

Democratic troubles revive debate over left-wing buzzwords

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From “intersectionality” to “equity,” many say jargon is alienating key voters. But progressives say inclusive language is vital.

May 27, 2025 By [Naftali Bendavid](#)

Maybe it’s using the word “oligarchs” instead of rich people. Or referring to “people experiencing food insecurity” rather than Americans going hungry. Or “equity” in place of “equality,” or “justice-involved populations” instead of prisoners.

As Democrats wrestle with who to be in the era of President Donald Trump, a growing group of party members — especially centrists — is reviving the argument that Democrats need to rethink the words they use to talk with the voters whose trust they need to regain.

They contend that liberal candidates too often use language from elite, highly educated circles that suggests the speakers consider themselves smart and virtuous, while casting implied judgment on those who speak more plainly — hardly a formula for winning people over, they say.

The latest debate is, in part, also a proxy for the bigger battle over what the Democrats’ identity should be in the aftermath of November’s devastating losses — especially as the party searches for ways to reverse its overwhelming rejection by rural and White working-class voters.

“Some words are just too Ivy League-tested terms,” said [Sen. Ruben Gallego \(D-Arizona\)](#). “I’m going to piss some people off by saying this, but ‘social equity’ — why do we say that? Why don’t we say, ‘We want you to have an even chance’?”

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear — who like Gallego is considered a potential 2028 Democratic presidential hopeful — made a similar point.

“I believe that over time, and probably for well-meaning reasons, Democrats have begun to speak like professors and started using advocacy-speak that was meant to reduce stigma, but also removed the meaning and emotion behind words,” Beshear said, citing such examples as using “substance abuse disorder” to refer to addiction.

“It makes Democrats or candidates using this speech sounding like they’re not normal,” Beshear said. “It sounds simple, but what the Democratic Party needs to do is be normal and sound normal.”

Other Democrats and progressives strongly disagree, saying the party’s problems can hardly be traced to a few terms that, they say, are used by activists far more than by actual Democratic politicians. There are good reasons for using nonprejudiced language and seeking new ways to be sensitive to those who have suffered discrimination, they say — and only bad reasons for jettisoning them in the face of Republican attacks.

“We are simply asking people to consider the language they are using as we move toward shared goals,” said Daria Hall, executive vice president of Fenton Communications, a progressive communications firm. “It is important to acknowledge the human element within populations and to recognize how they identify themselves. Language evolves; it always has.”

The divides are not clear-cut. But some Democrats are emphasizing a need to embrace centrist, common-sense ideas in a plainspoken way, while others say the key is to trumpet progressive, inclusive policies that fit the angry populist mood.

Recent years have seen a pattern of progressives embracing new terms that conservatives turn against them. From “woke” to “critical race theory” to “gender-fluid,” Republicans have long excelled at using such “politically correct” terms to depict Democrats as out of touch.

“Honestly, Democrats trip over themselves in an attempt to say exactly the right thing,” said Allison Prash, who teaches rhetoric, politics and culture at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

“Republicans maybe aren’t so concerned about saying exactly the right thing, so it may appear more authentic to some voters.”

She added, “Republicans have a willingness to paint with very broad brushstrokes, where Democrats are more concerned with articulating multiple perspectives. And because of that, they can be hampered by the words and phrases they utilize.”

Against that backdrop, a crop of youthful, up-and-coming Democrats is arguing that liberals need to abandon what they portray as a series of constantly evolving linguistic purity tests.

Gallego derided the term “Latinx” — which avoids the gender binary suggested by “Latinos” and “Latinas” — as “stupid,” saying few Hispanics use the term. He also recalled once being told not to describe his own background as “poor,” but rather as “economically disadvantaged.”

“Not every person we meet is going to have the latest update on what the proper terms are,” Gallego said. “It doesn’t make them sexist or homophobic or racist. Maybe they are a little outdated, but they have a good heart.”

Beshear said liberals, in genuine efforts to be more sensitive, have drained the power from many words. Saying someone has defeated “substance abuse disorder,” he said, minimizes the sheer human triumph of beating addiction; decrying “food insecurity” fails to convey the tragedy of hungry children.

