

United States - If Harris Loses Today, This Is Why

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To win working-class voters — and possibly today’s election — Democrats need to attack economic elites. But the Kamala Harris campaign hasn’t consistently offered an anti-elite counter to Donald Trump’s right-wing populism.

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The Democratic National Convention in August was roundly acclaimed as a great success, presenting a [unified front](#) that stretched from Shawn Fain and Bernie Sanders to Adam Kinzinger and Leon Panetta. Ezra Klein saw a party that finally “[wants to win](#).” The vibes were good, almost euphoric. Over the past few weeks, however, Harris has dropped in the polls, and heading into Election Day, many Democrats feel less than confident.

What’s going on? [A poll of 1,000 Pennsylvania voters](#) from the Center for Working-Class Politics (CWCP), *Jacobin*, and YouGov shows that the campaign was tentatively heading in the right direction this summer. It also suggests why, despite Donald Trump’s efforts to alienate voters, the race is still neck and neck.

In late August, the historian Eric Foner wrote that Democrats were attempting to make the election about [competing definitions of freedom](#) — about, as Tim Walz said in his [acceptance speech](#), “the freedom to make a better life for yourself and the people that you love,” against the freedom of corporations “to pollute your air” and banks to “take advantage of customers.” UAW president Shawn Fain [went even further](#) at the national convention in naming and blaming the villains that stand in the way of a better life for working people: “Corporate greed turns blue-collar blood, sweat, and tears into Wall Street stock buybacks and CEO jackpots,” he argued, adding that Trump was a “scab” who would protect the interests of corporations and billionaires. That same month, the campaign announced a series of commitments to tackle the housing shortage, crack down on price gouging, and raise the minimum wage.

Our survey found strong support for this kind of economic populist messaging and widespread antipathy for billionaires and corporate elites, especially among constituencies that Harris has struggled to reach — union members, voters without a college degree, and blue-collar voters, with whom Harris was [trailing by 4, 7, and 19 points](#) respectively in our poll. Despite these clear findings, Harris has pivoted away from anti-elite, economic messaging in the last month of the campaign and backtracked or de-emphasized some of her more [popular policies](#) in response to [pressure from the business community](#).

Democrats have once again decided to place the very risky bet that catering to moderate, college-educated voters will win more support than it loses in working-class defections. Leading up to election day, they've put most of their chips on [a message](#) that warns voters of the threat posed by a second Trump presidency. If our study's results are any indication, it's a gamble that could backfire massively.

Unequivocal Results

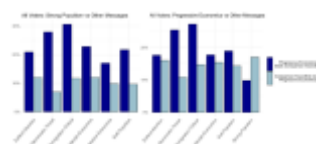
We tested five sound bites taken directly from Harris' own campaign language on 1) protecting abortion rights, 2) securing the border and providing a pathway to citizenship, 3) the threat Trump poses to democracy and his vows to turn the justice system against his enemies, 4) the "opportunity economy," emphasizing support for small businesses and tax cuts for the middle class, and 5) a "soft populist" pitch to fight for ordinary people against corporations that refuse to play by the rules. We also tested hypothetical "strong populist" and progressive economic sound bites: the strong populist message included a pledge to stand up to "billionaire crooks and the politicians in Washington who serve them," while the progressive economic message emphasized strengthening unions, taxing corporations and the rich, and expanding social services. We asked respondents to rate these sound bites on a scale of 1 (strongly oppose) to 7 (strongly support).

The results were unequivocal: the strong populist and progressive economic sound bites outperformed other messaging strategies by wide margins, followed by Harris's "opportunity economy," soft populist, abortion, immigration, and, last of all, democracy messages. Counting all respondents who gave these sound bites a score of five or higher as "supporters," the strong populist and progressive economic messages received 9 and 8 percent more support than democracy messaging. Populist messaging was especially effective with low-income, blue-collar, and non-college-educated respondents, receiving 10, 12, and 13 percent more net support than the democracy sound bite.

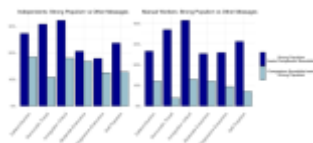


While some are wary of economic populism, afraid that it will dissuade electorally crucial "moderate" swing voters, we found the opposite to be true: the only other group that demonstrated similarly significant support were independents, who respond more positively to the strong populist and progressive economic sound bites than the democracy sound bite by around 11 points.

