaign trail, looking like he's taking a break from fixing [Pete Buttigieg's Subaru](#). He sounds like it, too. “Social Security to illegals,” he marveled in another campaign ad, “who would be for that?”

Direct outreach to Republicans is an essential piece of Mr. Osborn's campaign. “The truth is, I agree with President Trump on many of the most important issues facing the country,” he wrote in an essay [for the Fox News website](#), listing China and draining the swamp as examples. “If he needs someone to help him build the wall,” Mr. Osborn added, “well, I'm pretty handy.”

And yet, in the same Fox News essay, Mr. Osborn said he was in the race because, “The U.S. Senate is just a country club of millionaires who work for billionaires and have no idea what it's like to work for a living.” Statements like this are the reason Bernie Sanders has called Mr. Osborn a model for how to run a working-class campaign. It's easy to imagine Mr. Sanders making the same point about billionaires running the Senate, and impossible to picture Fox News publishing it.

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Despite the spicy language, Mr. Osborn's positions on most cultural flashpoints tilt more libertarian than conservative — for gun rights but against a national ban on abortion, in favor of sealing up the border

but opposed to masked men snatching immigrants off the street. Most of the time, he'd rather talk about economics, a telling overlap with Mr. Mamdani. "I don't hang my hat on social issues," Mr. Osborn told The Bulwark. He saves his energy for [another target](#): "the billionaire class ruling over us, thinking they could divide our country up."

After staying publicly neutral in the 2024 election, when it declined to field a candidate, the Nebraska Democratic Party leadership is backing Mr. Osborn this time around. He'll take the support, but he isn't joining a party that's a pillar of the system he wants to disrupt.

Mr. Osborn is far from the only figure with a populist message this year. Mr. Sanders has spent much of the last six months packing arenas — many in red states — on his "Fighting Oligarchy" tour.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has picked up on the spirit, joining Mr. Sanders as he has moved deep into Trump country. Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut [has become an evangelist](#) for the cause [despite representing](#) one of the wealthier states in the nation. A barrage of Democrats who share Mr. Osborn's working-class background and pointed economic appeal are competing in battleground districts. Even Roy Cooper, the genial, moderate governor of North Carolina, has had a populist makeover for [his current Senate race](#), which he entered with an ad telling voters, "The biggest corporations and the richest Americans have grabbed unimaginable wealth at your expense."

That approach is in line with arguments coming from an influential group of Democratic operatives, like the data guru and "populist" David Shor, who say that pocketbook issues are still the strongest weapon in the Democratic arsenal. Future Forward, the leading Democratic super PAC, [raised close to \\$1 billion in the 2024](#) election cycle with the goal of persuading voters that Joe Biden and Ms. Harris would reduce the cost of living. It didn't work then, and the party's ratings on the economy and inflation continue to lag behind Mr. Trump's.

Populists think only a shock to the system will change these perceptions. "I want to tear the Democratic Party down and build it back up from the studs," [said Nathan Sage](#), a self-described "child of a trailer park" running for the Senate in Iowa. Voters won't listen to the message if they don't trust the messenger — and, according to Mr. Sage, that means a comprehensive overhaul to make "a Democratic Party that people like me will actually want to be a part of."

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This kind of full-court press for the working class is a gamble. But there are no safe choices for a party whose approval ratings [are bouncing around 35-year lows](#). Exhuming Liz Cheney one more time with the hope of turning out white-collar suburbanites is another risk, and in a country where the median full-time worker earns just under \$63,000 a year and about 60 percent of adults don't have a college degree, the numbers are with the populists. For every stockbroker in Greenwich that the party loses, there are two janitors in Kenosha to be won — the building blocks of a durable, coherent majority that can break through the paralysis in Washington and level the playing field for working Americans.

There are good reasons to believe Democrats can build this coalition today, starting with this one: They've done it before.

The dirty secret of American politics is how little the big picture really changes. For almost a century, Democrats have been at their strongest — with solid majorities in Congress and a firm grip on the White House — when they united working people around a populist message powerful enough to overcome their cultural differences.

The story goes back to the forging of the New Deal coalition. Franklin Roosevelt's first term in the White House was consumed by the clash between labor and business. The president sided with workers, astonishing corporate leaders who had assumed they would have a friend in Washington. A defiant Roosevelt said he welcomed the hatred of "[economic royalists](#)," and in 1936 he steered Democrats to one of the largest victories in American history.

