From Crisis to Working Majority

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Reports of the death of the Democrats are greatly exaggerated. Three new books, despite their author’s pessimism, suggest how to reconstruct the party’s middle-class foundations.

The story of the Democratic Party crisis begins in Macomb County, north of the Detroit City line -- and in Northeast Philadelphia, Cobb County near Atlanta, California's San Fernando Valley, and numerous other working- and middle-class neighborhoods across the country. These were the homes of loyal Democrats: people who felt at ease in a diverse, bottom-up, majority coalition that used politics and government to advance the interests of working people. But here we find alienated voters today with little good to say about politics or Democrats.

I heard those disaffected voices in Macomb County in 1985, when “Reagan Democrats” told me that the “middle-class white guy” gets a “raw deal” today When journalists Peter Brown of the Scripps-Howard newspapers and Thomas Edsall of The Washington Post visited Macomb and other areas last year, they found people even more articulate about busing, taxes and welfare, liberals and flag-burning -- and even more remote from the national Democrats.

The political journey of these voters and communities informs three major new works that chronicle the deepening crisis of the Democratic Party: E.J. Dionne's Why Americans Hate Politics, Peter Brown's Minority Party, and Thomas and Mary Edsall's Chain Reaction. Together, these books, published on the eve of the 1992 presidential campaign, leave the Democrats shrouded in almost unrelieved gloom. According to Brown and the Edsalls, the party of the “little people” is now too narrowly based and fractured to form a majority coalition and too identified with minorities and special interests to speak for average Americans. In their view, the party of government -- of the “New Deal” and the “Fair Deal” -- has become merely the party of taxes and big government.

Brown is clearest on the implications: Democrats are a minority party, in association and electoral position; they will lose in 1992 and for the foreseeable future. The Edsalls are, in
many respects, even more pessimistic, if that is possible. They present a Democratic Party that “enters the fray tired, buckling at the knees after five defeats in six rounds”; the party “as it is now constituted is in danger of losing its stature as a major competitor in national politics.”

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These conclusions are difficult to rationalize away because the books raise fundamental questions about Democratic identity and because the critique is substantially true. These are not post-landslide works with idiosyncratic conclusions about a fumbling Jimmy Carter, a pinched and parsimonious Mondale, or a Dukakis unable to strangle his wife's murderer. These books ask Democrats and liberals to explain what they stand for, whom they represent, what their values are. These books leave little cover for Democratic leaders who cling to the romantic image of a Democratic majority in waiting -- its broad base and still sound principles somehow suppressed just below the surface of our national politics.

But for all the dark passages in these works, the cumulative critique should be liberating. It should shatter illusions and stimulate a debate worthy of a party in crisis. Brown and the Edsalls do depressingly little to point the way out, but Dionne understands that the burden of change and hope for recovery he with the liberals. For the alienated politics of this period are a product of a stunted Democratic liberalism that has left its potential base frustrated, disappointed, and angry. But, fortunately, disaffected Democratic voters still primarily look to the Democratic Party for signs of life. And alienated Democrats “defect” year after year rather than convert once and for all, because a contradiction-ridden Republican coalition has endemic difficulty assimilating them. Obscured by the authors' gloom is a story of political opportunity and a potential map out of crisis.

Democratic Decline
Each of these works begins with race, civil rights, and the upheavals of the 1960s, though these events are but a preface. Each tells a broader story of the widening gulf between the party and its white working-class supporters. They reacted first to the urban riots and busing, then to a growing sense of Democratic elitism and permissiveness before crime and family breakdown and the liberal embrace of group rights. Each author concludes with the Democrats' perceived indifference to the value of work and the interests of working people. That widening gulf provided the opening for a populist conservatism, pioneered by George Wallace, consolidated by the Reagan presidency; it created a conservative, top-
down Republican coalition aligned with elements of the working and middle classes and arrayed against the liberal state.

