

Bridging the Blue Divide: The Democrats' New Metro Coalition and the Unexpected Prominence of Redistribution

Jacob S. Hacker, Amelia Malpas, Paul Pierson and Sam Zacher

The electoral base of the Democratic Party has been transformed over the past generation. Democrats have lost ground in rural America while adding strength in cities and, more recently, suburbs. A major consequence of this shift has been the creation of a “U-shaped” Democratic voting base, with both poorer metro voters and affluent suburbanites siding with the party. This spatial alliance overlays a multi-racial one, as Democrats rely more heavily on voters of color than any other major party in American history. Many analysts have argued that the Democratic Party has managed this sea change by shifting from economic to cultural and identity appeals. This claim is consistent with leading models of two-dimensional party competition, as well as a fair amount of cross-national research on parties of the left and center-left in contemporary knowledge economies. However, we find little evidence for this claim in national Democrats’ messaging (via party platforms and on Twitter), nor, more important, in their actual policy efforts. Instead, we show that even as Democrats have increasingly relied on affluent, educated voters, the party has embraced a more ambitious economic agenda. The national party has bridged the Blue Divide not by forswearing redistribution or foregrounding cultural liberalism, but by formulating an increasingly bold economic program—albeit one that elides important inequalities within its metro-based multi-racial coalition. Understanding how and why Democrats have taken this path is central to understanding not just the party’s response to its shifting electorate, but the way parties manage coalitional change more broadly.

Over the past few election cycles, the Democratic Party has firmly established itself as the party of multi-racial metro America. It has done so not by increasing its already overwhelming margins in urban areas but by winning majorities in the suburbs surrounding


economically vibrant cities, including affluent suburbs that once leaned Republican. Meanwhile, Republicans have cemented their strength outside of metro America, with particularly big gains among white voters in regions battered by the continuing shift to a post-industrial knowledge economy (Mettler and Brown 2022).


Perhaps the most profound consequence of this shift is the decline of income as a driver of party identification. Indeed, both parties are now coalitions of the affluent and economically struggling (Kitschelt and Rehm 2019). The effect of this development on the Republican Party has received considerable attention (e.g., Cramer 2016; Autor et al. 2020; Baccini and Weymouth 2021). Yet a major transformation has also occurred on the Democratic side. With Democrats’ recent suburban victories, the party’s voting base has become strikingly “U-shaped,” with both the poorest and richest voters siding most strongly with the party (Zacher 2023). The Democratic electorate is now a coalition of two very different sets of metro voters: 1) the affluent and highly educated, mostly white, who have prospered in the knowledge economy and often reside in the suburbs of high-growth cities, and 2) the less affluent, disproportionately of color, who have limited access to these high-wage sectors and often struggle with residential segregation and rising housing costs—challenges that reflect, in part, the privileges of the first group.

A list of permanent links to Supplemental Materials provided by the authors precedes the References section.

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Jacob S. Hacker  is Stanley Resor Professor of Political Science at Yale University (jacob.hacker@yale.edu; United States).

Amelia Malpas  is a Predoctoral Fellow in Political Science at the Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University (amelia.malpas@yale.edu; United States).

Paul Pierson  is the John Gross Professor of Political Science at the University of California at Berkeley (pierson@berkeley.edu; United States).

Sam Zacher  is a Doctoral Candidate in Political Science at Yale University (sam.zacher@yale.edu; United States).

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For a party formerly defined by its class orientation, the rise of an economically bifurcated metro voting base is a huge shift. How has the Democratic Party managed this growing “Blue Divide”? According to many, the answer is simple: Democrats have reoriented themselves toward the cultural liberalism of their affluent white voters—potentially to their peril. These commentators describe a party placing greater emphasis on cultural purity tests and less on pocketbook politics, alienating non-affluent voters in the process. Such portrayals are a staple of Fox News and other conservative sources. Yet the chorus of criticism is bipartisan. Here, for example, is *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt (2022): “The social liberalism of Democrats ... has simultaneously attracted progressive college graduates and repelled more culturally conservative working-class voters.” Democratic strategist Ruy Teixeira (2022) goes further: “It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Democrats’ emphasis on social and democracy issues, while catnip to some socially liberal, educated voters, leaves many working class ... voters cold. Their concerns are more mundane and economically-driven.”

These critiques dovetail with a growing body of scholarship on party competition in post-industrial democracies. According to this scholarship, a key way that parties manage internal economic divides is to pivot from economic appeals to cultural and identity ones—in the language of party theorists, to substitute “second-dimension” issues for traditional “first-dimension” issues.¹ There is a large and growing literature on the use of second-dimension strategies by conservative parties (e.g., Gibson 1996; Tavits and Potter 2015; Ziblatt 2017), including the contemporary GOP (Hacker and Pierson 2020). Variants of this argument have also focused on left parties (e.g., Gethin et al. 2022; Abou-Chadi and Immergut 2019; Maks-Solomon and Rigby 2020). Piketty (2021), for example, has argued that left parties have retreated from redistribution to court the affluent educated—a voting bloc that appears to place distinctive emphasis on “moral issues” as opposed to material concerns (Enke, Polborn, and Wu 2022). In Piketty’s evocative depiction, parties long oriented toward the working class now represent the moderate economic preferences and progressive cultural stances of the “Brahmin left.”

In the United States, the pull of affluent, educated voters reflects both their high levels of political engagement and their pivotal location in America’s territorially based framework of representation. Highly educated voters are more attentive to politics, more likely to vote, and more able to donate. They also disproportionately reside in the suburbs, a critical target for Democrats seeking to reduce their disadvantage in an electoral system that underrepresents urban voters. From these observations, it is a short leap to the conclusion that the “suburbanization” of the Democratic Party, as David Hopkins (2019) terms it, is reorienting the party toward the cultural and economic positions of affluent, white Democrats—making the “party’s elected officials

more ideologically unified, especially on cultural issues,” in Hopkins’s words, but also working “to preclude the party-wide adoption of an ambitious left-wing economic agenda.”

These claims have a clear and plausible logic: a new group of voters has become pivotal within the Democratic electorate, this segment has a distinct set of interests and preferences, and the Democratic Party has responded by moderating its economic positions and by de-emphasizing first-dimension priorities while moving toward second-dimension appeals. Importantly, this process is self-reinforcing. The movement of Democrats to the cultural left “in turn induces further realignment among voters with relatively liberal or conservative values, which triggers new changes in party positions, until this process equilibrates at a higher level of social polarization” (Enke, Polburn, and Wu 2022). These theoretically grounded analyses thus provide scholarly heft to the now-ubiquitous portrayals of a “woke” Democratic Party that has alienated working-class voters (primarily white, but also Black, Latino, and Asian) by placing priority on cultural issues rather than pocketbook priorities.

In this paper, we argue that this set of claims is mostly wrong. The interest cleavages within the new Democratic electorate are indeed acute. Yet national party elites have managed to bridge this Blue Divide largely without pivoting from the first dimension to the second. Nor, with important exceptions we shall discuss, have they increasingly moderated their economic positions. To the contrary, in recent years Democratic elites have stepped up their emphasis on big economic programs and the active use of government to shape the economy, even as they have courted affluent suburban voters. The party has certainly moved to the left on social issues, emphasized civil rights more than in the post-1970s past, and at times passed (or, more often, tried to pass) policies related to abortion, immigration, and gun regulation. We do not dispute that these goals and rhetoric are sometimes helpful for holding together the coalition. However, the party’s use of enhanced government spending and regulation to achieve society-wide economic goals continues to get pride of place. Indeed, those aspirations have actually grown *more* ambitious as the party’s voting base has become more affluent and suburban, culminating in a breathtakingly expansive policy agenda (by U.S. historical standards) after Democrats captured the House, Senate, and presidency in 2020.

To substantiate these arguments, we undertake two parallel investigations: the first examines the party’s platform and communications; the second focuses on what Democrats have tried to do when in power. Each, we argue, shows a party placing emphasis on bold first-dimension priorities rather than pivoting toward second-dimension appeals. To be clear, we focus on what Democrats actually say and (try to) do, not how the party is perceived—a separate issue we take up in the conclusion. Nor are we arguing that Democrats have ignored the

shifting character of their coalition. Instead, we show they have carefully curated their economic agenda to offer benefits to core voters while minimizing intra-coalitional conflict. In particular, while placing increasing priority on big and broadly redistributive programs and ambitious market-shaping policies, party elites have avoided policies that directly threaten the privileges of more affluent suburban voters, particularly those that would impose visible new taxes on well-off households or undermine the locally rooted advantages that wealthy suburbanites enjoy. Democrats have not substituted cultural liberalism for economic liberalism, but they have been treading gently around policies that have long reinforced the deep place-based inequalities within their metro coalition.

Democrats have also attempted a balancing act on issues related to race and ethnicity, even as their voting base has become increasingly diverse. A precondition for Democrats' cross-class coalition has been the growing racial liberalism of white Americans living in large metro areas. This has allowed Democrats to attract affluent white voters while also benefiting from the strong allegiance of voters of color, including Black voters and recent Asian and Hispanic immigrants and their children. But Democratic elites remain acutely aware that foregrounding the racial justice demands of aligned voters and groups could split their coalition or add fuel to conservative attacks on the party. Democratic leaders did not need to hear Steve Bannon tell a reporter in 2017, "I want [Democrats] to talk about racism every day" (Klein 2017), to recognize these grave threats to building and maintaining a coalition wide enough to overcome the representational biases they face. An ambitious agenda that prioritizes economics is in part a response to these risks—not just because it keeps the focus on potentially unifying aims, but also because big, near-universal economic plans provide scope for directing resources to voters of color without framing policy primarily in racial terms. As we shall see, Democrats have tailored their agenda both to avoid alienating affluent suburbanites and to ameliorate material inequalities that disproportionately affect racial and ethnic minorities as well as women. With both aims, their strategy has involved centering big economic programs that can credibly offer much to many. Here again, policy curation has served as an essential form of coalition management.

