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Unnecessary tradeoffs

Centrists and progressives often portray racial agendas and attracting non-urban, working-class voters as irreconcilable. Yet they need not be

Over the past months in the United States, something resembling panic has overtaken the Democratic Party. The popularity of the president, Joe Biden, is extremely low, major policy initiatives have stalled, a governorship election in supposedly solidly Democratic Virginia was lost and significant setbacks are likely in the upcoming Congressional midterms.

For many Democrat 'progressives', the blame lies in the stars rather than in themselves. Republican success, in this view, is due to a combination of 'anti-black white supremacy' and structural features of the US political system, such as the presidential electoral college and the Senate, which favour regions and populations that do not support the party. For 'centrist' Democrats, on the other hand, the real problem lies in the party itself — or, rather, in its progressive wing insisting on championing issues of racial or social justice with 'views and values not shared' by a majority of voters.

There is much that is distinctively American about this debate but echoes can be found in left parties across Europe. In particular, the challenge of reconciling a progressive social and racial agenda with the need to attract a majority coalition, which includes non-urban and working-class voters, is one faced on both sides of the Atlantic today.

How issues are framed

Centrists and progressives often portray these goals as irreconcilable: *either* left parties champion progressive social and racial agendas *or* they attract more non-urban and working-class voters. Yet they need not be.

As the political scientist William Riker famously argued, to borrow his book titles, political outcomes depend on *The Art of Political Manipulation* and *Agenda Formation*. 'Successful politicians structure the

world so they can win,' he wrote. Concretely, *how* issues are framed plays a critical role in determining how attractive and salient they are to voters.

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A recent study of working-class voters sponsored by YouGov, the Center for Working Class Politics and the left-wing magazine *Jacobin* confirms what many previous studies have found: when policies are framed as benefiting one group over, or at the expense of, another, they are less popular. For example, when white voters are told that redistributive policies require taking money from them to fund programmes primarily benefiting minorities, support for such policies plummets. When precisely the same policies are presented as taking money from the rich and redistributing it to working people or the less fortunate, support goes up.

This is often portrayed as the result of racism — and, of course, some white voters harbour racist sentiments. But minority voters prefer colour-blind or class-based issue framing as well. As two well-known scholars put it, 'the strongest arguments' for redistributive policies are those that 'reach beyond race to the moral principles to which both black and white Americans are committed, not as blacks or whites, but as Americans … Reaching beyond race has a power to it, not because it evades the reach of prejudice but because it calls into play the principle of fairness — that all who need help should be helped, regardless of their race.'

'Mainstream language'

This holds too with regard to the continuing disadvantages faced by minorities and immigrants. The above-mentioned study, for example, found that potentially Democratic working-class voters 'did not shy away from progressive candidates who strongly opposed racism. But candidates who framed that opposition in highly specialized, identity-focused language fared significantly worse than candidates who embraced either populist or mainstream language.'

As Bhaskar Sunkara, the editor of *Jacobin*, noted, 'the political costs of a campaign message focused on ethnic identity seem significantly larger than the benefits … Among five different candidate sound bites presented to respondents, the worst-performing was one that the pollsters internally described as "woke moderate".'

Other scholars similarly find it indeed possible to go beyond colour-blind or class-based appeals and attract 'persuadable' voters, as long as such discussions are not framed in zero-sum ways. Ian Haney López, one of the most forceful proponents of this view, contends that left politicians need not shy away from discussing the persistent disadvantages suffered by minority communities — they just need to stress that addressing these disadvantages will create a fairer, more just society overall.

Contributing to a situation where various groups feel threatened by or in zero-sum competition with each other is antithetical to building the broad, diverse coalition the Democrats need.

Persuadable voters, López notes, are indeed turned off by messages that address 'racism solely in terms of harms to communities of color in a manner that implicitly excludes and perhaps even faults whites'. But when addressing injustices is presented as benefiting 'working people, whether … white, Black, or brown', such a race-class message resonates among a broad cross-section of voters.

Race-based appeals

Yet despite such findings, as one commentator noted, some Democratic politicians and activists 'emphasize — and, occasionally, even exaggerate — the racial implications of race-neutral, redistributive policies', including infrastructure spending, aid to small businesses, the expansion of Medicaid (helping those on low incomes with healthcare costs) and even government-sponsored access to Covid-19 vaccines and treatments. This has contributed to a situation where such race-based appeals and policies have become associated with the Democratic Party overall in the minds of some voters. (In his 2020 campaign Biden did this less than his progressive rivals but he has still framed some of his policies in such terms.)

'Contributed', of course, is a crucial word here: Republicans do everything they can to deepen such an association, recognising that anything that presents the Democratic Party and its policies as primarily benefiting minorities and (especially illegal) immigrants at the expense of others mobilises their base and deepens the wedge between non-urban and working-class voters and the Democrats. Populists in Europe engage in similar framing, to heighten voters' fears about immigrants and strengthen the belief that they are taking resources from 'deserving' natives.

If the Democratic Party wants to avoid a tradeoff between pursing

progressive racial and social policies and attracting the majority coalition it needs to win elections, it has to frame that agenda so that citizens can view a vote for it as being in their own *as well as* their country's interest. Contributing to a situation where various groups feel threatened by or in zero-sum competition with each other is antithetical to building the broad, diverse coalition the Democrats, as well as other left-wing parties, need to win — as well as to the health of democracy overall.

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