



Sen. Bernie Sanders speaks as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez responds to calls of support during a stop of their "Fighting Oligarchy" tour that filled Civic Center Park, Denver, on March 21. (AP/David Zalubowski)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

March 31, 2025

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Are the Democrats beginning to learn their lessons from November's shellacking? Yes and no.

Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez get high marks for their "Fight Oligarchy" [rallies](#) which are drawing thousands of people. I am not crazy about the word "oligarchy," which is accurate but unfamiliar to many people. But they are trying to reclaim the mantle of populist economics from the GOP. As I noted in one of my post-election [post-mortems](#), that is essential if the Democrats are to ever win national elections again.

Certainly, the Trump administration is giving the Democrats plenty of ammunition. Entrusting the libertarian, egomaniacal zillionaire Elon Musk with disrupting the bureaucracy is a gift that will keep on giving. Musk and his techie acolytes seem to revel in their ability to fire people, which is not the kind of thing that endears their effort to workers who fear for their job security. The Democrats must focus relentlessly on the ways the super-rich get even richer at the government trough while laying off people who make good, but not exorbitant, salaries serving the public.

The fight to raise the minimum wage should continue. Many Democrats are rightly warning about threats to Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, [most notably](#) former Maryland governor and Social Security Commissioner Martin O'Malley. Democratic leaders should do local media appearances at local nursing homes, explaining how [devastating](#) Medicaid cuts could prove to millions of elderly patients who depend upon it. Enlist nurses: Everyone trusts and loves nurses.

Are the Democrats beginning to learn their lessons from November's shellacking? Yes and no.

[Tweet this](#)

The best is yet to come. The Trump tax cuts are set to expire by year's end. Republicans are scrambling to come up with a [path](#) to renew them. Those cuts

overwhelmingly benefit the very rich, and Democrats should be able to craft a series of clever ads and talking points that expose this giveaway for the regressive policy that it is.

Economic populism is one necessary way to reconnect with workers. The other sine qua non of electoral viability is to divorce the Democratic Party from cultural extremism. Transgender-related issues have replaced abortion as the totem of culture war politics. Some, but only some, Democrats are beginning to divorce themselves from the received orthodoxy about that totem.

A few weeks ago, California Gov. Gavin Newsom used a [discussion](#) with conservative provocateur Charlie Kirk to state that he shared the concerns of young women athletes who are competing with trans women athletes. "I think it's an issue of fairness, I completely agree with you on that. It is an issue of fairness — it's deeply unfair," Newsom said.

It would have been better if Newsom had shared his qualms somewhere other than a discussion with a right-wing activist. Bill Clinton voiced his [concerns](#) about Sister Souljah's racist comments at a meeting of Rev. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow PUSH coalition. He also admitted to a prior mistake, playing golf at an all-white club and apologized for the lapse, promising it wouldn't happen again.

Advertisement

Two California legislators [slammed](#) Newsom for his remarks. "We woke up profoundly sickened and frustrated by these remarks," said state Rep. Chris Ward and state Sen. Carolina Menjivar in a statement. Emphasis on the word "woke." On Threads, Human Rights Campaign President Kelley Robinson [posted](#): "The fight for equality has never been easy, but history doesn't remember those who waver – it remembers those who refuse to back down. Our message to [@cagovernor](#) and all leaders across the country is simple: The path to 2028 isn't paved with the betrayal of vulnerable communities – it's built on the courage to show up for what's right and do the hard work to actually help the American people."

Betrayal? This is merely an attempt to abort a necessary debate about an issue on which people of good faith disagree.

The center of gravity is shifting, whether the special interest heresy hunters on the left like it or not. In 2019, when some Democratic candidates started listing their pronouns on their social media [profiles](#), a spokesperson for HRC said that listing pronouns "is a best practice for all campaigns at every level."

Earlier this year, the most prominent openly gay Democratic politician, former Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, quietly [removed](#) his preferred pronouns from his social media profile.

Not everyone got the memo. Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers submitted his budget proposal last month, and what generated the most attention had nothing to do with spending. Evers included a [provision](#) to change the language of state regulations. Instead of using the word "mother," he proposed using the words "inseminated person." Who talks like that? The Democrats' abuse of English for ideological purposes makes them look crazy.

Republicans seize on these cultural issues, but they go too far. They get mean. Most people who think changing the word "mother" is a bad idea do not also think being mean to transgender people is the answer. Most people recognize that every rule has anomalies, and that anyone who is anomalistic, especially a young person, should be helped, not scorned, as they confront the challenges such an anomaly poses. Most people want to be kind, but they do not want to make the anomaly the rule.

Embracing populist economics must go hand in hand with abandoning the ideologically contorted language crafted by cultural elites if the Democrats hope to win elections again. Common sense concerns about girls' sports cannot be dismissed no matter what language you employ. Anyone who fails to see the way Democrats' engagement on culture issues dooms them to failure is someone who doesn't realize the degree to which they make Trumpism possible.

The next few months will provide Democrats with the opportunity to regain their footing and, if they are smart, to reconnect with those working-class voters who were once the party's base. But only if they have the courage to embrace some common sense.