In the next section, we show just how pivotal affluent suburbanites now are to the Democratic Party's economically bifurcated voting base. Then we lay out our argument for why, despite arguments and expectations suggesting a shift to cultural issues, the national party has proved able to advance an increasingly bold economic agenda—one that is both left-leaning and given top priority by party elites. The two sections that follow substantiate our argument, focusing first on the party's positions in platforms and on Twitter and then on its federal policy actions. We conclude by considering why

Democrats have taken this course, why they are not perceived as having done so, and why, at this fraught juncture for American democratic capitalism, political scientists could learn much from closer examination of the rich world's largest center-left party.

Democrats' Suburban Turn

The Democrats' growing reliance on affluent suburbs reflects two key trends. The first—common to rich democracies but particularly important in the United States—is the rise of the knowledge economy, where intangible assets like intellectual property and skills have superseded physical capital as a driver of growth. Success in the knowledge economy rests in considerable part on the "agglomeration effects" that occur when firms and workers are packed into urban hubs. This transformation has elevated the economic significance of metro centers with dense concentrations of knowledge workers. Meanwhile, rural places and small towns have been left behind, buffeted by the decline of employment in sectors exposed to global competition and technological change. This transformation has also changed the voting base of left-of-center parties. Though mostly affluent, college-educated workers are generally progressive as well, at least on cultural issues, and they have become an increasingly vital voting bloc for parties once associated with blue-collar work.

The second trend—more distinctive to the United States—is the growing disadvantage that center-left parties face as their voters concentrate in metro areas. Other democracies with majoritarian systems, such as Canada and Britain, also impose a representational penalty on metro-based parties—a density tax, so to speak—because left parties squander so many votes with big victories in urban districts (Rodden 2019). However, the American political system is unusually disadvantageous to metro representation. Controlled by partisan officials at the state level, the U.S. districting process is prone to gerrymandering by the non-metro party, which has added to Democrats' geographic disadvantage in the House, as well as in state legislatures. More important, the Senate starkly overrepresents less populated states. Over the past quarter century, Democrats have struggled to gain Senate majorities despite consistently representing states with a majority of the population. The Electoral College also penalizes populous states, albeit to a much smaller degree. Finally, the association between population density and partisanship is higher in the United States than in other majoritarian democracies (Taylor et al. 2023), further disadvantaging the metro-based Democratic Party.

Because of these interwoven trends, the contemporary American political economy contains a "Density Paradox." On one hand, there are growing rewards for density in the American *economy*. On the other, there are growing penalties for it in American *politics*. The metro places that elect Democrats are advantaged economically

but disadvantaged electorally—and hence so too is the Democratic Party.

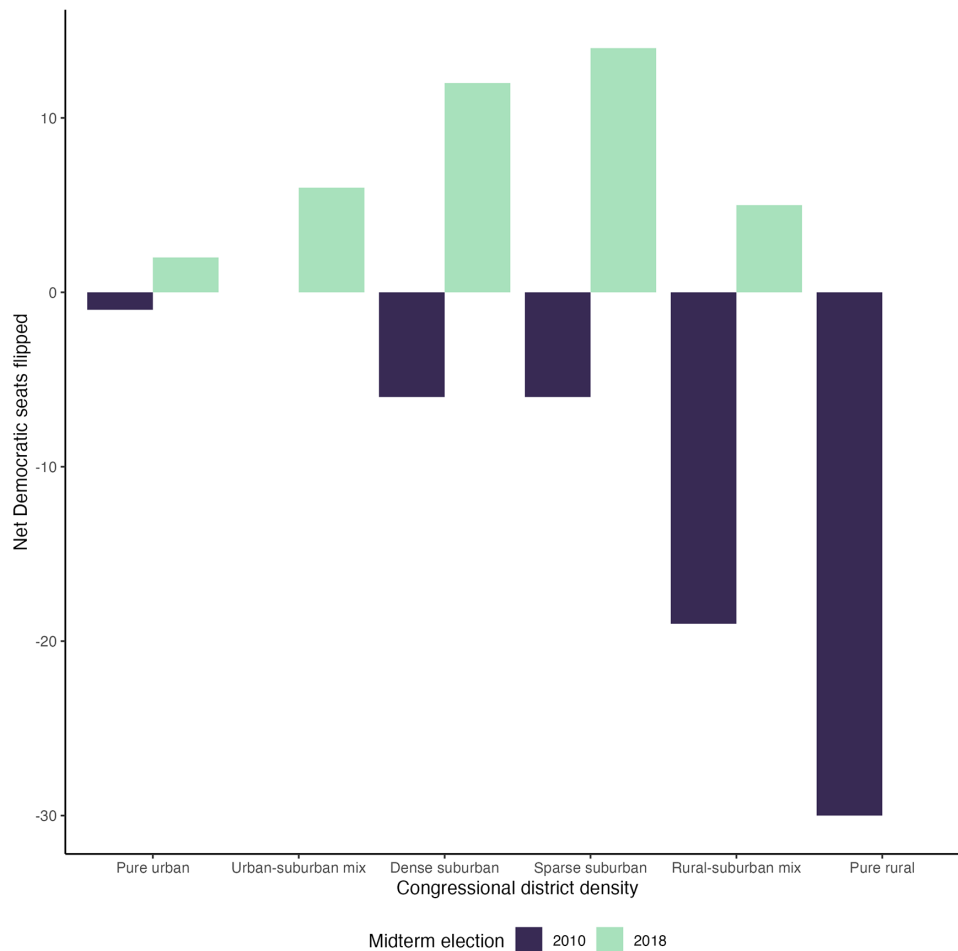
All this has made the Democrats’ growing reliance on prosperous metro areas both necessary and consequential. The party’s base has long been in cities, but the party has dramatically expanded its reach into less dense suburban areas that are economically integrated with major urban centers. Democrats’ suburban inroads reflect their growing support from college-educated white voters, as well as the diversification of the suburbs as voters of color have moved there. Outside of dense metro areas, support for Democrats has plummeted, particularly among white voters without a college degree.

This can be seen most clearly in partisan control of House districts (Hacker et al. 2023). Since 2008, Democrats have lost rural districts and won suburban ones (Montgomery 2018), doing particularly well in the suburbs of major metropolitan areas (figure 1). Democrats

now represent 24 of the 25 highest-income congressional districts (Proximity One 2022)—a striking change from the past (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). In the Senate, roughly 80% of Democrats represent states where at least a plurality of residents live in suburban counties—up from less than half in 1992 (Hopkins 2019, 10). At the presidential level, the Democratic candidate now wins places that produce the lion’s share of the nation’s output: the 1 in 6 counties that backed Biden in 2020 are responsible for 71% of GDP (Muro et al. 2020). If metros are ranked by total output, Biden won 43 of the top 50, including every one of the top 24 (Brownstein 2023).

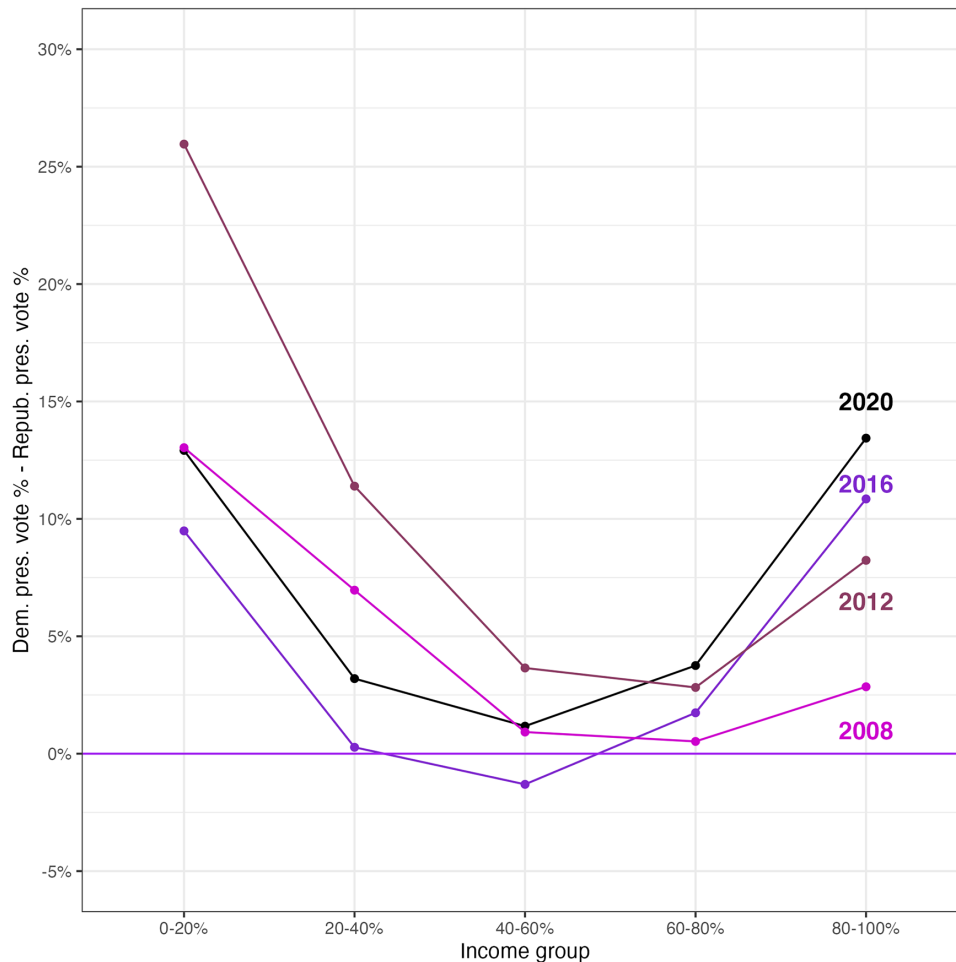
Given Democrats’ historical identity as the party of “the little guy,” the most striking result of this shift is the growing share of highly affluent voters who back the party. Figure 2 uses data from the Cooperative Election Study (CES) (Kuriwaki 2022). By 2020, Democrats enjoyed roughly the same average vote margins (a 10–15 point

Figure 1
Democratic losses and gains in the 2010 and 2018 wave elections relative to district density



Note: This figure shows the net congressional seat gains by party in two wave elections, 2010 and 2018. It illustrates that Democratic losses in 2010 were concentrated in more rural districts while their gains in 2018 came from the suburbs. Data from the Bloomberg Congressional Density Index.