In order to examine the trade-offs of different messaging strategies across individuals, we also looked at relative (rather than net) support. This more fine-grained approach shows that the strong populist sound bite scored higher than the democracy sound bite among 27 percent of Pennsylvania voters, whereas only 8 percent gave the democracy sound bite a higher score. The progressive economic message is similarly persuasive, with only strong populism faring better at the individual level.



The data is even starker among blue-collar workers and independents, among whom 37 and 31 percent preferred strong populism to democracy messaging, respectively, whereas only 4 and 10 percent preferred democracy messaging to strong populism.



Crucially, populism also performed very well against the immigration sound bite, questioning the assumption that Harris’s move to the right on immigration has successfully attracted “moderates.” Across the board, if the choice for economic populism over other messaging strategies involves a trade-off, then it loses far less support than it gains.

It’s the People vs the Elites, Stupid!

The strength of economic populist messaging needs to be understood in the broader context of growing distrust of political and economic institutions, especially among those who feel left behind by postindustrial social change. For those who made it to the top, the new winner-take-all economy has produced tremendous fortunes and concentrations of power, while those who have not fared as well — especially blue-collar workers — are increasingly disillusioned with the status quo and pessimistic about the future.

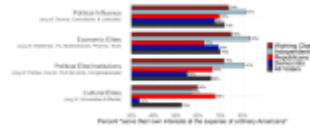
But it’s not just working-class voters who feel that the country is headed in the wrong direction. In the face of widening inequality, [trust in the political establishment](#) has never been lower; fewer people than ever [identify with either party](#); 70 percent of Americans [believe](#) that powerful interests are rigging the economic system; only 40 percent of lower-income Americans believe that it is [still possible to achieve the “American dream”](#); and [almost no one](#) believes that the country is “headed in the right direction.” In this context, it’s no surprise that the strong populist message we tested — which calls out “billionaire crooks, big corporations, and the politicians in Washington who serve them” — performed so well with Pennsylvanians, and especially with working-class Pennsylvanians.

To examine anti-elite attitudes in more detail, we asked a series of questions that gauge attitudes toward a number of influential institutions and industries. Specifically, we asked respondents whether these groups “contribute to the common welfare” or whether they “serve their own interests at the expense of ordinary Americans.”

We find that the “enemies” typically identified in right-wing populism — such as media organizations, nonprofits, universities, and unions — are not particularly effective objects of populist ire. Instead, the least popular groups in our poll were lobbyists and large political donors, with 78 and 74 percent of respondents saying they served their own interests at the expense of ordinary Americans, respectively. Across the political spectrum, Americans agree that legalized corruption is corruption.

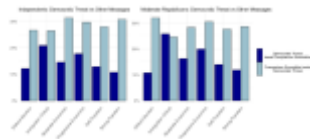
Respondents also placed a number of other elites near the top of their hit list: the “1 percent,” Big Pharma, Wall Street, and Big Tech are widely seen as pernicious influences in American life, followed by political and governmental institutions like parties and civil servants, whose unpopularity was driven more by Republicans and independents than Democrats. Importantly, our poll shows that independents and working-class respondents were significantly more distrustful of elites across the board. Apparently, winning over these groups doesn’t require a more “moderate”

position on corporate greed or legalized corruption.



The poll also suggests that an argument against cultural elites and the “woke” establishment would ring hollow next to a politics that calls out the main targets of anti-elite ire: the lobbyists, donors, and corporations that actually rig the system. Why, then, has Trump mopped up the antiestablishment vote?

Since entering the national stage in 2016, Trump has portrayed himself as a champion for ordinary Americans, battling an antipatriotic establishment. The Trumpian narrative places liberals in control of many of the powerful institutions in American life — in government, law, philanthropy, media, universities, high-tech industries, health care, and even finance. There is [some element of truth](#) in this narrative, and as long as Democrats remain tethered to the politics of these powerful institutions and the professional classes that populate them, Trump will be able to refract anti-elite sentiment through a partisan and cultural lens. By ceding this territory to MAGA and failing to articulate a full-throated anti-elite politics of their own, Democrats have allowed Trump to claim the populist mantle, even as his policies represent a massive boon for corporate power.



Democrats have an uphill battle: a credible left-populist politics would involve actually cutting ties with some of the elites, interest groups, and constituencies that they have been [cultivating](#) since the 1980s. This isn't without trade-offs; but it might cost Democrats even more not to do so.

