

Basic insight #1: We have a factional future. We already have a factional present, but it is incompletely constructed. We have:

- (1) An “old coke” democratic party faction, the faction of pelosi and biden and jim clyburn, and of the major groups in the party—environmentalists, african-americans, feminists, public sector unions. that faction believes in the ideology that everyone gets a piece of chicken. It is the conception of what a party is that fits with how the “party decides” school things about parties, as coalitions of “high demanders” who more or less strike a blood oath to support each other and work together.
- (2) A democratic socialist wing—the faction of the squad, the justice Dems, the remnants of the sanders campaign, and all the magazines and unemployed phds in the history of consciousness writing for jacobin. this is a real social formation, capable of developing ideas, forming organizations, participating in primaries, raising money, etc. a large % of them once thought of themselves as outside the party, but they can rationalize working as democrats because they really think of themselves as factionalists first.
- (3) The as-yet not really existing moderate faction. this faction has existed in the past—that’s what the dlc was, and it was highly consequential. but it was consequential in part because it represented a really large segment of actual elected officials. when you go back and look at what % of democratic senators, reps and governors were dlcers, it is impressive. there’s nothing like that now, in part because the democratic party is never going to elect howell heflin to congress (and no, joe manchin is not today’s howell heflin). many of those moderates succeeded because of pervasive regionalism—they thought they could get voters to think of them as geographically distinct from the rest of the party. jon tester and joe manchin sort of fits this definition, but it’s remarkable how little it works any more (largely as a function of the forces of the nationalization of politics).
- (4) The current moderates in the party are a really small rump, and characterized by pervasive—and i’d say pathological—individualism. they think their success will come from being differentiated from any larger collective project. my point here is that is unlikely to work. in a nationalized political environment, moderates can only succeed by being seen as part of something larger with a brand available and attractive to voters that is seen as pushing the rest of the party in a distinct direction. that is, they have to be part of a faction.

Second insight is that there’s no homogenous thing called “moderates.” work by fowler, hill, et al shows that moderates really exist and are electorally consequential. they are:

- (1) There are people who actually hold wishy-washy views on a range of issues on the standard l-r scale (for example, people who think abortion is ok in some situations and not others, or people who think that affirmative action is ok in universities but not employment, etc.).
- (2) Cross-pressured voters (both socially conservative and economically liberal, and economically conservative and socially liberal);

- (3) Either anti-system or anti-political voters (those who simply are averse to politics as a mode of social action, and thus are opposed to working in ideological categories).

My proposition here is that the most important problem to sort out where building a faction is concerned is how to make a marriage of bloombergian wealthy donors and a large segment of business (note republicans increasing hostility to the chamber of commerce!) work with a potential voter base that's got something of the opposite set of ideological priors (more economically interventionist and socially conservative). because if we can't somehow figure out how to connect the available elite base of the faction with the available voter base, then we really don't have anything.

The complicated factor here is that this voter base is, as mike lind has argued, the least organized in the country. they have no peak organizations to represent them, which is why they—and their cousins in other countries—are the natural hunting ground for populists of both the left and right. the rest of the democrats are unlikely to be very successful keeping these voters away from trumpists, but we might.

So how could you actually build a coalition of such voters? what do they have in common? if we only thought of them as spaces in a 2x2 table, the project would seem to be sort of hopeless. but i think it's not. ideological coalitions always involve some acts of creativity that bridge distinctions—the ideologies of progressivism and conservatism were once seemingly impossible ideological mashups. but as hans noel has shown, creative intellectuals paved the way by showing the future party entrepreneurs how their parties might be put together in a new way. that could be our project as well.

So i would start by making a few observations about what they have in common:

- (1) Both of them are more likely to be consumers of government than producers. in various ways, they need government to work—as business people, they need it to be functional to create a climate in which their businesses can thrive, and as working to lower-middle class people they depend upon it to educate their children, protect them from crime, and produce economic growth and opportunity. but they approach these things from the side of the people getting the service. and thus there is a natural coalition to be built that is not—as in the conservative coalition—anti-governmental, but pro-government action but skeptical of government and professional interests. i think that translates in policy terms into support for social insurance rather than direct service provision, and various measures that give consumers leverage over service providers (like school choice).
- (2) More broadly i think the abundance agenda and the work that abundance network is doing fits there, as does the “anti-captured economy” agenda of breaking up networks of entrenched interests that are upward redistributing (although there's potential conflict because some of those interests, in finance and tech, are the very rich people we might want to mobilize). so i would describe this as addressing inequality that flows out of government itself rather than just address it through redistribution (where there are, at the limit, likely to be strong differences, as well as on the scope of labor union power).

(3) These two groups seem incompatible if we have a uni-dimensional measure of social liberalism and conservatism. and they are if the focus is on, for instance, things that pick up primarily gender roles and sexuality (like pornography, abortion, etc.). but my hypothesis is that there is less tension here if we focus on the “social order” dimension. one of the secrets of Michael Bloomberg’s success, for instance, is he combined very liberal positions on sexual/tolerance issues with a very tough position on policing. i think there’s a lesson here on what could hold these parts of a moderate faction together. not just crime, but possibly a skeptical position on “wokeness,” and “common sense” positions on things like the substance of education and school discipline, combined with a generally positive orientation toward symbols of national unity and support for some measures of cultural assimilation of immigrants (which may bridge what is likely to be a more fundamental tension on the size of immigration). so that’s where i see this potential faction drawn on the insights of Ruy as well as Abundance Network.

Intellectuals can only do so much in the project of building a moderate democratic faction. but i think there are a few things that we and only we can do:

- we can point to where the actual social coalition upon which a faction can be built exists;
- we can sketch out ways that the fundamental tensions in that coalition can be bridged at the level of social philosophy and tangible policies;
- we can engage in the quite negative but probably necessary function of criticizing the existing network of moderate organizations and make clear to donors and others that they are strategically bankrupt;
- we can make clear the importance of organizing rather than just messaging. someone else has to do that organizing, but we can legitimate it.