Figure 2
The percentage of voters by income group voting for the Democratic presidential candidate versus the Republican presidential candidate over time



Note: The figure shows that the top 20% of voters by income have increasingly preferred the Democratic presidential candidate from 2008 through 2020. Over that time span, the income distribution of the Democratic voting coalition is increasingly “U-shaped.” Reproduced from Zacher 2023. Data from Cooperative Election Study. Survey weights are used.

edge) among voters in the top income quintile as they did among voters in the bottom quintile.

Nationally, Democrats command a multi-racial, cross-class coalition grounded in metro America that has allowed them to win the popular vote in every presidential election but one over the past thirty years. Because of the Density Paradox, however, these national majorities are no guarantee of governing power. To gain that, Democrats need to win the less densely populated peripheries of fast-growing cities. These suburbs shifted decisively toward Democrats in 2018 and provided the difference again in 2020, particularly in the close races that gave Democrats their razor-thin Senate majority (Frey 2020). In 2022, Democrats avoided the large midterm losses expected of the party holding the White House because they “largely retained their winning 2020 coalition in heavily contested races” (Catalist 2023).

If Democratic leaders want to win power, they must tailor their appeals and legislation to bridge the growing Blue Divide. How they do so is our next topic.

Bridging the Blue Divide

According to both received wisdom and recent scholarship, a center-left party that comes to rely on voters who are well-off, college-educated, and metro-based will be electorally pressured to make two strategic pivots: first, from economic to cultural and identity appeals (the appeals that most resonate with these generally culturally and racially liberal voters) and, second, from an active-government redistributive agenda toward a more moderate economic approach (since affluent voters are generally more skeptical of such an agenda). And, indeed, in the early years of the Democratic Party’s suburbanization,

these expectations seem to have been met—at least with regard to economic policy. Scholars have amply documented the party’s transit toward middle-of-the-road “New Democrat” positions on regulation and redistribution in the 1990s, as evidenced by President Clinton’s embrace of welfare reform, NAFTA, and financial deregulation and his famous declaration that “the era of big government is over” (e.g., Mudge 2018; Hilton 2021; Kazin 2022; Geismer 2022).

In the last decade, however, Democratic elites have changed the script. In this section, we sketch out the main reasons why a stepped-up economic liberalism has proved attractive and viable for the Democratic Party, despite the party’s growing reliance on affluent suburban voters.

The Argument in Brief

What do we mean by a “stepped-up economic liberalism”? In a nutshell, we argue that national Democrats in power have moved toward an economic agenda that is both bolder (involving more spending and more active government shaping of markets) and broader (covering more issues, including some like family, industrial, and antitrust policy not previously given priority). A number of the biggest developments have involved “predistribution” (Hacker 2011), in which active government efforts are designed to reduce inequality in the market, among other aims, rather than redistribute income or wealth after the fact. Examples include efforts to encourage labor union formation, discourage corporate concentration, and use “industrial policy” to create clean-energy jobs. In their fiscal agenda, Democrats have also embraced a great deal of explicit redistribution to reduce poverty and inequality. By way of illustration, the expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) passed in early 2021, which Democrats unsuccessfully sought to extend in 2021–2022, reduced child poverty by more than one-third (Gould 2022).

Moreover, this bolder and broader agenda is not secondary to the party’s stances on cultural and identity issues. It is the centerpiece of both what Democratic elites have tried to do in power and how they present their governing aims. Indeed, one of our central findings is that Democrats have incorporated concerns about racial and gender inequalities directly into their economic program. In other words, Democrats’ stances *have* adapted to reflect their economically bifurcated multi-racial coalition, but a large part of this adaptation has occurred within their economic agenda (i.e., spending, taxing, and regulation) rather than via rhetoric or rights-based policy changes. To return to the CTC example, the credit’s huge expansion disproportionately reduced poverty among lower-income Black and Hispanic households even as it reached many middle-class households. Similarly, recent infrastructure, housing, and climate investments have been coupled with ambitious executive-branch initiatives designed to focus

benefits on economically and environmentally disadvantaged communities.

This observation brings us to our biggest theoretical departure from standard accounts. In explaining what parties do, analysts typically start at the micro-level. Party behavior, in these analyses, largely reflects shifting voter preferences. By contrast, we start at the macro-level. Voters often have competing and contradictory preferences, limited understanding of complex issues, and spotty awareness of what parties in government actually attempt to do. This gives parties strategic latitude (see, e.g., Bawn et al. 2012). Moreover, in a highly polarized context, parties may have considerable power to elide or finesse issues where key parts of their voting base are in conflict. For one, voters inclined to support their party—or, increasingly important, to *oppose* the other party (Iyengar et al. 2019)—are also inclined to stick with their party even when it pursues policies they dislike. For another, politicians themselves have increased incentives to act as “teams” when parties are polarized and in close competition for control of government (Lee 2016). This combination of mass and elite teammanship increases the power of parties as agenda setters. In the famous phrasing of Schattschneider (1960, 69), parties have the capacity to organize some issues “into politics while others are organized out.”

For today’s Democrats, both factors are at play. There is less division over economic policy within the party’s U-shaped voting base than typically assumed—in part, because of genuine interest convergence on various kinds of expanded public spending and regulation; in part, because of partisan teammanship. At the same time, party elites have considerable capacity to develop positions and policies that sidestep truly divisive matters. This capacity reflects not just the agenda-setting power that party elites enjoy in a highly polarized two-party system, but also the degree to which the complex multi-venue American policy landscape allows national policymakers to obscure or evade contested issues. We take up each of these points in turn.

Democrats’ Muted Class Divide

Democrats are an increasingly class-riven party. But it is easy to overstate how far the party’s affluent suburban voters are from the rest of the party on economic policy issues. Recent scholarship on the knowledge economy is instructive (e.g., Ansell and Gingrich 2021; Xu 2023). With the rise of agglomeration hubs, this work argues, shared interests based on co-location diminish the class divide between poorer and richer voters. In the context of metro economies, affluent voters may well support—or at least not oppose—considerable spending and redistribution to improve the economic environment or quality of life of the places where they live.

On top of this interest-based convergence, there is the powerful pressure of partisanship. Opinion polls show much greater gaps between the parties on economic policy than within the Democratic Party between richer and poorer voters. Whether this reflects true interest convergence or party-motivated beliefs, rich Democratic voters are at least superficially supportive of relatively high levels of spending and redistribution (e.g., Maks-Solomon and Rigby 2020). Add to this the power of *negative* or *affective* polarization—support for a party because it is not its opponent—and affluent suburban Democrats may have considerable motive to go along with the party program.

To be sure, there are limits to this support, which is why agenda setting and policy design are so important. In particular, we should expect greater opposition to redistribution among affluent Democrats if and when policies impose substantial and visible *costs* on them. Loss aversion is a potent force in politics (Weaver 1986). It is particularly potent when costs are concentrated on highly attentive voters in similar circumstances who are co-located—which well describes suburban voters.

This constraint is most obviously relevant for taxation. While lower-income voters are attracted to spending initiatives, higher-income voters are hesitant to fund them. Careful parsing of opinion data, as well as analysis of redistributive state referenda, suggests that affluent Democrats are much less enthusiastic about economic policies when they think they must finance them through higher taxes (Zacher 2022). Moreover, there is ample evidence that Democratic elites recognize this risk. In 2020, Joe Biden ran for president with a pledge to avoid raising taxes on households with incomes above \$400,000. This \$400,000 level—essentially ruling out new taxes on all but the richest two percent of Americans—was up from the already-high level that Barack Obama proposed in his 2008 run: \$250,000 (around \$300,000 in 2020 dollars). This rising no-new-taxes threshold reflects the party's shifting class profile and poses a real constraint on more progressive tax policies and the amount that can be raised for redistribution.

Here again, though, the magnitude of this constraint can easily be overstated. A signal factor to consider is America's remarkable economic inequality. Compared with other rich democracies, wealth and income are far more concentrated at the very top of the economic ladder in the United States. An ironic consequence of this hyper-concentration is that policymakers do not actually have to tax most top-decile households to raise substantial sums; enhanced taxation on corporations and the very rich is enough.

These opportunities have proved especially fertile for Democrats, because Republicans have repeatedly enacted large tax cuts focused on business and the wealthy—tax cuts that Democrats can trim back if they gain power. In 2021, Democratic plans rested heavily on repealing many of the GOP's 2017 tax cuts, which were highly skewed toward

corporations and the rich. As we shall see, the Biden administration's most ambitious proposals—which called for roughly \$4.5 trillion in new spending over the 2022–2031 decade and allowed a considerable degree of redistribution, alongside major predistribution efforts designed to create better-paying jobs—were more or less fully financed despite honoring Biden's \$400,000 threshold. Democrats proposed having cake and eating it too, offering more spending for everyone while promising to protect all but the richest voters and corporations from higher taxes.

The Specter of Suburban Backlash

Taxation, however, is not the only policy area where Democrats risk alienating the affluent members of its new metro-based coalition. Wealthy suburbanites also benefit from a set of policies that reinforce the highly disparate public services and life chances that Americans experience based on where they live. Central to these privileges is local control over residential zoning and key public goods, such as K–12 education (Trounstine 2018; Weir and King 2021). In the context of stark racial and class segregation, these arrangements allow wealthy suburbanites to focus tax dollars on valued services they consume while limiting poorer households' access. In the language of critics, suburban autonomy fosters “opportunity hoarding” (e.g., Hanselm and Fiel 2017).

Frontally challenging such opportunity hoarding would almost certainly activate fierce resistance. Indeed, none other than Donald Trump highlighted this possibility in his failed reelection campaign. Courting newly Democratic suburban voters, Trump issued a highly racialized appeal in battleground states: “The cities are coming for you.” If Biden won, Trump claimed, Democrats would “destroy the beautiful suburbs.” Trump and HUD Secretary Ben Carson asserted that Democrats were “mak[ing] sure there is no escape” from “the crime and chaos [found] in Democrat-run cities” (Trump and Carson 2020).

