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FACTION IS THE
(ONLY VIABLE)
FUTURE FOR THE
DEMOCRATIC PARTY

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Contents

Executive summary	1
Overconcentrated and overeducated: the Democratic Party's chief problem	2
Democrats' collapsing support among rural and working-class voters	3
<i>Working-class disenchantment</i>	6
A crucial contributing factor: the nationalization of political communication and public opinion	8
Quick fixes and utopian reforms won't work	10
The case for creating a faction	11
<i>What factions are and what they do</i>	11
<i>Factions in American history</i>	12
<i>The opportunity for a new faction in the Democratic Party</i>	13
Policy platforms and messaging strategies to broaden the party	14
<i>Rural America</i>	14
<i>Working-class America</i>	17
Conclusion	20
About the authors	20

Executive summary

The Democratic Party finds itself in a highly precarious electoral position. Although the party performed historically well in 2022, its central weaknesses – those which threaten its ability to govern both nationally and especially at the state level – were still very much in evidence. Even in “good” election cycles, Democrats struggle to translate their typically impressive aggregate vote totals across the country and within states into seats in government. Core to the party’s struggles are its weaknesses with rural and working-class voters. If left unaddressed, the party will not only become irrelevant throughout many states in the country, but it will also continue to face difficulty – and maybe *increasing difficulty* – in winning the presidency and congressional majorities.

To effectively address these problems, like-minded activists, donors, and others in the broader Democratic ecosystem must come together to form and *institutionalize* a proper faction within the party that has a platform and brand that differs from that of the big city- and college campus-dominated national party establishment. This new faction needs to be capable of recruiting, financing, and otherwise supporting candidates to run on a platform and brand more appealing to the rural and working-class voters that the party has been hemorrhaging in recent decades. While this new faction will emphasize different issues than the national party, it need not alienate most voters within the current Democratic base. From a policy standpoint, the faction should pursue strategic moderation on social issues paired with progressive economic populism and championing, on a district-by-district basis, local issues that are not amenable to politicization in the national discourse.

Overconcentrated and overeducated: the Democratic Party's chief problem

In American politics, geography matters. This reality is a problem for Democrats because it means that while their candidates get a lot of votes, they don't have much to show for it. Indeed, despite often winning a majority of the vote nationwide, Democrats have found it increasingly difficult to gain governing majorities.¹ Because their voters are concentrated in communities that, geographically speaking, make up a minority of communities throughout the country, those votes don't translate into an equivalent amount of governing authority.

One cannot understate the importance of this point: Political geography—and how parties' coalitions are distributed across space—plays an outsize role in American politics. No other advanced democracy privileges geographic considerations as much as ours; they are central to our system of representation and elections. Two of our defining representational institutions – federalism and single-member districts – were designed under the assumption that citizens' interests vary across space and are fundamentally linked to the distinctiveness of particular *places*. Consider federalism. If ours was a unitary rather than a federal country, and elections were conducted between parties (rather than between individual candidates) at the national level, Democrats would be well-positioned to win and maintain majorities within the national legislature most of the time. But in our federal system, where Democratic voters are overly concentrated in a minority of states and within a small number of locales within those states, political boundaries and the proportion of the population on either side of those boundaries matter a lot. This dynamic is at the core of the Democrats' electoral disadvantage.

Creating and institutionalizing a new faction within the party could expand, both compositionally and geographically, the Democratic base without significantly alienating existing supporters.

Two groups are central to the party's geography problem: rural voters and, more broadly, working-class voters. The party has performed increasingly worse among these two constituencies dating back many cycles now, with trends spiking dramatically for the worse since former President Donald Trump's election in 2016.

In sum, the overconcentration of Democratic voters makes it difficult for the party to translate its routine voter majorities into governing majorities at both the state and national levels. This would not be the case if the party were to 1) trade a fraction of its support among urban voters for support among rural and exurban voters, and 2) trade a share of its college educated white-collar constituency for an equivalent share of working-class voters who have been gravitating toward the GOP. Crucially, however, the party doesn't necessarily need to sacrifice one part of its coalition in a desperate gambit to regain a cohort that used to comprise its base but has since drifted away. Indeed,

1. While it is true that both parties suffer from the problem of inefficiency wrought by geographic polarization, as evidenced by Republicans failing to make substantial gains in the 2022 midterms despite winning more congressional votes, the problem is much worse for Democrats on balance because of how difficult it is to spread tightly clustered urban votes out over multiple districts, even when deliberately trying to do so via gerrymandering. This problem is particularly acute within state legislatures.

one great advantage of creating an intraparty faction is that it doesn't require zero-sum tradeoffs. Creating and institutionalizing a new faction within the party could expand, both compositionally and geographically, the Democratic base without significantly alienating existing supporters.

Democrats' collapsing support among rural and working-class voters

A defining, if underappreciated, feature of American politics over the last 30 years is the Democratic party's collapse among rural and working-class voters. To be clear, these two subsets of voters overlap a great deal. In many important respects, rural voters can be thought of as a subset of the working class who live in sparsely populated areas. But as far as public opinion and elections are concerned, these groups ought to be thought about separately. The key distinction is that many rural voters think about politics through a geographic lens, whereas the nonrural working class focuses less on geography and more on class and other issues.² As such, these groups differ in terms of policy priorities, which we discuss in greater detail below. Additionally, when we discuss the working class, we mean the group as a whole, not just whites.

Over the last couple decades, Democratic support in the countryside has cratered. As recently as 1996, President Bill Clinton won over 1,100 rural counties—roughly half the nation's total. By 2008, Barack Obama only managed to carry 455 despite cruising to an easy national victory. And by 2020 Democrats barely had a pulse in rural America. Joe Biden only managed to win 194 rural counties, or about 17% of the party's 1996 haul. And Democrats still might not have hit bottom. Republican Glen Youngkin won the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election while carrying the Commonwealth's 20 least populous counties by an average of 27 points. Polling in the spring of 2022 showed the GOP with a whopping 34-point advantage in rural areas on the generic congressional ballot. These polls proved prescient, as preliminary analyses of election returns suggest that Democratic congressional candidates performed worse in rural areas in 2022 than in any year in the modern era, garnering less than 30% of the rural vote.³

Figure 1 similarly shows that the urban-rural divide has grown staggeringly wide over the past three decades. In the mid-1990s, knowing where a voter lived on the urban-rural continuum would have given you virtually no predictive leverage regarding their partisan proclivities. Today, it is one of the strongest predictors, behind only partisan identity and whether or not the voter in question identifies as Black. Figure 1 shows two additional things: 1) that growth in the divide has been asymmetrically driven by rural areas shifting toward Republicans and 2) Trump had the effect of shifting this trend into overdrive.

