

ED KILGORE,  
MANAGING EDITOR:

The Democratic Strategist has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As The Democratic Strategists' editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

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DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST  
STRATEGY MEMO

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HONESTLY AND PASSIONATELY  
DEBATE THE REAL DISAGREEMENTS  
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By JAMES VEGA

Last week, many Democrats were startled to read the following very inflammatory headline in *The Hill* magazine:<sup>1</sup>

*“Centrist Dems Ready Strike Against Warren Wing”*

The text of the article contained a barrage of equally lurid, militaristic metaphors. Centrists were *“gathering their forces to fight back.”* They were readying to *“seize back the agenda.”* Hillary Clinton was *“caught in the crossfire.”*

The actual evidence that the article provided for these flamboyantly operative metaphors of fierce hand-to-hand combat on a blood-soaked political battlefield, however, was laughably—indeed absurdly—thin. The New Democratic Coalition, a caucus of moderate house Democrats had **released a mild, three page agenda**<sup>2</sup> that did not contain even a single word of criticism of Warren, populism or “the left.” Members of the group had attended an entirely cordial meeting with Nancy Pelosi during which she told them they were “valued members” in the House Democratic Caucus while she listened politely to their views. Even in the article itself, the authors of the NDC agenda resolutely refused to directly criticize Warren or the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. The quotes in the article that were directly critical of “populism” came from outside observers, not the principals of the NDC.

The article nonetheless caused a wave of very justifiable annoyance among a wide range of Democrats because it was very clearly and deliberately intended to provoke and feed a bogus narrative of deep intra-Democratic conflict. **Ed Kilgore, for example, put it well:**<sup>3</sup>

As a veteran of the intraparty wars of the 1990s and early 2000s, I really don’t know that this is what the Donkey Party needs right now, when Democrats are more in accord on big issues than at any time in my own memory, and with a pretty important election ahead. Yes, of course, there are significant differences among Democrats on policy issues; we’re about to see one of them, on trade policy, blow up for a bit. [But] there are plenty of calm ways to talk about legitimate differences, and when it comes down to it, primaries are available to let the rank-and-file decide.

He then directly challenged the motives of the author of the piece.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/234224-centrist-dems-ready-strike-against-warren-wing>

<sup>2</sup> <http://newdemocratcoalition-kind.house.gov/sites/newdemocratcoalition.house.gov/files/American%20Prosperity%20Agenda.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/political-animal-a/2015\\_03/struggle\\_for\\_the\\_soul\\_or\\_just054472.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/political-animal-a/2015_03/struggle_for_the_soul_or_just054472.php)

Perhaps the very first step would be for Democrats to avoid the temptation to seek attention through media types who are trolling for a “Democrats in disarray” article. If I were those Dems, I sure wouldn’t have Kevin Cirilli [the author of the Hill article] on speed-dial status.

It would be easy to dismiss this one particular article as simply an aberration but the critically important fact is that it’s not. “*Dems in Disarray*” or “*Civil War among Dems*” articles are a clichéd staple of both lazy beltway journalism and conservative journalistic “trolling” and more articles like this are absolutely certain to appear in the coming months. Conservative journalists have an obvious partisan motive in promoting such divisive narratives, of course, and journalistic hacks know that they can slap together an article on this theme without even having to move from their favorite barstool—“*let’s see, I’ll call over to Third Way for a quote, then read the quote to someone over at Salon for an response, then I’ll add a first paragraph about divisions threatening to blow the next election for the Dems and slap a ‘Dems in Disarray’ title on it and presto it’s done—and all before the ice even starts to melt in my double Jameson’s and soda.*”

The real problem, however, is that the vision of the Democratic Party as actually being divided into warring rival clans of either “*inside the beltway, corrupt corporate Centrists*” or “*ultra-left, infantile populists*” still has a strong emotional hold on many Democrats. Although a number of years have passed, there are still strong feelings left over from the 1990’s and early 2000’s when the Democratic Party was indeed torn by genuine factional strife and many Dems still carry around deep resentments and anger left over from that era.

