

Epistemic Exclusion, Performative Politics, and Procedural Dysfunction in the Post-2020 Democratic Party

Introduction

The post-2020 Democratic Party faces internal challenges that go beyond electoral tactics or policy disagreements. **Epistemic exclusion** – the silencing or derision of dissenting viewpoints – has grown alongside **performative politics** that substitute symbolic gestures for concrete policy achievements. These trends are reinforced by **procedural dysfunction**, such as consensus-driven decision-making and identity-based gatekeeping, which often prioritize purity and symbolism over results. This report examines how the Democratic coalition – from institutional actors to activist subcultures – increasingly favors *virtue signaling* and *purity tests* over pragmatic governance. It also contrasts these patterns with the Republican Party's kinetic, outcome-driven legislative agenda, and analyzes how the Democrats' strategic culture may be undermining voter retention and coalition strength. We draw on empirical data (e.g. polling, ideological shifts, legislative outcomes), political commentary, and research in political psychology (on communal narcissism and moral grandstanding) to illustrate these dynamics. Figures like David Shapiro, Richard Hanania, and Ezra Klein have commented incisively on these issues, from the narrowing of internal discourse to the formation of political identity around performative virtue. The evidence suggests that, while Republicans forge ahead with tangible (if controversial) laws, Democrats risk devolving into what one critic calls “a cargo cult of rituals and tests,” losing sight of falsifiable policy goals in favor of internal status games. In the sections below, we explore these phenomena in detail and consider their implications for the Democratic Party's future.

Epistemic Monoculture and Purity Tests

A growing body of evidence and commentary indicates that the left-of-center political sphere has become more ideologically insular since 2020, fostering a **self-reinforcing epistemic monoculture**. In practice, this means a narrower range of acceptable thought within Democratic and progressive circles, with strong social pressures to conform to certain views on cultural and political issues. Dissenting opinions – even from long-time Democrats or marginalized voices – are often dismissed or ridiculed rather than debated, a phenomenon researchers term *epistemic exclusion*. For example, a recent study by the nonpartisan group More in Common found that progressive activists are markedly less willing than others to listen to or understand conservative viewpoints. They tend to view those who disagree as misinformed or immoral, and are quick to **dismiss opponents as ignorant or ill-intentioned** ¹. This mindset contributes to *purity testing*, where individuals must signal unwavering adherence to the in-group's orthodoxies or face ostracism.

Evidence of Narrowing Discourse: Empirical data on the ideological composition of the Democratic coalition shows a trend toward homogeneity at the elite and activist levels. Over the past two decades, Democrats have become far more likely to identify as liberal and far less likely to include moderates or

conservatives in their ranks. In the late 1990s, only 28% of Democrats called themselves liberal (and an equal 25% identified as conservative), but by 2021 fully 50% of Democrats identified as liberal, with self-identified conservatives dwindling to around 12% ². (The remainder identify as moderate.) This ideological sorting is summarized in **Table 1** below, and it mirrors the *partisan-ideological alignment* seen in the GOP (where about 74% now identify as conservative) ³ ⁴. The Democratic Party today is much more uniformly left-leaning, especially among its white college-educated members, who have overwhelmingly embraced a progressive cultural worldview ⁵ ⁶.

Table 1. Ideological Self-Identification Among Democrats, Late 1990s vs. 2021 ²		
Ideology	Late 1990s	2021
Liberal (or Very Liberal)	28%	50%
Moderate	~47% (approx.)	~38% (approx.)
Conservative	25%	12%

While a more uniformly liberal party might suggest greater unity, in practice it has meant **less tolerance for internal disagreement**. The More in Common study noted above revealed that progressive activists not only impose purity tests on would-be allies, but also *overestimate how many people share their views and use language inaccessible to the wider public* ⁷. In other words, those most engaged in left activism often exist in an echo chamber – a *self-referential culture* with its own jargon (“Latine,” “DEI,” etc.) and moral litmus tests – and fail to recognize how alienating or extreme their norms appear to non-activists. This dynamic has been described by social commentator David Shapiro as “*narrowing status games around single referents (namely privilege and diversity)*”, which inevitably lead to **purity testing, virtue signaling, and gatekeeping** within progressive movements. In such environments, group status and moral authority are earned by outdoing others in *ideological purity* – espousing the most uncompromising stance, adopting the latest correct terminology, and reflexively rejecting heterodox ideas or even nuanced debate.