It's also important to note how widespread this phenomenon is. Democrats have hemorrhaged rural and working-class support from coast to coast. It's not, in other words, a problem that's been confined to a handful of states or regions. From the windswept high plains of the Dakotas to the

2. A bevy of recent research has established the centrality of geographic considerations to rural people and their relative non-importance to nonrural people. See, for example: Nicholas F. Jacobs and B. Kal Munis, "Place-Based Imagery and Voter Evaluations: Experimental Evidence on the Politics of Place," *Political Research Quarterly* 72:2 (2019), 263-277; Jacobs and Munis, "Staying in Place: Federalism and the Political Economy of Place Attachment," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 50:4 (2020), 544-565; Jeffery Lyons and Stephen M. Utych, "You're not From Here!: The Consequences of Urban and Rural Identities," *Political Behavior* (2021): 1-27.

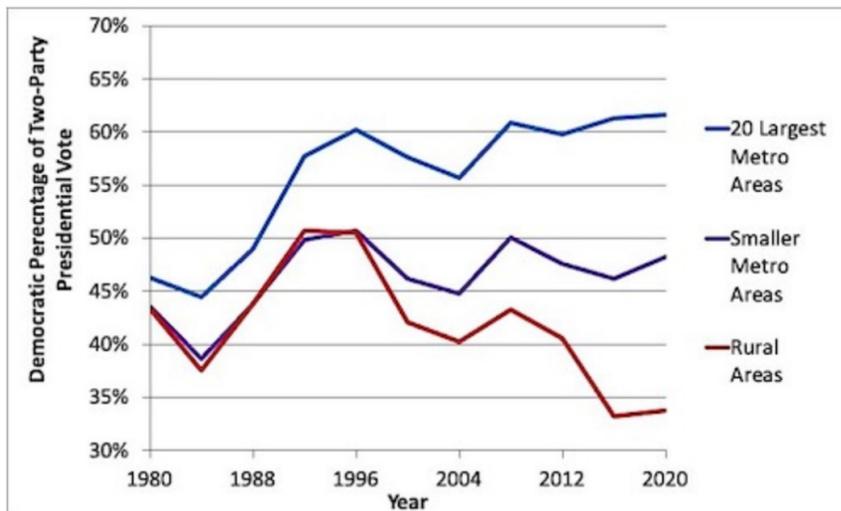
3. Sarah Melotte and Tim Marema, "Gap Between Urban and Rural Congressional Voters Widened in Last 16 Years," *The Daily Yonder*, Dec. 6, 2022.

eastern Piedmont and elsewhere beyond and in between, the same basic patterns are at work.⁴

The asymmetric nature of the divide is highly consequential to electoral politics. While we tend to think of Democrats as performing strongly in urban areas, this is only partially true. When one considers all metropolitan areas in aggregate, it would be more accurate to say that Democrats only perform well in those areas *relative* to how poorly they perform in rural areas. Democrats only dominate in the very largest metro areas in the country (i.e., the top 20 largest cities), college towns, and a few idiosyncratic others. Indeed, among smaller metros (i.e., those outside the top 20), Democrats do not win a higher share of the vote now, on average, than they did in 1996 – if anything, there’s a been a slight erosion in these communities that is evident throughout the country, from Great Falls, Montana, to Youngstown, Ohio. Meanwhile, rural areas are voting an average of 15 points less Democratic today than they were in 1996 and 7 points less than in 2012.

Rural people’s antipathy toward the Democratic Party cannot be explained away by the notion that they are conservative ideologues.

Figure 1: Support for Democratic presidential candidates over time by community type⁵



Rural people’s antipathy toward the Democratic Party cannot be explained away by the notion that they are conservative ideologues. That’s simply not true. Our analysis of Cooperative Election Study survey data featuring survey responses from over 11,600 rural people and 60,557 nonrural people reveals that rural people broadly endorse many left-of-center policy positions. On *health care*, 52% of ruralites support “Medicare for All” (compared to 59% of suburbanites and 74% of urbanites). When it comes to allowing governments to negotiate prescription drug prices (88% rural favorability) and import prescription drugs from foreign countries in order to lower costs

4. See Sarah Melotte and Tim Marema, “Gap Between Urban and Rural Congressional Voters Widened in Last 16 Years,” *The Daily Yonder*, Dec. 6, 2022; Ruy Teixeira, “Democrats’ Long Goodbye to the Working Class,” *The Atlantic*, Nov. 6, 2022.

5. Figure source: David Hopkins, “As New Census Numbers Show, the Biggest Divide Isn’t North v. South Anymore—It’s Metro v. Rural,” *Honest Graft Blog*, Aug. 12, 2021.

(64%), rural support is just as high as in nonrural areas. Regarding *trade policy*, rural support for tariffs (a proxy for economic protectionism) does not vary substantially from urban areas (except as applied to China, where ruralites support tariffs at a significantly higher level). Regarding the *environment*, while support isn't as strong as in urban areas, a majority of rural respondents still support giving the EPA the ability to regulate carbon emissions, requiring states to use a minimum level of renewables even if it increases energy prices a little, and raising the fuel efficiency of vehicles. Rural areas did not provide majority support for giving the EPA power to strengthen enforcement of the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts (48% in favor) but neither were they overwhelmingly against it. In short, rural Americans cannot be dismissed as hopeless ideological fanatics when it comes to most policy issues.

On cultural issues and immigration, however, we do see clear policy divergence between rural and nonrural areas. Regarding *guns*, while healthy majorities of nonrural people support banning assault rifles, the idea fails to reach majority support in the countryside. And, unlike in other areas, a majority of rural people want to make it easier, not more difficult, to obtain a concealed carry permit. On *policing*, rural areas are very much against the idea of reducing police numbers and, in fact, are the only geographic community type where a majority of respondents believed there should be a 10 percent increase in police officers. As for *abortion*, rural areas are relative bastions of support for pro-life positions, as shown in Table 1. However, as in other community types, the vast majority of rural Americans reject the notion that abortion should be illegal in all circumstances. Regarding *immigration*, rural areas were the only places where majorities indicated that legal immigration should be drastically cut, a wall should be built between the U.S. and Mexico, and federal funds should be withheld from sanctuary cities.