Although these attacks largely fell flat, they signal two potential lines of fracture within Democrats' coalition. The first is racial. Democratic politicians now win substantial majority support from voters of color, while the GOP coalition has remained overwhelmingly white. The growth of racial liberalism among white Democrats has made it easier for party elites to manage their diverse base. Yet there is still resistance, especially among pivotal blocs of moderate white voters, to rhetoric and proposals that heavily emphasize racial inequalities.

The second potential line of fracture is geospatial, reflecting the fraught politics of local control. Though Trump highlighted crime, he also argued that Biden threatened to end restrictive zoning in the suburbs of major cities. There is considerable evidence that affluent metro dwellers are highly protective of these privileges even when they profess egalitarian and racially liberal values

(e.g., Marble and Nall 2021). Serious challenges to suburban opportunity hoarding—which not only hurts lower-income and non-white households, but also contributes to skyrocketing housing costs in metro America—would likely activate deep divisions within the Democratic electorate.

Here are a set of policies, then, that Democratic leaders have strong incentives to keep off the national agenda even if some segments of the party wish to address them. Fortunately for these leaders, this set of policies is largely managed at the local level and widely perceived to be a local responsibility. The link between these policies and racial and economic inequality is also relatively opaque to large swaths of voters. In other words, the localized, low-profile character of these policies facilitates party efforts to keep them far from the national party's core economic agenda, despite the profoundly negative effects that opportunity hoarding has on the party's less affluent voters.

In short, Democrats have adopted a certain kind of pocketbook politics. Rather than pivoting to cultural issues or moderating on economics overall, they have foregrounded an ambitious economic agenda that embraces activist government as well as substantial redistribution. Yet they have also carefully curated this agenda to limit the potential for backlash within their new metro electorate.

What They Say: Party Platforms and Leadership Rhetoric

The next two sections lay out the evidence for this argument, examining both positioning and policymaking—what Democrat elites say and what they do. We start with the most routinized, and arguably important, form of official communication that parties use to signal their priorities: the party platform.

Democratic Platforms, 1980–2020

Analyzing platforms has become something of a cottage industry (e.g., Schumacher et al. 2015; Malpas and Hilton 2021; Hopkins, Shickler, and Azazi 2022). We adopt a simple issue-based approach, drawing on the coding efforts of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019). As figure 3 shows, economic issues are the most frequent type of issue in Democratic platforms in every presidential year since 1980 and, indeed, comprise the (slim) majority of Democratic platforms throughout this period. There is a clear rise in the share of platforms devoted to cultural/identity issues in the mid-1990s and 2020—in both cases, mostly taking space once devoted to foreign affairs. So far, however, this shift has been modest. Economic issues still dominate. (Refer to the [online appendix](#) for details.)

Because the CAP coding is topic-based, we cannot evaluate substantive positions using it. Fortunately, we

can draw on the related coding effort of Malpas and Hilton (2021). Looking specifically at Democrats' economic agenda, they find the party has returned to a much more egalitarian stance since the 1990s. Indeed, the party now has more progressive stances on social insurance and other public programs and on pro-labor policies than at any point since 1984. The party's support for programs targeting low-income groups has also risen sharply. The notable exception to this leftward economic shift, they argue, is support for redistributive taxation, which was lower in 2020 than in any year since 1992. As noted, Joe Biden ran for president promising he would not raise taxes on all but the highest-income households, which the 2020 platform echoed.

The 2020 Unity Task Force as a Marker of Democratic Priorities

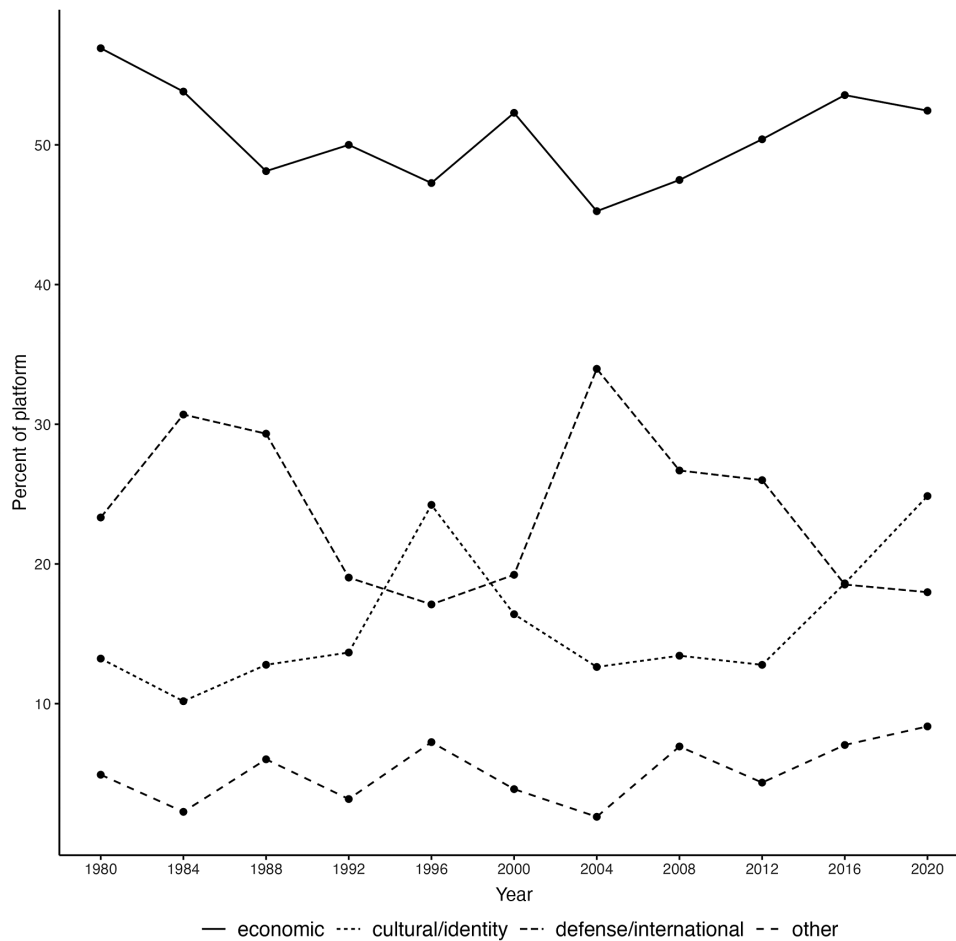
By many measures, then, the 2020 Democratic platform was focused and unusually ambitious on economic issues. We can see this pattern, too, in the "Unity Task Force" documents that the Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders campaigns agreed to at a time when it was clear that Biden would win the nomination but Sanders had very strong support. These documents would, in many ways, become a blueprint for Democrats' agenda in 2021 and thus deserve special attention.

Two features stand out. First, the task force's expansive recommendations were overwhelmingly economic in character. By page count, just over three-quarters of the documents focused on economic issues, including climate change, education, and health care. Second, these economic priorities emphasized broad social programs and combined redistributive efforts with predistributive ones designed to boost wages and unionization, including in low-wage sectors like child care. Prominent in the task force materials—and in Democrats' post-2020 plans—was the embrace of the once-unfashionable idea of industrial policy, the support of particular jobs and sectors with social and environmental benefits through targeted federal investments and rules. Moreover, these measures were often designed to be of special benefit to the least advantaged workers, who are disproportionately workers of color (and, in fields like elder and child care, *women* of color). This embedding of concerns about racial injustice within universalistic economic policies can be seen throughout the recommendations and was echoed in the Democrats' platform.

Analyzing Party Communications via Twitter, 2015–2022

Although platforms are important agenda-setting documents, they are not particularly effective at conveying a party's priorities to citizens. To understand how a party

Figure 3
The percentage of the Democratic Party’s platform focused on key policy topics



Note: The figure shows that while the share of Democrats’ platform dedicated to economic issues has fluctuated, it has remained around 50% for this entire period. Data from the Comparative Agendas Project; refer to the [online appendix](#) for further discussion of how subtopics were aggregated.

conveys its image beyond its most elite segments, we must look elsewhere.

The place we have chosen to look is Twitter (now called X). Every day, politicians use Twitter to advertise, take positions, and claim credit (Mayhew 1974). Some, like Donald Trump (before he was kicked off the platform), see it as their primary medium. For most, it is a vital part of their communications strategy.

Twitter has three features that make it particularly useful for our analysis. First, it provides a great deal of relevant text; we analyzed 2,948,009 tweets from 353 Democratic members of Congress and the president, from January 2015 through December 2022. Second, tweets are linked to individual politicians. Third, and finally, because Twitter’s audience is disproportionately young, affluent, and college-educated, Twitter is arguably the medium most likely to pick up tailored appeals to more culturally liberal Democrats. In short, Twitter

communication represents a hard test for our argument that Democratic party elites emphasize economic liberalism. (Refer to the [online appendix](#) for more on our Twitter data collection and analysis and various sensitivity tests.)

The unit of analysis for our investigation is substantive three-word “n-grams” (hereafter “terms”), such as “Build Back Better.” We focus first on the most common terms used by the Democratic leadership: Presidents Obama and Biden, Speaker Pelosi, and Senate Majority Leaders Reid and Schumer. We look at both their personal and official accounts during the periods they occupied their official roles.

Table 1 shows the top ten terms in Democratic leadership tweets. As can be seen, all but one—“Roe v. Wade”—focus on Democrats’ economic agenda, and the top four (as well as two outside the top four) are references to specific economic proposals. While abortion stands out as the sole cultural issue in the top ten, its prominence should be viewed in the context of the Supreme Court’s

Table 1
Top Democratic and Republican leadership terms on Twitter, 2015–2022

	Democratic Leadership	Republican Leadership
1.	Build Back Better	fake news media
2.	Affordable Care Act	complete total endorsement
3.	American Rescue Plan	Make America Great
4.	Inflation Reduction Act	Paycheck Protection Program
5.	Bipartisan Infrastructure Law	tax cuts jobs
6.	Roe v. Wade	New York Times
7.	America's working families	men women uniform
8.	Americans' pre-existing conditions	Chinese Communist Party
9.	health care millions	sleepy Joe Biden
10.	affordable health care	American health care

Note: The table displays the top ten trigrams appearing in the tweets of the Democratic leadership (left) and the Republican Leadership (right). Each party's "leadership" encompasses all members of the party who occupy the role of House Speaker, House Minority Leader, Senate Majority Leader, Senate Minority Leader, or President. Tweets are included for leadership members only when they occupy these official roles. Refer to the [online appendix](#) for additional details of our analysis.

overruling of *Roe*. It would be strange if Democratic leaders did *not* discuss the demise of a fifty-year precedent of which the party had long affirmed support, especially given the unpopularity of the 2022 decision.