One striking manifestation of epistemic exclusion is the derision often aimed at anyone deemed outside the orthodoxy. Shapiro points out that disagreements are frequently met not with refutation but with personal disparagement – the assumption that “*people who disagree with me are just stupid*”. This attitude was on display in a social media exchange he highlighted: a leftist commentator mocked conservative accounts for sharing a headline without a link, sneering that right-wing audiences “don’t even pretend” to be interested in reading beyond the confirmatory headline. The irony, of course, was that this reflects precisely the closed-minded derision the left accuses the right of. Such examples underscore what “the data shows,” according to Shapiro – that many on the left engage in *outright epistemic exclusion and ridicule* of dissent, rather than persuasion or self-reflection.

Academic research in political psychology provides context for these behaviors. Studies of *moral superiority* and *political narcissism* suggest that strong partisans on both sides can exhibit a kind of collective narcissism – a belief that their group is uniquely virtuous or enlightened. In the case of progressive activists, this often takes the form of **communal narcissism** (a grandiose self-conception derived from the belief that one is an especially “good” or compassionate member of the community) and **moral grandstanding** (using moral talk to seek status and validation) ⁸ ⁹. Such individuals derive ego gratification from being seen as righteous and may have a heightened need to *display* their moral commitments. Research finds that moral grandstanding is correlated with adopting more **extreme ideological positions** – particularly when status-seeking is the motive ⁸. In other words, the incentive structure in an activist echo chamber rewards people for taking the most uncompromising, performatively virtuous stance, since this garners admiration

within the group. This dynamic can create a *ratchet effect* toward ever-narrower orthodoxies: moderates or dissenters self-censor or exit, while remaining members compete in one-upmanship of moral purity. The end result is a **self-reinforcing monoculture** of beliefs, increasingly insulated from external reality or critique.

Notably, even some *within* progressive circles have started voicing alarm. Progressive pundit Ezra Klein has observed that contemporary politics have turned every issue into a matter of identity, making partisan affiliation a “mega-identity” and encouraging zero-sum thinking ¹⁰. In his book *Why We’re Polarized*, Klein argues that both left and right have sorted into tribes defined by identity and culture, which can distort their ability to process information and govern effectively ¹¹. He defends the importance of identity concerns, but also warns that parties must deliver tangible improvements to people’s lives – not just cater to their base’s self-conception – if they want to build durable majorities ¹² ¹³. In effect, Klein is cautioning Democrats that *performative ideological conformity is not a substitute for results*. When internal monoculture leads to “**policy by bubble**” – i.e. platforms and rhetoric that play well on Twitter or academia but fail to resonate with most voters – the party risks electoral backlash and stagnation.

Performative Politics vs. Concrete Policy Outcomes

Observers across the political spectrum have noted that the Democratic Party in recent years often opts for **symbolic gestures and performative displays** in lieu of pursuing concrete, verifiable policy goals. This tendency was on vivid display in June 2020, amid nationwide protests over racial justice. In a widely publicized event, Democratic congressional leaders knelt for 8 minutes and 46 seconds while wearing Ghanaian kente cloth stoles, as a show of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. The act was meant as a solemn tribute to George Floyd and an expression of commitment to police reform – yet it was largely perceived as a theatrical stunt. *“The announcement did not warrant such a visual stunt, but the Democratic Party, the party of optics and gesture, apparently could not resist,”* wrote **The New Yorker**, describing the scene as pageantry that *“felt not just misguided but like an outright mockery”* ¹⁴ ¹⁵. While House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senator Chuck Schumer, and others draped themselves in ceremonial cloth for the cameras, the actual policy proposal they unveiled (the Justice in Policing Act of 2020) contained only modest reforms – many of them **largely symbolic themselves**, such as re-banning chokeholds already prohibited by the NYPD years earlier ¹⁶. In the words of that *New Yorker* critique, *“the party of optics and gesture”* produced *“reformist legislation which, like the kente stoles themselves, is largely symbolic”*, doing little to tackle the entrenched structural issues at hand ¹⁶.