Some Democrats contend that their use of elite-sounding terms is highly exaggerated. Actual party leaders rarely use words like woke or gender-fluid, they say, contending they are mostly used by left-leaning activists or academics — or by Republicans trying to create an issue.

Sen. Elissa Slotkin (D-Michigan) is another rising swing-state Democrat who contends that her party needs to use language that comes, as she puts it, from the factory line and not the faculty lounge.

She said the scope of her party’s challenge hit home when a voter wearing a “Make America Great Again” cap asked her, “What’s your hat?” He was hoping for a Democratic message that could fit onto a cap, she said, and she realized there was no obvious answer.

She recalled speaking to a roomful of skeptical Teamsters before the November election. “I just said, ‘Hey, you motherf---ers, I don’t want to hear another godd--n word about all Donald Trump has done for you,’” she said, adding, “They love it. ... To me that is a different way to enter the room.”

The Democrats’ renewed linguistic debate broke into the open in April, when Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont), a progressive firebrand, was headlining a “Fighting Oligarchy” tour to rally opposition to Trump’s alliance with ultra-wealthy figures.

“We have a nation which is now run by a handful of greedy billionaires,” Sanders [told an enthused crowd](#) in Nampa, Idaho, on April 14. “I used to talk about oligarchy and people say, ‘What is he talking about?’ Everybody knows what I’m talking about tonight.”

In a subsequent [interview with Politico](#), Slotkin mentioned her view that the term “oligarchy” does not mean much to most people, and that Democrats would be better off declaring, say, that Americans do not have kings. Sanders [retorted on NBC’s “Meet the Press”](#) that “I think the American people are not quite as dumb as Ms. Slotkin thinks they are.”

Slotkin downplays the dispute, although she stands by her contention that “oligarchy” is not a user-friendly word. More important, she said, is the Democrats’ need to confront Trump with “alpha energy,” which she described as a sort of plainspoken toughness leavened with compassion.

Since taking office, Trump has continued his all-out war on words that he deems liberal or woke, ordering them excised from government websites and [targeting programs](#) that have such terms in their names as “diversity, equity and inclusion,” or DEI.

Trump says he is rescuing free speech from progressives’ cultural tyranny. Liberals say Trump is doing the opposite — silencing language he opposes.

Sen. Elissa Slotkin (D-Michigan) during a Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs hearing on April 3. (Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post)

The battle unfolded on a particularly emotional front in the 2024 election, when GOP leaders seized on the view of Democratic nominee Kamala Harris and other Democrats that people have a right to choose their own pronouns. Trump [aired ads](#) declaring, “Kamala is for they/them; President Trump is for you,” that were considered highly effective by strategists on both sides.

Hall, who leads her firm’s racial justice and DEI group, said the point of progressive language is not to judge anyone but to respect how people want to be identified in this moment. “We have a lot more work to do, but we have to give ourselves some grace, because we are all learning as language continues to shift,” Hall said.

The true irritant for some critics is not the words, she added, but the underlying social shifts. “American demographics are changing, and some people have an issue with that,” Hall said. “Diversity, equity and inclusion are not bad words unless people make them so. These words are an effort to be more inclusive, not less.”

Many Democrats privately admire Trump’s ability to talk in a way that connects with voters on a visceral level. He is unusually skilled, they concede, at finding words and phrases that stir powerful emotions, from promising to “make America great again” to decrying an “invasion” of “illegal” immigrants.

Democrats contend that Trump’s slogans are empty at best and dishonest at worst. But they have struggled to find equally powerful language to convey Democratic values and ideas.

“What the Trump team has completely failed at is having anything behind their slogans,” Slotkin said. “They figured out the slogans, but they have no plans.” Democrats need to have effective policies, she said — but at the same time, “you need the tagline.”

The notion that Democrats must communicate better in the 2026 and 2028 campaigns is increasingly accepted within the party, and potential candidates including Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker and former transportation secretary Pete Buttigieg have been road-testing their tone and style.

“It’s so important for Democrats to have a vocabulary that can reach everybody,” Buttigieg told reporters [after a recent town hall in Iowa](#). “You can’t fashion that vocabulary online, or only talking to people who already agree with you or are already kind of in your political style.”