Table 1: Attitudes on abortion by community type⁶

Abortion	Type of Area Living In How would you describe the place where you live?			
	City	Suburb	Town	Rural area
On the topic of abortion, do you support or oppose each of the following proposals?				
Abortion -- Always allow a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice	64	58	52	43
Abortion -- Permit abortion only in case of rape, incest or when the woman's life is in danger	45	45	49	54
Abortion -- Prohibit all abortions after the 20th week of pregnancy	55	58	62	70
Abortion -- Allow employers to decline coverage of abortions in insurance plans	39	43	47	55
Abortion -- Prohibit the expenditure of funds authorized or appropriated by federal law for any abortion.	40	45	49	58
Abortion -- Make abortions illegal in all circumstances	20	17	20	24
Abortion -- Prohibit states from requiring that abortions be performed only at hospitals (not clinics).	42	39	38	40

While this public opinion data shows that there is some disagreement in rural areas with the cultural policies advanced by the left flank of the Democratic Party, it's clearly not the full story. Rural

6. 2020 Cooperative Election Study conducted by YouGov.

voters dislike the party for reasons beyond policy, a fact supported by volumes of data, including a recent survey experiment conducted by John Ray at YouGov Blue which found that when asking rural voters to choose between two hypothetical candidates with (treatment) and without party labels (control) attached, the Democratic candidate performs 35 points worse when party labels are listed than when the labels are withheld.

In other words, the Democratic label/brand is associated with a 35-point handicap in rural areas, which cannot fully (or even largely) be attributed to policy disagreement.⁷

The explanation for this gap is what scholars refer to as “rural resentment.” This concept is defined as a pervasive belief among rural Americans that they have been left behind, ignored, and looked down on by urbanites and the government and media elites who cater to them.⁸ Rural resentment has been shown to be strongly linked to voting for Republicans, even after accounting for partisanship, racial attitudes, ideology, gender, age, educational attainment, and other relevant factors.⁹

The key takeaway of this research is that Democrats can’t fully fix their problems in rural areas by moderating on cultural issues (though this will surely help). They also need to be creative in building back the trust of rural communities who see them as elitists who view rural communities with contempt.¹⁰

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Working-class disenchantment

Just as the rural Democratic collapse isn’t confined to overwhelmingly rural states, the party’s problem with the working class is nationwide. And while the party’s decline among working-class voters has not been as dramatic as its rural collapse, it’s been no less consequential due to how large and widespread the constituency is overall. From 2012 to 2020, working-class support for Democrats declined precipitously. In 2012, for example, Obama *won* working-class voters by 2 points, a mere 4 points behind his winning margin among college-educated voters. In 2020, however, Biden *lost* working-class voters by 4 points while improving substantially on Obama’s support among college-educated voters. Absent intervention, this trend appears poised to be a feature of our elections for some time, as polling conducted by the *New York Times*/Siena College showed an even larger disadvantage for Democrats among working-class voters in the lead-up to the 2022 midterm elections.¹¹

7. This polling was conducted for a private partner and not publicly released, though the pollster has shared the results with us directly. Additionally, the chief pollster on the project discussed the data and some of their implications on a podcast: <https://soundcloud.com/thegreatbattlefield/public-opinion-in-rural-america-with-john-ray-of-yougov-blue>

8. Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

9. Nicholas Jacobs and B. Kal Munis, “Place-Based Resentment in Contemporary US Elections: The Individual Sources of America’s Urban-Rural Divide,” *Political Research Quarterly* (2022).

10. Kal Munis and Nicholas Jacobs, “Why resentful rural Americans vote Republican,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 20, 2022.

11. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/10/17/upshot/times-siena-poll-likely-voters-crosstabs.html>

One might be tempted to diminish the importance of this trend by pointing out that over the same period Democrats went from winning college-educated voters by 6 points in 2012 to 18 points in 2020. However, the working class comprises a far greater share of the national electorate than college-educated voters. In fact, the white working class typically comprises a staggering 40% of the electorate on its own. By comparison, the college-educated account for about 41% of voters, with white college-educated at 31%.¹² Moreover, the working class outnumbers college-educated voters in all 50 states.¹³ And the working-class edge is particularly large in crucial swing states such as Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.¹⁴

Another mistake some may be tempted to make is to assume that declining working-class support for Democrats is driven exclusively by working-class whites. It's true that the migration of the white working class to the GOP has been underway for decades. Yet the trend has also clearly taken root and grown over the last decade among nonwhite working-class voters. Indeed, between 2012 and 2020 working-class support for Democrats declined by 18 points among non-whites. This has been a key driver of recent declines in support for the Party among Latino voters (a 10-point drop between 2018 and 2020, for example), which has made the party considerably more vulnerable in several key states throughout the country, including Florida, Nevada, and Texas.¹⁵

On policy, working-class voters are more likely than their college-educated peers to support *tariffs* of all kinds, according to the CES data we analyzed.¹⁶ Regarding *immigration*, the white (but not nonwhite) working class is supportive of curtailing it and increasing border security, including building a border wall. When it comes to *abortion*, working-class views are not meaningfully different, on average, than those of their college-educated peers. Regarding *policing*, the working class supports putting more officers on the streets and does so at much higher rates than college-educated voters. There are no meaningful differences between working-class and college-educated voters regarding policies toward *guns*, *health care*, and the *environment* and we find that Democratic stances on these issues are popular among both groups.

As is the case with rural voters, however, Democrats have a more noticeable disconnect with the working class when it comes to cultural issues. Many have observed that Democrats seem “out of touch” when they emphasize academic and theoretical concepts perhaps best left to college seminars. Talking points concerning “white privilege,” “gender theory,” “systemic racism,” “critical race theory,” and the like are not well received by working-class voters.¹⁷

In sum, working-class voters are not necessarily crosswise with the Democratic party when it comes to many core policy issues. Big problems only emerge with the cultural touchstones that play a large role in shaping party stereotypes.

12. Echelon Insights, “2022 Turnout Estimate,” October, 2022, <https://echeloninsights.com/turnout-2022/>

13. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?eid=391444&rid=330>

14. Echelon Insights, “2022 Turnout Estimate,” October, 2022, <https://echeloninsights.com/turnout-2022/>

15. Catalist, “What Happened in 2020 National Crosstabs,” https://www.dropbox.com/s/ka9n5gzxwotfula/wh2020_public_release_cross-tabs.xlsx?dl=0

16. Clare Foran, “Why Do So Many Americans Think Democrats Are Out of Touch?,” *The Atlantic*, Apr. 29, 2017.

17. See, for example: Douglas Schoen and Carly Cooperman, “New polling confirms Democrats’ left-leaning policies are out of touch,” *The Hill*, Mar. 13, 2022; Aliza Astrow and Lanae Erickson, “Overcoming the Democratic Party Brand,” *The Third Way*, Nov. 7, 2022, <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/overcoming-the-democratic-party-brand>

A crucial contributing factor: the nationalization of political communication and public opinion

A key accelerant beyond these changes has been the nationalization of American politics. This has occurred in many ways. State party platforms and state legislative agendas, for instance, are increasingly similar throughout the country. Campaign finance has also been nationalized, with increasing percentages of funds being raised outside of the district or state where they are spent. But perhaps most troubling is that voter behavior and opinion have nationalized to an extreme degree as well.¹⁸ What we mean by this is that voters increasingly make decisions on who to vote for—up and down the ballot, across the entire federal system from president to city councilman—upon a narrow set of *national* political considerations.