By *Minority Party*, Brown means a Democratic Party so closely identified with have-nots and ethnic minorities that it ceased to represent the working middle class. Brown's Democrats are “behinden” to a minority group with minority views. Blacks want activist government to guarantee a basic standard of living; whites would leave the responsibility to individuals and cut welfare spending. Whites are upset about soaring crime rates and the breakdown of the family, a subject Brown says Democrats ignore lest they seem insensitive to blacks. Whites believe the “statute of limitations” has expired for their “past crimes against blacks,” but blacks experience discrimination and demand affirmative action.

Because of “liberal guilt” or simply fear of the party's Jackson wing, Democrats are stuck in a minority position-in both meanings. “For Democrats to take an implicit shot at their black base,” Brown writes, would be “the political equivalent of man bites dog.” In Brown's account, the Democrats remain hobbled as the party of big government, welfare, quotas, and permissiveness. Since the middle class now sees not the rich but “the black underclass as the enemy,” the party remains strategically trapped. It cannot attack the rich lest it alienate the upwardly mobile middle class; it cannot ally with the poor lest it alienate the “white middle class.” Brown seems unable to entertain the idea that the interests of the working middle class-the vast majority of Americans clash with those of America's most affluent.

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The Edsalls' *Chain Reaction* also begins with race, though they pursue more subplots to the same unrelieved story of Democratic decline.

Republicans have dominated Democrats by using the “overlapping issues of race and taxes” to forge a populist conservatism able to “break the underlying class basis of the Roosevelt-Democratic coalition.” The Democrats historically built a majority, bottom-up coalition that “sought to shift power, wealth, and the protection of the state toward the working class.” This conception had won the Democrats the loyalty of poor Southern whites, urban Catholics, unionized workers, and, later, black and Hispanic voters. But “race,” the Edsalls believe, “has become a powerful wedge, breaking up what had been the majoritarian
economic interests” of all these groups in the traditional liberal coalition. Taxes, in turn, have been used to drive home the cost to whites of federal programs that redistribute social and economic benefits to blacks and other minorities.

The 1964 Democratic landslide, ironically, was the turning point. On the one hand, it “snapped the bond” between the national Democratic Party and “the segregationist” South and brought the party into alignment with black America. On the other hand, it toppled the moderate, Eastern-establishment, Rockefeller wing while defining the Republican Party as anti-civil rights. After another half-decade of spreading ghetto riots and black power politics, rising black crime and illegitimacy, busing and open housing battles, the Democratic coalition was hopelessly fractured and vulnerable to Republican attacks.

George Wallace's rudimentary conservative populism defined white workers as the victims and the liberal elitist Democratic establishment as the new class enemy, displacing the Republican big-business establishment. But Republicans soon captured populist racial conservatism. Spiro Agnew's attacks on “radical liberals,” Richard Nixon's assault on the Voting Rights Act and busing, and Ronald Reagan's mocking of “welfare queens” brought unparalleled racial polarization in voting by 1980 and made possible the consolidation of a conservative “populist egalitarianism” in the 1980s. A “top-down conservative coalition” now had the “moral high ground.”

Republicans won over white, working- and lower middle-class voters who felt “besieged in the preserves they had built, in their homes, neighborhoods, jobs, schools, and unions.” These voters felt the Democrats had largely abandoned them. In the 1970s the middle-class status and way of life was threatened by stagnant incomes, escalating interest rates, inflation, and, most important, tax rates that placed a “steadily growing share of the cost of government on middle- and lower-middle-class voters.” Taxes were no longer understood as collective resources but instead came “to signify the forcible transfer of hard-earned money away from those who worked, to those who did not.”

The Democrats were blamed for an exponential growth in “taxpayer-financed welfare, food stamps and other expenditures for the poor”; a court-led expansion of busing to achieve integration and expansion of rights for all kinds of groups; and under President Carter, believe it or not, a capital gains tax cut for the rich. By the 1980s, not surprisingly, the Democrats had lost “perhaps its most precious commodity: the trust of the public in the ability of Democrats to handle the nation's economy” Working middle-class Americans,
backbone of the New Deal, had turned against the liberal state. The fusion of race and taxes was now complete.

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Dionne begins with the same raw material, but figures out that the story is unfinished. *Why Americans Hate Politics* centers on the shifting alignments over three decades that have allowed both parties “to become vehicles for upper-middle-class interests” and thus confine “a large chunk of the electorate to the sidelines, wondering why the nation's political discussion [has] become so distant from their concerns.” These alienated voters have come to hate politics in general, but their alienation primarily reflects battles within the Democratic Party that have left voters of moderate means without a champion.

