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2028ers: Don't Get Fooled Again

Third Way



“The year of The Squad.”

It was 2018, and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez won a stunning NYC House primary, leading a band of new members to Washington. “All the energy is on the left” became the conventional wisdom for Democrats. It remained that way until it blew apart on Super Tuesday 2020.

Progressive stalwarts Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders were expected to dominate the field. And fresher faces, like the rising, mainstream star Kamala Harris, confronted a choice. Do they expand their base by moving to the Democratic center or farther to the left? The loudest and most persistent voices in the echo-chamber insisted the choice was obvious: move left.

She did. And ultimately, Harris did not make it out of the starting gate. And Joe Biden won in a blowout, crushing Sanders and even defeating Warren in Massachusetts.

Now it's 2026 and here we go again. The far left's recent House victories in NYC and elsewhere have made the leftwing chorus even louder than in 2018. So, Democrats preparing to run for president will face the same choice Harris did. If they follow the siren song of the left, they will steer their ships into the rocks. If they remain in the mainstream, they will have a fighting chance of winning not only the primary, but also most crucially, the general election.

In this memo, we explain why we know Democratic voters want their nominee to be in the Democratic mainstream. Indeed, the path to the nomination and the White House begins with understanding five electoral realities:

- **Democratic primary voters are mainstream, not extreme.**
 - 38% moderate/conservative, 31% somewhat liberal, 31% very liberal.
 - “Somewhat liberals” skew closer to moderates on most issues.
- **Only 6% are socialists, and they are outliers.**
 - On crime, immigration, and the economy, the tiny group who call themselves socialists are far to the left of the other 94% of Democratic primary voters.
- **Democrats want an authentic, effective fighter.**
 - A fighter for working people (86%) who gets things done (78%) and is authentic in his or her beliefs (72%) are the attributes of an ideal Democratic nominee. All non-ideological.
- **Electability > Ideology.**

- Twice as many Democrats feel the party needs to move to the center rather than the left to win.
- On crime, immigration, economic and transgender issues, Democratic voters believe far-left issue positions carry electoral liabilities.
- **60% is the golden ratio in a general election.**
 - Over the last six presidential election cycles, Democrats win when they secure at least 60% of self-identified moderates. When they don't, they lose.
 - Any strategy that ignores the math of the general election is doomed to fail.

In every contested presidential primary, some have claimed that “this will be the left’s year!” Howard Dean in 2004, John Edwards in 2008, and Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020. Every cycle they were wrong, and 2028 will be no exception.

Democratic presidential primary voters want an electable, dynamic reformer who fights like hell for things that matter to ordinary people, can get things done, is not a weirdo, is not wed to Washington, and does not belong in senior living.

Democratic Primary Voters Are Mainstream, Not Extreme.

In the last year, Third Way has conducted three surveys of Democratic presidential primary voters totaling over 4,000 voters. This constitutes one of the largest samples of likely 2028 Democratic primary voters available today.

In the aggregate, the Democratic primary electorate breaks down into three distinct ideological lanes: 38% self-identify as moderate or conservative, 31% as somewhat liberal, and 31% as very liberal. As explained below, the “somewhat liberals” hue much closer to the moderates than to the very liberals. In other words, a majority of the Democratic electorate falls in or close to the center. This means that the presidential primary electorate doesn’t look at all like the “Commie Corridor” in New York City that just nominated a DSA member.

Democratic Primary Electorate Ideological Makeup



Source: Third Way/Global Strategy Group survey of 1,400 Democratic presidential primary LVs conducted February 2–10, 2026.



Digging deeper, on many issues (particularly around public safety, immigration and the border, the economy, and climate change) the “somewhat liberals” (“somewhats”) lean closer to the moderates than to the very liberal respondents.