To some degree, this is a supply-side issue. Indeed, a primary contributing factor to all the forms of nationalization listed above is yet another form of nationalization: in political communication. Once again, there are different facets to this phenomenon, including first and foremost the withering and, in all too many communities, outright collapse of local news outlets, particularly newspapers.¹⁹ The vacuum left by a hollowed out local news infrastructure has been more than filled with national news. It has also abetted the nationalization of party platforms, legislative agendas, and campaign finance because there are fewer local journalists present to shed light on these issues and hold those in power responsible for them.²⁰ More directly related Democrats' foundering support among working-class and (especially) rural communities, recent political science scholarship demonstrates that when local newspapers close, rates of a straight-ticket voting – a clear indicator of nationalized voting behavior – increase significantly.²¹ Furthermore, in areas where access to local news is poor, voters know less about candidates running for office in their district.²² This is an important point as rural areas are more likely to suffer from poor access to local news, which takes away a primary outlet through which state and local Democrats can differentiate themselves from a national party brand that a majority of rural voters find toxic.

While the party and its candidates have little control over the collapse of local news, these actors have contributed directly to the nationalization of political communication in other ways. For example, the Democratic Party has focused on national politics at the expense of state and local politics in recent decades, which has meant that local Democratic Party infrastructure across the

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18. Daniel J. Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

19. Nick Mathews, "Life in a News Desert: The Perceived Impact of a Newspaper Closure on Community Members," *Journalism* (Sept. 2020).

20. Robert P. Saldin, B. Kal Munis, and Richard Burke, "Local Beats, National Consequences: The Link Between Local News and American Democratic Health," *The Niskanen Center*, Oct. 12, 2021.

21. Joshua P. Darr, Matthew P. Hitt, and Johanna L. Dunaway, "Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior," *Journal of Communication* 68:6 (2018): 1007-1028.

22. Daniel J. Moskowitz, "Local News, Information, and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections," *American Political Science Review* 115:1 (2021): 114-129.

country has withered in a strikingly similar pattern to that of local newspapers: that is, all over, but in especially dramatic fashion in small towns and rural areas.²³ This is a crucial point, as the local volunteers recruited and organized by county central committees and other local party organizations play a key role in translating the Democratic Party agenda into the local vernacular and linking party priorities to issues, whether national, regional, statewide, or local in scope, that affect voters on the ground. While some, such as Georgia Democrat Stacey Abrams and her likeminded affiliates in the Peach State, have reinvested in local party organizing to great success, there has been too little imitation of those efforts elsewhere and many party activists and strategists continue to prefer spending money on the latest shiny object, clever advertising strategy, or GOTV technique for immediate (if extremely temporary) effect rather than commit to the slower but ultimately more effective process of party building. Individual candidates, meanwhile, are often over-reliant on the same network of DCCC-approved consultants, most of whom are far younger, more educated, and more progressive than the electorates they struggle to connect with. As a result, Democrats across a diverse multitude of districts run inflexible and uncreative one-size-fits-all campaigns that do precious little to help them distinguish themselves from a party brand that is toxic in many areas.²⁴

As we have discussed elsewhere, the party—or, more realistically, a faction within the party—and its candidates running beyond the suburbs, or in heavily working-class areas, need to disrupt the forces of nationalization by focusing on those aspects of campaigns’ communication environments that they can control.²⁵ During election season, that means:

1. Playing some defense by distancing themselves from national party stereotypes on issues that are especially meaningful to rural/working-class voters (e.g., guns, in rural areas; free trade or loosening immigration restrictions in white working-class areas).
2. Reframing national policy discussions to focus on the specific local relevance and impact of those policies.²⁶
3. Going on offense by identifying and championing hyperlocal issues of relevance to voters in particular districts or states that are ignored in the national partisan discourse.

Beyond campaign season, local party infrastructure should be built, focusing especially on volunteer recruitment, training, and retention to establish a durable and visible presence for the party and signaling that Democrats are “showing up.” A 50-state strategy is necessary to put the party on a solid foundation for the future. As local knowledge accumulates, it pays future dividends because it can continue to be leveraged in future elections and decrease reliance on volunteers and consultants from outside the district. Simply pouring immediate resources into a handful of competitive races may make sense in any given cycle, but it has disastrous long-term consequences.

23. Jonathan Mahler, “The Democrats’ Last Stand in Wisconsin,” *New York Times*, Nov. 1, 2022.

24. See both: Ian Ward, “The Democrats’ Privileged College-Kid Problem,” *Politico*, Oct. 9, 2021; and Ryan D. Enos and Eitan D. Hersh, “Party activists as campaign advertisers: The ground campaign as a principal-agent problem,” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (2015): 252-278.

25. Robert P. Saldin and B. Kal Munis, “Go Local, Young Democrat,” *Democracy Journal*, 2022, Spring, No. 64.

26. The effectiveness of this approach among independent voters and weakly attached supporters of the opposite party is demonstrated in a working paper by political scientists Richard Burke and Kal Munis, entitled “Talk Local to Me: Assessing the Heterogenous Effects of Local Appeals,” and available at: <https://bit.ly/burke-munis>.

Quick fixes and utopian reforms won't work

Democrats' inability to decisively defeat their thoroughly disgraced Republican opponents is cause for concern, both for the party and the country. That the GOP—a party seeped in conspiracism and whose de facto leader attempted a coup just two years ago—remains viable nationally and dominant in many parts of the country suggests that there is a problem with what the Democrats are offering as an alternative.

Frustration over Democrats' failure to break out of the pattern of parity that has characterized party competition for much of the last few decades—particularly now after the Republican party has discredited itself—has, understandably, spurred many Democrats to look for remedies. Unfortunately, the most popular fixes misdiagnose the problem, are improbable, or both.

Simply pouring immediate resources into a handful of competitive races may make sense in any given cycle, but it has disastrous long-term consequences.