The emerging upper-class bias of the Democratic coalition was first evident in the struggle for civil rights, when liberal reformers “failed to understand that the burdens of achieving racial justice were being borne disproportionately by their traditional supporters among the less affluent whites.” White liberals, shamed by the impoverishment of black Americans, came to look upon blue-collar workers and working-class ethnic communities as relatively affluent. The liberal state sought to uplift blacks, while largely ignoring the needs of other working people.

The New Left of the same period, Dionne notes, was “primarily a movement of middle-class and even upper-middle-class radicalism.” The reformers’ momentary ascendancy in the party -- best captured by the unseating of Mayor Richard Daley’s Chicago delegates to the 1972 Democratic convention -- illustrated “the declining power of the party’s white, working-class base.” The Democrats were now losing ground among lower- and middle-class voters and actually gaining ground, even in 1972, among the upper class and the younger college-educated. The major Democratic congressional gains in 1974 came in well-educated middle-class and suburban areas, bringing in new members committed to “cultural liberalism and procedural reform.”

The New Left and reformists within the party, by opening up the new realm of cultural politics, “gave Republicans and conservatives new ways of winning votes from those with modest incomes and traditionalist values.” The mainstream liberals who came relatively late to oppose the Vietnam War, nonetheless managed to associate the party with “military weakness, flag burning, and draft dodgers”; they steadfastly supported a welfare system
that seemed to many an “enemy of the family” and of work, to promote “dependency, illegitimacy, permissiveness”; they supported the court-led effort to expand rights to abortion and the rights of homosexuals, atheists, and others in a rights revolution.

Liberalism had come to be seen “as a set of abstract, even exotic commitments” of the well-educated, upper middle-class. It allowed Ronald Reagan to define a conservative populism that could attract working- and middle-class voters and sidestep the traditional pocketbook issues that had made them Democrats. Indeed, even if the 1988 election had been limited to those earning under $50,000, Dukakis would still have lost to Bush -- what Dionne calls “one of the most chilling statistics” of 1988.

These new works by Brown, the Edsalls, and Dionne tell a depressing tale of a narrowly based party that has lost touch with average Americans and lost its ability to promote the public good. While Dionne offers glimmers of hope for the future, the Edsalls conclude with an epitaph: the Democratic Party has “lost its creative strength,” its “capacity to learn, and thus to adjust, protect, enlarge, and fight for what is really valuable.” The party, they believe, is too “deeply enmeshed in a network of special interests,” lobbyists, and political action committees (PACs) to respond to opportunities; too hemmed in by declining public funds and intensifying global competition to shelter the disadvantaged or surmount internecine party battles. Democratic liberalism, the Edsalls believe, may in the end “have made choices that are in fact irredeemable -- choices that render problematic, at least for the foreseeable future, the restoration of a nationally competitive coalition representing the interests of those in the bottom half of the income distribution.”

A Conversation with Democrats
These three works, intelligent and well researched, frame a broad consensus on what afflicts the Democrats. Yet there is, nonetheless, something wrong with this overall story. Look again at Macomb, where David Bonior, a progressive Democrat, won re-election to the Congress with 66 percent of the vote in 1990 and liberal Senator Carl Levin took 58 percent. Edsall fails to notice that most of the Democratic legislative seats lost in the 1984 Reagan landslide were retaken and held through the 1980s. Indeed, the authors' silence on Democratic survival in Macomb after the Reagan revolution is part of a general lack of curiosity about the signs of Democratic viability. Why did Michael Dukakis, after decades of Democratic failures and missed opportunities, surge into a 17 percentage point lead after the 1988 Democratic convention? Why do Democrats hold such commanding advantages in the U.S. House and Senate, state legislatures and state houses? It is just insufficient to throw out a few paragraphs about special-interest PAC money and incumbent advantages and
suppose that one has explained away the Democrats' continuing hold on politics below the presidential level.

