

A New Cause for Democrats: Restoring the Opportunity to Earn in the Digital Age



Third Way

In 2007, American bookstores made \$17 billion in sales. It was \$11 billion by 2017—not because people were reading less, but because they were reading differently. Sure enough, over that decade, 250,000 jobs vanished in bookstores and print shops. Yes, 300,000 Americans are now working for Amazon alone, but those jobs require different skills, offer different opportunities, and are located in different places.¹

This disruption is happening everywhere. A potent mix of technology, globalization, and hyper-capitalism has left people angry, anxious, and adrift. Enough voters thought Donald Trump and the GOP offered answers for these times. Too many thought Democrats did not.

We have seen this kind of epochal transition before. When people left the farms for factories, Industrial Age capitalism ran amok with child labor, exploitative employers, powerful trusts, and other market abuses that required government reforms. Progressive and New Deal policies helped workers adjust to the Industrial Age and gave birth to the middle class. In turn, that became the basis for a powerful and long-term political coalition.

Democrats must now help workers adjust to the Digital Age and, through this, form a modern coalition that can beat back Trumpism. Trump's disastrous presidency may mean opposition to him is enough, politically, in 2018. But to win in 2020 and beyond as well as secure a mandate for change, **Democrats must offer a social contract for the Digital Age that addresses voters' deepest worry: Will they and their kids be able to earn a good life?**

The problems of this era are different from those created by the industrial economy, but the scale of Digital Age disruption is the same. Our labor market—a key barometer of opportunity—is broken and outdated. We're creating *jobs*, but they are neither good enough nor spread widely enough. It's far too difficult to get the *skills* needed to succeed in a rapidly shifting economy. And the *benefits of work* have so eroded that too few jobs provide a good life.

For Democrats, a modern economic vision focused on restoring the *opportunity to earn a good life* will enable them to win and govern successfully because:

1. **This cause reflects voters' lived experience in the Digital Age.** For most Americans, the biggest economic problem they face on a day-to-day basis or worry about for their children in the future is the scarcity of opportunities to earn a good life. Income inequality is pernicious and immoral, but it does not describe voters' primary daily concerns, experience, or needs. To win and get a mandate, Democrats must make America's cause their own.
2. **This cause aligns with timeless American values.** *Opportunity* is what people need and crave, and *earn* taps into a bedrock American value that transcends race, education, income, and geography: the pride and purpose that comes from equitable access to make your own way and provide for your family. Fairly or not, voters often think Democrats care more about giving away free things than they do about celebrating and fighting for work; that must change.

3. **This cause syncs with the realities of the new economy.** Job *disruption* is not the same as job *destruction*. There are 37 million more jobs in the United States than when the tech boom began in the 1990s.² But work has radically changed, along with the opportunity and security it provides. Artificial intelligence, self-driving cars, advanced robotics, 3D printing—all of these advances have massive benefits for consumers yet pose massive challenges for workers. Democrats must confront the reality of these seismic shifts, not evade them.

To advance an agenda that can save the middle class—and to beat a dangerous right-wing populism that falsely promises to restore an America of the 1950s—Democrats cannot offer nostalgia. Resurrecting 1990s Democratic centrism or Nordic-style socialism won't cut it.

In the 1990s, Democrats got half the equation right—focusing on macro policies that boosted economic growth here and for billions around the world. But they badly underestimated how much technology and globalization would shred much of our Industrial-Era economic bargain, one in which Americans could feel confident that their hard work would pay off. It's clear now that while the private sector remains the only way to generate national prosperity, the market on its own will not deliver economic opportunity to nearly enough Americans. **The way to remedy that is the design and championing of a Digital-Age social contract.**

“A hopeful, modern social contract would offer a bold redefinition of government's role in expanding the opportunity to earn for every American.”

What would a hopeful, modern social contract look like? It would offer a bold redefinition of government's role in expanding the opportunity to earn for every American. **It would require Democrats to embrace ambitious, new ideas fit for the Digital Era.** It would **reimagine** investment in good-paying jobs, **reinvent** postsecondary education and skills, and **redesign** the pay and benefits of work.