One common approach involves dreaming of major structural reforms designed to blunt Republicans' geographically rooted counter-majoritarian advantages. Yet the ideas that generate the most enthusiasm—adding states or Supreme Court justices; eliminating the Electoral College or the Senate filibuster—are often implausible. Some would require a constitutional amendment which is an unrealistic hurdle. Yet even major reforms that have a plausible, if still difficult, path to enactment carry their own risks. Killing the filibuster, for instance, could easily backfire and deprive Democrats of an important check on a GOP Senate majority (as it already has for judicial confirmations). Moreover, in our polarized political climate, hardball institutional reforms would inevitably enrage many citizens who would consider them illegitimate, backdoor efforts to disadvantage their tribe and prop up a nefarious and corrupt elite.²⁷

Rather than dreaming of new senators from the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, Democrats would be better served by considering what it would take to be competitive in states that actually exist. The same goes for the other major structural reforms, because in our system there is simply no substitute for the hard work of organizing, mobilizing, and engaging in the sometimes unseemly business of party politics.

Another trap Democrats often fall into is lurching for a quick, temporary image makeover in the hopes of ginning up support in the country's heart- and-hinterlands. Outfitting candidates in cowboy hats or staging hunting photo-ops often seem like clever ways of signaling cultural proximity to voters. But too-clever-by-half play-acting will only trick so many voters. At best it is a short-term solution. At worst, it comes off as transparently condescending.

Still other Democrats indulge in the great American pastime of pining for a third party that more closely captures their political preferences and obviates the need to share the party with awkward coalition partners. This idea will always carry some appeal in a two-party system. After all, as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recently observed, only in the U.S. would she and Joe Biden be in the same party.

27. To be sure, there are some institutional reforms that are both plausible and have the potential to do at least some good without dumping fuel on the fire. The Electoral Count Act, reforming the redistricting process, and further experimentation with ranked-choice voting all strike us as worth exploring. Yet ultimately, reforms of this sort can only take us so far.

If we lived in a different country, starting a third party might be worth considering. However, there's a reason why we haven't had a new major party since the 1850s when the Republicans dislodged the Whigs. The structure of our political system, with first-past-the-post elections and single-member districts, tips the scales heavily against the creation and viability of third parties. In our system, garnering, say, 25% of the vote doesn't translate into a quarter of the political power being contested; it translates into zero. Because the two-party system is baked into the cake of American politics, the creation of a third party is a Pollyannish pursuit and will be a black hole for money and energy.

The case for creating a faction

Our country's enormous population, sprawling geography, and demographic heterogeneity make it difficult for our two parties to be internally cohesive. As a result, the ideological and coalitional diversity that other countries' systems process through multiple parties has usually been institutionalized in the U.S. through durable factions *within* the two dominant political parties. Indeed, intraparty factions have been a common feature in American political history. In effect, they have been our system's way of answering voter demand for more than just two options at the polling station. Building a new faction within the Democratic party is an achievable goal and offers an opportunity to shape the future of the party and the nation's politics. This type of faction would recruit attractive candidates, develop ideas to inspire voters, and mobilize those voters to participate in partisan politics. Absent a strong, durable, organizationally-dense faction, individual Democrats will struggle to distinguish themselves from their party's national brand or fight for leverage in national politics.

What factions are and what they do

The term "faction" is commonly used to refer to all sorts of political groupings and subgroupings with varying levels of coherence and organization. But we employ the term to refer to entities that are, essentially, parties within a party. By faction, we mean an institution within one of the major parties that has an affiliated team of politicians, political professionals, activists, interest groups, donors, and intellectuals. A faction is characterized by its formal organization and its grounding in ideas (as opposed to, say, the charisma of a single politician). There's more structure to factions than a "wing," or a "bloc" or a "Gang of X." Factions develop and promote policies derived from broader ideas with a goal of influencing and shaping the party they are embedded in. Factions are also characterized by their durability. They aren't, for instance, just temporary coalitions dedicated to, say, gaining a congressional majority in the next election or shepherding a particular policy proposal through the legislative process. While factions can enjoy relatively rapid rises and achieve relatively quick successes, building a faction should be thought of as a years-long process, with the expectation that such an institution will be active for a decade or longer.

Factions are formed to try to shift a party closer to their views and to change the party's reputation. They look to play a prominent role in crafting their party's programs and shaping its reputation in the eye of the public.

In this great task of redefining the party, there are a couple key initial steps that need to be taken, one more abstract and philosophical, the other more practical. The first and more intellectual task is to articulate (and later promote) a set of ideas and a broad philosophy of what the party is or

should be about. This exercise might drill down to the level of identifying some policy areas of interest, but is more geared toward defining a general story about what the purpose of government is, how that vision is in keeping with American ideals, and why the faction feels the need to mobilize in pursuit of them. This task should also involve an explanation of how the faction differentiates itself from the rest of the party and from the other party. It was this work that eventually allowed political actors affiliated with the Democratic Leadership Council in the ‘80s and ‘90s to be able to say, “I’m not a Michael Dukakis Democrat, I’m a DLC Democrat”—and for that to be understood as a meaningful distinction. The second, more practical initial task is to begin building a network. A big part of this can be thought of as creating a support structure to help affiliated candidates. Once built, this allows a faction to connect those affiliated candidates to a set of political professionals, policy experts, donors, and activists who can staff campaigns, generate public policy plans, provide funding, and so forth. In most cases, there should also be a geographical component to this network. Factions will be stronger and have more reach if they have a presence beyond the Beltway.

Later steps involve direct efforts to shape policy. The faction’s candidates can challenge incumbents in primaries. Factions can also shape the inner workings of Congress. When a party is homogenous that tends to result in strong caucus leaders. But in a more factional environment, power tends to be decentralized because factions can demand that as a condition of supporting leaders. In that dynamic the relative power of committees and subcommittees can increase. It can also create opportunities for factions to work across the aisle on policies of mutual interest. Factions have also often played a role in presidential politics. They have, for instance, influenced the process of selecting presidential candidates. And they can help support an affiliated president or exert pressure on one with whom they disagree.

Factions in American history

Table 2: Intraparty Factions in U.S. History

Stalwart Republicans	1868-1888
Liberal/Mugwump Republicans	1868-1888
Half-Breed Republicans	1872-1888
Old Guard-Conservative Republicans	1896-1916
Populist Democrats	1896-1924
Progressive Republicans	1904-1928
Southern Democrats	1938-1976
Liberal Republicans	1938-1968
Liberal-Labor Democrats	1958-1976
New Politics Democrats	1966-1980
New Right Republicans	1964-1996
New Democrats	1986-2007
Tea Party Republicans	2010-2020

Sources: Daniel DiSalvo, *Engines of Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Rachel Blum, *How the Tea Party Captured the GOP* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

There has been at least one faction present in at least one of the major parties for all but about two decades (see Table 2 above).

However, not all factions are the same. Some—like the New Politics Democrats who emerged in the late 1960s—attempt to move the party further from the ideological center, often in conjunction with bringing new constituencies into the party. Others—like the New Democrats who were formed in response to the landslide presidential defeats of the 1980s—seek to pull their party back to the center of American politics.

