



## Trump broke the Democrats' thermostat

The American left was sent spinning in 2016 and is yet to recalibrate



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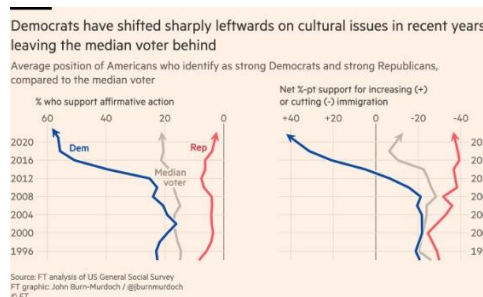
**John Burn-Murdoch** 15/11/2024

In April 2022, Elon Musk tweeted a cartoon made by US evolutionary biologist Colin Wright. The image shows a stick figure representing Wright, a self-described “centre-left liberal”, becoming politically stranded as the American left shifts ever further leftward during the 2010s, leaving him closer to the right despite his ideology not changing. The graphic was mocked at the time. But recent events suggest it may have a grain of truth to it.

To be clear: the main reason the Democrats lost the US election is that inflation kills political incumbents. But that doesn't mean there are not other lessons in the results.

Data suggests the Democrats lost ground with moderates, while holding steady among progressives. Charges that racism propelled voters to Donald Trump are at odds with the rightward swing among Black and Hispanic voters, and with a raft of data showing that racial prejudice is in steady decline among Americans of all political stripes.

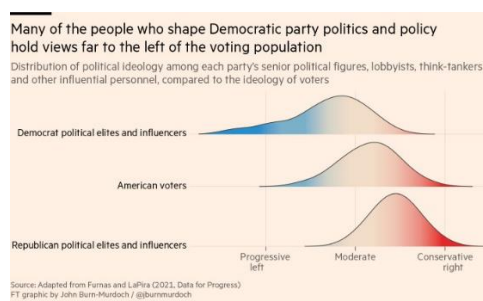
Instead, the data shows Democrats taking a sharp turn leftward on social issues over the past decade. This has distanced them from the median voter, just as Wright's cartoon depicted. We see this not only in Democratic voters' self-reported ideology, but in their views on issues including immigration and whether or not minorities need extra help to succeed in society. Notably, the shift began in 2016. This suggests that Trump's election radicalised the left, not the right.



Some counter that this is simply what progressive politics is, but the evidence suggests otherwise. America's decades-long progress towards racial and sexual tolerance and equality has been a gradual shift, led by progressives with the centre and right quickly following.

The pivots of the past decade, by contrast, have been abrupt and are leaving the majority behind. They are better characterised not as moves towards greater tolerance and equality but as shifts in rhetoric or proposed solutions for addressing disparities, where there is plenty of room for disagreement without bigotry.

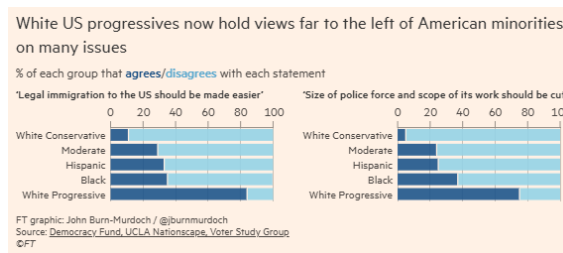
Many of these pivots originated with the activists and non-profit staffers that surround the Democratic party. In an invaluable piece of research carried out in 2021, political scientists Alexander Furnas and Timothy LaPira at the think-tank Data for Progress found that these “political elites” or tastemakers hold views often well to the left of the average voter — and even the average Democratic voter — on cultural issues.





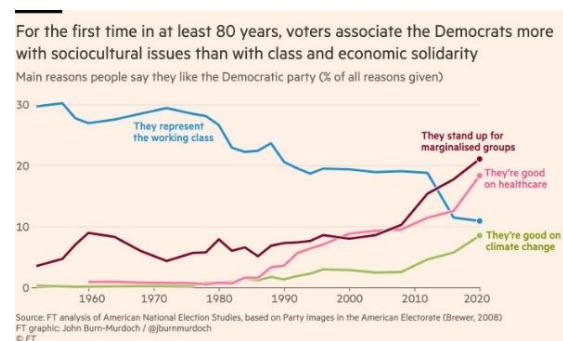
This can create situations where policies and rhetoric alienate the very groups they're aimed at. While 73 per cent of white progressive Democrats favour cutting the size and scope of police forces, only 37 per cent of Black Americans agree. A new study by Amanda Sahar d'Urso and Marcel Roman, at Georgetown and Harvard universities respectively, found that the use of the gender-neutral term "Latinx" used by some progressives was not only deeply unpopular with many Hispanic Americans but may have actively pushed some towards Trump.

Political party leaders may counter that such gestures come from activists, not politicians. But there is now widespread concern about speech-policing among every group of Americans apart from the progressive left.



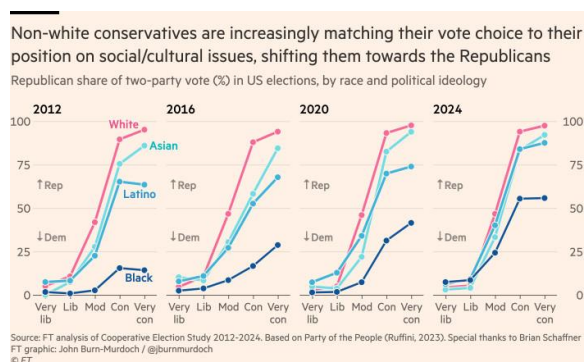
US voters also perceive the Democrats as having moved much further left than the Republicans have shifted right in recent years.

These shifts, layered on top of increasing education polarisation, are changing the image of the Democratic party in voters' minds. Survey data shows that in every election from 1948 to 2012, American voters' image of the Democrats was as the party that stood up for the working class and the poor. In 2016 that flipped. Now it is seen primarily as the party of minority advocacy.



This evolution has reduced the salience of class and economic solidarity — a domain in which Furnas and LaPira find Democratic elites more in tune with the public than their Republican counterparts — and elevated sociocultural issues, where the GOP is on firmer ground.

As predicted, this resulted in racial realignment on November 5, with Hispanic and Black conservatives voting increasingly in line with their social values rather than their economic priorities.



Whether or not progressives are ready to accept it, the evidence all points in one direction. America's moderate voters have not deserted the Democrats; the party has pushed them away.