But it is now vital that Democrats from every sector of the Democratic community recognize that circumstances have significantly changed and that this essentially tribal way of conceptualizing and defining the disagreements within the Democratic coalition now profoundly hinders our ability to seriously debate the real issues that we urgently must confront.

To see why this is so, consider the fact that, aside from foreign affairs, there are basically three conceptually distinct kinds of disagreements that end up scrambled together in the simplistic political categories of “centrists” versus “populists” (a dichotomy which is also sometimes framed as “New Democrats” versus “The Left”)

1. The disagreement between Democrats who want to reduce the power of wealth in politics and the institutionalized corruption and elite control of the political system that it creates versus Democratic candidates who basically accept and even benefit from the current system and wealthy Democratic political contributors who relish the power and influence their contributions provide.
2. The disagreement between Democrats who accept the conservative economic philosophy of “Neo-Liberalism” versus those who support progressive (or “Modern New Deal”) economics
3. The disagreement between Democrats who advocate the political strategy of “winning the center” in political campaigns versus Democrats who support absolutely unswerving, full-throated and uncompromising progressive platforms and candidates.

These three topics represent entirely genuine areas of disagreement within the Democratic coalition and they absolutely must be debated—fully, fiercely and passionately. But consider what happens when these issues get redefined into a simple argument between “centrists” and “populists”.

First, advocates supporting one position or another regarding any particular one of these three issues become subject to attacks that assume that if they agree with the centrist or populist position on any one of these topics, they necessarily agree with the centrist or populist position on all three topics. Advocates thus find themselves criticized for positions they have never taken or beliefs they have never held.

Second, even within any one of these three separate areas, the unspoken assumption is that advocacy of a particular “centrist” or “populist” position can be treated as proof of membership in a broad centrist or populist “camp” or “tribe.” This assumption then makes it possible to suggest that anyone agreeing with a particular centrist or populist position can fairly be held responsible for the most extreme or objectionable views held by any members of their faction.

And, come on, let’s face it. This kind of stuff goes on all the time. Consider the case of Elizabeth Warren. Based on her reputation as the leading political advocate of the “populist” position within the Democratic coalition, critics will confidently accuse her of advocating things like “redistribution instead of economic growth,” “the politics of envy,” “bashing the rich” or, as a much criticized Third Way editorial in the Wall Street Journal described her views last year, as advocating “a fantasy-based blue state populism” that will lead the Democratic Party “over a populist cliff.”

Writing in the [Huffington Post](#)<sup>4</sup>, Mike Lux responded:

Elizabeth Warren and her fellow progressives are not, either in rhetoric or policy, anti-growth or anti-business or out to “soak” the rich (unless by “soak” you mean taxing them at the same rate as their secretaries). And to say that they are is a cliché completely unsupported by anything they are saying.

***...I looked and looked for all the times where Warren bashes the rich or uses negative “rhetoric about wealth creation.” I went through every recent speech, committee transcript, and floor debate where she spoke that I could find, and I couldn’t find any instances where she said there is anything wrong with being rich or wealth creation. I couldn’t find them because they don’t exist.... [Critics] set up these ridiculous straw men and tell us that the Warren message is all about stuff she has never said.***

Let’s take a look at the speech where Elizabeth Warren laid out her agenda, at the AFL-CIO’s National Summit on Raising Wages. In that speech, and in others she has given, Warren proposes a variety of policy proposals that create jobs, especially making investments in roads, bridges, highways, education, and research and development and in promoting manufacturing jobs and small-business opportunities.