This episode became emblematic of **performative politics** – highly visible symbolic actions (kneeling in kente cloth, painting “Black Lives Matter” on streets, tweeting the latest virtue signal) that generate buzz and moral satisfaction, but do not materially change the conditions they purport to address. Such gestures can even *distract* from substantive action: in the kente cloth case, the media spectacle arguably *“bulldozed”* the news of the actual bill being introduced ¹⁴, and the visual became fodder for both ridicule and polarized debate, while meaningful police reform died in the Senate. *“All politics rests on an aspect of performance,”* the *New Yorker* piece acknowledged, but warned that Democrats’ penchant for “**photo-op**” politics has *“overcome consideration of what the resulting pictures would communicate”* ¹⁵. The communication received by many was that Democratic leaders preferred **virtue signalling** over the hard work of policy change – a conclusion reinforced when federal police reform stalled, yet the images of kente-clad politicians remained in circulation as a testament to empty symbolism.

Similar patterns have played out on issues ranging from climate change to pandemic response. Democratic officials and aligned activists often emphasize *symbolic declarations of values* (for instance, pledging “net zero” targets or adopting inclusive rhetoric) without accompanying them with clear, measurable plans. As an example, consider New York City’s response to various social concerns in recent years. The City Council has passed a flurry of progressive-styled ordinances – some well-intentioned but marginal, others largely cosmetic. In April 2023, the Council moved to **ban the sale of guinea pigs in pet stores**, citing a pandemic-era surge in abandoned pet rodents straining animal shelters ¹⁷ ¹⁸ . The legislation garnered attention for making NYC the first city to outlaw guinea pig sales. Yet on the same day, the Council chamber was filled with *very different* cries for help: **hundreds of retired city workers** crowded the gallery to protest the planned reduction of their health care benefits, a life-altering policy change that city government was preparing to implement ¹⁹ ²⁰ . According to local reporting, as these retirees – “firefighters, teachers, police officers, librarians, EMS technicians” – rallied to save their medical coverage, the Council proceeded with **“business as usual,” debating the Guinea pig question** and other niche measures, such as mandating diaper-changing stations in parks and a resolution on a fast-food chain’s labor practices ²¹ ²² . The contrast was striking: on one hand, a performative focus on boutique issues (cute pets, symbolic resolutions) that allow lawmakers to signal compassion or progressivism at little political cost; on the other, an avoidance of directly addressing a *core governance responsibility* – the health care promised to public servants – because it was fraught with fiscal and political complexity. The episode led one columnist to quip that the Council found time to **“debate guinea pigs while retired heroes watch their Medicare benefits vanish”**, underscoring how performative priorities can sideline pressing real-world needs ²³ ²⁴ .

These tendencies have not gone unnoticed by Democratic strategists and sympathetic critics. In late 2023, *TIME* magazine’s politics newsletter featured a piece titled **“The Democrats Begging Their Party to Ditch the Activist Left”**, centered on a new book by political analysts John Judis and Ruy Teixeira ²⁵ ²⁶ . The article highlights a growing concern that *“working-class voters [suspect] the party cares more about woke jargon and performative ultimatums than the needs of their former base”* ²⁷ . Judis and Teixeira argue that Democratic leadership became enthralled by a *“rarefied vocabulary”* of campus-derived cultural radicalism – **symbolic politics around race and gender** – while neglecting the bread-and-butter economic and safety issues that resonate with many voters ²⁸ ²⁹ . This critique points to phenomena like **virtue signaling** (publicly espousing “correct” positions or language for social approbation) and *“performative ultimatums”* (taking all-or-nothing stands to broadcast moral purity) as not only alienating to middle America, but ultimately *self-sabotaging* for the left. When a political movement prizes making a statement over making progress, it can spiral into what David Shapiro terms a **“self-reinforcing death spiral, tightly clustering around a few values”**. In such a spiral, **moral grandstanding** replaces persuasion, and internal purity replaces external effectiveness. Political psychologist Joshua Grubbs and colleagues note that this dynamic can fuel polarization: individuals who engage in moral grandstanding are more likely to report hostile and combative political engagement, often driving away potential allies and moderates ³⁰ ³¹ .