- **Socialism:** Moderates (33%) and somewhats (31%) are only mildly supportive of socialism, while a majority of very liberals (52%) are warm to it.
- **All of the Above Energy vs Green New Deal:** Moderates (66%) and somewhats (56%) prefer an all-of-the-above energy policy over the Green New Deal. Very liberals prefer the Green New Deal at 69%.
- **Defunding the Police:** Only 6% of moderates and 16% of somewhats support defunding the police. 24% of very liberals support it.
- **Abolishing ICE:** Moderates (79%) and somewhats (72%) prefer overhauling ICE. Very liberals (55%) prefer abolishing ICE outright.
- **Taxing Billionaires:** All Democrats want to tax billionaires, but their motivations diverge. Moderates (74%) and somewhats (66%) support more taxes on billionaires to invest in the working-class. 51% of very liberals prefer taxing them because billionaires should not exist.

Only 6% Are Socialists, and They Are Outliers.

When we looked at the Democratic electorate by more descriptive ideological labels, only 6% chose socialist.

This tiny slice of the electorate are outliers on every policy issue:

- **Defunding the Police:** 42% of socialists support defunding the police, compared to just 13% with all other Democrats.
- **Socialism:** Unsurprisingly, 100% of socialists are warm to socialism. That drops to 33% with all other Democrats.
- **Green New Deal:** Socialists prefer the Green New Deal at 74%. Everyone else prefers an all-of-above energy strategy on climate (55%).
- **Taxing Billionaires:** 66% of socialists prefer taxing billionaires because they believe they should not exist. Everyone else prefers taxing billionaires to provide opportunities for the working class.
- **Universal Jobs Program:** 65% of socialists favor a federal universal jobs program. It's just 24% for all Democrats.
- **Abolishing ICE:** Socialists prefer abolishing ICE at 70%. 69% of everyone else prefers overhauling ICE.

Democrats Want an Authentic, Effective Fighter.

The three top attributes that Democrats want in a nominee are:

- A fighter for working people (88%).
- Who works across the aisle to get things done (76%)
- And is authentic in his/her beliefs (72%)

Importantly, Democratic voters do not ascribe an ideology to this authentic fighter for working people who gets shit done.

And why should they? Fighters come in many varieties. Bernie Sanders is a fighter who is far to the left and old. Elissa Slotkin is a young fighter who calls herself a “radical pragmatist.” Everyone knows Elizabeth Warren is a fighter from the left and Rahm Emanuel is a fighter from the center.

- **Fighter for working people, whatever the ideology:** 88% of Democratic primary voters say they would “vote for someone I don’t agree with on every issue as long as they are strong and will fight for the working people of this country.” Likewise, the most appealing candidate profile was “fighter” (86% appealing): “This candidate has the guts to stand up to Trump and the MAGA wing of the Republican Party.”

- **Authentic:** 72% of Democratic primary voters would “vote for someone I don't agree with on every issue as long as they are authentic and true to what they believe in.” And 59% prefer a candidate who is “authentic, relatable, and down-to-earth, even if they don't line up with you ideologically on every issue,” over one who “stands with you on most of the major issues.” Moderates (63%) and somewhats (62%) chose authenticity; only socialists chose ideological alignment (57%).
- **Bipartisan dealmaker:** 76% of Democratic primary voters prefer a candidate “who works across the aisle to get things done, even if it means compromising sometimes,” over a candidate “who sticks to their progressive beliefs, even if it means getting less done.”

It will become more obvious as we approach 2028, but Democratic voters don't want a candidate who has been purity tested by the far left on every issue, nor do they want a consultant-crafted politician. Rather, they want an authentic, gets-shit-done fighter for working people. Plenty of mainstream candidates fit that bill.

Electability > Ideology.

Democratic primary voters desperately want the White House back, and they believe the party should move to the ideological center to do so. That's because they are pragmatic and see far-left positions (some of which they may hold) as a liability.

Electability: 62% of primary voters prefer a candidate who can win the general election rather than a candidate who stands by their progressive values. That preference has remained remarkably stable since 2019, when 65% said they preferred the candidate with the best chance to beat Trump. In 2020, the center left consolidated behind Biden based on that imperative. This is the same objective driving Democratic voters today.

The notable exception is socialists. 63% of socialists say they would prefer a candidate who adheres to progressive values than one who is most likely to defeat the Republican nominee.