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-lux/the-dc-centrists-straw-me\\_b\\_6800302.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-lux/the-dc-centrists-straw-me_b_6800302.html)

She proposes raising wages in several different ways, including a higher minimum wage, equal pay for equal work for women, reforming overtime rules, and strengthening union bargaining power. She supports finding ways for more retirement income for seniors, including stronger pensions and increased Social Security benefits. She wants to reduce the debt of middle- and low-income folks by reducing both student and housing debt. And she wants to protect the economy from future financial meltdowns and protect middle- and low-income consumers from being cheated by unscrupulous lenders.... And she does think that corporations and wealthy folks could afford to pay a little more in taxes. [But regarding taxes what] she basically wants is simply a level playing field for low- and middle-income folks with the wealthy and powerful.

...Now, I will admit one thing: There are certain big corporations that Elizabeth Warren has spoken ill of...She's not big into Wall Street banks blatantly cheating their customers and clients and never being held to account for it.

Many readers, none of whom have actually read all her major speeches, committee transcripts and other publications, will simply dismiss Lux's argument out of hand because they "know" in their guts that deep, deep down Warren really agrees with the economic philosophy of the Occupy movement. They "know" this on the basis of an unconscious syllogism that goes as follows: Warren is a "populist." Populists want to take wealth from the rich and give it to the poor. Therefore, Warren wants to do this as well.

The pull of this argument is so strong that, no matter what Warren actually says or does, her critics remain unmoved. She is a "*populist*" and "*everyone knows*" what populists "*really*" believe.

Now let's be clear. Populists themselves can be every bit as guilty of this kind of thinking as centrists. Consider, for example, the case of Lawrence Summers. Unless a populist has read a recent Tom Edsall column in the New York Times or studied the websites of the Center for American Progress and The Brookings Institution, he or she will confidently dismiss Summers as a quintessential corporate beltway centrist insider. After all, he was Clinton's Secretary of the Treasury in the 1990's, when financial deregulation and a number of other neo-liberal policies were put into practice, he was then for a period a managing partner in a hedge fund and while president of Harvard University he advocated some embarrassingly ignorant and socially atavistic views about women's mathematical and scientific abilities.

But, as [Tom Edsall's recent column reveals](#)<sup>5</sup>, Summer's view have actually changed quite significantly:

...Earlier this year, Summers co-wrote the Report of the Commission on Inclusive Prosperity, a forceful set of economic proposals released on Jan. 15 by the Center for American Progress.

In order to stem the disproportionate share of income flowing to corporate managers and owners of capital, and to address the declining share going to workers, the report calls for tax and regulatory policies to encourage employee ownership, the

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<sup>5</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/04/opinion/establishment-populism-rising.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/04/opinion/establishment-populism-rising.html?_r=0)

strengthening of collective bargaining rights, regulations requiring corporations to provide fringe benefits to employees working for subcontractors, a substantial increase in the minimum wage, sharper overtime pay enforcement, and a huge increase in infrastructure appropriations—for roads, bridges, ports, schools—to spur job creation and tighten the labor market. Summers also calls for significant increases in the progressivity of the United States tax system....

I spoke with Summers on the phone last week to get more details about his thinking. One of his central goals, he said, is to make sure that “workers get a larger share of the pie.”.....Signaling that he now finds himself on common ground with stalwarts of the Democratic left like Elizabeth Warren and Joe Stiglitz, Summers adds, “Government needs to try to make sure everyone can get access to financial markets on an equal basis.”

Summers’s policy proposals have been praised by former critics. Asked for his assessment of Summers’s views, Lawrence Mishel, president of the liberal, pro-labor Economic Policy Institute, emailed “*I very much appreciate that Larry Summers has recently highlighted the need for a ‘high pressure economy’ [i.e. one seeking full employment] and the need to ‘expand worker bargaining power.’*” Dean Baker, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, which sponsors the work of liberal economists, replied to my inquiry: “*It’s funny you would ask this. I was just writing something praising Summers and others for changing their thinking.*” In his not-yet-published pro-Summers essay, Baker writes: “*The idea that an economy could suffer from a persistent shortage of demand is an enormous switch for Summers or anyone who had been adhering to the economic orthodoxy in the three decades prior to the crisis*”