Yes, he lost some of the wealthy Democrats who supported his first campaign. But a remarkable coalition joined his crusade: Northeastern Catholics, Midwestern factory workers, dust bowl farmers, overwhelming majorities of the white South, Black voters turning against the party of Lincoln for the first time, and millions more. Although separated by race, religion and geography, their lives had all improved in concrete terms over the last four years, and they rewarded Democrats for it.

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Working people transformed American politics by consolidating in a single party for the first time. A generation later, they transformed it again when they began their long exodus from the Democrats.

“The time has come to start acting to bring about the great conservative majority party,” Ronald Reagan declared in the run-up to his 1980 campaign. He had idolized Roosevelt as a young man — he voted for him four times — and he retained enough of his New Deal instincts to identify the essential elements of this majority. “The New Republican Party I am speaking about,” he said, “is going to have room for the man and the woman in the factories, for the farmer, for the cop on the beat” — in short, the “working men and women of this country.” They had been the heart of Roosevelt’s party, and they became the Reagan Democrats of the 1980s.

Bringing those voters back into the Democratic coalition was the overriding purpose of Bill Clinton’s first presidential race. The campaign’s mantra, “It’s the economy, stupid,” was designed to keep the spotlight on voters struggling to get by.

Clintonomics would later turn into a celebration of the high-tech New Economy, but in that first campaign, it still had a populist edge. Mr. Clinton ran on raising taxes on the wealthy, cutting them for the middle class and establishing universal health care. “Bush has never used the bully pulpit to attack the wealthy for screwing the workers,” Mr. Clinton told campaign staffers, confident he wouldn’t make the same mistake. And his moves to the center on the cultural front — reforming welfare, cracking down on crime — helped him win the Democratic nomination. When he swept across the South on Super Tuesday, The Times praised him for demonstrating that “it is politically possible to bring poor Blacks and blue-collar white voters together.”

Barack Obama pulled off the same feat on an even more impressive scale. He mixed kitchen-table populism with cultural moderation in both of his campaigns, urging voters to focus on the problems that he said really mattered — crowded emergency rooms, special interests with a stranglehold on Washington, and corporations that would take a job and “ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit.”

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He talked like an old-fashioned Democrat, and, outside of the South, the country more or less treated him like one. Mr. Obama rolled through the Rust Belt, and Democrats in the Senate won states that now seem hopelessly out of reach, including Arkansas, Montana and West Virginia. Although he set records in the suburbs, white voters without college degrees were the largest group in the 2012 Obama coalition, well ahead of educated whites, and greater than Black, Hispanic and Asian American voters combined. Mr. Trump shredded this coalition. But his gains are more precarious than they look — and the shrewdest Republicans know it.

Patrick Ruffini saw this coming. A longtime Republican pollster, Mr. Ruffini began arguing that conservatives were poised for major improvements with nonwhite voters before Mr. Trump clinched the nomination in 2024. But he says the blueprint for a Democratic comeback might already have been drafted. “Going back to a Bernie-2016-style campaign,” [he told the Cook Political Report](#), “might be the ticket.”

What Mr. Ruffini means by “Bernie-2016-style campaign” will sound familiar: an authentic outsider running hard on economic populism with policies that are simple to grasp, easy to remember and

designed to start fights with defenders of the status quo. This doesn't require capitulating to the right on the cultural front — Mr. Sanders certainly didn't — but it does mean a laser focus on fixing a rigged economy and broken political system, along with direct appeals to voters with more conservative social views.

Voters don't need to agree with a politician on every issue. But they want candidates to share their priorities and show a backbone — to prove they can beat the establishment where it counts.

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A recent study from Mr. Ruffini's consulting firm, Echelon Insights, [provides some empirical backing](#) for this approach.

In line with conventional wisdom, the study showed that most voters fall into one of two sharply opposed camps: liberals and conservatives. Democrats still licking their wounds from 2024 might be surprised to learn that consistent liberals are the largest slice in the electorate — 43 percent, compared with 31 percent for conservatives.

But in a polarized party system, the true king makers — the voters who decide elections — don't fall neatly into the left or the right. According to Echelon, populists with fiscally liberal and socially conservative views are by far the largest group of swing voters, at 22 percent of the electorate.

Libertarians are a distant fourth, with just 5 percent. Democrats have struggled over the last decade because their biggest gains came from this smallest section of voters, while Mr. Trump cleaned up with populists.

According to [a study](#) from the left-leaning Center for Working-Class Politics and Jacobin, almost a tenth of Mr. Trump's supporters in 2020 were "essentially 'Bernie Bros'": blue-collar, culturally moderate, economic progressives. Those numbers were presumably even higher in 2024, when more of these voters either shifted to Mr. Trump or sat out the election. If Democrats want to make up their losses, they need to win these voters back.