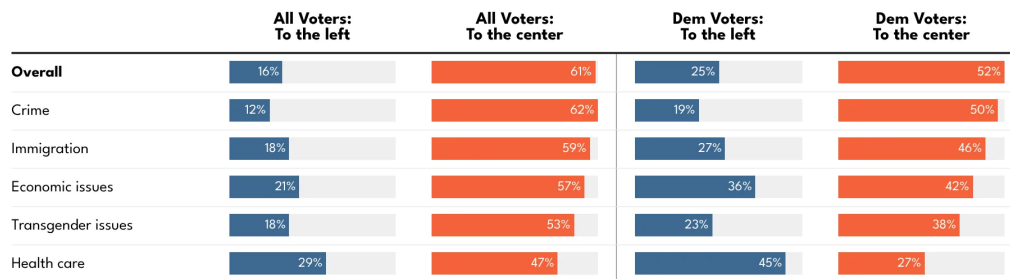
Move to the Center: A recent New York Times poll found that 61% of voters believe Democrats should move to the center, nearly four times the share who said the party should move further left.

Among Democratic voters, 52% say the next Democratic presidential nominee should move the party to the center in order to win in 2028, while only a quarter said the nominee should move to the left. That desire holds for nearly every leading policy question: crime, transgender issues, the economy, and immigration. The only exception was health care.

NYT/Siena Poll: Voters Want the Democratic Party to Move to the Center

All Voters: On (issue) would you personally like to see the Democratic Party move to the left, to the center, or neither direction?

Democratic Voters: In order to win the next presidential election, do you think the Democratic candidate needs to move the party to the left, to the center, or neither direction...?



Source: New York Times/Siena Poll of 1,507 registered voters nationwide conducted May 11–15, 2026 (n=611 Democrats and Democratic-leaning independent voters)



Meanwhile, the loudest and tiniest slice of the primary electorate is urging Democrats to move to the extreme left. The DSA and other far-left groups will try to strongarm candidates into embracing policy positions that guarantee electoral defeat in the general.

The pressure campaign on presidential candidates in 2028 will make 2020 look like a cakewalk, and candidates who ignore the lessons of recent Democratic primaries will do so at their peril.

60% Is the Golden Ratio in a General Election.

A primary win means nothing without a path to 270 electoral college votes. And since 1980, Democrats have only managed to win a single presidential election when they did not capture at least 60% of moderate voter support nationwide: Barack Obama in 2012, who was helped by winning a bigger slice of conservatives than typical Democrats.

Democratic Presidential Share of the Moderate Vote

Year	'80	'84	'88	'92	'96	'00	'04	'08	'12	'16	'20	'24
Moderate Vote (%)	46	47	51	61	62	53	54	60	56	52	62	57

Source: Third Way, Galston & Kamarck; 2012 & 2016 CNN Exit Polls; 2024 AP VoteCast Data.



In 2020, 62% of moderate voters broke for Joe Biden after winning the primary as the most centrist Democrat in the race. In 2024, Harris's won 57%. That looks solid from a distance but was not enough to win any of the seven battleground states. Emerging from a primary with a candidate who cannot win a substantial supermajority of moderate voters in red and purple states is certain defeat.

Since 2018, the far left has not flipped a single Republican-held congressional seat. By contrast, moderate New Democrat and Blue Dog candidates have flipped 50 and have consistently overperformed Democratic baselines. Meanwhile, candidates endorsed by Justice Democrats and Our Revolution have been incredibly weak and underperformed expectations, as The Argument's Lakshya Jain has written.

If far left candidates running in super blue districts are underperforming baseline expectations, how exactly is that kind of politics going to flip states that Trump won?

Conclusion

Believing that “this time will be different” is a fool’s game, whether it involves investing in Pets.com, crypto stocks, or buying into the fantasy that “all the energy is on the left.”

Presidential candidates must adapt to what Democratic voters want in 2028, but they must judge those desires not by social media likes, crowd sizes, or primary wins in deep blue places. Rather, they must see that primary voters overwhelmingly want a nominee who will *not* lurch to the far left and lose the general election, nor do they want a complacent Democrat. They want an authentic, gets-shit-done fighter who can win.

