

The Democrats are at a Crossroads and They Need to Turn Left

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According to [David Brooks](#), Joe Biden was elected to address the “poisonous combination of elite insularity and vicious populist resentment.” As Democratic Party members become ever more college-educated, and as resentment towards the left intensifies, opponents to Democrats seem to be willing to do anything, die from Covid or attack the Capitol, as long as they can “stick a middle finger in the air against those who they think look down on them.”

This polarization has been [brewing for decades](#). Half a century ago, socioeconomic status predicted how Americans would vote. Since then, education level has become a much stronger predictor, and Donald Trump drastically accelerated this division—especially among white voters. Joe Biden is at a crossroad right now in his presidency, and he’s going to have to address this poisonous combination if the Democratic Party is going to get any traction in the coming years. His best chance of doing so is to push the party to adopt more of Bernie Sanders’ identity.

Biden’s agenda right now is in jeopardy. He successfully passed a bipartisan infrastructure bill, but his victory came at a cost given that he had been using the delay in its passage to motivate moderates to move on the social policy legislation. The House had been holding back on voting on the infrastructure bill until two moderate Senate Democrats agreed to vote in favor of a budget reconciliation package that contained, among other things, the bulk of Biden’s social policy goals. Further, Biden’s approval ratings are concerningly low, and recent gubernatorial elections are raising concern that the 2022 midterms could be catastrophic for Democrats. Biden needs to decide how he wants to proceed.

One option would be to [do what Bill Clinton did](#) in his shoes, and rebrand himself as more moderate. Going into the 1994 midterms, Bill Clinton was a first-term president with a low approval rating (47% compared to Biden’s current 42%) facing a Republican opposition unified behind Newt Gingrich and his Contract with America. After the Republicans won both houses of Congress, he focused on balancing the budget, thereby appealing to the center and the right and, as it turns out, fueling his successful reelection. Biden could take a similar approach in the interest of avoiding costly midterms; he could abandon the already downsized social policy budget reconciliation, and turn his focus to economic issues.

A better option however, both in the interest of addressing the poisonous combination and helping Democrats succeed in 2022, would be to do everything he can to get the budget reconciliation passed in the fullest form, so that he can and continue following Bernie Sanders’ lead and garner Sanders’ supporters. Sanders, as the chair of the Senate Budget Committee, has his fingerprints all over the budget reconciliation, evidenced by the populations that the programs included would help most, the same populations that vote the least for Democrats. The same people who feel patronized by liberal elites. As David Brooks puts it, “these packages say to the struggling parents and the warehouse workers: *I see you. Your work has dignity. You are paving your way. You are at the center of our national vision.*”

Orienting Biden’s policy objectives in this direction would help Democrats build their share of the non-college-educated electorate, but it will not be enough. Democrats need to unite behind a platform that will redefine the composition of the party and or get a lot more people to vote, and either way, Sanders’ policies, along with the [willingness to compromise](#) that he has carried through the debate on the budget reconciliation, are the best way forward.

As things stand, [Democrats are in trouble](#) in 2022, 2024, and long term. David Shor, an analyst who worked on Barack Obama’s reelection campaign has developed a complex model that

predicts that in 2022, if Democrats win 51 percent of the popular vote they’ll lose a seat in the Senate and therefore the majority. The model predicts that if they win 51% in 2024, they’ll lose seven seats. Democratic voters are concentrated in urban areas and more populous states, and as the party becomes more urban and college educated, its existing electoral disadvantages only compound. The Senate makes it easy to understand the disadvantage that an overwhelmingly urban coalition creates under our constitution. The 17 least populous states make up 7% of the population—34 Senators. The three most populous states make up 25% of the population—6 senators. This also gives rural states disproportionate influence in the electoral college and in judicial and bureaucratic confirmations.

If Democrats can pass legislation like the budget reconciliation and continue to push forward Sanders’ policies, the effect on rural and working-class voters should speak for itself. Uniting behind Sanders’ policies also ought to have a tangible impact on non-voters. In 2016, Sanders, like Trump, [was viewed as an outsider](#) by pundits. The two appeal to non-voters with their populist rhetoric and anti-establishment images. Less generally though, Sanders is especially attractive to a huge group of non-voters: [young people](#). The youngest voting groups, 18-to-29-year-olds, vote at extremely low rates (they reached an all time low of 20% in 2014), but support Bernie Sanders at impressively high rates. In Michigan for example, a state the Biden won in the 2020 democratic primary by nearly 17 points, “Sanders won 18-to-24-year-olds by 61 points; 25-to-29-year-olds by 56 points; and 30-to-39-year-olds by 19 points.”

Unification within the Democratic Party behind Sanders’ policies, combined with an awareness of the potential for their popularity among young and working-class voters if they play their cards right, is the best chance for short and long-term success of the Democratic Party. It may also be the best chance for the preservation of our democratic institutions and planet.