If Democrats embrace the *opportunity to earn* as their organizing cause, they will sharply improve their chances of dispatching Trumpism, exciting their base of young people and people of color and expanding their coalition by winning over more swing voters. Most importantly, this is what the country needs. It's a calling as historic as the one 20th-century progressives undertook to tame Industrial-Age capitalism and build a social safety net. This is the calling of *our* time.

Why should Democrats embrace a modern economic vision focused on restoring the opportunity to earn a good life? Below, we describe three reasons.

1. This cause reflects voters' lived experience in the Digital Age.

Democrats must have an economic cause that is in sync with people's actual, daily lives. Their cause must be at the intersection of the hopes and anxieties of working- and middle-class families. And for those Americans, the opportunity to earn a good life is what they want for themselves and their kids and fear they won't get in this modern, changing economy.

Pew's 5,000-person 2016 poll found that most people believe "job conditions have become more challenging than a generation ago and that more stressful change is coming."³ Fifty-one percent expect less job security in the future, while **only 14% predict more job security.** An April 2017 Kaiser/Washington Post poll found that 54% of Americans held a negative view of job opportunities in their community.⁴ Majorities of African-American (65%), Latino (63%), and working-class white people (58%) feel that "hard work and determination are no guarantee of success for most people."⁵

True, there are parts of America where opportunity seems plentiful. In these places, technology and globalization are a gentle breeze from behind, not a gale-force wind in the face. Ironically, they are in places where Democrats have dominated the political landscape—along the Northeast Corridor, Pacific Coast, and a handful of hot regions in between. But the rest of the country, including many communities within fast-growing

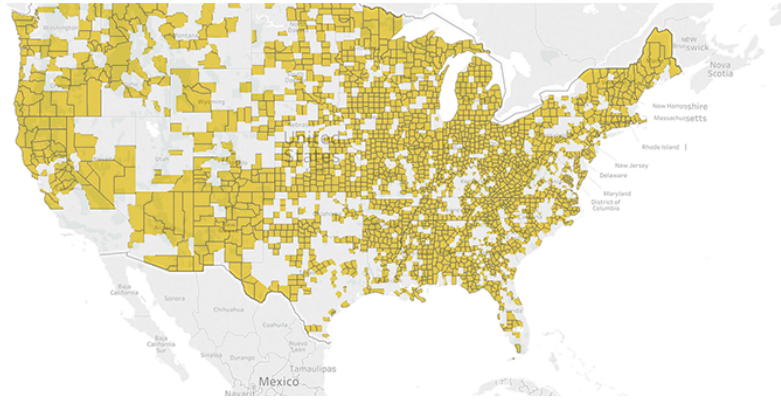
regions, is dominated by opportunity deserts with stagnating wages, diminishing job opportunities, and declining businesses. Congressman Jim Himes, Chairman of the New Democrat Coalition, recently remarked, “Across this country there are cities, towns and rural communities that are not feeling [economic] growth. They’re doing everything they can just to tread water, while the benefits of economic growth go to a small slice of Americans.”⁶

“Opportunity deserts are ubiquitous—in big cities like Detroit, small cities like Scranton and Green Bay, and rural places like Mercer, Wisconsin.”

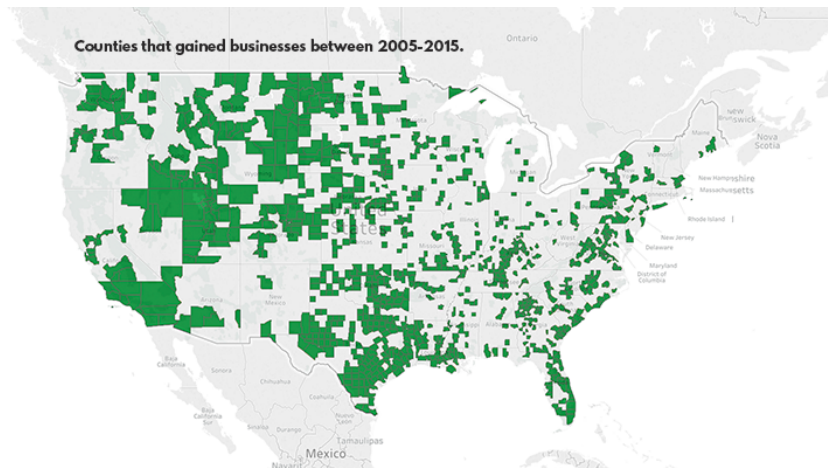
Senator Mark Warner and the Aspen Institute point out that seismic economic shifts are “undermining the social contract between workers and business, leaving workers with less pay, greater economic insecurity, and fewer opportunities for skills training.”⁷ These opportunity deserts are ubiquitous—in big cities like Detroit, small cities like Scranton and Green Bay, and rural places like Mercer, Wisconsin. In these areas, there is:

- **Less opportunity to work.** From 2005 to 2015, America added 160,000 net new businesses. But in 2,100 of 3,100 counties, the number of businesses in operation actually fell by 200,000.⁸ That means for people in two-thirds of the country, there are fewer places to even look for a job than there were a decade ago.

Seventy-six of 83 Michigan counties lost businesses, 58 of 72 Wisconsin counties lost businesses, and 42 of 67 Pennsylvania counties lost businesses. Together, these three “blue wall” states had 28,500 fewer businesses operating and providing jobs in 2015 than in 2005. For those who think this is just a rural, white problem, 10,000 of those net business closures came in just five counties where collectively the African-American population share is twice as high as the national average.⁹



Source: Census Bureau, "County Business Patterns."



- **Less opportunity to start a business.** Over the last four decades, the rate of startups has been cut by nearly half—one of the reasons that 25 states have fewer businesses in operation than ten years ago.¹⁰ Bank lending to small businesses is still 11% below its pre-recession peak.¹¹ Rural lending to businesses is *below 1996 levels* when adjusted for inflation.¹² Three out of four venture capital dollars are invested in California, New York, and Massachusetts, which means that if you have a great startup idea nearly anywhere else in America, your best choice is to move. Venture capital funding to women and people of color is an afterthought even in high-flying areas.¹³

The startup machine that has always spread opportunity across the country is busted. "In essentially every measurable respect, the storied dynamism of the US economy is fading," writes the Economic Innovation Group.¹⁴ Would-be entrepreneurs in much of America see opportunity going to someone else, someplace else.

- **Less opportunity to earn a decent wage.** If your highest degree is a high school diploma, your wages have sagged like a slow-leaking balloon, with 36 million working adults losing 2.2% in buying power since 2005.¹⁵ The pay gap stubbornly persists between people of color and white people (72 cents on the dollar) and between women and men (80 cents).¹⁶

Even in cities where the topline economic numbers are better — San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Austin, New York, and Los Angeles—fewer than half the jobs pay a wage sufficient for a middle-class standard of living. In places where the economy is stalled or slipping backwards, it's worse. Less than one-third of the jobs in Harlingen, TX, Utica, NY, and Hattiesburg, MS pay a wage sufficient for a middle-class life.¹⁷

- **Less opportunity to learn your way up the ladder.** For the 1.8 million freshmen who enroll at a four-year college, two in five will not earn a degree in six years.¹⁸ The old path from mailroom to management is gone, because there is no mailroom and because businesses don't invest in entry-level workers like they used to. Employer-provided training fell from three in ten workers to two in ten between 1996 and 2008.¹⁹

The use of contractors and contingent labor is accelerating, as Senator Warner and the Aspen Institute point out.²⁰ The beleaguered working class is on its own in terms of gaining the skills necessary to earn a good life.