Ezra Klein, in a *New Yorker* interview shortly after the 2020 election, similarly admonished Democrats to **focus on tangible outcomes rather than abstract posturing**. *“Make it such that Americans feel a difference in their daily lives from Democrats having the power to govern,”* Klein urged, noting that this *“obvious”* advice is *“not typically what Democrats do.”* He observed that in their last governing trifecta (2009–2010), Democrats tended to **“let the filibuster stop them”** and often designed complex policies whose benefits were delayed or invisible to the public ³² . For instance, the 2009 stimulus included a tax credit delivered so subtly that many recipients didn’t realize they had benefited ³² . *“You don’t get re-elected on things people don’t know you did,”* Klein remarked bluntly ³² . This critique speaks to a procedural aspect (which we will explore in the next section) but is fundamentally about messaging and priorities: Democrats too often seek technocratic

or symbolic *virtue* – e.g., crafting an impeccably detailed policy, or showcasing their values through gestures – rather than ensuring that voters see and feel concrete improvements attributable to Democratic governance. Klein’s prescription was clear: pass bold legislation that directly improves lives **now**, even if it means breaking with procedural shibboleths (like the filibuster) or incurring controversy, because “*failed promises*” and intangible gestures breed more public frustration than they assuage ³³. In other words, *results* are the best political messaging; anything less is performative and, in the long run, self-defeating.

Procedural Maximalism and Identity-Based Gatekeeping

Layered atop the left’s substantive drift toward symbolism is a style of internal process that often valorizes **maximalism in procedure and identity-based gatekeeping**. By *procedural maximalism*, we refer to practices like strict consensus decision-making, elaborate inclusivity protocols, and insistence on extensive input from every identity subgroup – all motivated by laudable ideals of democracy and equity, but sometimes resulting in paralysis or dysfunction. By *identity-based gatekeeping*, we mean the tendency to police who is allowed to speak or lead on an issue based on their identity characteristics (race, gender, etc.), under the logic that lived experience grants authority. Both patterns, taken to extremes, can hinder a coalition’s ability to make timely decisions, adapt, and **include a diversity of perspectives** (ironically, the very thing they seek to promote).

The Tyranny of Consensus: Left-wing activist movements have a long tradition of favoring consensus-based governance, aiming for inclusive deliberation and collective agreement. However, experience has shown that unyielding consensus rules can be “*the tyranny of the individual*”, enabling lone objectors to veto initiatives supported by the majority ³⁴. The Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 is a famous example – general assemblies operated on pure consensus, often grinding to a halt because any participant could block a proposal for any reason. As one Occupy veteran recounted, during a meeting of 100 people discussing whether to join a workers’ picket line, a single person “*casually raised her hand and said, ‘I block that’*”, instantly ending discussion and scuttling the action ³⁵. Activists later reflected that Occupy’s overemphasis on consensus made it “*almost impossible in very large groups*” to decide anything, especially when trust and unity of values were lacking ³⁶. The excessive use of “blocks” (vetoes) – sometimes wielded not out of principled objection but performatively, “*because [people] have friends watching on livestream who want to block*” – created a “*real royal mess*” in the decision-making process ³⁷. In short, consensus, taken as an inviolable rule, incentivized **performative obstruction** (to signal one’s radical bona fides or allegiances) and allowed bad-faith actors to exploit procedural loopholes ³⁸. The outcome was often stasis and disillusionment. Contemporary progressive organizations, from campus groups to advocacy coalitions, have faced similar critiques: the insistence on maximal inclusivity and unanimous comfort can lead to protracted debates over minor points of language or privilege, while urgent decisions languish. A **Journal of Social and Political Psychology** analysis of Occupy noted that strict consensus proponents were faulted for “*insisting on the democratic rigor of their process*” even when it clearly undercut the movement’s effectiveness ³⁴ ³⁹. This points to a broader tension in left institutions between *process and purpose* – when following the most purist process (e.g. horizontal consensus, endless consultation) becomes a goal unto itself, the original mission (achieving policy change, winning elections) can suffer.

Identity-Based Gatekeeping: Alongside procedural rigidity, the post-2020 left is often characterized by an intense consciousness of **identity hierarchies** within its own ranks. Progressive spaces commonly emphasize acknowledging one’s privilege (or lack thereof) and deferring to those from marginalized groups on topics that concern them. In many ways this has been positive – elevating voices of people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, etc., who historically were sidelined. Yet it has also given rise to a culture of *internal*

