Opinion
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A voter walks toward his polling place in Cary, N.C., during his state's primary election March

A voter walks toward his polling place in Cary, N.C., during his state's primary election March 3, 2026, to choose candidates for the November midterm elections. (OSV News/Reuters/ Jonathan Drake)



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In recent weeks, we looked at how the Democrats need to address economic issues not in terms of traditional left vs. right framing, but by articulating the need for a new social contract, one that specifically addresses income inequality and the corruption of our public life that flows from it.

Even if the Democrats hit a home run on economics, they also need to step back from the cultural extremism they have embraced in recent years. There is a reason that the last ad run against Kamala Harris in 2024 and the first ad run against Texas state Rep. James Talarico featured the candidates' stances on transgender issues: The ads work. They are effective because the positions held by most Democratic politicians on these issues are extreme and transgender-related issues have replaced abortion as the principal totem in the culture wars.

It would be craven to suggest that the Democrats moderate their position simply because it is unpopular. One potential presidential candidate who is leaning hard into his pro-trans positions, Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, was correct when he said, "Never throw anyone under the bus. Stand up for your convictions." But a willingness to reexamine one's convictions is, or at least was, a hallmark of liberalism. In this case, pro-trans activists, and the large donor base aligned with them, permit no such reexamination, even suggesting the effectiveness of the attack ad against Harris was attributed to its underlying economic message, not the gender message. That is a level of denial that is difficult to fathom. It can be explained only by the keen desire to maintain the established progressive orthodoxy on the issue.

The reason to distance the party from that orthodoxy is because it is at best unproven and at worst a fallacy. Let's take the issue of transgender women in sports. As liberals, we value fairness, but both those who favor the inclusion of trans women, who are biological males, in women's sports and those who oppose it claim fairness is on their side. I tend to agree with tennis legend Martina Navritolva, who has no problem with sexual minorities per se, and others who point out the obvious differences between male and female body types. We have an NBA and a WNBA, a men's tennis tournament and a women's, for a reason. What further tips the issue in the direction of moderation, however, is the added concern for young women to have safe spaces in locker rooms and lavatories, a concern that seems valid on its face,

Could there not be sporting leagues specifically for trans athletes? We have the Paralympics for athletes with physical disabilities. A league for trans athletes might not reach everyone who wants to participate, but nothing is 100%. Short kids may want to play basketball, but usually can't in a competitive league. There are some distinctions that matter in a sport — strength, height, and, yes, sex.

The Democrats also need to moderate their position on so-called "gender-affirming" care for minors. There is some debate among the experts and the science is emphatically not "settled." For example, the United Kingdom's Cass Review barred irrevocable procedures for minors unless they are participating in a clinical trial citing a lack of research justifying such procedures. A report from Yale Law School argued that the Cass Review was wrong to insist on further research. I am no expert, but the Cass Review seemed more convincing and the arguments were presented in a less strident, more dispassionate tone. The Yale report read like a

political manifesto at times.

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Earlier this year, the American Medical Association retreated from its previous, unequivocal support for irrevocable procedures such as puberty blockers or surgical interventions for minors, following a similar decision by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. "In the absence of clear evidence, the A.M.A. agrees with A.S.P.S. that surgical interventions in minors should be generally deferred to adulthood," the AMA said. The AMA later said The New York Times' report on their statement mischaracterized their position. What was going on?

In an op-ed at The New York Times, Jesse Singal explained the politics that surrounded the medical establishment's embrace of "gender-affirming" care. "The approach of left-of-center Americans and our institutions — to assume that when a scientific organization releases a policy statement on a hot-button issue, that the policy statement must be accurate — is a deeply naïve understanding of science, human nature and politics, and how they intersect," he wrote. His explanations are persuasive and reflect the fact that human nature, even for experts, is fallen.

My reason for wanting the Democrats to moderate on the issue is simple: Minors should not make irrevocable decisions, period. Common sense dictates that. Claims about denying such treatment causing higher suicidal ideation mistake correlation for causation. There is no study that indicates the denial of irrevocable care causes a spike in suicidal thoughts. "It's really unhelpful to talk about [the idea that suicide rates are so high among transgender youth] because, A, we don't see it, thankfully, and what message does that send young people that this is so bad to contend with that you might end up taking your own life. That's a terrible message," said BBC reporter Hannah Barnes in an interview on Andrew Sullivan's "Dishcast."

Finally, Democrats are right to oppose any bigoted attitudes towards people who identify as transgender. Being mean is not the answer, unless one belongs to the Trump cult. There are non-irrevocable things that can be done to support a child who is wrestling with gender dysphoria, starting with counseling and working to create non-judgmental environments in schools. Banning teenagers from presenting themselves as trans makes no sense: It is mean to those who genuinely experiencing gender dysphoria and counterproductive for those who are going

through a phase or seeking an avenue for rebellion. The surest way to get a teenager to do something is to tell them they can't.

But Democrats need to find ways of showing their support that do not send the signal they want to overturn some of the most basic norms of society. Indicating one's pronouns is well-intentioned, but it suggests that no one's gender identity is fixed and, for most of us, it is. Saying gender is "assigned" at birth makes it sound like there is a conspiracy afoot. There are academic distinctions between biological sex and gender but for 99% of the population, for 99% of the time, there is no meaningful distinction. Speaking as if there were makes Democrats sound weird, not empathetic. It also reeks of virtue signaling which is another thing voters detest about the Democrats.

Every time I write on this topic, I get some nasty emails. NCR usually publishes a rebuttal, which is a good thing, but I wish the rebuttals were at least open to the idea that the cultural and political left got out over its skis on this issue. That never happens. The criticisms, ironically, are always binary: The argument is always that you either adhere to the orthodoxy, or you are a science-denying bigot. The reality of gender dysphoria is complex and its situation in the larger culture is yet more complex. There is a place for nuance and thoughtful discussion.

The need for Democrats to distance themselves from the policy positions articulated by academics, interest groups and political activists is obvious. As Ezra Klein noted in a must-read essay:

> Democrats became more uncompromising on immigration and lost support among Hispanic voters. They moved left on guns and student loans and climate, and lost ground with young voters. They moved left on race and lost ground with Black voters. They moved left on education and lost ground with Asian American voters. They moved left on economics and lost ground with working-class voters.

Interest groups and academics traffic in identity politics, but most voters are more than one thing. They are business people as well as gay, workers as well as Black, parents as well as Latino. They are all Americans — and Democrats need a message aimed at all Americans, not a mere aggregate of particular interest groups.

It is time to stop the cultural nonsense. If Democrats need to articulate an economic message that is more revolutionary, on cultural issues they need to stop sounding like they just left the faculty lounge. Insofar as trans issues are the new totem in the culture wars, if the Democrats do not abandon the shrill orthodoxy of the Human Rights Campaign and other related groups, they will keep losing elections. More importantly, the received orthodoxy doesn't pass the common sense smell test.

Trans issues may be the most totemic issue but they are not the only issue hurting Democrats. The party needs to find better ways to discuss the environment, immigration, crime and most especially the current political situation, all of which we will look at in a future column.

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