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What Dionne figured out, and what the Edsalls and Brown missed, is the character of this alienated discourse: this is a conversation among Democrats. Only a few of Brown's Macomb County, Reagan Democrats spoke positively about Republican values; for the most part, they were discussing how the Democrats had failed them. Brown fails to notice that most of his Reagan Democrats, year after year, keep checking first to see whether the Democratic presidential candidates (even a Michael Dukakis) have found their way back to the middle class. These Reagan Democrats want to “go home,” if only the party would prove hospitable. That was the Republican fear in 1988. In an interview with Dionne, Lee Atwater, Bush's campaign chair, worried: “They would have gone back and been Democrats again. They're always looking for excuses to be, because they are Democrats. So if we were to allow the Dukakis campaign strategy to unfold and not get on these [social] issues, they would have prevailed.”

As it turns out, despite the years of growing disillusionment, voters still think Democrats will do more for the middle class, and Republicans more for the big special interests. Between 1972 and 1980, over 70 percent of these populist voters consistently voted for Democratic congressional candidates who apparently figured out how to represent their interests and values. The Edsalls and Brown miss all of this because they believe that a business-oriented, conservative Republican Party has won over major segments of the white working and lower middle class, based on conservative populist principles. Brown's white middle class is largely classless, uninterested in class-based appeals and no longer apt to see “the greedy rich taking advantage of them.” The Edsalls believe the Republicans have succeeded in bringing the affluent and workers together into a stable coalition which he variously describes as “an ideological common ground,” a “cross-class alliance,” “a sustained policy majority,” an effective joining [of] “the interests of business and moderate-income whites,” and finally, “a merger of ideological interests.”

In fact, the opposite is almost certainly true. Dionne captures the core contradiction: “the new conservative majority that has dominated presidential politics since 1968 is inherently unstable, since it unites upper-income groups, whose main interest is smaller government and lower taxes, and middle-to-lower-income groups, who are culturally conservative but
still support most of the New Deal and a lot of the Great Society.” The diverse elements of the Republican coalition find common ground in some areas -- reducing social spending for the poor and reversing affirmative action—but they agree on little else. This is hardly a “merger of ideological interests.” They disagree on cutting back the regulatory state, on reducing government spending, on holding down the minimum wage, on social security, on trade, indeed, on the New Deal and much more.

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The 1990 budget battle brought all this to a head. Initially, a business-led Republican coalition sought tax revenues and spending cuts at the expense of middle-class families. The Democratic alternative, belatedly embraced by Democratic congressional leaders almost in spite of themselves, taxed the rich, defended the middle class -- and turned out to be good politics. The derailing of the conservative alliance in 1990 could turn into a real crack-up if middle class and populist voters were to focus on the unreality of their “shared interests” with the winners in the 1980s -- a period that produced stagnant incomes for the working and middle classes and drastic income gains for rich investors and corporate executives.

It is the specter of such a crack-up that leads Republicans back to the “race issue” -- the best way to heat up the cultural issues and to keep populist social conservatives from acting on their class instincts. But the Republicans' resort to race is no measure of strength; it is the measure of an unstable Republican coalition. The “conservative malaise,” as Dionne describes it, “explains why George Bush ran such a persistently negative campaign in 1988” and why he seems so intent on riding “racial quotas,” white South Africa, and an anti-affirmative action Court nominee, right into the 1992 election.

None of this detracts from the depth of the Democratic crisis, but it suggests an opening. The Democratic challenge is how to allow these Democrats and would-be Democrats to find their way home. Fortunately, there is a wealth of guidance in these and other works to excite the imagination and provide a map for Democrats in 1992.
Rediscovering Middle-Class Politics

The primary challenge for Democrats, these authors agree, is the rediscovery of the forgotten middle class. Brown and the Edsalls, however, believe the Democrats will remain hopelessly marginalized by their racial identification. Both believe that a broader Democratic approach will fail because the party is forced to begin with the “neediest” and only then think about how to attach middle-class elements; they think a Democratic class strategy will turn into “class warfare” -- a mindless attack on the rich, just as the middle class is settling into a rich man's party. Neither author can envision what Dionne calls “a new politics of the middle class.”