We get a clearer sense of how economic policy-focused Democratic leadership tweets are by comparing them with Republican leadership tweets. For the Republican leadership, we include President Trump; Speakers Boehner, Ryan, and McCarthy; and Majority Leader McConnell (again, only when they occupied these official roles). In the second column of [table 1](#), we show the top ten terms in these Republicans' tweets. The contrast could not be greater. With the exception of "Paycheck Protection Program," "tax cuts jobs," and "American health care" none of these terms concern Republicans' economic agenda, and the top Republican term is "fake news media." Though non-substantive, we included "complete total endorsement" as it captures a central feature of Republican tweets during the Trump presidency—their focus on general loyalty to Trump and the party as opposed to specific policy positions. (Also revealing: the party did not bother to write a new platform in 2020, recycling the 2016 one.)²

Comparing Different Segments of the Democratic Party

Party leaders have the strongest incentive and means to broadcast party appeals. Nonetheless, we are also interested in how much messaging diversity there is within the Democratic caucus. Are the leadership's priorities similar to those of other Democrats? How distinctive are the tweets of members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), which is often accused of pulling the party to the cultural left? Do members of Congress from more suburban or affluent districts tweet about distinctive issues?

[Table 2](#) replicates the format of [table 1](#) but with the top ten terms used by all Democrats in Congress in the right column. We also include alongside each term its ranking

by all Democrats (for the leadership's top terms) and the leadership (for Democrats' top terms). Among all Democrats, we find moderately more emphasis on social and cultural issues (in addition to "Roe v. Wade," "Martin Luther King"), as well as a reference to voting rights. We also find an economic proposal not in the leadership top ten: the Child Tax Credit. Overall, however, tweets from the full caucus remain heavily focused on Democrats' economic agenda, if somewhat less so than the leadership's tweets.

Of particular interest is whether we see distinctive rhetoric on Twitter among members of Congress from the suburban districts where recent Democratic gains have been concentrated. For this intra-party analysis, we look at the top 100 terms used by 1) all Democrats, 2) the Democratic leadership, 3) Democratic members from the poorest 50 party-controlled districts, 4) Democratic members from the CPC, 5) Democrats representing districts flipped in 2018, 6) Democratic members from suburban districts, and 7) Democratic members from the richest 50 party-controlled districts.³

[Figure 4](#) provides a picture of the relative frequency of tweet terms by issue area across groups. What stands out is the degree to which economic issues dominate all groups' top terms. For every group, the two core economic categories ("health care" and "economic") comprise 45% or more of all terms. Among all Democrats, health care is the most frequent single topic. Thus, despite the incentives to use Twitter to fight the culture wars, Democratic platforms and Democratic politicians' use of Twitter tell a similar story: economic issues are front and center.

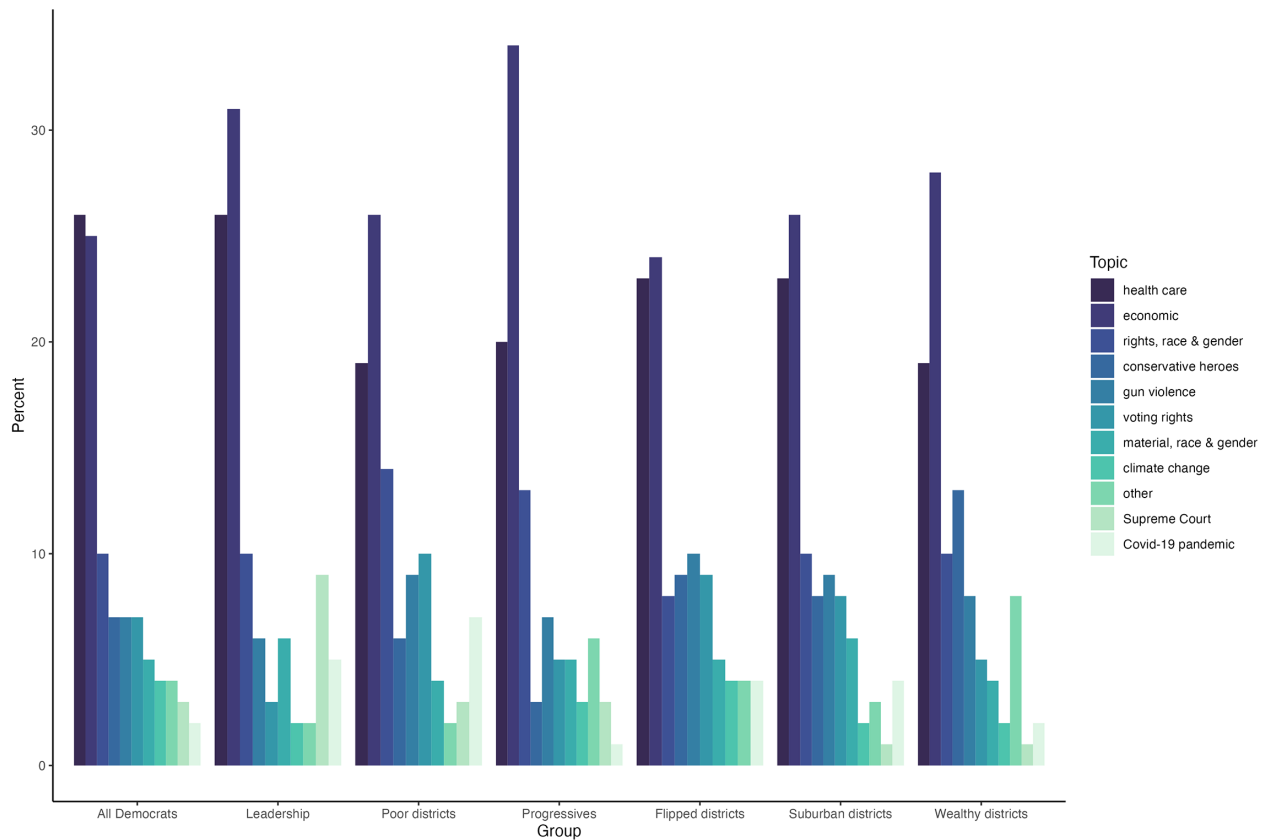
Nonetheless, there is revealing variation across groups. Democrats from wealthier districts talk positively about the police, military, and other conservative-coded entities more than any other group (e.g., "keep communities safe," "brave men [and] women"). Democrats in the CPC talk more about the party's economic proposals (e.g., "Child

Table 2
Top Democratic leadership and caucus terms on Twitter, 2015–2022

	Democratic Leadership	All Democrats
1.	Build Back Better (3)	American Rescue Plan (3)
2.	Affordable Care Act (2)	Affordable Care Act (2)
3.	American Rescue Plan (1)	Build Back Better (1)
4.	Inflation Reduction Act (42)	affordable health care (10)
5.	Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (9)	Roe v. Wade (6)
6.	Roe v. Wade (5)	Child Tax Credit (32)
7.	America's working families (587)	Voting Rights Act (23)
8.	Americans' pre-existing conditions (62)	public health crisis (43)
9.	health care millions (76)	Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (5)
10.	affordable health care (4)	Martin Luther King (82)

Note: The table displays the top ten trigrams appearing in the tweets of the Democratic leadership (left) and all Democrats in the House and Senate (right). The parenthetical numbers show the ranking of each top-ten trigram in the tweets of the other group (all Democrats and the Democratic leadership, respectively). Refer to the [online appendix](#) for additional details of our analysis.

Figure 4
Topics of Democrats' 100 most frequent terms on Twitter



Note: The figure illustrates the overwhelming centrality of economic issues in Democrats' tweets. Data from Twitter; refer to the [online appendix](#) for further discussion of how phrases were coded.

Tax Credit,” “student loan debt”)—an unexpected finding given the frequent assertion that it is the party’s left flank that is marching the caucus toward the cultural left. Truer to expectations, Democrats in the CPC also talk more about civil rights (our “rights, race & gender”

category). So too, however, do Democrats from the poorest districts. Indeed, despite the common argument that it is affluent progressives who emphasize racial justice and voting rights, these topics are discussed much more frequently by Democrats representing poorer districts.

Related, the prominence of tweets about race and gender that emphasize *material* issues is also striking (e.g., “racial wealth gap,” “Paycheck Fairness Act”). So common were these tweets in fact that we separated them from those that framed racialized and gendered issues in terms of rights (e.g., “Women’s Health Protection [Act],” “civil rights movement”). The frequency of tweets in this “material, race & gender” category suggests that even on issues particularly relevant to key party-aligned social groups, Democrats’ tweets often embed identity-oriented issues within an economic focus.

Finally, Democrats representing districts flipped in 2018 most use terms focused on health care (e.g., “affordable health care,” “prescription drug costs”), followed by terms in the other economic categories. Here again, the modest variation across district types is less notable than the common emphasis on economic issues. We now consider what Democrats have done to act on these issues.

What They Do: The 2021–2022 Democratic Policy Agenda

The best way to identify parties’ priorities is to examine what they try to *do* when they have opportunities to govern. Twitter pronouncements and even party platforms are not binding commitments. Passing laws requires making hard trade-offs, marshaling allies, overcoming opponents, and risking voter backlash.

In this section, we examine the major federal policies that Democrats sought to implement in 2021–2022 when they enjoyed control (by a single Senate seat) of both Congress and the White House. To aid in our analysis, we draw on 38 elite interviews (described in the [online appendix](#)) with participants in and close observers of the process, including officials within the administration, Congress, and advocacy and interest groups.