Today’s opportunity lies in a combination of these approaches. A new Democratic faction would seek to push the party back toward the center and differentiate itself against the Democratic Socialists, who are increasingly taking on the characteristics of a faction. However, a new, more centrist faction would also be geared toward making inroads with constituencies that are now largely outside the party, namely, rural and working-class voters.

The opportunity for a new faction in the Democratic Party

The dynamics of contemporary American politics suggest there is currently an opportunity to carve a foothold within the party system and thereby shape the country’s future. The Democratic party is already experiencing signs of revived factionalism. A leftist contingent has been surging in recent years and has developed a large membership organization, the Democratic Socialists of America, that has many of the hallmarks of a traditional faction. It has a sizeable group of affiliated politicians like Bernie Sanders and “The Squad,” some of whom, such as Justice Democrats, are eager to openly challenge the party’s leadership and will probably become more aggressive as their numbers increase in the congressional caucus. Others are more than willing to primary established members of Congress, as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Cori Bush did. This budding faction has its own information networks, especially in social media, and it has a set of affiliated think tanks like the Roosevelt Institute, Demos, New Consensus, and Data for Progress. It also has outlets like *N+1* and *Jacobin* to disseminate its message and to promote policy ideas like the Green New Deal and Medicare For All. And it has created its own fundraising system focused on small-dollar donors.

Factions are the vehicles for accommodating and adding diversity in American politics, and they offer political actors the mechanism for inserting fresh ideas and policies into public life. The internal homogeneity of both major parties over the last few decades is an anomaly, not the norm.

This development on the party’s left will require others in the party with a different vision for its future to actively mobilize. The way to do this is to build a coherent factional brand that distinguishes itself from the Democratic Socialists. It remains to be seen which faction would be dominant, but whichever gains the upper hand, the Democratic Party of the future will probably be more divided than at point since the decline of Southern Democrats. It is worth emphasizing that such internal divides are not something to lament; quite the contrary. They are entirely normal in American politics. But more than that, they have usually enhanced the functioning of our party system and our politics more generally by improving the parties’ ability to govern a large, diverse country. Factions are the vehicles for accommodating and adding diversity in American

politics, and they offer political actors the mechanism for inserting fresh ideas and policies into public life. The internal homogeneity of both major parties over the last few decades is an anomaly, not the norm.

Policy platforms and messaging strategies to broaden the party

Rural America

In rural America, Democrats face three key problems: 1) the demographic composition of rural areas is such that they have higher shares of people holding conservative views on social and cultural issues that better align with the national Republican Party; 2) in the minds of rural voters, Democrats are associated with political, media, and cultural elites who alternately mock, scorn, and ignore them; they feel left behind; and 3) the collapse of a local news infrastructure in rural areas makes it all the more difficult for local Democratic candidates on the ground to differentiate themselves from a toxic (to rural voters) national brand. The first two of these problems represent a “branding” problem, while the third poses an obstacle for rural Democrats’ efforts to address that branding problem.

There are a few Democratic politicians who provide strong examples for how to successfully navigate these difficulties. First among these figures is U.S. Senator Jon Tester (MT). He has faced a top-tier GOP challenger in each of his three contests, and *FiveThirtyEight* rates Montana’s partisan lean as Republican +20.²⁸ Yet Tester does four things that allow him to overcome his partisan disadvantage:

1. *connection*: he “shows up” both physically and virtually in rural Montana;
2. *style*: he lets shine his rural Montanan authenticity;
3. *independence*: he breaks with his fellow Democrats on important issues where his party is out of step with a majority of Montanans; and
4. *messaging*: he avoids polarizing hot-button national topics where possible, recasts them through a local lens when he must address them, and champions local issues important to Montanans that aren’t part of the national political conversation.

Regarding “showing up,” other Democrats who have had success running in rural areas have also stressed having a presence within communities as an important means of conveying a modicum of care and interest in the people who live there, even if a majority of them are unlikely to vote for you.²⁹ Tester is attentive to his constituents and even in an era where politicians are increasingly unlikely to hold in-person town hall meetings he still does. But Tester doesn’t just hold town halls in the state’s cities, like Missoula and Bozeman, he also does them in smaller places with populations under 10,000, such as in Havre. In addition, he makes time to attend community events in tiny majority-Republican locales with populations under 1,000.

28. Nathaniel Rakich, “How Red or Blue is Your State?,” *FiveThirtyEight*, May 27, 2021.

29. See Steve Bullock, “I Was the Governor of Montana. My Fellow Democrats, You Need to Get Out of the City More,” *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2021; Chloe Maxmin and Canyon Woodward, *Dirt Road Revival: How to Rebuild Rural Politics and Why Our Future Depends on It* (Beacon Press, 2022).

Tester also understands the media dynamics of rural places, where higher proportions of people follow talk radio and, due to a greater reliance on broadcast television, local TV news programming.³⁰ Local news sources are better trusted and their presence, particularly when they focus primarily on local news, has been shown to be effective in mitigating partisan polarization – something that Democrats desperately need in rural areas.³¹ These vital local news sources are, of course, seemingly on the path to extinction, but Democrats can take advantage of those that remain.

Personal style is another key. A third-generation Montana dirt farmer, Tester's roots run deep in his state and it's apparent in everything about him, stylistically, from the way he speaks to the way he dresses and in how he carries himself. Many voters prefer locally rooted candidates, even after taking partisanship into account, because they believe that such candidates are more likely to understand and advocate for their interests.³² These effects are strongest in districts wherein large shares of the voters themselves have deep roots within the district, which is more likely to be the case the more rural the district is.³³ Rooted, authentic candidates enjoy a boost in support, on average, of up to 4 points in U.S. Senate races, 5 points in U.S. House races, and 3 points in state legislative races.³⁴ And while these characteristics aren't something that can be coached, those tasked with recruiting Democratic candidates would be wise to keep an eye out for deeply rooted, authentic leaders.

