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Why Democrats Must Reject the Pledges



Third Way,

To: Every Democrat Pondering a 2028 Presidential Run

From: Third Way

As Democrats sift through the rubble of Trump 2.0 and prepare for the horrors to come, there are still many open questions about why we find ourselves in the political wilderness. But one thing is a certainty if our party ever wants to defeat MAGA extremists and return to power. We must never again let our candidates fall prey to the siren song of far-left groups who claim, without evidence, to speak for our coalition and offer a path to the nomination. In fact, if we allow what happened in the 2019 primary to recur, we might as well save ourselves billions and countless hours of blood, sweat, and tears and just sit out the next election.

For 106 days, Kamala Harris ran a campaign targeted to appeal to swing voters and the moderates who make up a sizable chunk of a winning Democratic presidential coalition. But there were no number of American flags at the DNC, Never-Trump Republican endorsements, or visits to the border that could overcome the weight of the politically fraught positions she took to satisfy the far left in the 2019 primary. Whether it was banning fracking, opening the border, or providing federally-funded gender-reassignment surgeries to undocumented immigrants, Trump and his allies hung these anvils around the neck of the Vice President and persuaded voters that she was “dangerously liberal.” Facing a choice between a candidate they believed was extreme on policy or one who was extreme in his behavior, the American people decided they’d rather take their chances with the latter.

This election conclusively proved that a Democrat cannot embrace the far-left groups to please the activists in a primary and then simply “pivot” to stances that voters actually like in the final months of a general election campaign. The political poison stays in the bloodstream and infects everything they do moving forward. That is why it is both imperative and urgent that anyone considering a run for the Presidency in 2028 on the Democratic line “Reject the Pledges” and refuse the untenable demands of far-left groups—and that their aides follow suit. Don’t even consider adopting these positions, or anything like them. Don’t tweet positively about them. Don’t say you support them privately. Don’t fill out their questionnaires. And if you want to best position yourself for 2028, publicly distance yourself from far-left, losing ideas.

Below is a short list of wrongheaded and unbelievably unpopular policies that far-left groups are trying to strongarm Democrats to embrace. They might sound good in a faculty lounge, but as you read this list, ask yourself, can a Democrat win the popular vote if we’re the party of...

- Defunding the police;
- Ending incarceration for drug use;
- Cutting the prison population in half;
- Decriminalizing border crossings;
- Abolishing ICE;
- Cancelling all student loan debt;
- Making college free;
- Providing all Americans a guaranteed income;

- Establishing Medicare for All and abolishing private insurance companies;
- Creating a federal job guarantee to provide a job to every person in America;
- Declaring a “climate emergency;”
- Banning fossil fuels; and,
- Banning the sale of gas appliances?

That’s an agenda that would be wholesale rejected by American voters, leading to a Dukakis-level drubbing at the top of the ticket—no matter how unqualified or unacceptable the opponent. Of course, groups will generate new, equally bad ideas ahead of 2028. Avoid those, too. Telltale signs of damaging left-wing ideas? “Free” and wildly expensive. Maximalist. Would win a round of applause at an ACLU or DSA meeting. A simple test: could you see saying this at a town hall of swing voters in a battleground state—and getting hearty applause? If not, save your candidacy and decline their demands.

The groups will complain loudly, but to be clear, rejecting these positions doesn’t mean you are a sell-out, a small thinker, or a defender of the status quo. It means that regardless of the merits of their fringe ideas (and the merits are often deeply questionable), you believe that making substantial progress requires winning elections—and not alienating the vast swath of swing voters of all races. It means that you want to win and govern—not join in a political suicide pact. It means that you understand that moving the Overton window is a fine thing to write about in an academic paper, but it has nothing to do with Democrats winning elections and saving us from these MAGA lunatics.

Too many candidates have fallen into the trap of believing that going farthest left will gain them purchase with Democratic primary voters and deciding that they will simply have to sort out the general election math later. Not only is that view short-sighted, it also ignores the history and reality of winning Democratic primaries. Unlike Republicans, primary voters in the Democratic party gravitate towards candidates they believe can win, rather than those who are ideologically purest. They’ve been doing that since 1960, and that’s the calculation they’ll make in 2028 to avoid at all costs a repeat of the nominee being easily branded as “dangerously liberal.”

This truth about our primaries is in large part because key voter groups in the Democratic base are moderate: particularly African Americans and Latinos. While White progressive voters may often be the loudest voices in elite debates, they are ideological outliers even in a primary, and wooing them alone is not a path to the nomination (just asked the countless candidates who tried to run that play in the 2020 primary). This is a feature, not a bug, for Democrats: the fundamental asymmetry of American politics means that those who choose our candidates are more closely aligned with the

overall electorate, and the strategy for winning in a primary mirrors that of winning in the general. (In contrast to Republicans, who often must take extreme positions to appeal to an extreme primary audience which values purity over electability.)

Democrats have the luxury of a talented bench, and there is no doubt that dozens of candidates will throw their hats in the ring next time around. We cannot repeat the hand-raising debacle of the 2019 primary debates, when our brightest stars leapfrogged over each other to the left based on a mistaken view of how primaries in our party are won. And we cannot have our candidate enter another general election full of self-inflicted wounds. Every Democrat who believes they may be our path back to the White House and every Democratic Party organization dedicated to electing Democrats must stand strong—now—and refuse to engage in the interest group litmus tests. It's time to win again. To do that, we must Reject the Pledges.