It should be clear by now that the key to Democratic success is becoming a middle-class centered, bottom-up coalition -- a mass party, encompassing the needs of the have-nots and working Americans, that centers on the values and interests of the middle class. According to recent polls by CBS News/New York Times, Tarrance and Associates, and Greenberg-Lake, voters believe that Republicans favor the rich over the middle class (.59 to 11 percent before the budget debacle and 63 to 8 percent afterwards); they think that Democrats, more than Republicans, resist big special interests (48 to 21 percent). But, critically, voters are unsure whom the Democrats represent: a quarter say they favor the rich and a like amount think they favor the middle class; almost half are just confused about where the Democrats stand. However, when forced to choose which party will do a better job helping the middle class, voters by margins of two or three to one, depending on the poll, say the Democrats. The Democrats can aspire to becoming a national party again when that result represents, not just the Republican's association with privilege, but a genuine identification of Democrats with the middle class. That goal suggests several interrelated themes.

**Broad-based Social Policy.** Democrats need to rediscover broad-based social policy that sends a larger message: Democrats are for “everybody,” not just the “have-nots.” That means defending and enlarging social insurance initiatives that reach the lower and middle classes rather than constructing safety nets that protect only the poor. Safety nets, however fiscally appealing, represent bad politics and a moral trap that ultimately separates the poor, as well as the Democrats, from a majority coalition. Theda Skocpol, in these pages, posed the right question: “Why should people just above the poverty line, struggling without benefit of health coverage, child care, or adequate unemployment insurance pay for programs that go exclusively to people below the poverty line”?

Antipoverty and welfare programs consume liberal political energies, but the programs have not significantly changed the position of the poor, at least not since 1970. Without
broad-based political support, these targeted and “stigmatized” services end up first on the budgetary chopping blocks. They have only a marginal impact on poverty rates and barely reach America's underclass. However, there are three broad-based areas where the evidence suggests government action can reduce the level of poverty: lowering unemployment, achieving a more equitable distribution of income, and expanding universally available social insurance programs. Social security, we have been slow to recognize, is our most important anti-poverty program. A party that can speak expansively of broad, cross-class issues, such as full employment tax relief, and health care is able, in Skocpol’s words, to “speak with a consistent and moral voice to all Americans.”

**Mediating for the Middle Class.** Brown and the Edsalls depict middle-class frustration with a society that bends over backwards for the poor. But the authors miss entirely the other side of the equation -- middle-class America’s deep frustration with the ascendancy of the wealthy and the corporations. Most voters see politics as corrupted by money: they believe that the wealthy control the politicians, the parties, and the government, while skipping out on paying their fair share of taxes. To be sure, a majority believes the middle class is being squeezed but less “to pay for programs for the poor” (21 percent) and more “to pay for tax breaks for the rich” (32 percent). Even in Louisiana, where Democratic defection has run amok, David Duke's supporters were as likely to complain that the middle class is being squeezed by “the cost of tax breaks for the rich and unfair advantages for big business” as by “the cost of welfare programs for the poor and unfair advantages for minorities.”

The Democrats, themselves increasingly dependent on special interest money, have been painfully slow to respond to middle-class frustration with the imbalance in favor of the affluent. But the budget battle in October 1990 illustrates the power of a tax debate recast in populist terms; the Democrats were prepared to impose a millionaire’s surtax, while the Republicans insisted on a cut in capital gains tax rates for the rich. The voters, after years of hating the Democrats on taxes, abruptly concluded in October 1990, by 38 to 25 percent, that the Democrats would do a better job than the Republicans “dealing with taxes”; even by March of this year, the Republicans were only able to climb back to parity on taxes. When Democrats insist that the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes, they send a message that everybody must contribute; they provide symbolic evidence that Republicans are handmaidens of the rich, while Democrats can be trusted to mediate for the middle class.