Polling can show the elements for a winning strategy, but it takes political leadership to convert the statistics into a coalition.

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This begins by recognizing that inside Democratic primaries, liberals hold the cards. The trick is to fire up the Democratic base while reaching out to the middle — to replicate Mr. Mamdani's success mobilizing liberals around pocketbook issues and use the same platform to win over populists drawn to candidates like Mr. Osborn.

Echelon's study shed light on the kinds of policies that could unite those two groups. It showed decisive majorities for a \$20-an-hour minimum wage, a right to health care and a higher tax rate for people earning over \$250,000 a year. Other polls have found similar levels of support for a federal jobs guarantee. And with approval of organized labor hovering near 60-year highs, spearheading a comeback for unions is a smart short-term move that could yield major returns for Democrats over the long run. The picture is messier on the cultural front, where working-class voters tend to be less progressive than white-collar professionals. But over the last generation, the entire electorate, including the working class, has moved left on issues as varied as abortion and L.G.B.T.Q. rights.

And on the economy, more and more people are open to a sharp populist message. The affordability crisis has forced some suburbanites with six-figure incomes to live paycheck to paycheck. The gig economy has replaced once stable careers with perpetual freelancing. Increasing numbers of professionals are struggling to find steady work, and the total could soar if predictions about A.I. are close to accurate.

Billionaires didn't cause all these problems, but they are the winners in an economy that about 70 percent of Americans believe has been rigged in favor of the powerful. With economic anxiety reaching deep into the professional class, populism isn't just for hard hats anymore.

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The credentialed precariat is already expressing itself in politics. College-educated young people have gone wild for Mr. Mamdani, but his [base in the mayoral primary](#) consisted of voters making between \$25,000 and \$125,000 a year. That spectrum ranges from the barista with an M.F.A. from the New School to paralegals at white-shoe law firms wondering if they'll ever have their own place. New York City's challenges with the cost of living are extreme, but they're getting more familiar every day.

All of which helps explain why the most popular elected official in the country today is none other than Mr. Sanders. "Old-school labor populism, it's not something that I love personally," Lakshya Jain of Split Ticket [said in a recent interview](#). "But that is actually, probably the single most electorally potent wing of the party."

A coalition of liberals and populists wouldn't just be a marriage of convenience. It would be a response to the economic problems both sides feel are most important in their lives today, and to historic victories for progressives in the culture war. And it could win a lot of elections.

What could go wrong? The honest answer is: plenty.

A more populist Democratic coalition would be an uncomfortable place for the college-educated professionals who shifted left in the Trump years. It would be even less friendly to the megadonors who bankroll the party. Bringing populists and liberals together in a pincer movement will take enormous skill, and the alliance could be blown apart by cultural differences that both Republicans and establishment Democrats will be eager to exploit.

Although the gap between working-class and white-collar voters on economics has narrowed, it hasn't disappeared. To name just two fault lines, working people tend to be more skeptical about raising taxes to pay for new government services and more concerned about keeping energy prices low than, say, tackling climate change.

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Then there's the not-so-little question of who's supposed to lead this revolt. Mr. Osborn is almost certainly out of the running. Even if he wins next year, his social views are too out of step with the party to be able to make it through a Democratic presidential primary. Mr. Sanders would be a natural candidate, but he has aged out of the role.

His heir apparent, Ms. Ocasio-Cortez, is more comfortable working within the Democratic establishment, but also more polarizing. Although MSNBC would be in her corner, a Joe Rogan endorsement probably isn't in the cards. She remains untested in campaigns outside New York; after a strong showing in her 2018 debut, [she has underperformed expectations](#) at the ballot box. And it's by no means obvious that she can do better with rank-and-file Democrats where Mr. Sanders came up short, starting with Black voters in South Carolina.

But charismatic politicians with shaky moderate credentials have gone far before, including the president who shaped so much of today's forbidding economic landscape. "The time has come to start acting to bring about the great conservative majority party we know is waiting to be created," Reagan told supporters still reeling from the implosion of Richard Nixon's presidency. "This will mean compromise. But not a compromise of basic principle. What will emerge will be something new: something open and vital and dynamic."

Half a century later, the moment for building a great progressive majority party has arrived, a coalition asserting itself against a sclerotic political elite, our economic overlords in Big Tech and Wall Street and a radical right crusading against its own country. Turning Democrats into the vehicle for this coalition will

take a struggle — a bruising, messy contest to seize the reins from a party establishment that will be scrambling for its life. But working people fight much harder battles every day. It's about time they had somebody in their corner.

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