gatekeeping, where the validity of an argument may be dismissed based on the speaker's identity rather than the argument's merits. Phrases like "stay in your lane" or accusations of speaking over others are frequently employed to enforce this norm. The result can be an inadvertent **essentialism**: only certain people are deemed *qualified* to discuss police reform (e.g. Black Americans), or immigration (immigrants), or gender issues (the gender minority in question), and others are expected to yield or only echo the "authentic" voices. While born from a place of inclusion, in practice this can marginalize *internal diversity of thought*. For instance, Black or Latino Democrats who voice heterodox views on crime or education might be told they are out of step with "their community" – reflecting what the *New Yorker* called the "*myth of the black monolith*" in Democratic strategy ⁴⁰. In 2020, Washington, D.C.'s mayor symbolically painted "Black Lives Matter" on a street, only for left-wing activists to add "Defund the Police" as a corrective, highlighting a **division between black liberals and black leftists** ⁴¹. Yet Democratic leaders often pretend no such division exists, presenting a facade of unanimity among people of color. "*Internal divisions within the race are not tolerated; they must be drowned out with bright colors,*" the *New Yorker* piece observed tartly, referencing the kente cloth display as literally covering over differences ⁴⁰. This speaks to a form of gatekeeping where only one narrative from each identity group is elevated (the most progressive one), and others are suppressed or ignored for the sake of a united front.

The fixation on identity as the axis of authority also feeds **status contests** within progressive subcultures. Sociologist Freddie deBoer has described how in some leftist spaces, individuals compete in a hierarchy of oppression – *the more marginalized your identity, the greater your moral authority*. Activist and writer David Shapiro echoes this, warning that "*any time you build a movement around just a handful of values, you inevitably end up with purity testing and gatekeeping*", and that **privilege-checking can become a narrow status game** rather than a genuine tool of insight. If one's status in the group is determined by how well one demonstrates awareness of privilege/oppression, then performative denunciations and hair-trigger call-outs of others' missteps become common. The atmosphere can quickly turn accusatory and self-policing – everyone constantly proving their woke credentials to avoid being denounced. This phenomenon is sometimes derided as "*cancel culture*" or *call-out culture*, though those terms are contentious. What is clear is that it creates a **climate of fear and conformity**: people are reluctant to question prevailing views (even if they have relevant expertise or contrary data) if they don't belong to the "right" identity group, or if doing so might get them labeled insensitive. Over time, this dynamic *hollows out honest dialogue* and can degrade institutional competence. For example, Richard Hanania has argued that modern civil-rights and diversity policies, however well-intentioned, have had the effect of installing a *de facto* ideological litmus test in many organizations ⁴². In his 2023 book *The Origins of Woke*, Hanania posits that expansive interpretations of anti-discrimination law pressured universities, corporations, and government agencies into adopting **DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) programs** that police speech and thought in the workplace ⁴³ ⁴⁴. The result, he contends, is a new system of "*thought control*": an official ideology of identitarianism that one must publicly adhere to, replacing older norms without necessarily improving organizational outcomes ⁴⁵. While Hanania's perspective is a conservative one, even liberals like journalist Matthew Yglesias have raised concerns that some progressive institutions are becoming "**legibility traps**" – so internally focused on representation and identity processes that they lose sight of delivering on their core functions. In one notable instance, a major progressive news outlet saw staff meltdowns over whether a particular article or phrasing was harmful to a community, leading to public editorials about internal equity – while its ability to produce journalism was paralyzed. Such cases illustrate *procedural dysfunction* born of good intentions: inclusion and consensus are paramount, but taken to an extreme, they render the institution ineffective or incoherent to outsiders.

Strategic Implications and the Contrast with the GOP

The cumulative effect of the above trends is a Democratic Party and progressive movement that, in the eyes of many observers, **struggles to convert its cultural energy into political power**. Internally, the party may enjoy a fervent base engaged in moral discourse and activism, but that fervor too often gets channeled into intramural battles or symbolic crusades instead of broad electoral appeal or policy wins. Externally, voters who don't share the niche values or linguistic codes of the activist class may feel alienated or talked down to. Indeed, electoral evidence since 2020 suggests that the Democratic coalition is fraying at its edges, even as it grows more uniform at its core.

