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How Kamala Harris can win

The Democratic Party needs a message that reconnects it with the working-class voters it has alienated in recent decades

Kamala Harris has a lot to do in a short time — build a team, choose a running mate, introduce herself to the country. But her most important task is to figure out what this election should be about.

Over the past week, Harris has been campaigning on protecting democracy, the rule of law and reproductive freedom from another four years of Donald Trump. As a forceful defender of abortion rights and a former prosecutor, she is ideally equipped to make these issues the centrepiece of her campaign. She relishes reminding voters of Trump's status as a felon. 'I took on perpetrators of all kinds,' she declared in her first campaign rally, at a gym in Milwaukee on Tuesday. 'So hear me when I say: I know Donald Trump's type.'

But standing up to Trump and defending reproductive rights is not enough. To defeat him, Harris needs to address the legitimate grievances he exploits — the sense among many Americans, especially those without a college degree, that their voices aren't heard, that their work isn't respected and that elites look down on them. She needs a message that reconnects the Democratic Party with the working-class voters it has alienated in recent decades. Delivering this message may not come naturally to her as a former senator from California, and Trump has wasted no time attempting to brand her a 'radical-left lunatic.' But if she wants to shape a progressive politics that can wrest the future from the MAGA movement, then she has to try. It could be the difference between victory and defeat this November.

A country unable to control its destiny

To begin addressing the anger and polarisation gripping this country, Democrats need to recall what brought us to this volatile historical moment: An overwhelming majority of Americans — some 85 per cent — believe that their leaders don't care what they think and that they lack

a meaningful say in shaping the forces that govern their lives.

This sense of disempowerment underlies the Republicans' most potent issues in this campaign: inflation and immigration.

If Harris continues to repeat economic facts without acknowledging most voters' feelings, she will fail to address the mood of discontent that has her running just behind Trump in the polls. Low unemployment, robust job growth, rising wages — by the usual metrics, the economy has been a success during the Biden years. And yet inflation looms so large for voters that most disapprove of the president's handling of the economy. Why? Because inflation is not merely about the price of eggs. Many voters experience it as an assault on their agency, a daily marker of their powerlessness: No matter how hard I work or how much I make, I can't get ahead or even keep up.

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And why was the surge in illegal border crossings so troubling, even for voters who live far from the southern border? Not because they believe Trump's florid demagogy about criminals, rapists and residents of mental hospitals pouring in but because they see a country unable to control its borders as a country unable to control its destiny — and as a country that treats strangers better than some of its citizens.

Reimagining the economy and renewing our sense of shared citizenship may seem like separate undertakings. The first is about inflation, tax rates and trade policy, and the second is about identity, community and mutual respect. But they are part of the same political project. Economic arrangements not only decide the distribution of income and wealth; they also determine the allocation of social recognition and esteem.

Acknowledging failures

To win back the trust of the voters they've lost, Democrats need to acknowledge that the neoliberal globalisation project they and mainstream Republicans pursued in recent decades brought huge gains for those at the top but job loss and stagnant wages for most working people. The winners used their windfall to buy influence in high places. The government stopped trying to check concentrated economic power. The two parties joined forces to deregulate Wall Street. And when the financial crisis of 2008 pushed the system to the brink, they spent billions of dollars to bail out the banks but left ordinary homeowners mostly to

fend for themselves.

By 2016, four decades of neoliberal governance had created inequalities of income and wealth not seen since the 1920s. Labour unions were in decline. Workers received a smaller and smaller share of the profits they produced. Finance claimed a growing share of the economy but flowed more into speculative assets (like risky derivatives) than into productive assets (factories, homes, roads, schools) in the real economy.

Rather than contend directly with the damage they had done, both political parties told workers to improve themselves by getting college degrees. The politicians said: What you earn will depend on what you learn; you can make it if you try. The elites who offered this advice missed the implicit insult it contained: If you're struggling in the new economy, it's your fault. This galling mix of economic injury and credentialist condescension helped propel Trump to the presidency.

Trump's economic policies did little for the working people who supported him. He tried (but failed) to abolish the health care plan on which many of them relied. And he enacted a tax cut that went mainly to corporations and the wealthy. But his animus against elites and their globalisation project continued to resonate. In 2020, Joe Biden defeated him, but voters without a college degree stuck with Trump.

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Biden, a mainstream Democrat of long standing, was no radical. As JD Vance observed in his speech at the Republican National Convention, Biden voted for NAFTA, China's admission to the World Trade Organization and the Iraq war. (Vance neglected to add that most Republicans did, too. More Republicans than Democrats voted for NAFTA and normalising trade relations with China, and the Iraq war debacle was conceived and led by President George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld.)

