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Was It Something I Said?



Third Way,

To: All Who Wish to Stop Donald Trump and MAGA

From: Third Way

For a party that spends billions of dollars trying to find the perfect language to connect to voters, Democrats and their allies use an awful lot of words and phrases no ordinary person would ever dream of saying. The intent of this language is to include, broaden, empathize, accept, and embrace. The effect of this language is to sound like the extreme, divisive, elitist, and obfuscatory, enforcers of wokeness. To please the few, we have alienated the many—especially on culture issues, where our language sounds superior, haughty and arrogant.

In reality, most Democrats do not run or govern on wildly out-of-touch social positions. But voters would be excused to believe we do because of the words that come out of our mouths—words which sound like we are hiding behind unfamiliar phrases to mask extreme intent.

Why the tortured language? After all, many Democrats are aware that the words and phrases we use can be profoundly alienating. But they use it because plain, authentic language that voters understand often rebounds badly among many activists and advocacy organizations. These activists and advocates may take on noble causes, but in doing so they often demand compliance with their preferred messages; that is how “birthing person” became a stand-in for mother or mom. And if we don’t think more carefully about our language, many in America will be banking on help from Donald Trump and Republicans, because Democratic levers of power will be few and far between.

In this memo, we are putting a spotlight on the language we use that puts a wall between us and everyday people of all races, religions, and ethnicities. These are words that people simply do not say, yet they hear them from Democrats. Over the years we’ve conducted, read, and analyzed hours upon hours of focus groups, and we’ve yet to hear a voter volunteer any of the phrases below except as a form of derision or parody of Democrats. We’re not talking about techno-speak, like net-zero and climate resiliency. Those words put up their own Ivy League walls between policymakers and voters. Here we are focusing on the eggshell dance of political correctness which leaves the people we aim to reach cold or fearful of admonishment.

Finally, we are not out to police language, ban phrases or create our own form of censorship. Truth be told, we have published papers that have used some of these words as well. But when policymakers are public-facing, the language we use must invite, not repel; start a conversation, not end it; provide clarity, not confusion.

Therapy-Speak

These words say “I’m more empathetic than you, and you are callous to hurting other’s feelings.”

- Privilege
- Violence (as in “environmental violence”)
- Dialoguing
- Othering
- Triggering
- Microaggression/assault/invalidation

- Progressive stack
- Centering
- Safe space
- Holding space
- Body shaming

Be aware of words proliferating in elite circles that have closed off open conversations and have made it uncomfortable for many people to engage in hard topics.

Seminar Room Language

This language says “I’m smarter and more concerned about important issues than you. Your kitchen table concerns are small.”

- Subverting norms
- Systems of oppression
- Critical theory
- Cultural appropriation
- Postmodernism
- Overton Window
- Heuristic
- Existential threat to [climate, the planet, democracy, the economy]

When we use words people don’t understand, studies show that the part of their brain that signals distrust becomes more active, undermining our ability to reach them.

Organizer Jargon

These words say “we are beholden to groups, not individuals. People have no agency.”

- Radical transparency

- Small 'd' democracy
- Barriers to participation
- Stakeholders
- The unhoused
- Food insecurity
- Housing insecurity
- Person who immigrated

Democrats can fight for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, and immigrants more effectively if they speak in everyday language and in the language of those most affected by these issues.

Gender/Orientation Correctness

These say “your views on traditional genders and gender roles are at best quaint.”

- Birthing person/inseminated person
- Pregnant people
- Chest feeding
- Cisgender
- Deadnaming
- Heteronormative
- Patriarchy
- LGBTQIA+

Standing up to MAGA's cruel attacks on gay and transgender people requires creating empathy and building a broad coalition, not confusing or shaming people who could otherwise be allies.

The Shifting Language of Racial Constructs

These words signal that talking about race is even more of a minefield. You will be called out as racist if you do not use the latest and correct terminology.

- Latinx
- BIPOC
- Allyship
- Intersectionality
- Minoritized communities

As we fight racism and discrimination, we should reflect upon whether the words we are using are part of the reason Democrats are losing support from all non-White voter groups. We must know when to take a step back and listen, instead of peppering our websites, fundraising asks, and newsletters with sociology buzzwords.

Explaining Away Crime

This says: “The criminal is the victim. The victim is an afterthought.”

- Justice-involved
- Carceration
- Incarcerated people
- Involuntary confinement

People deserve to feel safe where they live, work, and go to school, and we can’t defend the progress we’ve made on criminal justice reform or hope to make more unless we acknowledge that reality in plain terms.

Conclusion

Some will take issue with the inclusion of words or phrases we ask Democrats to avoid when talking to the public. And to reiterate, we have used some of these phrases in our own writings in the past.

Before you draft your angry tweet thread, think about conversations with persuadable voters in your own life—especially friends, family, and co-workers—and consider whether the use of the language above would help or hurt your case. Recognize that much of the language above is a red flag for a sizable segment of the American public. It is not because they are bigots, but because they fear cancellation, doxing, or trouble with HR if they make a mistake. Or they simply don't understand what these terms mean and become distrustful of those who use them. So instead, they keep quiet. They don't join the conversation, they leave it.

We will never abandon our values or stop doing things to protect those who need help, encouragement, trust, a second chance, acceptance, a fair shake, and the opportunity to pursue life, liberty and happiness. But as the catastrophe of Trump 2.0 has shown, the most important thing we can do for these people and causes is to build a bigger army to fight them. Communicating in authentic ways that welcome rather than drive voters away would be a good start.