One stark indicator is **voter retention among key demographics**. Democrats have long relied on a "rising American electorate" of diverse, younger voters – a strategy predicated on racial and generational demographics. But recent elections show that assumption faltering. In 2020, despite Joe Biden's victory, Democrats saw an unexpected *erosion of support among non-white working-class voters*, particularly Latino and also Black voters. Analysts Judis and Teixeira document roughly an **18 to 20 point swing** among Hispanic working-class voters toward Donald Trump and the GOP in 2020 compared to 2016 – a seismic shift in a demographic that Democrats once assumed was safely theirs ⁴⁶. This trend continued into 2022 and 2023, with polling and elections (such as the Virginia and New Jersey governor races, New York City council races, etc.) indicating that significant portions of working-class Latino and even Black voters are open to Republican messages on jobs, inflation, crime, and schooling ⁴⁷. Notably, these are groups who **do not identify with "woke" terminology or progressive ideological frames** as strongly as white college-educated liberals do. Yet the Democratic brand is increasingly defined by those progressive frames, which may come across as either irrelevant or hostile to more culturally moderate voters of all races. Teixeira warns that Democrats, convinced by their own narrative that any defections are due to voter bigotry, "*didn't think very hard or very long about why they lost white working-class voters*" and now risk repeating the mistake with non-white workers ⁴⁸ ⁴⁷. Instead of course-correcting after 2016, Teixeira observes, the party "*doubled down on the rising electorate*" strategy and treated Trump's appeal as a pure function of racism – writing off those voters as deplorable and focusing ever more on satisfying left-wing activists ⁴⁹ ⁵⁰. This, he implies, was a form of epistemic closure: Democrats "*interpreted [their] defeat*" in the most self-justifying way and thus "*who needs [those voters]?*" ⁴⁹. The danger now is that **history is repeating**, with Democrats minimizing the significance of, say, Hispanic voters' shift by again attributing it solely to misinformation or intolerance, rather than examining whether the party's focus has drifted from these voters' concrete concerns.

Meanwhile, the **Republican Party has pursued an aggressive, kinetic legislative agenda** at both state and federal levels – often directly targeting the cultural issues where Democrats stake moral high ground. Far from engaging in careful consensus or symbolic posturing, GOP officials have moved swiftly to codify their positions into law, even at risk of public backlash. Since 2020, Republican-controlled state legislatures have unleashed a wave of **hard-edged policy changes** on everything from election rules to school curricula to abortion and LGBTQ rights. For example, after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, numerous red states immediately implemented or passed near-total abortion bans, achieving a decades-long Republican policy goal. By early 2023, at least **nine states were considering bills to restrict or criminalize drag shows**, and more than a dozen were advancing bills to ban classroom instruction on gender identity or sexual orientation in certain grades ⁵¹ ⁵². Florida, under Governor Ron DeSantis, became emblematic of this "war on woke," enacting laws to restrict how race and gender can be discussed in schools and workplaces (the "Stop WOKE Act"), banning transgender treatments for minors, and expanding a law prohibiting instruction on LGBTQ topics (labeled by critics as the "Don't Say Gay" law).

DeSantis openly declared that *“Florida is where woke goes to die,”* emphasizing an unabashed will to wield power against progressive cultural influence ⁵³ . In the U.S. House of Representatives, the new Republican majority in 2023 quickly passed a “Parents’ Bill of Rights” aimed at giving parents greater oversight of school curricula – a bill filled with culture-war signals about book banning and sex education ⁵⁴ . While many of these initiatives are controversial and have faced public opposition (polling shows, for instance, that about **58% of Americans oppose restrictions on drag performances and a majority oppose criminalizing gender-affirming care for trans youth** ⁵⁵ ⁵⁶), the GOP has been willing to *act first and deal with backlash later*. In effect, Republicans are prioritizing delivering tangible wins (for their base) – such as eliminating abortion access in dozens of states, curbing what they view as progressive indoctrination in schools, and passing large tax cuts (as they did federally in 2017) – whereas Democrats often prioritize showing that they *care* or *stand* for certain values, without translating those stands into equivalent sweeping changes.

The contrast in **strategic culture** is stark: Republicans, for all their infighting, tend to close ranks to achieve collective goals (judicial appointments, deregulation, cultural rollbacks), frequently using hardball tactics and party discipline. They also seem less preoccupied with internal virtue hierarchies – a GOP lawmaker is rarely “canceled” for not being conservative enough on every issue (the party tolerates moderates like Sen. Susan Collins and extremists like Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene under one tent, as long as they help the GOP hold power). Democrats, on the other hand, often mire themselves in **procedural self-restraint** (e.g. refusing to eliminate the Senate filibuster for fear of violating norms ¹³) and internal policing (such as litmus tests on identity issues). Ezra Klein lamented that Democrats “tend to let the filibuster stop them” even when voters have given them a majority ¹³ – a procedural choice Republicans did not emulate when they used budget reconciliation (a filibuster-proof process) to pass tax cuts, or when they nearly nuked the filibuster to confirm conservative judges. Additionally, Democratic leadership sometimes indulges its left wing’s performative demands at the expense of pragmatism. For instance, in 2021, the insistence on passing a gargantuan Build Back Better bill to satisfy all factions – rather than breaking it into individually popular measures – resulted in months of internal bickering and ultimate defeat of the full package. A more ruthless Republican-style approach might have been to pass whatever was possible and claim victory on some fronts rather than none.