We focus on the signature legislation of this period: a broad-ranging package of economic and social policies known as “Build Back Better” (BBB). BBB was an enormous initiative, dwarfing in proposed scope the early-2021 American Rescue Plan. It was also crafted largely without concessions to Republicans, making it ideal for assessing Democrats’ priorities and strategic choices. Moreover, Democrats were able to pursue this party-line approach only because of their increased support from suburban voters – signaled by the party’s narrow but crucial victories in the two Georgia Senate run-off elections held in January 2021 – and thus had strong reason to be attentive to those voters.

The Core Elements of the Democrats’ 2020–2021 Agenda

What became Build Back Better started with the Biden administration’s announcement in the spring of 2021 of two distinct packages: the “American Jobs Plan,” focusing

on both physical and human infrastructure; and the “American Families Plan,” focusing on education, health, and family policies. These two plans together subsumed a striking number of the policy ideas contained in the Unity Task Force documents discussed in the last section. By the standards of recent American history—and by “recent,” we mean the past half-century—the scale of these initiatives was unprecedented. Indeed, this brief summary necessarily excludes numerous provisions that would be considered major pieces of legislation if enacted on their own.

The American Jobs Plan (AJP) called for \$2 trillion in new spending over eight years—approximately 1% of GDP per year. The plan included \$621 billion in traditional infrastructure spending (roads, bridges, ports, rail systems, mass transit, etc.). It contained \$300 billion in support of manufacturing, \$213 billion for affordable housing, and another \$380 billion for research and development, the electricity grid, and nationwide high-speed broadband. Many of these provisions were designed to encourage a transition away from fossil fuels. The plan also included \$400 billion in “human infrastructure” spending for home- and community-based health and elder care. These last provisions, like many other elements of the plan, were designed to generate higher-quality jobs and opportunities to unionize (Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget 2021). Indeed, as noted, a major element of these proposals was their embrace of industrial policy—a commitment not well captured in budget numbers.

The American Families Plan (AFP) outlined a very large expansion of federal social policy, at an estimated cost of \$1.8 trillion over ten years. Its proposals would have improved access to higher education (two years of free community college and considerably more generous Pell Grants) and health care (extension of Affordable Care Act subsidies, expanded eligibility for Medicaid, and notable improvements to Medicare). The proposal also promised a dramatic expansion of family policies—a domain in which the United States has been an extreme laggard among wealthy nations (Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015). It would have introduced two years of universal pre-kindergarten, a major new program of child care subsidies (income-tested, but reaching far into the middle class), along with support for better pay for child-care workers, and a new program guaranteeing paid family and medical leave—initiatives that together accounted for more than one-third of the \$1.8 trillion total. Here again, the price tag does not fully convey the envisioned impact. Democratic policymakers spoke of remaking the “care economy” so workers (disproportionately female and of color) gained better jobs as government boosted demand for their services—predistribution and redistribution went hand in hand.

Finally, the AFP called for making the CTC fully refundable (which, as pointed out, reduced child poverty

Table 3
Major spending and tax proposals under unified Democratic control (share of GDP)

Policy Domain	1993-1994	2009-2010	2021-2022	Notes
Recovery/Relief	2.4%	6.2%	8.2%	1993 stimulus blocked in Senate
Health/Social Policy	7.0%	2.6%	8.0%	1993 and 2009 health plans; 2021 AFP
Infrastructure	1.3%	0.3%	8.8%	1993 and 2010 presidential plans; 2021 AJP
Climate	-2.1%	5.7%	(incl. above)	1993 BTU tax; 2009 cap-and-trade
Tax Changes	-6.6%	-3.4%	-5.9%	2009 ACA revenues; 2021 corporate
(negative numbers indicate revenue increases)	—	-5.9%	-6.6%	2009 cap-and-trade; 2021 individual 2009 Obama campaign plan
Student Loans	2.6%	0.2%	2.2%	1993 student savings; 2009, 2021 debt relief
Proposed Spending	13.3%	15.1%	27.2%	Includes debt forgiveness
Proposed Taxes	-8.7%	-13.4%	-12.5%	
President/ Democratic Margins in Congress	Clinton H: 258-176 S: 57-43	Obama H: 257-178 S: 60-40	Biden H: 222-213 S: 50-50	60-40 Senate majority under Obama from 7/2009 to 2/2010; 50-50 Senate majority under Biden after 1/5/2021

Notes: The table displays the estimated budgetary impact of major Democratic presidential or congressional leadership initiatives within the designated policy domains as initially proposed. All estimates are expressed as a percentage of 1993, 2009, or 2021 GDP, depending on the two-year time period covered. Negative numbers indicate revenue increases. Estimates may not sum to reported totals due to rounding. Refer to the [online appendix](#) for additional details.

by more than one-third in 2021) while substantially increasing its value, as well as increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit for households without children. Expanded temporarily in 2021, the Biden administration now proposed that the CTC would remain at its generous new levels until 2025, although Democrats clearly hoped they would be able to keep moving that date back once voters became accustomed to receiving the benefit.

In combination, these proposals constituted the most extensive package of economic benefits for low- and middle-income families in a majority party's legislative agenda since at least the 1960s. Certainly, the envisioned spending dwarfed that contemplated during the last two periods in which Democrats controlled Congress (with significantly larger majorities) alongside a newly elected Democratic president: 1993–1994 and 2009–2010. [Table 3](#) compares the share of GDP devoted to the party's initial "recovery" package and its major domestic spending proposals during each of these three intervals, as well as the associated increase in federal revenues. We sought to find the earliest reliable estimates of proposals' budgetary effects, since many of these initiatives were revised on their way to defeat or enactment and we wanted to capture Democrats' initial aspirations to the fullest extent possible. These estimates are subject to various forms of uncertainty and error, but the differences shown in [table 2](#) are large enough to allay concerns about the unavoidable imprecision of such estimates: the 2021–2022 Democratic agenda collectively constituted more than 27% of GDP over a decade, compared with roughly 15% in 2009–2010 and 13% in 1993–1994. The 2021–2022 gap between spending and revenues is largely explained by Democrats' decision not to fund the recovery package to increase its stimulative effect—itsself a marker of the change in party elites' thinking.

As large as these differences are, they do not account for the full shift in Democrats' preferred policies, as they do not consider the increased commitment to redistribution through industrial policy, unionization, and the like. However, [table 3](#) does show the estimated value of the student debt relief pursued through executive action by presidents Obama and Biden and through legislation under President Clinton. Proposed student debt relief adds more than 2% of GDP (over ten years) to the spending total in 2021–2022.

The Highly Redistributive Structure of BBB

Examining the distributional profile of these big initiatives provides further evidence of Democrats' priorities. Though the overall distributional impact was never quantified, BBB was clearly highly redistributive. On the revenue side, as noted, tax increases were focused on corporations and the very rich. In the context of American inequality, these progressive tax hikes were sufficient to fund nearly all of the Democrats' ambitious proposals.⁴ On the spending side, several of the proposals had large poverty-reducing impacts, particularly the more generous CTC. Medicaid expansion was another priority item focused on lower-income voters, one that, like the CTC, promised disproportionate benefits for Black and Hispanic households. Many of the other social policy initiatives—including unprecedented investments in child care and housing—were designed to channel most of their benefits to the bottom half of the income distribution while still providing some benefits to upper-middle class voters critical to the party's recent victories (refer to the [online appendix](#) for more details on the benefit and eligibility structure of these initiatives).

This distributional strategy could be called “targeting within *near-universalism*” (cf. Skocpol 1991), since these initiatives generally offered disproportionate benefits to low-income households and phased out at the highest income levels, but also offered notable benefits (with no new taxes) to more affluent voters. Nor was the redistributive impact limited to the policy benefits contained in the American Families Plan. Much of the American Jobs Plan was designed to foster good-paying jobs for less-advantaged workers, particularly those without college degrees. Again, the breadth and boldness of Democrats’ proposals cannot be properly assessed without considering both predistribution and redistribution and, in particular, the newfound enthusiasm for industrial policy in the energy and care sectors.

What Happened to BBB

Most of these ambitious plans would not survive the legislative gauntlet. Some of the infrastructure initiatives found their way into the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law that Democrats carved off from the AJP. As might be expected, the compromises needed to gain Republican support produced a smaller bill with far less capacity to produce new working-class jobs and predistribute income. Spending was not only radically reduced (to a total of \$550 billion in new expenditures) but stripped of most of the features—for care, climate, and housing—that departed from conventional infrastructure spending and promised significant redistribution. The progressive sources of finance were also eliminated.

Democrats repackaged their social policy agenda to include some of the initiatives dropped from the infrastructure law. A slimmed-down \$2.2 trillion BBB bill passed the House in November 2021. All Republicans opposed it. The legislation contained concessions to moderate Democrats, notably a restoration of much of the state and local tax (SALT) deduction, which would benefit affluent residents of high-tax states and add nearly \$300 billion to the price tag. (The one Democrat to vote against the bill did so to protest this costly concession.) This was the clearest example of members of Congress from affluent districts using their pivotal position in the legislature to provide special benefits to the richest members of the party’s metro coalition.

In trimming spending, House Democrats relied largely on scheduling many provisions to “sunset” after one to six years. This was a way to reduce top-line spending for the bill without ditching programs entirely. The hope was that once implemented it would be possible to extend them—an increasingly common practice in Congress. At the same time, the House bill retained extensive funding for many priorities from the original plan: a trimmed paid leave benefit, affordable housing, expanded home care through Medicaid, and a new hearing benefit through Medicare.

Although the CTC received only a one-year boost in generosity, BBB made it fully refundable. This permanent change promised on its own to reduce child poverty by an estimated 20% (Marr, Cox, and Sherman 2021).

