

Selling Change to People Who Hate Change

November 21, 2021 By [Chris Ladd](#)

People don't like change. They love change as a slogan, a goal, an airy sentiment evoking a better tomorrow, but here's the thing about tomorrow – it's never today. When change intrudes into today, people panic. The more someone perceives they have, the more they panic when change looms.

Since whites began fleeing the party over Civil Rights, Democrats have been scratching their heads, wondering why these simple-minded folk are "voting against their interests." Whenever people seem to be voting against their interests, chances are you've failed to understand their interests. As the GOP careens off down a Fascist rabbit hole Democrats are left to solve a deadly puzzle. How do you build an appeal that can unite Americans across our racial chasm without abandoning a post-racial future?

[One necessary element is a mythology](#), a narrative defining an "us" around which a sense of patriotism and shared sacrifice can coalesce. But there's another piece of this puzzle that's leaving Democrats short of the support they expect to earn. Their policies are individually popular, at least in the abstract, but each time they attempt to enact some element of their agenda they face a puzzling backlash.

Apart from the complex politics of white racism, there's a base psychology of risk aversion Democrats ignore when they try to offer change. It is possible to use the democratic process to enact sweeping changes, but it can rarely be accomplished outside an emergency setting, and it can never be achieved without respecting the fundamental psychology of risk.

People in general, regardless of race or background, [are wired to be risk averse](#). Humans will prefer to keep a dollar rather than engage in a risk likely to yield five more. People will prefer to hold what they already have rather than engage in a low-risk bet for significant gain. This is reflected in the old Marxist slogan, "you have nothing to lose but your chains." Turns out, that's a bet few people wanted to take. People will tend to prefer their chains over an uncertain chance at chainlessness under most circumstances. That's why North Korea survives. That's why it's so difficult to convince workers to form a union. That's why Americans still don't have the basic civilizational infrastructure people elsewhere take for granted.

That tendency toward risk-aversion [changes when people face a certain loss](#). People will take sometimes desperate chances to preserve as much of their position as possible when a loss looms.

There's one more wrinkle. Much of the human aversion to loss dissipates [when the potential loss is in the future](#). This helps explain why people do such a poor job of saving for retirement, even when they have adequate resources. Or why people are so ready to engage in wildly speculative risks in asset markets. In the present tense, if my investment in some schlocky bitcoin scam appears to be creating impressive returns, I'm likely to stick with until it's too late. We don't feel future pain.

In politics, this means that major changes are almost always blocked by risk aversion. The exceptions:

- People will tolerate significant changes to their lives when the change is framed to avoid costing them anything (e.g., funded by higher taxes on a distant, unseen "rich"). In other words, people will tolerate changes that feel "free."
- Change is possible when people are desperate or very afraid.

- Policies that deliver the candy today in exchange for potential risk in the future can often succeed, especially if there's a lot of candy upfront.
- All of these conditions are mitigated to an extent under the presence of a unifying narrative, creating a shared sense of risk and reward.

People love change when it's an abstract possibility. They hate change when it requires them to give up something they have, even if that something is lousy insurance from a company they hate that constantly bilks them. People want the bridge fixed, but they don't want their commute disrupted by construction. Overcoming this deeply-seated resistance requires creative policy-making, something Republicans have been good at and Democrats seem not to have learned.

Republicans like to pitch policies that have dramatic, even disastrous outcomes but deliver plainly understandable benefits in the present tense. Slashing taxes for the children of billionaires in ways that cripple our capacity to deliver basic services pleases voters because all it asks from them right now is that they accept a small check. Easy. As a voter, I get a check. Something catastrophic happens somewhere in the distance that I can't see, but I get a check. Whatever this may be on a moral plane it is winning electoral politics. It will win every time.

Mask mandates and other pandemic mitigation measures turned out to be difficult policy, especially among white voters, because it asks them to do something right now in exchange for a better in some distant future. That's a difficult political ask, especially in the absence of a unifying mythology. Among white voters most attached to the special status of whiteness, being asked to make a sacrifice for the collective is tantamount to tyranny. The risk of dying from Covid sounds like a powerful motive for action, but no current voters are ever dead. People whose Covid denial has been proven definitively wrong aren't around to vote.

All of these rules are generalizations. Don't read one and then tell me about your aunt who isn't like that. On the aggregate they are rock solid. However, there are few additional rules that are specific to the US. All of these rules are stronger in places that failed to outlaw slavery before Lincoln's election. That includes places like Arizona, West Virginia and Utah, not just Mississippi. These rules are weaker the closer you are to the old Puritan heartland of the Northeast.