But as president, despite his centrist career, Biden turned away from the policies that had prompted populist backlash and empowered Trump.

Biden's ambitious public investments in infrastructure, manufacturing, jobs and clean energy recalled the muscular role of government during the New Deal. So did his support for collective bargaining and the revival of antitrust law. It made him one of the most consequential presidents of

modern times.

Still, he remained unpopular. Biden and his team thought the problem was one of timing: Public investments take time to produce jobs and tangible benefits.

The dignity of work

But the real problem was more fundamental. Biden never really offered a broad governing vision, never explained how the policies he enacted added up to a new democratic project. Franklin Roosevelt understood the need to highlight the big picture. He persuaded the public that the agencies he created and policies he enacted offered the American people a way to check the corporate power that threatened to deprive them of a meaningful say in how they were governed.

Biden offered no comparable story.

When he broke with the era of neoliberal globalisation, reasserting government's role in regulating markets for the common good, he did so with little fanfare or explanation. He did not acknowledge that his own party had been complicit in the policies that had deepened the divide between winners and losers. Perhaps he was guided more by political instinct than thematic vision; perhaps he did not want to highlight his break with the market-friendly philosophy of the president he had served. His American Rescue Plan, Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, CHIPS and Science Act and Inflation Reduction Act — in the end, it all made for impressive policy but theme less politics. His presidency was a legislative triumph but an evocative failure.

This made him a weak match for Trump, a candidate with little policy success but whose MAGA movement spoke to the anger of the age.

So what does all of this mean for the Harris campaign?

Democracy in its fullest sense is about citizens deliberating together about justice and the common good.

Defeating Trump means taking seriously the divide between winners and losers that polarises the country. It means acknowledging the resentment of working people who feel that the work they do is not respected, that elites look down on them, that they have little say in shaping the forces that govern their lives.

To do so, Harris should highlight a theme that has long been implicit but

underdeveloped in Biden's presidency: the dignity of work. His public investments and labour reforms were designed to rebuild the communities hollowed out by globalisation and to create an economy that lets everyone flourish. The Harris campaign should not only defend these achievements but also embark on something more ambitious: a project of democratic renewal that goes beyond merely saving democracy from Trump. Democracy, in its most minimal sense, means you leave office when you lose — and it's this elemental aspect that Trump's behaviour calls into question.

But democracy in its fullest sense is about citizens deliberating together about justice and the common good. The dignity of work is important to a healthy democracy because it enables everyone to contribute to the common good and to win honour and recognition for doing so.

Potentially missed opportunity

For Harris, offering concrete proposals to honour work — and to reward it fairly — could force Trump and Vance to choose between the working-class party they hope to become and the corporate Republican Party they continue to be.

She should be asking questions that would invigorate progressive politics for the 21st century: If we really believe in the dignity of work, why do we tax income from labour at a higher rate than income from dividends and capital gains? Shouldn't the federal minimum hourly wage be higher than $7.25? Trump has proposed exempting tips from taxes. Well, here's a bolder suggestion: Why not reduce or eliminate the payroll taxes employees pay and make up the revenue with a tax on financial transactions?

Beyond tax measures: What about public investment in universal child care not only to support those who work outside the home but also to improve the pay and working conditions of caregivers? Democrats could promote sectoral bargaining so that fast food workers can negotiate wages and working conditions across their industry rather than company by company. Democrats could require companies to give employees seats on corporate boards and classify gig workers as employees. And what about automation? Should decisions about the direction of artificial intelligence and new technologies be left to Silicon Valley venture capitalists, or should citizens, backed by public investment, have a say in how tech unfolds, pushing for innovation that empowers workers rather than replaces them? On climate change, rather than imposing top-down, technocratic solutions, what if we tried listening to those who fear their livelihoods will be upended — creating local forums that give workers in

the fossil fuel industry and agriculture a chance to collaborate with community leaders, scientists and public officials in shaping the transition to a green economy?

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This is what a more robust moral and political argument about our future might look like — one that begins to address the discontent Trump has tapped into. Harris and her team may shrink from this ambition, hoping they can win the election by sticking with fear of Trump and abortion bans. The election season is too short, they might argue, and the stakes are too high; elevating the terms of public discourse is a project for another day.

But this would be a political mistake and a historic missed opportunity. Taunting Trump as a felon would rally the base but reinforce the divide. Offering Americans a more inspiring democratic project could change some minds, win over some voters and offer some hope for a less rancorous public life.

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