A Campaign Adrift

Of course, the Democratic Party was never going to undergo a radical transformation over the course of a single, highly truncated presidential race. But corporate greed and price gouging were a significant campaign theme going into September — and many Harris surrogates were going after Big Pharma, Wall Street profiteering, and the 1 percent. In the weeks leading up to the election, however, the campaign has attempted to distance itself from anything that even remotely smells of an anti-elite economic agenda, backtracking on previous commitments regarding [price controls](#) and [capital gains taxes](#). Instead, [the New York Times reports](#) that the Harris campaign has turned to friends on Wall Street for campaign strategy and policy advice, prompting billionaire Mark Cuban to gleefully declare that the “progressive principles . . . of the Democratic Party . . . are gone. It’s Kamala Harris’s party now.”

“Kamala Harris’s party” has plenty of policies. Since late August, the campaign has unveiled a plan to not regulate cryptocurrencies, spurring an [influx of campaign donations](#) from the industry. They released an [Opportunity Agenda for Black Men](#), providing a series of tax breaks and loan programs that would empower black men to become, among other things: [blockchain investors](#), marijuana-dispensary proprietors, small business owners, public school teachers, and participants in

government-funded “mentorship programs.” Their centerpiece economic policies would [subsidize new small businesses](#), [expand the child and earned income tax credit](#), and [provide tax breaks](#) for first-generation homebuyers who have paid their rent on time for two years.

Some of these might be good policies, but it’s difficult to tell what holds them all together. Rather than telling people what she plans to do for them here and now, Harris is reviving a stale, neoliberal language of [process and motion](#), of nudging, incentives, and means-testing, of “developing solutions” and “expanding opportunities” — a series of incremental improvements to problems that no one caused. This [microtargeted approach](#) meshes well with a campaign that has no clear position vis-à-vis the status quo, a campaign content to contract out its policy to Wall Street consultants and the think-tank-industrial complex. When asked how a Harris administration would differ from the Biden administration, [she answered](#), “Nothing comes to mind,” before backtracking and announcing that she plans to have a Republican in her cabinet.

To the extent that the Harris campaign has had an overarching narrative, it hasn’t been “freedom” or taking on corporate elites; it’s been Donald Trump and the threat he poses.

The campaign spent the week leading into Election Day on a “blue wall” tour with Liz Cheney to court independents and moderate Republicans. As [CNN puts it](#), these “events aren’t intended to focus on progressive policy pitches, but rather warnings about what a second Trump term could mean.” Our poll suggests that this strategy was a serious mistake, given that messaging on Trump’s threat to democracy polls especially woefully among independents and moderate Republicans.

It has the lowest net support among these groups, and a comparison of relative support for different messaging strategies shows that the democracy sound bite scored lower than most other sound bites among 30 percent of independents and moderate Republicans. It received more support than popular alternatives among only 10 to 15 percent of independents and moderate Republicans. In other words, democracy messaging is a massive loser among precisely those groups that the Cheney-Harris tour was attempting to win.

With her blue wall tour, Harris almost appeared intent on doing Trump’s job for him. She was telling voters: “Washington insiders and reasonable billionaires agree, Trump is too dangerous to be president,” effectively positioning him as the enemy of a deeply unpopular establishment and status quo.

All Is Not Lost

Over the past month, the feeling of possibility and optimism after the DNC has been eclipsed by the reality of Democratic establishment politics and a drop in the polls. The direction of the campaign over the past weeks has hurt Harris with voters across the board, but especially with critical working-class voters in states like Pennsylvania. In fact, given the peculiar way in which polling has [been weighted](#) this cycle, the working class may actually be even more decisive than the polls currently suggest.

While Harris’ democracy messaging doesn’t seem to have been effective with voters, it has been quite effective at suppressing dissent from the progressive wing of her own party who are rightfully terrified of a second Trump presidency. They remained largely silent as Harris took her cues from party insiders, donors, and Wall Street consultants on everything from capital gains taxes to Palestine. But their silence [hasn’t done her campaign any favors](#).

Nonetheless, Democrats still have a solid chance in today’s election. Harris’s abortion pitch does

appear to have been fairly effective with moderates and the Democratic base. Moreover, the Harris campaign's main super PAC, Future Forward, has attempted to shift emphasis toward [economic issues](#), registering [surprisingly public dissent](#) with Harris's democracy-focused messaging. One of their [most-played ads](#) going into Election Day contrasts Harris's plans to cut taxes for the middle class (possibly her most straightforward and popular position) with Trump's plans to give tax breaks to billionaires.

A lot hangs in the balance today, and a second Trump presidency does pose immense dangers to American democracy. But the viability of that democracy also depends on how Democrats resolve the tension at the party's core: Will they be the party of professional classes and corporate elites, or will they abandon their old allies to champion working people against a corrupt system?

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 11.05.2024:
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