



By: Teresa Ghilarducci - Rick McGahey

# A coherent economic story is the Democrats' best path to victory in the midterms



While no one should count their votes before they are cast, the Democrats appear well-positioned to gain control of the House of Representatives, and possibly even the Senate, in November's midterm elections.

A recent [New York Times/Siena poll](#) found Democrats leading the generic congressional ballot by 50% to 39%, and [Silver Bulletin](#) had Democrats up seven points at the start of this month—the best Democratic position of the cycle.

But rising voter support for the Democrats amounts less to an endorsement of the party than to a rebuke of President Donald Trump's administration.

This might be enough to carry the Democrats to victory in November, but turning protest into power will require more: a compelling economic vision.

Trump has always understood the power of a story. With four simple words—Make America Great Again—he leverages nostalgia to attract frustrated voters fearing the steady erosion of their social power and economic well-being by politicians who do not care about them.

He is both narrator and protagonist: only he decides what is true, and only he can make the MAGA dream a reality.

Trump's story also has its villains—Chinese manufacturing, immigrants, and the tax-hungry “left”—and a [clear plan](#) for vanquishing them.

He never explains exactly how high import tariffs, mass deportations, tax cuts for the wealthy, and aggressive deregulation are supposed to revive US industry, create good jobs, and bring prosperity to ordinary Americans.

But the promise is so compelling that his supporters assume there must be an underlying plan—and often fill in the blanks themselves.

## Long lists of policies

Ask a Trump voter how mass deportations help them, and they have an answer ready: it would clear the way for my children to find a job or an affordable apartment.

Ask the same about tariffs, and they will say that raising import prices prevents trading partners from “taking advantage” of the US, and forces companies to reshore production, thereby creating jobs.

Democrats might assume that highlighting the flaws in these explanations will be enough to turn voters against Trump.

### [Kamala Harris' “voluminous list of policies” was never distilled into a coherent economic narrative](#)

But what do they have to turn toward? Democrats offer vague aspirations and long lists of policies, but not the coherent story voters need.

Consider the “Opportunity Economy” that then-Vice President [Kamala Harris](#) put forward during her failed 2024 presidential run.

The goals were predictably lofty: “to make our middle class the engine of America's prosperity, to build a stronger economy where everyone, everywhere, has a chance to pursue their dreams and aspirations, and to ensure that the United States of America continues to out-innovate and out-compete the world.”

But Harris' plan for achieving these goals was vague, at best. The key was “being pragmatic,” “staying focused,” “applying metrics to our analysis,” and “engaging with all stakeholders.”

To be sure, she promoted some good economic policies: expanded childcare, support for small businesses, assistance for first-time homebuyers, and a higher minimum wage.

But [specifics](#) were lacking, and her

“**voluminous list of policies**” was never distilled into a coherent economic narrative.

## Coherent economic story

Democrats continue to make the same mistake. They increasingly wave the banner of “affordability,” but this can apply to everything from housing and health care to gas and food.

Moreover, the only way to lower prices directly is through massive deflation—hardly a program for prosperity, let alone an inspiring vision of the future.

**Many could describe the pillars of a fairer and more productive economy: decent jobs, public goods, and shared power**

In any case, as **Josh Bivens** of the Economic Policy Institute points out, the deeper problems are slow income growth, rising inequality, and extreme wealth concentration, not prices themselves.

Without an overarching and coherent economic story, long lists of policies covering housing, health care, wages, jobs, climate, AI, retirement security, infrastructure, anti-discrimination, equity, trade, tariffs, and taxation merely leave voters confused, bored, and frustrated. That is not how you win elections.

Many economists—including distinguished figures like Daron Acemoglu, Arindrajit Dube, Claudia Goldin, Simon Johnson, Mariana Mazzucato, Dani Rodrik, Emmanuel Saez, and Joseph Stiglitz, as well as younger scholars like Princeton’s Ellora Derenoncourt and Berkeley’s Danny Yagan—have offered useful proposals for crafting a Democratic narrative.

And workers, unions, and advocacy groups know what they need and want. Many could describe the pillars of a fairer and more productive economy: decent jobs, public goods, and shared power.

## Wage-led growth

But in our view, the glue that holds these ideas together—the story that makes them legible, legitimate, and politically durable—must be **wage-led growth**.

Many economists argue that sustained growth occurs best when ordinary workers’ wages rise along with productivity.

Since workers spend most of their income, higher wages translate into greater demand for goods and services, leading to increased investment, while rising productivity helps control inflation.

Instead of regarding wages mainly as a business cost or assuming that increasing them would be inflationary, the wage-led growth story treats higher wages as a powerful engine of economic expansion, productivity growth, and shared prosperity.



*Every successful political movement provides a clear answer to a simple question: how can government help solve your most pressing problems?*

It recognizes that prosperity does not trickle down from the ultra-wealthy; it rises and spreads when the vast majority of Americans earn enough to save, spend, and invest more.

Democrats must articulate this story, both its promise and its plot: the policies required to achieve it, including those that dismantle the economic, institutional, and political barriers to success.

Economists can help by clarifying the

mechanism by which higher wages would boost investment, productivity, demand, and better jobs.

But it will take skilled communicators and political leaders to craft a narrative that resonates with voters.

Every successful political movement provides a clear answer to a simple question: how can government help solve your most pressing problems?

Credible or not (and we definitely think not), MAGA did this.

But so did President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which, unlike MAGA, delivered on its promise of shared prosperity by expanding public capacity.

To regain the political power they need to implement their agenda, Democrats need to tell a similar—and convincing—story.

Teresa Ghilarducci is Professor of Economics at The New School and Visiting Scholar at Arizona State University.

Rick McGahey is a former staff director for the Joint Economic Committee of the US Congress and a visiting scholar at Arizona State University's Center for Work and Democracy.