Meanwhile, as the digital economy has concentrated opportunity in America, the prevailing Democratic focus has been on the concentration of wealth. To be sure, income inequality is pernicious. Fighting to prevent it is noble and just. But outside of a handful of mostly cosmopolitan places, people don't experience it in their daily lives. For example, there are more ultra-wealthy people living in New York City's 305 square miles than ultra-wealthy people living in a combined 27 states totaling 2.2 million square miles.²¹

Democrats need an economic cause that's closer to people's homes. If you live in any of the 2,100 counties bleeding businesses, if you are among the two-thirds of working adults

without a college degree, if you are a person of color or a woman and must endure a chronic wage gap, if you live in a Latino or African-American community routinely ignored by the growing parts of the economy—opportunity feels like a diminishing resource. Take broadband: high-speed internet access is key to commerce, health care, entertainment, and family communication. But 39% of Americans living in rural areas lack access to high-speed broadband while only 4% of those in urban areas do. ²²

In November 2012, just days after President Obama was comfortably reelected, we asked 800 Obama voters if the government should focus more on economic opportunity or economic security. By a 66 to 29% margin, Obama voters chose opportunity. ²³ Opportunity was +50 among non-whites, +36 among women, and +28 among millennial Obama voters. Opportunity is what people want and are worried about.

In our April 2016 online focus groups in ten swing states, voters wanted government to provide “more opportunity for success” and overwhelmingly volunteered that they and their community were “ill-equipped,” “aren’t equipped,” “are not equipped,” and “definitely not well equipped” to react to globalization and technology. ²⁴

And in our June 2016 poll of the middle class, by a 54 to 39% margin, voters chose a candidate who said, “Our economy has changed and we need to focus on equipping Americans to succeed with more skills, more jobs, and more savings,” over one who said, “The economic deck is stacked against everyday Americans and we need to break up the Wall Street banks and make the rich pay their fair share.” ²⁵

A growing scarcity of opportunity is Americans’ lived experience, and expanding opportunity is what they want their elected leaders to fight for.

2. This cause aligns with timeless American values.

If opportunity is what people want, *earn* is what they value. They value the dignity and self-respect that comes from contributing to the well-being of their family, community, and country.

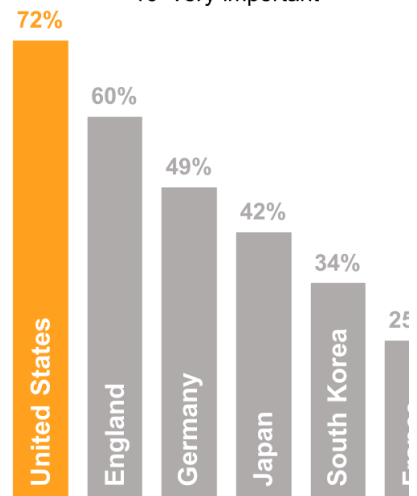
Democrats should not retreat from fighting for a robust safety net for the vulnerable. But the party of the safety net has to lean into work and the American civic tradition of earning your way through life.

Democratic office-seekers tout this when they speak of themselves. Candidates regale us with stories of the first job they had as a kid and the sacrifices their parents made as a mill worker, single parent, milkman, maid, exterminator, or bartender. Democrats point to the sacrifices that immigrants made coming to this country, often with little or no wealth to their name, and toiling hard to build a better life for future generations. When Democrats tell those stories about once-upon-a-time generations, those people are rightfully heroes.

As a cause, the opportunity to *earn* a good life comports with America’s ethos and civil mythology. There is a reason that a term known around the world is “the American work ethic.” Dating back to Social Psychologist Max Weber’s 1905 work, America has been associated with “egalitarian principles, a disdain of leisure activities, and the belief in the importance of hard work.”²⁶ A century later, the value of hard work is as strong as ever. Today, 73% of Americans see hard work as very important to getting ahead in life.²⁷ That is the highest among advanced economies with England second at 60% and Germany (49%), Japan (42%), South Korea (34%), and France (25%) far behind.

How Important is working hard to getting ahead in life?

Share of respondents saying “10–very important”



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project.

Many Americans worry, however, that the country is retreating from this bedrock value: the importance of work and a job. A 2017 Pew Research Center survey found that 50% of Americans said “not enough importance” is put on working and having a job in society. Only 19% said society places “too much importance” on working and having a job.²⁸

“Democrats should own and embrace the cherished values of working and earning.”

