



Democrats' Moderate Majority

After the Democrats' 2016 losses, conventional wisdom held that "all the energy is on the left." But after two subsequent election cycles, that thesis has been demolished. In 2018, moderate candidates largely won primaries against the far left and went on to deliver the House majority. In 2020, Democratic primary voters nominated Joe Biden, who then defeated Donald Trump, while down-ballot moderates in swing districts saved the House majority. Meanwhile, the far left failed in both cycles to flip a single seat from red to blue.

It is now clear that if Democrats are to retain or expand the House majority and win back the Senate, they *must* run with mainstream, moderate candidates and ideas central to the Party's position.

A Moderate Dominated the Presidential Race

In the General Election, Biden Won *Because He Was a Moderate*.

- **Biden was Viewed as a Moderate:** As [CNN's Harry Enten has noted](#), "Biden was seen as more moderate than Trump... This stood in contrast to Trump being viewed as more moderate than Clinton in 2016." In Third Way's pre-election survey of battleground suburbs, we asked if voters hoped Biden would pursue an agenda similar to what Sanders ran on in 2020 or a more moderate one. Biden supporters said more moderate by 84–10%.
- **Biden Won Moderate Voters:** According to [exit polls](#), moderates made up the largest portion of voters at 40% (vs. 24% liberal and 37% conservative). Biden won moderates nearly 2-1 (64%-33%). This is 12 points better than Clinton's 2016 performance with this crucial group. Similarly, Independents accounted for 28% of voters, and Biden carried them 54% to 40%, also besting Clinton by 12 points.
- **Biden Outperformed Far-Left Candidates:** In NE-02, Biden won by 7 points while Kara Eastman, running for the second time with the backing of the Justice Democrats, lost by 4 in a swing-district race that saw huge turnout increases. Similarly, Dana Balter, running again as a Sanders-style candidate, also lost in NY-24, a district that Biden will likely win. Even Rep. Ilhan Omar underperformed Biden in her own district (MN-05) by 16 points (73,000 votes).

In the Presidential Primaries, Moderates Won by Every Major Metric.

- **Moderates Beat the Far Left:** Biden and other moderate presidential candidates won 57% of the vote in the primary contests that occurred before he was the presumptive nominee. When all was said and done, Biden won 68% of pledged delegates, compared to Clinton's 54% in 2016.
- **Moderates Boosted Primary Turnout:** Biden drove record turnout in South Carolina. In New Hampshire, [Dave Wasserman found](#) that towns won by moderates Buttigieg and Klobuchar increased turnout by more than 25% over 2016. [Michigan](#), which Biden won by 17 points, saw a "turnout explosion," increasing by 29% over 2016. By contrast, first-time voters were down in the Sanders states of Iowa, New Hampshire, and Nevada.

Moderates Delivered Congressional Majorities

- **Moderates Built and Held the House Majority:** In the 2018 midterms, moderate New Democrats accounted for 33 of the 41 red-to-blue House flips. In 2020, they will be the only ideological caucus to flip seats, with three gains already called. They also won two Dem vs. Dem general elections against left-wing candidates in blue districts (CA-53 and WA-10). They ran excellent, disciplined campaigns, and they won in tough red/purple districts. By contrast, candidates endorsed by Our Revolution and the Justice Democrats delivered zero new majority-making seats in 2018 and again in 2020.
- **Moderates Delivered Two New Senate Seats:** While Democrats have come up short (so far) in creating a Senate majority, moderates in 2020 delivered the only new Senate seats in Arizona and Colorado. No far-left candidates came within shouting distance of a new Senate seat in 2018 or 2020.

Moderate Ideas Won Elections; Far-Left Ideas Did Not

- **Moderates Won the 2020 Ideas Primary:** More than 20 Democratic candidates, who spanned the Party's ideological spectrum, spent almost two years debating their ideas on both substance and politics. In the end, moderates won the ideas primary, with voters picking a nominee who campaigned against and forcefully rejected the far-left's signature policies, including Medicare for All, a universal ban on fracking, abolishing ICE, and defunding the police.
- **House Members in Tough Districts Ran on Moderate Ideas:** 2020 candidates in tough districts ran on things like expanding health care through a public option, fixing our immigration system while maintaining a secure border, and supporting climate action but not the Green New Deal. While some were able to distance themselves from Democratic Socialism, Medicare for All, and the Green New Deal, these issues were too much of an anchor for others. The brand of the Democratic Party in some tough districts was just too blighted by those ideas for candidates to overcome.
- **Far-Left Ideas Lost at the Ballot Box:** In 2018, two candidates (Eastman and Balter) were the only ones running in winnable, red-to-blue races who ran ads on Medicare for All—and both lost. They tried again in 2020 and lost again. The reason is clear: support for Medicare for All crumbles when voters learn what it means. The Kaiser Family Foundation found initial support for the phrase “Medicare for All” at 56%, but when voters were informed of its details, like its elimination of private health insurance, support plummeted to 37%. Only 7 of the 42 members of the DCCC Frontline program supported M4A, and most of those were in districts that both Clinton and Biden won.
- **Socialism Hurt:** As the Washington Post noted, big House losses in **Florida** were due in part to being abandoned by “Cuban Americans, who were fed a steady diet of anti-socialism messages.” And because Democrats' runner-up in the past two presidential cycles was a notorious Democratic Socialist, vulnerable swing-seat moderates were easily and often attacked as socialist sympathizers.

Conclusion

Moderates were hurt by far-left ideas they did not support. The attack ads that Republicans ran in the places Democrats lost were largely focused on far-left principles like socialism, defunding the police, Medicare for All, and banning fracking. Though they opposed these ideas, moderates were unable to escape their impact in many red and purple places.