

Comrade Donald?

MAGA as the Great Misdirected Class Struggle

by Johannes Späth

Tempe, Arizona, US,
24 October 2024:
Trump Campaign Rally.

“In the twenty-something years that I’ve been covering politics, I have never seen them [top Democrats] so confused” – Ezra Klein, New York Times. How did it happen that the Democratic Party could lose so decisively in 2024 to a candidate burdened by more scandals than can be counted and openly hostile to democratic norms?

Thankfully, there are plenty of external factors to point towards that seemingly exonerate the Democratic Party from this utterly humiliating defeat against the arguably biggest con man in American history:

First, high rates of inflation due to the Covid pandemic gave every incumbent globally a hard time. Second, due to prevailing racism and sexism America just was not ready for a non-white woman as president. Finally,

the refusal of Joe Biden to drop out earlier in the race left the Democrats with no choice but to run a mediocre presidential campaign. And, if those explanations were not enough, there is always the elitist fallback: the idea that millions of Trump supporters in the Heartland are “deplorables” and simply cannot grasp the “shining light” of high-minded Democratic principles.

Unfortunately for Democratic strategists, there is a much less fatalistic and deterministic reading of this defeat: Democrats were just emphasizing the wrong issues and had a weak policy platform to campaign for. As this article will demonstrate, the MAGA movement’s success is a symptom of a misdirected class struggle. The 2024 election did not reveal an electorate opposed to progressive change; it revealed an electorate desperate for material change. The success of the

MAGA movement is best understood not as a rejection of left-wing politics in general, but as a misdirected form of class politics. The opportunity for the Left lies in reclaiming that terrain.

Data from the election tells a clear story of economic desperation. Exit polls showed voters who prioritized “democracy” or “character” went for Harris by nearly 80%, but those who prioritized “the economy” (the much larger group) went for Trump by a similar margin. Data from Blue Rose Research, a Democratic-linked firm, shows that the issues voters cared about most in 2024 were, by a wide margin: “cost of living,” “inflation,” and “the economy.” The data reveals a devastating trend: within these top three priorities, the Republican Party is far more trusted to deliver solutions than the Democrats. In fact, the only issue of moderate importance where Democrats held even a marginal

edge was Healthcare. Meanwhile, the issue they are most trusted with, LGBTQ issues, was ranked the least important of all 36 topics measured.

While, with some justification, political pundits have emphasized the shift of the non-white working class (defined here as those without a college degree) toward Trump between 2020 and 2024, the story is much broader. Low socio-economic status now generally, no matter the ethnicity, correlates positively with Republican support. This is a historic reversal for a group that should form a core constituency of the Democratic Party or the Left more broadly. Moreover, another group marked by

economic anxiety, young people, also shifted toward Trump in relative terms compared to older cohorts.

Economic desperation and pauperization are a bleak reality for many Americans. While specific metrics vary by institution, the prevailing data indicates a systemic state of financial fragility for a near-majority of Americans. Current economic indicators suggest approximately half of the population lives paycheck-to-paycheck, meaning that they cannot afford an unexpected expense of 500 dollars or more. Moreover, nearly a quarter of US households are spending more than 95% of their income on essentials. A national West Health-Gallup survey

found 11% of Americans, about 28 million people, said that they skipped meals to afford healthcare in the past year.

Of course, objectively, it is not advisable for anyone living on or below the line of poverty to vote Republican. The Democratic Party still has, out of a set of two poor choices, better economic policies for the majority. Unsurprisingly, the Trump administration is currently pursuing economic policies aimed at the ultra-rich at the expense of the already destitute – cutting healthcare subsidies for the poorest in order to offset tax cuts for the affluent. However, politics is not a theoretical model of how the hyper-rational homo oeconomicus would vote in their interest. Voters do >

“The 2024 election did not reveal an electorate opposed to progressive change; it revealed an electorate desperate for material change.”

Huntington Beach,
California, US.



Photo: © shutterstock

Comrade Donald?



Lake Oswego, Oregon, US, 4 May 2021.

Photo: © shutterstock

The lesson for Europe is as urgent as it is obvious: the “Barricade of Values”, the strategy of centering elections on the defense of democracy and liberal norms, is a failing shield against the sword of economic anxiety.”

not evaluate platforms as economists. They respond to signals, narratives, and perceived intent. The question is not which policy is objectively better, but which candidate appears to be genuinely fighting for them.

The argument presented here is that Trump was more successful in convincing the average American that he would be acting in their interest by centralizing the message of economic change. If we look at the MAGA platform in a superficial way, as most voters would do, arguably there are four to five main promises or proposals: the stopping of all irregular migration and the biggest deportation in history, tariffs and protectionism, stopping inflation, no tax on tips and the slashing of environmental regulations in order to get oil and petrol as cheap

as possible. Whatever their economic coherence, Trump's proposals shared a crucial political feature: they were legible as immediate material relief. Deportations signalled reduced labor competition for low-wage environments; tariffs promised the return and conservation of jobs; rhetoric on inflation acknowledged the central anxiety of everyday life and attacks on regulation implied cheaper energy. To many voters, these were not abstract policies but concrete signals: someone is trying to improve my situation now.