Democrats should own and embrace the cherished values of working and earning. As Vice President Joe Biden said, “A job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about your self-respect. It's about your place in your community.”²⁹ Numerous other progressives have said the same:

- Arlie Russell Hochschild in *Strangers in Their Own Land*: “Work is part of a larger moral code.”³⁰
- Author Joan Williams on the working class: “Maintaining two full-time jobs and a settled life is a significant achievement, one that takes unrelenting drive and rigorous self-discipline.”³¹ Williams further notes that working-class Americans of all races admire values of honesty, responsibility, integrity, and hard work.³²
- Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes that economic issues are moral issues and that “neither [political party] has full control of the key moral foundations that underlie economic morality.”³³
- According to a 2017 economic agenda survey commissioned by Demos, a progressive think tank, 79% of voters supported a narrative that said, “America needs to reinvent the economy so that hard work is rewarded and opportunity exists for those willing to work hard.”³⁴

The *opportunity to earn a good life* framework allows Democrats to appeal to the overwhelming majority of Americans of all races and income levels who desperately want equitable access to provide for their family but need a real shot to do so.

It would also allow Democrats to confront a serious perception problem among voters: that the Democratic Party is not the party of jobs. Democrats used to win on the question of which party is better on jobs. But perception shifted in 2010 and, most recently, Republicans won by 16 points on the question asking

which party was “creating more good-paying jobs in the US.”³⁵ Why is that? First, public opinion research on the 2016 election shows Democrats prioritized the interests of the poor and not the interests of the working- and middle-class. Second, Democrats were reflexively anti-business, which voters saw as anti-jobs. And, finally, Democrats’ focus on social issues (which was often supported) superseded attention to jobs.³⁶

A focus on earning would also allow Democrats to push back on the caricature of the Party as one of giving away things for free, which has undoubtedly hurt them with key segments of the voting population. Certainly, a portion of these sentiments results from racism and stereotypes that are simply unacceptable. That’s a fact. But there is a portion of this that does not. Our qualitative research found plenty of resentment in rural communities among whites, for example, regarding whites in their extended families and communities who “are healthier than I am and collect disability.”

Part of the American ethos is lending a helping hand—to your neighbors, your community, and your country. But that belief is paired with a deep commitment to hard work. Democrats should embrace these moral issues by acknowledging that voters value earning a living and helping them do so by knocking down racial and economic barriers to the opportunity to earn. By embracing this, Democrats can strengthen, not diminish, their commitment to them.

3. This cause syncs with the realities of the new economy.

Judging by broad national economic statistics, our economy looks pretty good: 89 consecutive months of job gains, 15 consecutive quarters of economic growth, a 4.1% unemployment rate, the largest number of working Americans in history—and the stock market, as President Trump likes to remind us and in spite of the recent correction, is still booming.

On the other hand, on a daily basis you could read some of the popular economic literature and decide to build a bomb shelter. An oft-cited study from Carl Frey and Michael Osborne of Oxford classifies 47% of US jobs as having a high-risk of automation

within the next decade or two.³⁷ A November *USA Today* headline warned that the United States could lose 73 million jobs to automation by 2030.³⁸ The median income is barely higher than it was at the turn of the century, and the labor force participation rate for men has wallowed near historic lows.³⁹ Sentiments like this have increased the popularity of a universal basic income (UBI) and a mostly redistributive agenda, especially among those on the left who see automation driving the extinction of work.

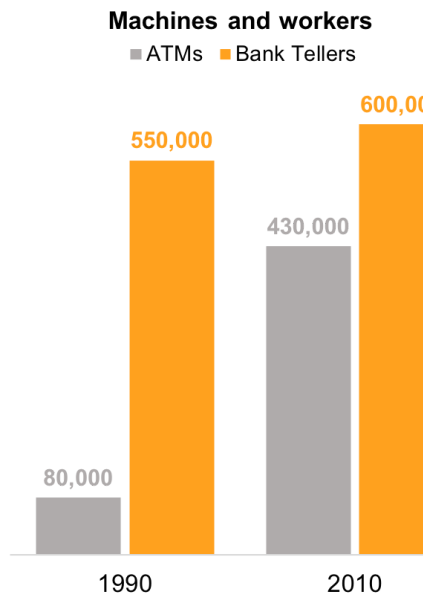
“*Democrats have to be in sync with this economy and realize that job disruption is not the same as job destruction.*”

Both views of the economy are off. We know with certainty that for much of the country this economy is anything but rosy despite very low unemployment and high stock prices. And we know with equal certainty that despite automation, work hasn't vanished. Democrats have to be in sync with *this economy* and realize that **job disruption is not the same as job destruction**.