- No policy can be adopted, no matter how broadly beneficial in reality, which is perceived to disproportionately benefit non-whites. You can offer my racist uncle \$100 safely enough, but if he hears that same plan gives one black man in particular \$110, he'll start loading his shotgun. American voters will (just barely) allow minorities to benefit from policy innovation as long as that policy is universal. If there is any hint of additional benefit to non-whites they will destroy it. Black farmers have been waiting decades for damages awarded to them in [the Pigford settlement](#). Every attempt to address those already established claims [has been thwarted](#). It's fine to try to address racial disparities, but make an effort to conceal those efforts within broadly beneficial, universal policies.
- Programs designed to help "the poor" do not appeal to white people, even to poor white people. To paraphrase Steinbeck, in America, white people are never poor, they're just wealthy folk facing temporary setbacks. Why are whites never poor? Because poverty threatens the definition of whiteness. If you tell white people you're offering them aid designed to assist the poor, you're telling them they're not white. You have no excuse to be surprised when they hate you for it.
- Americans are an untrusting and untrustworthy people. Our central ethos is narcissism. There are reasons. It's fine to complain about it and work to change it, but no political appeal will succeed without taking

American narcissism into account.

- If you build a pitch designed to benefit “the middle class,” you better be targeting people earning between about \$100,000 – \$150,000. Don’t waste time nattering on about how much money families in the statistical middle earn. It doesn’t matter. \$100K+ is “the middle” because 1) it’s floor of where the culture expects families to land if they go to college, stay out of trouble and do everything right, and 2) it’s actually well below the middle income for white families with at least one college graduate. Nevermind that many white voters will never reach this mark, it’s the standard of “middle class” lodged almost all Americans’ heads. If they aren’t there yet, they think they either will be or ought to be. What this means is that if you’re promising to shift a future burden onto “the rich,” but it lands on people earning less than about \$200K, you missed and you’ll pay for it politically.
- Americans will embrace a lousy, stupid choice over a beautiful mandate. Always create an illusion of choice.
- Stop talking about the poor. Americans don’t care, not even the poor ones. That doesn’t mean abandoning the poor. It means stop talking about them. The only measures that might succeed in improving the lives of the poor in the US are those that also impact everyone.

What do these rules mean?

Every proposed change [goes down better with a unifying vision](#). Build a powerful, emotionally resonant mythology and everything else becomes easier. In the meantime:

Half measures leave people feeling betrayed. There are no prizes for jumping halfway across a canyon. No airline survives by getting people halfway through a flight. Compromise measures can sometimes make matters worse. We would all be better off today if Democrats had insisted on a public option

in the ACA in 2009 and lost.

Build an appeal bold enough to make measurable improvements, noticeable on Day 1 in the lives of white families earning around \$120,000 a year. If you don't, your program will fail. For example, set up a Medicare expansion that would allow everyone to choose to buy into the program tomorrow for a modest fee, with minimal income indexing, without raising their taxes. Once it's become normal and they trust it to work, they'll pay to save it, but on Day 1, they won't pay to create it. Promise to pay for it with undetermined taxes on the rich and ride that plan to power.

This is the formula of every winning policy in our era. It can't be aimed at the poor. Almost no one has to give up anything to get it. It's just an "option," a choice, made universally available. And don't fall into the trap of arguing the details of how you'll pay for it. Choice plus universal reach with nothing required up front and no clear discussion of costs. That's the formula Republicans use to get their policy wins and the one Democrats refuse to leverage.

Failing to embrace this formula comes with a terrifying risk. Our next Fascist leader won't be as incompetent as Trump. Republicans understand this formula. Chances are, their next President will use it, and his target will be the quagmire of our healthcare system. Our next Republican President can target that "middle class" sweet-spot with a program of tax deductions rendering health insurance virtually free for Americans earning about \$100K and above, while passing a few populist measures managing drug costs. Meanwhile Republicans can gut Medicaid and child health insurance programs for the poor with virtual impunity. If Republicans get another chance they can buy all the political support they'll need from Americans who consider themselves middle class and Democrats will be finished.

So far, Democrats are too skittish to offer Americans solutions to problems like health coverage without hedges and half-measures, or without making demands that Americans won't accept. Even Bernie Sanders refused to offer the simple, winning formula of letting people buy into Medicare, instead promising to force them to abandon the illusory, but precious "choice" to keep their private insurance. It failed because people wouldn't surrender their choice. It will keep failing until Democrats drop that demand.

Republicans haven't seized this opportunity because almost all of them are unimaginative hacks in service of wealthy donors. Those donors have absolutely no interest in the public good and no patience for political innovation. Someone will break through this barrier and when they do their popular support will be unstoppable. Keep an eye on Josh Hawley and other national socialists in his mold.

Obviously, we'd all live in a safer place if Democrats could build a unifying mythology strong enough to replace white supremacy, but that's likely to take time. That mission could get a significant boost by securing some transactional wins based on simple bribery. You can't bribe people if you don't understand the landscape of their wants and fears. Offer people what they want and enough of them will split from the Fascists to form a powerful coalition. Sleep on this opportunity much longer and Republicans will seize it first, building a regime that will make Pinochet look cuddly.