Tester also bucks his party on issues where it is out of step with Montana voters (especially rural Montanans). For example, Tester has broken repeatedly with his party on immigration (e.g., voting against the DREAM Act in 2010, cosponsoring legislation in 2018 to increase border security personnel, and, more recently, being one of only eight Democrats to vote for a bill preventing undocumented immigrants from receiving federal COVID-19 support). He's also bucked the party on guns (e.g., voting against a bill that would have required background checks for all gun purchases; unlike most Democrats, he has never earned an F rating from the NRA). He also has an independent streak on the environment. In 2021, for instance, Tester crossed party lines to vote down a bill attempting to ban hydraulic fracturing, and he's a proponent of the Keystone Pipeline and delisting some endangered species. Tester has also publicly contrasted himself with national Democratic figures such as Chuck Schumer and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez.³⁵ And during his successful 2018 race, Tester didn't lambast Trump as other Democrats are wont to do, but instead leaned heavily into the fact that Trump signed upwards of 15 of his bills into law “to help veterans and first responders, hold

30. “Broadcast Television and Radio in Rural Communities,” National Association of Broadcasters, May 2018. <https://www.nab.org/broadcast-issues/rural.pdf>

31. Joshua P. Darr, Matthew P. Hitt, and Johanna L. Dunaway, *Home Style Opinion: How Local Newspapers Can Slow Polarization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

32. B. Kal Munis, “Place, candidate roots, and voter preferences in an age of partisan polarization: Observational and experimental evidence,” *Political Geography* 85 (2021): 102345.

33. Charles R. Hunt, “Beyond Partisanship: Outperforming the Party Label with Local Roots in Congressional Elections.” *In Congress & the Presidency*, vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 343-372. Routledge, 2021.

34. Charles R. Hunt, *Home Field Advantage: Roots, Reelection, and Representation in the Modern Congress* (University of Michigan Press, 2022).

35. Jonathan Martin, “Senator Jon Tester on Democrats and Rural Voters: ‘Our Message is Really, Really Flawed’”, *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2020.

the VA accountable, and get rid of waste, fraud and abuse in the federal government.”³⁶

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Democrats running in rural areas (or, indeed, in any district where national partisan dynamics leave them at a disadvantage) should avoid engaging in contentious debate on polarizing national issues such as race, gender, abortion, sanctuary cities, the specter of gun bans, and the like. After all, electoral campaigns are, in essence, a competition to define the narrative, or determine the handful of issues that will define what’s at stake in a particular election. So, when Republicans want to talk about highly contentious issues that work against Democrats in rural areas, Democrats should avoid engaging in those conversations when possible because doing so allows the GOP to latch on to and deploy them as bloody shirts in campaigns.

If such lightning rod issues must be discussed, candidates should recast them through a local lens to focus on the arguments for or against the policy in terms of costs and benefits to the district. New political science research shows the effectiveness of this approach in relation to the Affordable Care Act. Recasting policy arguments through a local lens helped persuade independent voters and weakly attached out-partisans.³⁷ Regarding racial issues, because rural America is overwhelmingly white (appreciating that there are, of course, some notable exceptions mainly, though not exclusively, concentrated in the South), Democrats in these areas should reframe discussions of racial privilege, inequity, and such away from race to instead focus on a class lens.³⁸ In lieu of engaging their Republican opponents on the national issues of the day, Democrats should *localize* their races by heightening the salience of pressing problems and issues that are either idiosyncratic to the district or broader in scope but ignored in national partisan discourse. This approach is beneficial as it allows Democrats to appeal to independents and Republicans without alienating their base.

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Tester has championed local issues most effectively in three policy areas:

1. *conservation and the environment*: On multiple occasions, Tester has pulled together diverse arrays of stakeholders, including loggers and other extractive interests as well as conservationists and recreationists, to collaboratively craft highly place-based legislation that benefits virtually everyone.
2. *veterans affairs*: About 10% of the Montana electorate are veterans, so his advocacy resonates especially well. This also helps Tester tap into patriotism, which is relevant since Democrats are often dinged for being insufficiently patriotic and over 90% of rural

36. Anne Helen Petersen, “Trump’s Shtick May Not Sell in A State Where Not Everything Is Red Or Blue,” *Buzzfeed News*, Jul. 6, 2018.

37. Richard Burke and Kal Munis, “Talk Local to Me: Assessing the Heterogenous Effects of Localistic Appeals,” working paper, <https://bit.ly/burke-munis>.

38. Kal Munis and Robert Saldin, “The Democrats’ Rural Problem,” *The Washington Monthly*, Jul. 28, 2022.

Americans see America as rating among the greatest countries in the world.³⁹

3. *corporate monopoly in agriculture*: Only a small share of rural voters work directly in agriculture but farming and ranching remain a potent cultural symbol in rural America. As a result, Tester's advocacy for family farmers and ranchers, including a 2021 proposal aimed at bolstering anti-competitive enforcement in the meatpacking industry, has widespread effects, both material and symbolic, beyond just the family farming and ranching communities. These kinds of issues are both substantively important for Tester's constituents and help him break through the forces of nationalization that work against rural Democrats.

Rural Democrats across the country need to be similarly creative in identifying and championing local issues specific to their states and districts that cross-cut partisanship. However, veterans and agricultural issues are good starting points that can likely work for Democrats in most rural places. Identifying and championing issues of local significance that are largely ignored in the national political conversation will build trust by allowing Democrats to disrupt the belief pervasive in rural America that Democrats don't care about rural voters and their unique issues.

To recap, in order for Democrats to improve their margins in rural areas, they can do the following:

- Recruit candidates who have strong roots (ideally rural roots), as voters tend to view these candidates as being more authentic and as more likely to understand the problems facing the district and its people.
- Build up a presence in rural areas by holding events as well as earning and buying media time in the platforms that serve rural communities.
- Strategically break with the national party and meet would-be constituents where they are on issues with high salience and high symbolic power in rural areas, like guns.
- Avoid wading into the national political conversation on hot-button issues. To the extent national issues must be addressed, localize the framing of those discussions as much as possible. Instead of focusing onto national issues, elevate the saliency of cross-cutting local issues that cannot easily be grafted on national divisions.

Working-class America

Among the working-class, Democrats face three chief problems:

1. distrust due to widespread perceptions, particularly in current and former manufacturing and natural resource extraction centers, that Democrats turned their backs on workers by advancing free-trade agreements and aligning with environmental groups;
2. umbrage over perceived disdain directed at them by national Democrats;
3. feelings that Democrats are increasingly foreign to and don't care about working-class cities and towns.

39. "September 2022 Times/Siena Poll: Cross-tabs for All Respondents," *The New York Times*, Sep. 16, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/09/16/upshot/september-2022-times-siena-poll-crossstabs.html>

Democrats should turn to Ohio for two excellent models—U.S. Representative and 2022 Senate nominee Tim Ryan and Senator Sherrod Brown—of how to make headway in addressing these difficulties. To address their working-class woes, Democrats need to focus on making incremental progress, not necessarily on winning these communities outright. Indeed, the Democrats have fallen out of favor among wage workers at such a rapid rate that focusing on cutting their loss margins is a necessary and ambitious first step. In that spirit, we highlight the strategic lessons that can be gleaned from Ryan’s (losing) 2022 U.S. Senate bid, where he improved upon Biden’s margins across the entire state and likely pulled several down ballot House candidates to victory. More impressive is how Ryan was able to convince large shares of Republican voters to split their tickets. The GOP candidates for governor and secretary of state won their races by 26 and 20 points respectively, whereas Ryan’s Republican opponent, J.D. Vance, only won by about 6.5 points.