Virtually none of these provisions survived. Needing all 50 Democrats to pass a reconciliation bill in the Senate, party leaders knew that Arizona’s Krysten Sinema and West Virginia’s Joe Manchin were pivotal. Sinema’s focus was taxes: her resistance forced the removal of some of the most progressive revenue measures, including almost all of those that would have raised taxes on the richest taxpayers (aside from heightened IRS enforcement of existing law). The final bill’s finances would come mostly from modestly higher corporate taxes, stepped-up IRS enforcement, and budgetary savings from new regulatory efforts to lower Medicare drug prices. By contrast, Manchin’s focus was the content and scale of spending.⁵ He also raised objections to a number of the most redistributive social provisions, such as the CTC, expressing concerns about work incentives. In the end, his opposition to these provisions proved decisive.

After a torturous journey, Democrats passed a radically slimmed down reconciliation bill, called the Inflation Reduction Act, in August 2022. A House bill that had called for almost \$2.2 trillion in new spending gave way to a public law that was estimated to spend just under \$500 billion (while also reducing the deficit by a little under \$300 billion). Much of the climate agenda originally contained in the AJP found its way into the stripped-down law, albeit with concessions to the fossil fuel industry that Manchin demanded. Outside of some health care provisions, though, *all* the social policy initiatives—which we have noted envisioned disproportionate benefits for lower-income Americans of color and women—were dropped.

Half Empty or 96% Full?

Autopsies of the BBB initiatives have often described it as an instance of overreach and hubris, criticizing Biden and Schumer for being preoccupied with satisfying the party’s progressives (e.g., Stokols and Haberkorn 2022). Many of these analyses focus on counterfactual reasoning concerning the prospects for a more successful legislative path. Lost in these postmortems, yet critical to our task of understanding the evolution of the party and its priorities, is sufficient recognition that the *overwhelming* majority of congressional Democrats supported expansive and redistributive economic initiatives and, moreover, were eager to make these efforts the centerpiece of the party’s agenda.⁶

What dictated trimming were the slim Democratic majorities in both the House and (especially) the Senate. As emphasized already, just two out of 50 members of the Senate caucus openly resisted the BBB outline that passed the House. To illustrate how much the Density Paradox

matters here, these 48 Senators represent more than 55% of the nation's population. It is possible that more opposition lurked in the shadows, with other moderates choosing to hide behind the public stances of Manchin and Sinema. In our elite interviews, we floated this hypothetical. Almost without exception respondents were extremely skeptical. As one put it, "There were a solid 48. And Sinema was gettable. Most Democrats were working together for a common purpose."⁷

In the end, what is most striking about BBB is not that it fell (just) short—that is what would be predicted given the Density Paradox and Congress's tendency toward gridlock. The real surprise is that Democrats pushed such a robust agenda, despite the strong arguments leading one to expect otherwise from an increasingly upscale and suburban party.

Avoiding Intra-Coalitional Conflict

Where the influence of the Democrats' shifting electoral coalition can best be seen is in what their economic agenda contained—and what it did not. We have already mentioned taxation. Democrats were careful to ensure that their proposals would not impose visible taxes—indeed, visible losses of any kind—on their new suburban voters. Democrats stuck to their commitment not to impose new taxes on those making less than \$400,000. They acceded in the House to the expensive demands, advanced mainly by Democrats in suburban districts of high-tax states like California, New Jersey, and New York, that the SALT deduction be partially restored. They replaced the "cap and trade" initiative pushed by the last Democratic majority, which would have increased energy prices, with large subsidies for renewable energy that would (at least in time) lower them.

The nation's stark levels of inequality, along with the top-heavy GOP tax cuts of 2017, facilitated all of these choices. These circumstances made it easier to target ambitious revenue goals on narrow (if politically powerful) constituencies. To an extent that has received insufficient notice, these opportunities played an essential role in reconciling tensions within the Democratic coalition. They made it possible for Democrats to simultaneously plan enormous expenditures, more or less pay for them, and protect the overwhelming majority of the electorate from direct tax increases.

Democrats also successfully navigated the other big threat to their coalition: the system of suburban opportunity hoarding associated with local control. There is growing recognition of the critical role these arrangements play in sustaining racial and economic inequality. One might imagine Democrats would feel pressure to confront them, especially after the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. Yet in fact Democrats were able to fashion strongly redistributive proposals while almost entirely skirting this set of

issues. The one instance where they very gingerly approached these issues clearly evidenced their caution. Rather than placing any restrictions on exclusionary zoning laws, the Biden administration proposed a fund, modeled on the Obama administration's "Race to the Top" education initiative, that would have rewarded municipalities for *voluntarily* reducing their zoning restrictions. This \$5 billion provision made it into the House's BBB legislation but, like all of the bill's major housing components, disappeared from the Inflation Reduction Act.

More broadly, Democrats' strategy of "targeting within near-universalism" allowed them to promise disproportionate benefits to less advantaged Americans while also delivering benefits well into the middle class. Party leaders repeatedly emphasized to potentially disgruntled members of the caucus that such plans were especially valuable to low-wage minority workers and their households. Clearly, though, this strategy also had the virtue from their standpoint of tackling racial inequality without rhetorically centering race. Revealingly, both President Biden and party leaders in Congress gave the two biggest racialized issues in the platform and Unity Task Force documents—immigration and criminal justice—a back seat relative to the party's core economic proposals in 2021–2022.

In seeking to bridge the Blue Divide, Democratic elites were bound by the strictures of the budget process. The sole way of bypassing the 60-vote requirement to overcome a GOP filibuster, the budget process also had a less obvious advantage: it kept the focus on new spending that plausibly offered something to all parts of the coalition. In our interviews, Democrats close to the process said that leadership efforts hinged on the carrot-focused strategy just discussed, for which the budget process was ideally suited.

It might be argued that the budget process, rather than any overarching strategy about issue priorities, is also why Democratic elites focused so heavily on economics. Non-economic policies would have fallen outside the rules. Indeed, Democratic leaders dropped a modest set of pro-immigration policies from their reconciliation package after the Senate parliamentarian said they could not be pursued through the budget process. (For the same reason, they also dropped a hike in the minimum wage.) House Democrats did pass several high-profile proposals that were doomed in the Senate. These "show votes" included both economic bills that weren't included in the budget—notably, the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act to foster unionization and the Paycheck Fairness Act, designed to reduce pay differentials between men and women—and non-economic legislation, including a voting rights bill and (after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe*) two bills designed to preserve and expand access to abortion. But House leaders focused on legislation that could be enacted, which necessarily favored measures that

met the requirements for the budget process and thereby encouraged a tax and spending agenda.

For the most part, however, the budget process seems to have facilitated what Democrats already planned to do. After all, BBB hewed closely to the 2020 platform, and Democratic tweets also put priority on economics. Moreover, Democratic leaders pursued big economic bills *outside* the budget process when they foresaw bipartisan support, indicating again the priority they placed on them. (In addition to the infrastructure law, they also brokered the CHIPS and Science Act—another industrial policy-inflected law.) According to the list of “important enactments” assembled by Mayhew (2023), six of the nine domestic enactments of 2021–2022 (excluding defense-related laws) are economic, including all three of the “extraordinarily important” ones: the recovery package, infrastructure law, and IRA.⁸ This is very much a list focused on economic issues, and it would have been much longer had Democrats gotten more of what they wanted.

Most important, the constraint posed by the filibuster cannot explain why the economic initiatives that Democrats pursued through the budget process were so big and left-tilted. The reconciliation process opened a window for a Democrats-only bill. To understand what Democrats tried to push through that window, we need to see the caucus’ near-universal support for putting a very high priority on a set of economic initiatives that were both broader and bolder than anything the party had pursued in decades.

Conclusion

The rise of geographic economic and partisan polarization has fundamentally changed the American political landscape. As the United States has shifted from manufacturing to an urban-oriented knowledge economy, denser metro areas have grown richer—and more Democratic. Meanwhile, less dense locales outside of metro America have lost economic ground—and more tightly embraced the GOP.

These transformations have generated new challenges for both of America’s two major parties as their coalitions have become more economically heterogeneous. The GOP’s evolution has received considerable attention, the Democrats’ less. Yet the Democrats’ efforts to manage unprecedented cleavages within their coalition deserve careful scrutiny, for they reveal a great deal about contemporary American politics.

A central challenge for Democrats, we have argued, is the Density Paradox: the dense places where Democrats do well are thriving economically but are disadvantaged politically in our territorial system of representation. This is why Democrats’ efforts to reach into affluent suburbs are so important to the party’s ability to gain and hold power. But building a broader metro coalition has its own

challenge: bridging a growing Blue Divide between the affluent and struggling segments of the party’s electorate.

Many analysts have argued that the deep cleavages within the party are forcing a pivot to cultural and identity issues—issues of appeal to the party’s more affluent voters and on which it may be easier for diverse interests to find common cause. This argument rests on a reasonable set of propositions about party strategy. It also comports with a fair amount of comparative evidence about both right and left parties. Moreover, it is consistent with common depictions of the Democrats in the popular press.

Yet it is not what we find. Instead, party elites’ discourse and policy initiatives show a clear emphasis on economic priorities. Moreover, even as affluent, college-educated suburbanites have emerged as a pivotal voting bloc, Democrats have not moderated their positions on economic issues. Instead, they have expanded the scale of their proposals, embraced a much more active use of government in directing economic activity, and increased the degree to which they seek to reduce inequality through both redistribution and predistribution, albeit with important areas of exception.

Democratic elites are not solely focused on economics, of course, nor are their economic programs wholly separate from social and identity-based issues. Indeed, we have emphasized that the party has placed greater priority on racial and gender inequalities *within* its spending, taxing, and regulatory agenda—by focusing on areas of particular concern to key social groups while still providing broad benefits. Still, it is very hard to square the image of a party pivoting to second-dimension issues with the reality of a party that has centered its rhetoric and agenda on the most ambitious set of economic proposals seen in the last half century of American politics.

Because this outcome runs counter to expectation, we have focused on documenting it. We have also sought to explain how it has been possible, emphasizing a constellation of conditions that has allowed national Democrats to fashion an economic agenda that is simultaneously ambitious, highly redistributive (by U.S. standards), and the source of surprisingly limited controversy within its coalition.⁹ Both elite agenda control and the opportunities created by America’s complex federal structure to avoid divisive initiatives have proved critical. America’s acute inequality plays its own part, permitting an expansive set of tax-financed proposals whose costs would bypass all but the most upscale portions of the Democrats’ new metro coalition. Finally, we have noted that Democrats’ intra-party economic divide is muted by genuine shared interests and ideals and by strengthened partisan identity that involves heightened animus toward the other party (e.g., Iyenger et al. 2019). These aspects of voter attitudes and identities are likely important in giving party elites more latitude—a “permission slip”—in shaping their agenda. Yet a permission slip is not a

blank check. Understanding underlying cleavages and how policies might activate them remains central to coalition management.