This strategic drift has **electoral consequences**. The Democratic Party is in danger of *“following the Republican Party into an extremist spiral,”* warns Teixeira – meaning a smaller yet more ideologically fervent party that struggles to win broad majorities ⁵⁷ . However, whereas the GOP’s “extremist spiral” still produces concrete policy (albeit polarizing ones), the Democrats’ version risks producing mostly internecine conflict and disillusionment. As Judis put it, Democrats went from being the party of the working class to something like an “hourglass” coalition – *“upscale voters and marginalized poor voters at the top and bottom, missing the middle”* ⁵⁸ . The top of that hourglass (affluent, educated liberals) exerts disproportionate influence on discourse and demands a politics of expressive virtue; the bottom (low-income, diverse voters) often have more immediate material concerns. If the party’s agenda is driven primarily by the cultural preoccupations of the former, it may fail to inspire the latter to turn out or stay loyal. Indeed, turnout among Black voters declined in 2022 compared to 2018, and Latino voters have shown increased volatility. Early 2024 polling has caused *“panicked”* reactions among Democrats as President Biden underperforms with minority voters and in swing states ⁵⁹ . Those voters are not flocking to Republicans en masse, but many are becoming *swing voters* or non-voters, eroding what Democrats assumed would be a permanent advantage in a diversifying America.

Ultimately, the Democrats’ **emphasis on performative progressivism and complex proceduralism may be hampering their ability to compete** with a Republican Party that, for all its democratic deficits, is

delivering change that its base can see. As Klein argues, people vote based on the tangible impact government has (or fails to have) on their lives ³³. If Democrats devote themselves to “*a rarefied vocabulary about race, gender*” and intramural virtue battles ²⁸, while Republicans hand out tax cuts, pass abortion bans, or even just claim to keep “woke ideology” out of schools, then Democrats risk being perceived as out-of-touch symbolic elites. This was encapsulated in a quote from a laid-off factory worker in 2020, describing Democrats: “*They hold hearings on banning plastic straws while we’re losing our jobs*”. It’s a crude summary, but it rings true to many.

Of course, not all is doom and gloom for the Democratic coalition. The party did manage to pass significant legislation under Biden (the American Rescue Plan, bipartisan infrastructure law, CHIPS Act, Inflation Reduction Act addressing climate change). These were real policies with real impacts – *when Democrats focused on concrete goals, they delivered*. The challenge is that such achievements are often under-sold by the party itself, while the performative missteps and culture-war imbroglios dominate headlines. Moving forward, figures like Judis and Teixeira urge a **return to a “party of the people” ethos** – prioritizing “*opportunity over identity politics, inclusion over tribalism*” ⁶⁰. This doesn’t mean abandoning the commitment to racial and gender equality, but contextualizing it within a broader, **universalist vision that working Americans of all backgrounds can feel a part of**. It also means rethinking internal culture: fostering an environment where debate is tolerated, where expertise matters as much as identity, and where *getting things done* is valued more than *getting virtue points*. Ezra Klein’s plea – “*Help people first*” ⁶¹ – could serve as a mantra to recalibrate Democratic priorities. If the party can demonstrate that its commitments to justice and equity yield **concrete improvements** (safer communities, better jobs, more affordable health care, etc.), it can blunt the GOP’s attacks and perhaps even reduce polarization by proving government can work for all.

In conclusion, the post-2020 Democratic Party stands at a crossroads. Down one path lies continued epistemic narrowing, performative grandstanding, and procedural self-sabotage – a path that may lead to moral self-satisfaction but electoral marginality. Down the other lies a course correction toward empiricism, pragmatism, and broad-based inclusion – treating diversity as a strength rather than a slogan, and treating policy as a tool for problem-solving rather than an arena for virtue exhibition. Striking that balance will not be easy, especially given the passions of the Democratic base and the very real injustices that fuel them. But as this report has illustrated, *failing to strike it* risks turning the Democrats into exactly what they fear: an ineffective echo chamber, ceding tangible power to an opposition that knows how to wield it. The contrasting fortunes of the two parties’ agendas since 2020 serve as a cautionary tale – one that Democratic leaders ignore at their peril.

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