....In a follow-up email to me, Summers took note of Dean Baker’s assertion that he had changed his views, replying that “*John Maynard Keynes is said to have responded to a similar question by saying ‘when the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do sir?’ Much has changed since the 1990s, including protracted shortfalls in demand, a dramatic decline in labor’s share of income, the pulling away of the top 1 percent, the possible emergence of secular stagnation, and the financial crisis. So of course my policy views have evolved.*”

Summer’s change of opinion is of particular significance because the Democratic community right now actually has a unique and indeed extraordinary opportunity to have a meaningful and substantive debate about economic policy.

In the last three months [The New Democratic Coalition](#)<sup>6</sup>, [The Brookings Institution](#)<sup>7</sup>, [The Center for American Progress](#)<sup>8</sup>, [The Economic Policy Institute](#)<sup>9</sup> and [The House Progressive Caucus](#)<sup>10</sup>, as well as [Elizabeth Warren herself](#)<sup>11</sup>, have all released serious

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<sup>6</sup><http://newdemocratcoalition-kind.house.gov/sites/newdemocratcoalition.house.gov/files/American%20Prosperity%20Agenda.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.hamiltonproject.org/events/the\\_future\\_of\\_work\\_in\\_the\\_age\\_of\\_the\\_machine/](http://www.hamiltonproject.org/events/the_future_of_work_in_the_age_of_the_machine/)

<sup>8</sup><https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/report/2015/01/15/104266/report-of-the-commission-on-inclusive-prosperity/>

<sup>9</sup><http://www.epi.org/pay-agenda/>

<sup>10</sup><http://cpc.grijalva.house.gov/uploads/The%20Better%20Off%20Budget.pdf>

<sup>11</sup>[http://www.warren.senate.gov/?p=press\\_release&id=696](http://www.warren.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=696)

economic policy proposals that essentially offer alternative economic strategies for the next Democratic administration. These proposals span the entire range of policy positions within the Democratic coalition and for the first time in decades progressive, center-left and moderate economic proposals by leading organizations can be directly laid side by side and compared. There has rarely if ever been a better opportunity for conducting a serious and meaningful debate about economic policy within the Democratic community.

The views of both Elizabeth Warren and Lawrence Summers figure importantly in this debate. As Edsall notes, Summers directly challenged the analysis presented by the Brookings Institution:

At a Feb. 19 panel discussion on the future of work organized by the Hamilton Project, a centrist Democratic think tank, [run by the Brookings Institution] Summers defied economic orthodoxy. He dismissed as “whistling past the graveyard” the widely accepted view that improving education and job training is the most effective way to reduce joblessness. “The core problem,” according to Summers, is that there aren’t enough jobs, and if you help some people, you can help them get the jobs, but then someone else won’t get the jobs. And unless you’re doing things that are affecting the demand for jobs, you’re helping people win a race to get a finite number of jobs, and there are only so many of them. He adds that he is “all for” more schooling and job training, but as an answer to the problems of the job marketplace, “it is fundamentally an evasion.”

Summers also emphatically endorsed policies to reduce income inequality:

...Summers dismissed as palliative such relatively modest proposals as supplementing the earnings of low-wage workers by increasing the earned-income tax credit and expanding eligibility for the refundable credit. Even a 50 percent increase in the earned-income tax credit at a cost of \$25 billion would barely address current income inequality, he notes...In other words, any attempt to correct the contemporary pattern in income distribution will require large and controversial changes in tax policy, regulation of the workplace, and intervention in the economy to expand employment and to raise wages.

If Summers is taking a more populist stance in this debate than many populists would anticipate, Warren is also advocating a more “mainstream” agenda than the critics who portray her views as “extremist” would like to admit. [Here’s what she says](#)<sup>12</sup>:

- We believe in making investments—in roads and bridges and power grids, in education, in research—investments that create good jobs in the short run and help us build new opportunities over the long run.
- And we believe in paying for them—not with magical accounting scams that pretend to cut taxes and raise revenue, but with real, honest-to-goodness changes that make sure that both we and corporations pay a fair share to build a future for all of us.

