

OPINION
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Who You Calling Conservative?

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Illustration by Sam Whitney/The New York Times



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You know you've touched a nerve with progressive activists when they tell you not just that you're wrong but that you're on the other side.

Such is the fate of any old-school liberal or mainstream Democrat who deviates from progressive dogma. Having personally been slapped with every label from “conservative” to “Republican” and even, in one loopy rant, “[fascist](#),” I can attest to how disorienting it is given my actual politics, which are pure blue American only when they aren’t center French.

But it’s not just me. New York magazine’s liberal political columnist Jonathan Chait was accused of lending “[legitimacy to a reactionary moral panic](#)” for critiquing political correctness. When Nellie Bowles described the excesses of social justice movements in her book “Morning After the Revolution,” a reviewer labeled it a “[conservative memoir](#).” Meghan Daum, a lifelong Democrat, was accused of having fallen into a “[right-wing trap](#)” for questioning the progressive doctrine of intersectional oppression.

If this was just about our feelings, these denunciations could be easily brushed aside. But the goal and the effect is to narrow the focus of acceptable discourse by Democrats and their allies. If liberals are denounced for “punching left” when they express a reasonable difference of opinion, potentially winning ideas are banished.

This narcissism of small differences effectively leaves it to Republicans to claim mainstream ideals like patriotism, which Matthew Yglesias (another targeted apostate) [argues still holds value](#) for non-MAGA America, and smart politics, like attending to the concerns of the working class, as George Packer (also frequently attacked) [points out](#).

In the run-up to a tight election with a weak Democratic candidate and a terrifying Republican opponent, pushing liberals and centrists out of the conversation not only exacerbates polarization, it’s also spectacularly counterproductive.

Take President Biden’s recent [executive order severely limiting asylum](#). The Congressional Progressive Caucus chair Pramila Jayapal accused him of trying to “[out-Republican the Republicans](#).” Mother Jones called the action “[Trump-like](#).”

Meanwhile, according to [a recent Axios poll](#), even 42 percent of Democrats support mass deportations of illegal immigrants. It’s no secret this election will be fought in the swing states and won in the middle, which makes another poll’s finding that [46 percent of independents](#) in support even more concerning for the party’s electoral prospects.

Consider other liberal political positions that have been denounced by the progressive left: Criminal offenders — even those not named Donald Trump — should go to prison and a well-trained and respected police force provides community safety.

Then look at where voters stand on these issues. According to [a recent Pew poll](#), “a majority of voters (61 percent) say the criminal justice system is generally ‘not tough

enough on criminals’ and “overwhelming majorities of Biden and Trump supporters say it is extremely or very important for police and law enforcement to keep communities safe.”

This also holds true for certain culture-war issues. Contrary to progressive diktat, “a growing share of voters (65 percent) say that whether a person is a man or woman” is determined by sex.

Yet shunning anyone on the left who insists otherwise has become a progressive strategy. What better way to dismiss or delegitimize the heretics than to smear them as covert members of the opposition?

And labeling people makes it easier to avoid hearing their critiques or dealing with the actual issues in question.

Those on the left who’ve been dumbstruck as Donald Trump has intimidated his most vociferous Republican critics (see: Chris Sununu, Nikki Haley) into falling in line might exert a little more self-awareness of similar moves by the left.

The goal of progressives may be solidarity, but their means of achieving it are by shutting alternative ideas down rather than modeling tolerance. Leah Hunt-Hendrix, a co-author of a recent book called “Solidarity,” said those [liberals who critique illiberalism](#) on the left are “falling into the right’s divide-and-conquer strategy.”

But liberal people can disagree without being called traitors. Liberals can even agree with conservatives on certain issues because those positions aren’t inherently conservative. Shouldn’t the goal be to decrease polarization rather than egg it on? Shouldn’t Democrats aim for a big tent, especially at a time when registered party members are declining and the number of independents is on the rise?

Those on the Democratic side of the spectrum have traditionally been far better at nuance, complexity and compromise than Republicans. It would be to our detriment if policies on which a broad swath of Americans agree are deliberately tanked by a left wing that has moved as far to the left as Republicans have moved to the right. Those who denounce militant fealty within the Republican Party shouldn’t enforce similar purity tests in their own ranks.

Pamela Paul is an Opinion columnist at The Times, writing about culture, politics, ideas and the way we live now.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/27/opinion/liberals-conservatives-progressives.html>