

How Harris wins

And Trump and Republicans blow it



By Ross Douhat
Columnist

OPINION

It's November 6, 2024, the morning after Election Day.

To understand Kamala Harris's narrow victory over Donald Trump, you have to think about Marie Kondo, the Japanese style guru famous for her ruthless minimalism, whose prescription

for a cluttered home is to remove any object that doesn't immediately "spark joy".

The progressivism that infuses the contemporary Democratic Party can be a cluttered, claustrophobic worldview. In its Trump- and Biden-era form, it doesn't just include a large array of interest groups, each making their own policy demands. It argues that all of these demands must be accepted and acted on together; that there's an underlying philosophical or even creedal unity ("In this house, we believe ..."), a seamless garment that can't be divided up. Everything is intersectional, and you can't just pick and choose: Climate justice is reproductive justice is antiracism; if you stand with migrants, you also have to stand with teachers' unions and vice versa.



The illustration shows Democrat presidential candidate US Vice President Kamala Harris beside a map that forecasts her win in the 2024 election.



This cluttered sensibility — a variation on what my colleague Ezra Klein once dubbed the “everything bagel” spirit in liberal governance — hasn't prevented progressivism from becoming the most powerful ideology in American life. Even with the wilder forms of wokeness in partial retreat, progressive ideas still pervade the nation's cultural institutions to such a degree that you can wander from an Ivy League faculty lounge to a corporate human resources department to a Hollywood gathering to a magazine editorial meeting and feel as though you inhabit a single-party state.

But for Democratic Party leaders, the combination of doctrinal clutter and sweeping cultural power creates political headaches and electoral vulnerabilities. The inflexibility of left-wing ideology means that if you dissent forcefully on its litmus tests, you'll quickly feel like an outsider if not a heretic, choosing between a difficult life as a moderating influence (ask Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema how that goes) or a lurch into outright opposition. And progressive cultural dominance means that anyone who feels disillusioned with some arm of the American establishment — with the medical system or the modern university, with the FDA or the CIA — can end up feeling alienated from liberalism writ large. This creates a lot of very different kinds of swing constituencies that can be happy to see the left's power tempered or rebuked.

Since 2015, the remarkable resilience of Donald Trump has depended on making himself an avatar for these varied discontents — a symbol of rebuke and rebellion and a natural leader for a coalition of alienated and disappointed outsiders, plus a few disillusioned insiders as well. When Trump was riding high in the early summer of 2024, his outsider coalition seemed to be adding members at a rapid clip — picking up young men and recent immigrants and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, none of whom had necessarily embraced a consistent right-wing agenda but all of whom were looking for a countervailing force against Democratic orthodoxy.

On paper, Kamala Harris seemed like an unlikely candidate to stanch this bleeding of support. She was a consummate Democratic insider from a super-liberal state, perhaps more a machine politician than a progressive true believer but one with a long record of fealty to left-wing groups and causes. She lacked the history of moderation that made Joe Biden a reassuring figure in 2020 and had little experience with the sort of Clintonian triangulation that Biden practiced intermittently at best. In the heat of July, it seemed the Democrats desperately needed a capable centrist, not a California liberal, and that turning from Biden to Harris would save them from a rout but still probably lead to a defeat.

But it turned out that there was an alternative to explicit centrism.

Harris did stake out some moderate positions, promising border enforcement and touting her prosecutorial credentials. But mostly, she followed a Marie Kondo strategy, applying the life-changing magic of tidying up to the Democratic platform. She didn't offer a comprehensive moderate agenda or seek out a Sister Souljah confrontation with some left-wing interest group. Instead, she offered a form of progressive minimalism, reducing a cluttered agenda to a few popular promises and just leaving everything else out.



Delegates cheer during the Democratic National Convention on August 22, 2024, at the United Center in Chicago, Illinois, the venue wherein Vice President Kamala Harris officially accepted the Democratic presidential nomination.



Her convention speech was especially Kondo-ist: short, sparse, and nonspecific about virtually everything except restoring Roe v. Wade, protecting middle-class entitlements, and keeping Trump out of the Oval Office. The interest groups got oblique gestures, not shout-outs and promises. The ideological buzzwords disappeared. When climate change came up, it was linked vaguely to “clean air” and “clean water” rather than any specific regulatory regime. The words “racism” and “affirmative action” made no appearance at all. The everything bagel wasn't rejected or reseasoned; it just wasn't on the menu.

To Republicans, this was all incredibly frustrating, as was the minimalist media strategy that accompanied the minimalist agenda. They argued, correctly, that Harris was often just avoiding issues, not offering some clear new policy approach. They complained, accurately, that she was dropping her past positions without any adequate explanation. (Indeed, her minimalism often didn't even rise to the level of a flip-flop, because there wasn't any new landing place.)

They also pointed out that her minimalism would have never survived contested Demo-

cratic presidential primaries with a gantlet of interest-group demands — that only the last-minute coronation and the urgency and brevity of a general election campaign enabled Harris to sell herself this way. And they noted that all the interest groups would be ready to reassert themselves on Day 1 of a Harris administration, that their ideological demands had been muted but not repudiated, and that a vote for her was still a vote to hand them power once again.

If all these points had merit, there was one aspect of the Harris campaign that the complaining conservatives badly misunderstood. They

growing as an oppositional force, an alliance of every kind of anti-progressive and anti-Biden impulse, from crunchy to corporate, populist to Reaganite, socially conservative to techno-futurist. But without the big target of progressivism's full agenda to organize against, with only a few popular ideas defining Harris's sprint to the November election, the spotlight fell increasingly not just on Trump's own sins and limitations but also on his coalition's internal contradictions. Suddenly, the absence of a coherent conservative policy agenda actually mattered. Suddenly, it was a problem that Trump's path to victory depended on both anti-woke secular voters and pro-life evangelicals, on conservatism-curious minority voters and aggrieved blue-collar white people, on mainstream business elites as well as the likes of Robert F. Kennedy Jr., on traditional movement conservatives and moderates who had no interest in the policies favored by the Heritage Foundation.

If there was a synthesis that would satisfy all these varying constituencies, Trump was not the man to find it. All the way to Election Day, his supporters complained that he was too undisciplined — which is to say, too much himself — to drive a consistent anti-Harris message. But the deeper problem was that his ticket needed an affirmative alternative to defeat her Marie Kondo-fied progressivism, and he was far too steeped in personal grievance and reflexive oppositionalism. He needed an obvious foil, a unifying threat to make his fractious anti-progressive alliance into a majority, and her minimalism refused to give him what he needed.

Of course, it was still a close-run thing. The Harris message wasn't the basis for any kind of great realignment or sweeping new majority, and Harris herself was still the inherently limited politician that she appeared to be as vice president — propped up by the media's anti-Trump and pro-Democratic tilt, dependent on Trump's weaknesses to compensate for her own rhetorical deficiencies, white-knuckling it through debates and interviews.

But winning on the most limited agenda and by the narrowest of margins is still winning. The 2024 campaign didn't permanently bury Trumpism or populism, fix progressivism's internal problems, or claim a mandate for sweeping change of any sort. It merely won the tens of thousands of swing votes required to carry the handful of swing states that decided the election. A minimalist message yielded a minimalist victory — and that was, for Kamala Harris and her supporters, quite enough.

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