**Work and Work Values.** To recapture the interest of the average family, Democrats must talk about mom than money and material needs. Republicans talk values, the Edsalls point
out: “belief in hard work, in the nuclear family, in self-reliance, in personal restraint, in thrift, foresight, and self-denial; belief in doctrines of individual responsibility in obedience to law, in delayed gratification, in respect for authority, and in a more repressive (or less expressive) sexual morality.” That association with values has enabled the Republicans to insinuate themselves into the lives of hard-working families who, on material grounds alone, would have little use for Republicans. It has enabled them to win over evangelicals and many white Southerners who are probably now lost to Democrats.

Democrats, of course, have good reason to remain a secular party associated with the broad voter commitment to modernity and individual rights, particularly among younger, better-educated, and women voters. With Republicans programmed to nominate socially conservative presidential candidates who meet all the litmus tests on abortion, pornography, and prayer, Democrats are the libertarians. Indeed, little of the realignment discussion takes note of offsetting Democratic gains among younger women, professionals, and more highly educated suburbanites. The unfolding issue of reproductive choice could produce important Democratic gains and trouble for Republicans divided between libertarian and conservative cultural traditions.

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Still, Democrats cannot win over the average family unless there are some limits on the party's moral agnosticism. In particular, a new class politics requires Democrats to defend the principle of reward for work and the social and moral worth of a strong family. These seem like simple affirmations, but not so for Democrats. The historic debate over the 1965 Moynihan report on the breakdown of the black family was instructive, for, as Brown points out, it stifled discussion for almost two decades about work, welfare, and family within Democratic circles and blocked Democrats from affirming their support for work and family as positive values. Even when the Congress initiated and passed “welfare reform” and expanded the earned income tax credit for the working poor, the Democrats were almost completely silent about the values they were advancing.

Minority communities, too, live by these values. The great majority of black men and women of working age are working, and frequently in the face of considerable odds -- high bus fares, unaffordable childcare and health insurance, and low service-sector wages that hardly make this a “rational” economic choice. Black women have always participated in the labor force at rates greater than white women, reflecting both economic necessity and
assumptions about their work lives. And we now know from work by Christopher Jencks and others that those on welfare not only are willing to work, but are often already working illegally to supplement their checks and support their children.

The broad middle class hungers for a society and a leadership that honors work. It idealizes a middle America that works hard, carries the burden for society pays the taxes, does the right thing but is little recognized. When Democrats honor work, they signal good priorities and values -- that they understand the lives of average Americans. And they remind voters that it is Republicans who devalue the work of the ordinary person. It is Republicans, as Dionne notes, who have honored those “who reached for instant wealth, instant fame, and instant luxury” and forgot the working middle class and “its devotion to the work ethic.”

**Civil Rights in a Majority Coalition.** Reforming the party into a bottom-up coalition of the broad middle class challenges the organizing ideas of the current, collapsing Democratic coalition. The plight of the poor and the unfinished business of achieving civil rights cannot, regrettably, be the first principle of Democratic politics. The party must be inclusive and self-consciously pluralistic; it must insist on strong anti-discrimination measures; it must work to achieve social justice. But a majority, governing coalition has a better chance of delivering on those principles than a party in crisis where symbolism substitutes for winning elections and delivering results.

For years, the Democratic coalition has not been able to deliver anything tangible to the party's black base. The black working and middle classes and black intact families have made important progress – and in no small part due to the Democrat’s commitment to equal opportunity and equal rights – but the progress is very, very partial. Black America is struggling to progress against forces that, by the end of the 1980s, produced fewer intact families and a growing majority of black children born out of wedlock; almost one-third of black Americans were poor; life expectancy, against the trend for white America, was dropping. Whatever the legitimate triumphs of the civil rights revolution for the black middle class, William Julius Wilson writes, the “life chances of the ghetto underclass are largely untouched by programs of preferential treatment based on race.”

The out-of-power Democrats could neither expand programs to fill the gaps in America's antipoverty efforts or even protect what already existed. Under Reagan, basic welfare programs (Aid to Families With Dependent Children and food stamps) were cut by almost a fifth; the minimum wage, kept at $3.35, was effectively cut by a third. With the courts and
the executive branch now effectively lost on civil rights, the Democrats are left with rear-guard, symbolic fights that do little to advance social justice, but carry a high political price.