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<sup>12</sup>[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-lux/elizabeth-warren-and-the\\_b\\_6432426.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mike-lux/elizabeth-warren-and-the_b_6432426.html)

- We believe in trade policies and tax codes that will strengthen our economy, raise our living standards, and create American jobs—and we will never give up on those three words: Made in America:
- We know that democracy doesn't work when congressmen and regulators bow down to Wall Street's political power—and that means it's time to remind politicians that they don't work for the big banks, they work for US!

In fact, when one compares the platforms of the Center for American Progress' Commission on Inclusive Prosperity, the House Progressive Caucus budget plan and Warren's economic program that she presented to the AFL-CIO, it is immediately clear that there is a substantial overlap. The debate is therefore not a simple either/or choice.

But what is indeed a very simple choice that Democrats must make is whether to discuss the ideas in these various proposals on their actual merits or to base the debate on stereotyped images of centrism and populism.

The answer should be clear. Can Elizabeth Warren seriously be dismissed as offering nothing more than "Blue state populist fantasies" when many of her proposals overlap those of Larry Summers and the Hillary-centric Center for American Progress? Can Larry Summers seriously be dismissed as a typical "pro-Wall Street corporate centrist" when many of the proposals he authored overlap those of Elizabeth Warren?

And more generally, what can populist Democrats actually gain by dismissing the Center American Progress as a bunch of "beltway centrists" (largely because many of its key personnel worked in the Clinton White House in the 1990's) and, by the same token, what can centrist Democrats hope to gain by stereotyping Elizabeth Warren as a "left-wing populist" who has the same economic program as the occupy movement when, in fact, many of her proposals mirror those of Larry Summers and CAP?

The only thing that is actually achieved by slinging essentially vacuous stereotypes like "corporate centrists" and "left wing populists" is a vicious downward spiral of mutual recrimination. Each side, seeing that their position is being willfully distorted, cease to have any intellectual respect for their critics and dismiss them as shallow propagandists whose views are not worth taking seriously. In frustration they then issue equally shallow counterattacks using exactly the same simplistic labels. A debate that should be a serious discussion of disagreements over issues rapidly degenerates into schoolyard name calling.

It should be obvious that the labels "centrist" and "populist" are so crude and imprecise as to be basically useless in serious intra-democratic discussion. They make meaningful and productive debate among Democrats impossible and prevent critical thought. They increase Democratic divisions, obscure real issues and divert debate into personal insults directed against groups and personalities.

Some populists and some centrists will resist this conclusion. For one thing, each side can always find some individuals who fit the stereotypes and who seem to "prove" the stereotypes' continuing validity. More important, the distinction between populists and centrists does



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reflect an underlying sociological reality—that grass roots social activists spread around the country and professional campaign managers and polling experts concentrated in Washington do indeed live in separate social worlds. They do not go out for beers together after work or labor side by side during political campaigns. As a result, both sides do tend to see each other as being quite distinct from themselves and as having a variety of annoyingly different outlooks and perspectives.

But neither grass roots activists nor Washington insiders can build a stable Democratic majority coalition without the other. The Democratic coalition is a coalition based on political necessity, not personal affection.

In fact, the frightening extremism of today's GOP has created a degree of Democratic unity far greater than at any time in the recent past. While Democrats all have personal preferences between the three leading figures in the party, most sincerely say that they genuinely respect Obama, Hillary and Elizabeth Warren at the same time. There is literally no support at all among the millions of people who vote for Democrats in favor of sectarian battles between factions.

The reality is simple. The only people who profit from fomenting conflict within the Democratic coalition are lazy journalists and the GOP. Both are vile and neither deserves our support. Passionate debate over serious issues strengthens the Democratic coalition; polemics over vacuous labels do not.