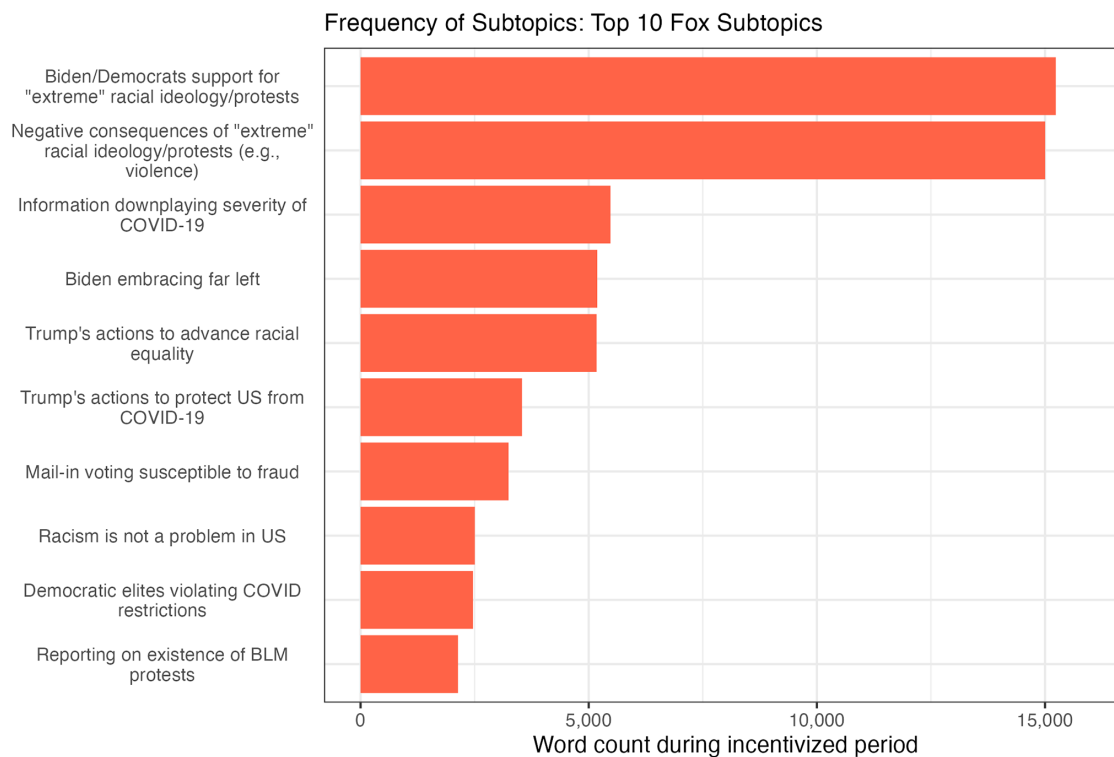
We have focused on why it has been *possible* for national Democrats to pursue this economically focused agenda. What motivates them to do so is beyond the scope of our analysis but is a critical subject for further research. A range of considerations deserve scrutiny, including the particular role of the COVID-19 pandemic and its disparate effects, the priorities of influential “policy-demanding” groups within the party (Bawn et al. 2012), and the role of competition among party elites, especially challenges to “establishment” Democrats from the party’s progressive wing (Malpas 2023).

It is also essential to investigate why party elites rejected alternatives, such as a more culturally- and identity-focused agenda. Here we would recommend deeper investigation of our suggestion that the potential fragility of the Democratic coalition around race, despite the increasing racial liberalism of most Democrats, plays a critical role. Especially where their reliance on dense urban areas disadvantages metro-based parties, as in the United States, obtaining a majority requires reaching well beyond the

median voter. That requirement in turn necessitates fashioning appeals that extend beyond the constituency of racial liberals.

This is certainly what Republicans appear to think. As noted in the Introduction, Steve Bannon *wants* Democrats to foreground racism. GOP rhetoric has focused relentlessly on portraying the Democrats as an identity- and culture-preoccupied party. Indeed, that rhetorical focus likely helps to answer a puzzle our account raises: why are Democrats widely *perceived* as obsessed with such issues—even if their platforms and tweets, and especially their program, are focused on big economic initiatives? A full treatment of this question, too, is beyond the scope of this paper, but the evidence from Twitter is suggestive. While Democrats’ top tweet terms emphasize economic priorities, Republicans’ stress cultural ones and, in particular, paint Democrats as extreme on those issues.¹⁰ And Twitter presents a milder version of this pattern than right-wing media do. Figure 5—from a recent study by Broockman and Kalla (*forthcoming*)—shows that, the number one topic on Fox News in the months preceding the 2020 election was “Biden/Democrats support for ‘extreme’ racial ideology/protests.”

Figure 5
Top ten topics on Fox News, September 2020.



Note: This figure shows the top ten subtopics on Fox News from August 31 to September 25, 2020, measured by the number of subtopic-related words in transcripts of weekday prime time shows. It illustrates that Fox focused on racial issues/protests and the alleged support of elite Democrats for protesters’ tactics/demands, as well as on downplaying the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic while playing up President Trump’s response to it. Reproduced from Broockman and Kalla *forthcoming*.

The GOP strategy of painting Democrats as threatening to the American way of life is not new, but it has gained power from the rise of right-wing media, which studies show both persuades marginal voters and amplifies affective polarization among strong Republicans (e.g., Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). Indeed, Broockman and Kalla (forthcoming) experimentally switched Fox viewers to CNN, and found that their perceptions of the Republican Party became much less favorable and they were significantly less likely to agree with the statement: “Biden supports eliminating all funding for the police.” Surely conservative attacks on Democrats do not provide a complete explanation for the received image of Democrats as culture warriors. Nonetheless, opposition frames, amplified through mainstream as well as conservative media, are likely an important reason for the disconnect, and certainly worthy of greater study.

If opposition frames help account for why pundits have been led astray, the misperceptions of social scientists likely rest elsewhere: in strong theoretical expectations about shifting voter alignments and weak disciplinary incentives to focus on how parties actually try to govern. As we have noted, political scientists have had good theoretical reasons to expect that parties of the left will moderate on economics and pivot to culture as their coalitions become more economically heterogeneous. There is also some evidence of this happening in other rich nations (Gethin, Martinez-Toledano, and Piketty 2022; but see Abou-Chadi and Hix 2022). The declining vote share of center-left parties in rich democracies has occasioned an outpouring of scholarship, much of it focusing on Europe (e.g., Abou-Chadi, Mitteregger, and Mudde 2021; Hacker, Malpas, and Pierson 2023). While the diagnoses differ, a common argument is that center-left parties have been weakened by their reliance on educated affluent voters who have pulled the party away from a progressive economic agenda.

Yet this is not what has happened to the Democratic Party. Nor, we have argued, has the party moved away from pocketbook issues because of its increasing reliance on a multi-racial voting coalition. Instead, it has incorporated genuine efforts to address racial (and gender) inequalities within a multi-faceted economic agenda designed to provide benefits more broadly. The primary reason for the confusion, we would suggest, is that the actions of parties cannot be simply “read off” the preferences measured in voter surveys. Especially in an era of intense polarization, national parties are vital configurations within which the demands of voters, the interests of influential aligned groups, and the opportunities and constraints of policymakers all converge. How parties sort out these competing claims—for better or for worse—is a vital research subject.¹¹ It offers a window into key features of our politics and represents a central determinant of the prospects for sustained prosperity and robust democratic governance.

Supplementary Materials

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592723002931>.

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Notes

- 1 We use “cultural” to denote both value-based and identity-oriented appeals. We also refer to these as “second-dimension” issues, as opposed to the traditional “first dimension” of economic and size-of-government issues. Overlap and ambiguity abound, of course; we discuss some of these complications later.
- 2 Not surprisingly, President Trump’s tweets—accounting for roughly half the GOP leadership’s total—have a disproportionate effect on the top n-grams. But even if excluded (refer to the [online appendix](#)), the Republican leadership’s tweets emphasize cultural over economic issues far more than the Democratic leadership’s.
- 3 Refer to the [online appendix](#) for information on the number of Democrats in each group and the overlap among them.
- 4 Though the CBO scored the House bill as adding \$160 billion to the deficit over ten years, Treasury officials strongly disputed this result, arguing that it underestimated the revenues that strengthened IRS enforcement would generate and that the legislation would be at least revenue neutral (Kessler 2021).
- 5 The differing concerns of the two holdouts are worth highlighting. Even these two moderates seemed comfortable with one side of the more ambitious package—spending for Sinema, taxes for Manchin.
- 6 In addition to the BBB agenda, upwards of 47 Senate Democrats supported pro-labor reform and a federal minimum wage increase.
- 7 Interview with Mark Zuckerman, President, The Century Foundation, February 22, 2022.

- 8 The other three are modest new gun regulations, federal protection of same-sex marriage, and reform of the Electoral Count Act of 1887.
- 9 “Limited” does not mean “none.” A 50/50 Senate meant that even limited internal division was ultimately sufficient to sink many of the party’s policy ambitions.
- 10 For example, Republicans frequently use the hot-button phrase “defund the police.” Democrats rarely do. Of the roughly three million Democratic tweets in our analysis, just 122 include the phrase or the words “defund” and “police” in the same tweet. And four in five of these tweets were distancing Democrats from the idea.
- 11 Americanists would be well-advised to situate explorations of this topic in cross-national context. In other majoritarian countries (especially Canada and the UK), the urban left—insulated from conservatizing electoral pressures in safe districts—has posed far greater challenges to established center-left parties than it has in the United States (Rodden 2019). How have Democratic leaders sustained agenda control, especially given the fragmentation of America’s political institutions?

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