In fairness, the Harris campaign also had some economic proposals superficially aimed at economic relief for the majority but it was way too little overall and de-emphasized towards the end of her campaign. Harris' flagship economic policies for the majority

were: \$50,000 mortgage assistance for first-time home buyers, no tax on tips, and a potential \$50,000 tax cut for newly founded small businesses. The Democratic platform was a collection of “boutique” policies. \$50,000 for the aspiring homeowner here, \$50,000 for the tech startup founder there. While these policies look superficially promising, they collectively reach less than 2% of the population in a given year. For the other 98%, who are watching the price of eggs double while their wages stagnate, these “opportunity economy” measures felt less like a helping hand and more like a rewards program for a class they may not belong to.

The result was a perception problem: while Trump promised disruption, Democrats appeared to offer minuscule calibration. More to the point, the internal Harris campaign data reveals that her best performing ads were those that raised the issues of economic desperation, inflation and the affordability crisis. Yet, the Democratic strategists made the curious decision to pivot the campaign away from the initially dominant economic angle towards centralizing the danger to democracy



The 2024 election did not reveal an electorate opposed to progressive change; it revealed an electorate desperate for material change.”

stemming from Trump. This pivot is well documented by longitudinal content analysis of Harris’ speeches throughout the campaign. It truly is a puzzling decision, given the fact that internal analysis must have shown the same facts that public data on the election now clearly demonstrates: 78% of Americans indicated that it is more important right now to “deliver change that improves Americans’ lives” than is “preserving of America’s institutions.” Moreover, 53% of Americans agreed with the statement that “Things in America are going poorly and what is needed is a major change and a shock to the system from whoever becomes President.” In a populist era, a candidate who promises a “shock to the system” (mass deportations, universal tariffs) is communicating a scale of change that feels equal to the scale of the voter’s desperation. Protectionism and deportation are blunt instruments that the working class understands as “putting me first.” This translates to America First in foreign policy. The Democratic platform of institutional stability sounds to a pauperized voter like protecting the system that has presided over their decline.

There is a tragic absurdity in the fact that while a majority of the electorate was signalling for a “shock to the system,” the Left offered a status quo campaign and then expressed bewilderment when the voters chose the only candidate who brought a sledgehammer. In the aftermath of the election result, Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders captured the sentiment best: “It should come as no great surprise that a Democratic Party which has abandoned working-class people would find that the working class has abandoned them.”

The data on the election does not tell a story of inevitability. Quite to the contrary, it tells a story of a mismatch between the needs of the electorate and the policy platform of the losing

party. There is hope in this perspective. With the right economic policies, aimed at an immediate and direct betterment of the majority of the population and the centrality of the message of true and genuine economic reform, the Left can win back parts of its core constituency and slay the ugly monster of right-wing populism. Zohran Mamdani, current Democratic Mayor of New York City, demonstrated that feat: by focusing his campaign on “bread and butter” issues like rent, affordability, and groceries, he managed to flip 30% of the districts that voted for Trump only a year prior in the presidential election. In a similar vein, the 2026 rise of Marine veteran and oyster farmer Graham Platner in the Maine Democratic Senate primary proved the power of a raw, anti-corporate message. By explicitly campaigning to dismantle what he termed the “billionaire economy” and targeting private equity’s stranglehold on everyday life, Platner built an insurmountable lead over the party’s centrist, establishment favorite by offering tangible economic relief rather than elite warnings about institutional continuity.

There is a lesson here for European countries, who struggle with their own class revolts expressed through right-wing populism. The lesson for Europe is as urgent as it is obvious: the “Barricade of Values”, the strategy of centering elections on the defense of democracy and liberal norms, is a failing shield against the sword of economic anxiety. In Germany, the SPD’s historic 2025 collapse proved that

voters will not accept “stability” if that stability feels like managed decline. In France and the UK, the dynamic is not fundamentally different: as the Left shifts away from broad, material claims toward narrower, segmented appeals, it creates a vacuum in which the far-right becomes the only actor articulating economic grievance in clear and universal terms. Right-wing populism is not an intellectual failure of the masses; it is a service-level failure of those parties supposedly representing the working class. The lesson is not that economic populism is inherently right-wing. It is that it is politically powerful and currently underutilized by the Left. The demand for a “shock to the system” is real and will not disappear overnight. The only open question is who will define and shape it. A progressive politics that centers material improvement, speaks in universal terms, and matches the scale of voter frustration does not need to fear that demand, rather it can harness it.

Johannes Späth is a Research Associate at the oiip. After studying political science with a focus on International Politics in Regensburg and Rome, he completed his Master’s degree in Political Science at the University of Vienna. At the oiip, his work focuses on monitoring US governance and policy, alongside research into global autocratization and the ways domestic political pressures shape foreign policy.