Since the introduction of Microsoft Windows NT in 1993, the United States has added 37 million jobs. We're averaging 163,000 net new jobs per month since the recession ended.⁴⁰ The same *USA Today* story predicting the loss of 73 million jobs to automation concludes that even more jobs will be created by growth and productivity. Yet, alongside that growth, massive disruption has changed work in profound ways:

- **Work is in different places.** As the Kindle gained in popularity over the last decade and internet ordering exploded, 250,000 jobs vanished in bookstores and print shops.⁴¹ However, 300,000 Americans are now working for Amazon alone, because when one industry dies others often spring up. But those Amazon jobs offer different opportunities and are located in different places than lost bookstore and print shop jobs. Further, many other jobs that could be done in one place can now be done anywhere. This is both liberating and terrifying.

- **Work requires different skills.** When ATMs came online, bank tellers were supposedly doomed. In 1990, we had 80,000 ATMs and 550,000 bank tellers. By 2010, the number of ATMs had skyrocketed to more than 400,000, but the number of bank tellers had increased, too. ⁴² The job of bank teller didn't die—it evolved, requiring new and more complex skills.



Source: James Bessen, "Toil and Technology"

Right now, there are nearly six million job openings, and we estimate more than three million of them are middle-class jobs. ⁴³ But not enough workers have the right mix of skills to fill those jobs and new ones that will be created in the decades ahead.

- **Work offers different security.** The era of one job leading to a gold watch is far behind us. Now, millennials will have four jobs in just their first decade out of school—double that of the generation before them. ⁴⁴ Contingent and contract work now comprises 40% of jobs, by some measures. ⁴⁵ According to a 2016 *Time* magazine survey, 22% of American adults have offered "some kind of good or service" in the gig economy. ⁴⁶ By choice or by circumstance, more people are stringing together jobs to make a living. Benefits are nothing like what they used to be.

Automation is indeed a seismic challenge. Economists Daron Acemoglu and Pascual Restrepo note that "automation changes the nature of existing jobs, and the reallocation of workers from existing jobs and tasks to new ones is a complex and often slow process." ⁴⁷ But this does not mean automation is the end of work. In fact, the authors find that automation creates demand for new, human-performed tasks, which should keep employment and wages rising. But these gains, they say, depend on workers acquiring new skills for new jobs. ⁴⁸

Erik Brynjolfsson, director of MIT's Initiative on the Digital Economy, notes how the country is at a crossroads: "This is a moment of choice and opportunity. It could be the best ten years ahead of us that we've ever had in human history or one of the worst." ⁴⁹ Paid work will continue, but the nature of that work will change. Whether that work provides the opportunity to earn a good life depends on the policy choices we make in the generation ahead.

Conclusion

In five out of the past six election cycles, voters have thrown at least one party out of the White House or one chamber of Congress. Voters are sounding an alarm that they pray Washington hears. The alarm comes from their pervasive anxiety about whether they and their children will have viable paths to earn a good life.

If Democrats want to fundamentally change these voters' lives and regain majorities, **they need a modern economic cause for the Digital Era.** This cause must square with the economic realities of today rather than that of an economy that once was. This cause must reflect the values and lived experience of voters. And above all, it must focus obsessively on one true objective: enabling far more Americans to *earn* a good life throughout the epic changes wrought by technology and globalization.

In a separate document, *A New Generation of Ideas*, we have outlined a series of new proposals that would expand the opportunity to earn a good life for everyone, everywhere. We hope these ambitious ideas can help drive a fresh conversation among Democrats about building a new social contract for the Digital Era. This would not only save the middle class and lift Democratic fortunes—it would ultimately provide a bulwark against the spread of nativist, nationalist, and nostalgic populism that is threatening our values, our Democratic legacy, and our country.

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