As Jesse Jackson observed speaking before the NAACP convention after the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court: “If you’re in a game in which you lose if you lose and lose if you win, it’s time to enter another game.” When the discourse enables your enemies to enjoy the political fruits of Willie Horton and quotas and you and your allies are further marginalized win or lose, it is time to change the terms of the debate. “The issue,” Jackson says, “is not quotas. It is not reverse discrimination. It is not welfare queens. It is the need for a new American agenda to restore the country’s economic base.” That is indeed a formula for reconstructing the Democratic Party and building a majority coalition.

Demystifying the Reagan-Bush Era
For nearly a decade, Republicans ran against the Carter presidency, a period that embodied what was bad about Democrats and this country-weakness before our enemies, things out of control, bad economic times for average Americans. Stagflation stripped away Democratic association with prosperity. In the public memory, even the 1982 recession became Carter’s. It was around such images that Reagan brought together the affluent and the middle class.

To challenge the conservative hegemony, Democrats need to define the Reagan-Bush years - to create an imagery of Reagan-Bush America that supersedes the Carter years and impeaches the credibility of conservative governance for middle America. “Me Republican-dominated decade of the 1980s,” the Edsalls write, “provided one of the most dramatic redistributions of income in the nation’s history.” Families worked harder and put in longer hours, with more and more husbands and wives both working, yet the average family (along with the bottom three-fifths of the population) either lost income or remained stagnant. Their skills lost value in the new world economy. They were promised tax relief, but middle America actually ended up paying higher taxes during the Reagan-Bush years.

Republican vulnerability goes beyond economic “fairness.” Republican rule produced bad values and a kind of betrayal. “The dominant ethos of the age seemed to be acquisitive, materialistic, self-indulgent,” Dionne writes. The Reagan-Bush years undercut the notion of common citizenship. Important segments of society prospered in the unmediated world economy -- including major corporations, top-level executives, and an elite with professional and analytic skills -- but not the mass of working people. During the Reagan-
Bush years, America's leaders stood by while the notion of common citizenship gave way to private advantage, at the expense of the middle class.

Republican intellectuals are working hard to refute this picture of the 1980s. The stakes are high. According to my own polling in July 1991, the American people believe that they are losing ground financially, unable to keep up with rising prices and taxes, while the rich fail to carry their fair share of the burden. Since the mid-1980s, more middle-class Americans have come to suspect that America is headed seriously off on the wrong track. To counter that interpretation, conservative thinkers have posited an alternative set of “facts”: Ben Wattenberg and other conservative columnists and authors, like Peter Brown, insist our standard of living is up, the middle class is growing, and poverty is shrinking. According to Wattenberg's *The First Universal Nation*, inequality is a “tricky statistical question,” but certainly “overstated”; don't believe those figures you read about infant mortality, illiteracy and drop-out rates; America, far from being in decline, is doing better at home, around the world, and compared to our competitors. The battle to define the Reagan-Bush years is a critical political arena where Democrats have the opportunity to disrupt the Republicans' hold on the middle class, contest again the issue of prosperity, and advance the welfare and values of middle America.

Reclaiming Politics
To recreate a rationale for electing Democrats, the party must, once again become the party of government. That may seem like odd advice, given the voters' current aversion to politicians and big government. But voters never turned against specific broad-based programs, like social security or environmental protection; and right through the Reagan years, voters were ready in polls to support increased spending for anti-drug programs, Medicare, AIDS research, day care programs, and much more. Voters turned on “big” government and overspending to be sure, that is, government that failed to represent “everybody.” There was a “flight from public life,” as Dionne writes, but it was politics that abandoned people, not vice versa.