Ryan elevated trade as an issue in his campaign and endorsed aspects of the Trump agenda, including criticizing China on this issue. In particular, he linked struggles facing Ohio workers to unfair advantages enjoyed by China and advocated that the U.S. be more aggressive in its orientation toward China, including through the use of tariffs. Though his criticisms prompted scorn from some liberals who were convinced that his rhetoric was fomenting hate toward Asians, CES survey data suggest that it resonated with the working-class, who care more about trade policy than other Americans.⁴⁰

Another strong point for Ryan was that he is an Ohioan through and through, which affords multiple electoral benefits. In his campaign stump speeches, Ryan leaned heavily into his family’s roots in the area and history laboring in the symbolically powerful industries synonymous with eastern Ohio, noting his grandfather was a steelworker. He also tied that heritage to his understanding of the “exhausted majority” within the state who have been left behind by changes wrought by economic forces over the past three decades.

Also related to style was Ryan’s presentation as a straight shooter. While there were many reasons that Trump appealed to working-class Ohioans in 2016, high on the list was his “tell it like it is,” rough-around-the-edges communication style, especially as contrasted with Hillary Clinton’s rehearsed and politically correct style. Ryan, like his fellow Ohio Democratic whisperer of the working-class, Sherrod Brown, did not follow the same overly cautious and stilted style associated with national Democrats. Instead, Ryan adopted an aggressive messaging strategy that the small minority of activists on the party’s far-left flank would likely regard as “toxic masculinity.” As but one example, Ryan made waves by declaring that “Ohio needs an ass-kicker, not an ass-kisser” in the Senate, an unsubtle reference to Trump boasting at a Youngstown rally that Vance had been “kissing my ass.”⁴¹ Ryan’s image simultaneously helps with problems #2 and #3 listed above, showing that not all Democrats are sneering cosmopolitan sophisticates out to shame all but the most woke among us, and signaling to voters that he is of them and understands the problems they face.

Ryan was also willing to buck national Democratic leaders on multiple issues. For example, he has stated that he believes that President Biden should not seek re-election in 2024.⁴² Doing so allows

40. Matt Flegenheimer, “In Tim Ryan’s Ohio Senate Race, the D Is Often Silent,” *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2022.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Julia Manchest, “Tim Ryan says Biden shouldn’t run in 2024,” *The Hill*, Oct. 10, 2022.

him to signal that he's an atypical Democrat unwilling to robotically fall in line with a party that the working-class is highly skeptical of. Moreover, the ways that Ryan has gone against his party have credibly reinforced that he cares deeply about working-class communities. For example, Ryan was critical of Clinton's infamously blundering remark at a candidate forum in Columbus that her policy plans would "put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business."⁴³ He even challenged Nancy Pelosi for the leadership in the U.S. House as a response to what he framed as the party's abandonment of the region and its people. Earlier this cycle he characterized the folly of the national party's electoral strategy by saying, "When I hear people at the national level say things like we have to invest in races where states have an increasing rate of college graduates; that's where we need to campaign, whoa! We're going to teach the Democratic party that the working-class folks, whether they're white or Black or brown men or women or gay or straight, we are the backbone of this party."⁴⁴ Though he lost, his remarkable overperformance suggests that many of the types of voters that Democrats need to win back felt seen by his willingness to break from the national party on their behalf.

Race is a topic that many in the working class, regardless of racial and ethnic background, feel alienated from Democrats on. Tim Ryan navigated it well by emphasizing the racially cross-cutting nature of class.

Race is a topic that many in the working class, regardless of racial and ethnic background, feel alienated from Democrats on, Ryan navigated it well by adhering to the approach that other class-focused candidates such as Brown and Bernie Sanders follow by emphasizing the racially cross-cutting nature of class. The effectiveness of this approach has been borne out in empirical social science research. Emphasizing class, as opposed to focusing on inequity and privilege through a racial lens, works because it binds larger numbers of people together. Research into the "race-class narrative," however, has found that it can be most effective to discuss the two in tandem by pointing out that racism is a weapon that the rich use to divide the working class against itself.⁴⁵ Appreciating that the racial composition of the working class varies substantially from one community to the next, Democrats should adopt the race-class narrative approach in areas where there are substantial proportions of nonwhites, while emphasizing class (and generally avoiding the topic of race if possible) in communities that are overwhelmingly white.

To recap, Democrats running in heavily working-class districts can do the following:

- Recruit authentic candidates, ideally those with working-class roots within the district.
- Elevate policies that activate voters' class identity, such as by focusing on trade policy and supporting tariffs.
- Adopt a populist disposition, both in terms of policy and style. Stylistically, speak directly and avoid political correctness.

43. Matt Flegenheimer, "In Tim Ryan's Ohio Senate Race, the D Is Often Silent," *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2022.

44. Chris McGreal, "Democrat Tim Ryan is running against his own party - it could help him win," *The Guardian*, Nov. 7, 2022.

45. "The Race Class Narrative," We Make the Future Action, <https://www.wemakethefutureaction.us/history-of-the-race-class-narrative>.

- Break with the national party where needed. Don't be afraid to be critical of the party in terms of its treatment of the working class and make clear that you will be a force for change in that regard.

Conclusion

To wield power in Washington more regularly and effectively, Democrats must win the White House and Congress. Despite usually winning the popular vote for each, Democrats have a difficult time achieving this due to their weaknesses in rural areas and working-class cities and towns. In many state capitals, meanwhile, the task seems downright impossible. In other words, Democrats either need to change things about themselves *or* they need to change the system altogether. Because systemic change is essentially impossible due to the institutional hurdles and Republican opposition, Democrats should change their approach in the areas in question. The best way to guarantee success in doing so—from winning elections to governance—is to create a faction within the party capable of recruiting and supporting candidates who can drive down Republican margins of victory in rural and working-class areas. They don't need to win these areas. Indeed, that is likely out of reach for the foreseeable future. But when it comes to congressional and legislative seats, margins matter. Losing your weakest areas 60-40 as opposed to 85-15 makes a tremendous difference.

In the end, the American political system rewards organization. Factions are a proven way for like-minded party actors to pursue shared objectives, promote their vision of the party's future, and ensure that their ideas are heard and have a place at the table. The reality is that despite all the problems posed by the Democrats' current, geographically concentrated coalition, the party is unlikely to do anything about it unless it is forced to change from the inside.

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