Politics has been suppressed for the majority of Americans because of real policies that have hurt average families, because progressives and Democrats have failed to defend the liberal state, because of a lot of ordinary corruption, and because Republicans have successfully narrowed the scope for legitimate political action. In that constricted space, the initial support for government initiatives -- for acting collectively -- quickly dissolves into skepticism and cynicism.
The suppression of politics is nonpartisan in character, but the effect is anti-Democratic, as it narrows the discourse in which progressive Democrats can establish their conception of national purpose. The suppression of politics is rooted, above all, in the failure of Democrats -- the party of government -- to articulate a rationale for the government's role in society. The Great Society brought tremendous growth in what Theodore Marmor, Jerry Mashaw, and Philip Harvey in *The Misunderstood Welfare State* call “the insurance/opportunity state” -- a network of social insurance programs aimed at providing economic security over the life-cycle of individuals. Rather than rescuing people from poverty, these programs were meant to be contributory and to insure people against destitution. The social insurance programs, such as Social Security, Medicare, and old-age pensions for government workers and the like, provide the dominant character of America's welfare state, constituting about 70 percent of social outlays. Yet who knows that? For the public, the welfare state is welfare -- AFDC and food stamps -- ”fiscally trivial” programs for the poor that Marmor and colleagues rightly insist are “in no way emblematic of the American welfare state.”

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It should be no surprise that conservatives sought to reduce the state to “welfare queens” and the “welfare mess.” But the New Left was also suspicious of the New Deal liberal establishment and ambivalent about bureaucracy and government; the Vietnam War only redoubled the distrust. What is more surprising is that the Democrats' liberal establishment began to narrow the party's main political purpose to helping the poor and the neediest, thus accepting the conservatives' narrow characterization of the state. Not since Lyndon Johnson -- not for almost twenty five years -- has any national Democratic leader articulated a vision of a broad-based state. Under Reagan the issue was reduced to the size of the safety net.

In the absence of that broader rationale, the public was free to generalize from specific government policies that seemed directly at odds with the interests of most Americans. There is something wrong, Dionne points out, “when constituencies who had gotten jobs, gone to college, bought houses, started businesses, secured health care, and retired in dignity because of government decided, of a sudden, that ‘government was the problem.”’

The collapse of political leadership after the Kennedy presidency created a rising distrust and cynicism about government. From Vietnam through Watergate, the Iran hostage crisis,
Irangate, the rise of special interest money, and the 1990 budget debacle, people doubted that government could be trusted to mediate on behalf of people -- that it could serve as arbiter among contending social forces or act to counterbalance the power of private interests.

Moreover, Republicans have worked hard to make Americans as politically impotent as possible. The presidency still has all its grandeur when it comes to war-making and foreign policy, but at home, the President is preoccupied with rearranging the “thousand points of light.” There is now even a Point of Light coordinator in the White House who helps the President pick his “daily point of light.” But when it comes to serious matters, like the recession, both the President and Congress have done nothing. “Meantime,” David Broder writes, “real people are being hurt by this slump -- and the government to which they legitimately look for help is too distracted to respond.” Little wonder, then, that a public which once clamored for jobs programs and economic stimuli in bad economic times now barely has the political imagination to think beyond just holding the line on spending.

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The space for politics has so narrowed that the American people have nearly lost the ability to attack problems collectively and, in the process, have lost the reason to elect Democrats to office. But through it all, people have not turned philosophically anti-government. In a recent national survey, just 18 percent wanted a government that did “as little as possible,” while 31 percent supported a government that provided “a safety net in case something bad happens” and, astonishingly, 44 percent, a government that guaranteed “a decent standard of living for everyone, including jobs and basic housing.” That is why Democrats have such a strong interest in revitalizing American -- showing people that the state can and does serve the whole citizenry, that the government need not be paralyzed but can effectively attack problems not just special interests, can win in politics.

There is no shortage of political ideas, if Democrats would become articulate about politics. On health care, where the middle class is vulnerable and where private-sector solutions have failed, the voters trust the Democrats over the Republicans by 52 to 21 percent. The public would also support strategies to mediate those uncertain economic forces and that give people hope of controlling their economic future: strategies such as public investment in infrastructure and technology after years of decline;
investment in educating people, particularly the non-college educated, after years of indifference to job training; progressive tax policies to offset the regressive impact of uneven integration into the world economy; and a commitment to reclaim America’s leadership in key technologies and industries. Democratic liberalism offers ordinary people empowerment -- using government to secure prosperity in a very uncertain world.

In the end, a revitalized politics provides the way out for a Democratic Party in crisis, enabling Democrats to reclaim what the New Deal left to them-the legacy of a bottom-up majority coalition that uses the state to tilt the balance in favor of ordinary people.
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