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Speaker Mike Johnson on May 22.

Free Country: Sam Adler-Bell

Abundant Populism
The GOP is closing in on
a massive wealth transfer.
Can Democrats unite
their warring visions?

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IN LATE MAY, House Republicans jammed through a reconciliation package that would almost certainly balloon the deficit, imperil America's credit rating, and redistribute wealth from the poorest Americans to the richest. Under President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act, millions of families would lose health insurance and food assistance, while the top 0.1 percent of earners would get a \$390,000 tax break on average.

An endeavor so straightforwardly greedy should present a serious political opportunity for Democrats. But while the GOP engages in class warfare by budget bill, Democrats remain mired in a partywide identity crisis, uncertain who and what to blame for their problems or how to talk to voters. As Bidenism—with its welfare-state expansion and antitrust enforcement—has failed to reverse working-class defection, moderate Dems have made a bid to regain control, embracing an agenda called “abundance,” most recently articulated in a book of the same name by Ezra Klein and

Derek Thompson. Abundance partisans assert the enemy to Democratic success is not corporate greed but regulatory red tape, NIMBYs, and environmental laws, all making it impossible to build and innovate. It's a "simple idea," as Klein and Thompson put it: "to have the future we want, we need to build and invent more of what we need." Who could disagree? It brings to mind my favorite George W. Bush-ism: "I know there is a lot of ambition in Washington," he told the AP two days before his inauguration in 2001, "but I hope the ambitious realize that they are more likely to succeed with success as opposed to failure." In Washington, tautology is a way of life.

So it's no wonder abundance has become a shiny new object for funders, pundits, and lawmakers alike. In early May, a bipartisan group of House members formed the Build America Caucus on behalf of the "pro-growth, abundance movement." Senate Democrats invited Klein to address their annual retreat. Governors Kathy Hochul, Josh Shapiro, and Wes Moore have boarded the abundance bandwagon.

But many progressives see the agenda as a Trojan horse for reviving neoliberalism—a return to Reaganite deregulation, corporate impunity, and supply-side mumbo-jumbo—as well as a fig leaf for the oligarchs: If the aim is growth and innovation, maybe we're all on the same side. An intellectual tug-of-war has begun: abundance versus populism, the latter represented by Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who speak directly to class discontent and argue that wealth disparity and corporate power remain the key hindrances to delivering for working people. Standing with them are the ideologically diverse members of the Democrats' newly formed "economic patriotism" working group in the House.

Recently, the advocacy organization Demand Progress took the question to voters: In a poll published in May, Democrats, independents, and Republicans were all shown to prefer a hypothetical candidate who wanted to "get money out of politics, break up corporate monopolies, and fight corruption" over one who planned to "reduce regulations that hold back the government and private sector." Among Democratic voters, the populist message won in a landslide: 59 percent to 16.8 percent.

But moderates appear to have their hands on the wheel, as more than \$100 million pours in to support the abundance agenda from libertarian funders and Silicon Valley philanthropists. They also seem fueled by the desire to sideline the party's loudest left-wing voices: the so-called groups, progressive special interests blamed for pushing the party to embrace woke posi-

tions on immigration, race, and climate. (Klein refers to the liberal tendency to pile diversity, equity, accessibility, and labor provisions onto the contracting end of building projects as "everything-bagel liberalism.")

In reality, however, most progressives agree with the goal of building more housing, clean energy, and transit. On paper, nothing should prevent Democrats from both naming the oligarchic enemy and un-kludging the administrative state. Why can't the forces of abundance and populism unite?

In late May, I spoke with Bharat Ramamurti, who served as a deputy director of the National Economic Council under Joe Biden. In Ramamurti's telling, abundance advocates too often conflate Republican obstruction with Democratic red tape—and downplay the role of corporate influence. For example, Klein has treated Biden's broadband act as a prime instance of liberal self-sabotage. But Ramamurti, who negotiated the bill, says it was Republicans, not liberals, who insisted on the elaborate, multistage challenges to the legislation. And they did so, he says, on behalf of companies that didn't want to compete with new federally funded infrastructure.

Klein and Thompson have also characterized the CHIPS and Science Act as an example of legislation undermined by everything-bagel liberalism. But the project—to subsidize semiconductor production—was a success. "Every single major chip manufacturer has accepted the conditions and gotten grant funding," Ramamurti says, "and many of them have already started building."

To be sure, there are some useless regulations that impede construction and technological progress. But as Ramamurti sees it, once you get past those, there are real trade-offs: "Is it worth paring back worker-safety requirements so that construction costs come down? Is it worth reducing envi-

ronmental protections so that we can build in more places?" In some circumstances, the answer may be "yes," but policymakers should contend squarely with those trade-offs rather than waving them away as so much bleeding-heart hand-wringing.

"People love to say, 'Look at what China is doing,'" Ramamurti notes. "They decided to lead the world in solar-panel production. And so they did it." But this was possible, he says, because the Chinese government tells Chinese companies "to keep producing well past the point of profitability." The American government, as it currently exists, would scream bloody murder if we tried.

The abundance agenda has the virtue of not demanding any significant showdown with capital or corporate power. If all that is standing between here and a progressive utopia is a change in the "political culture" of liberalism, as Klein and Thompson say, we're in luck. All we have to do is change a couple minds, flip the switch from FRET to BUILD, and let the good times roll.

But the abundance vision is smaller than it purports to be, myopic about power, and flattering to those who have it. It is satisfying—and convenient—to imagine the obstruction is all coming from inside the house, from wonksters and lawyers. The real impediments, however, are simultaneously more banal and more formidable. In the White House, Ramamurti tells me, "the biggest obstacle to fast, decisive, ambitious government action was the Administrative Procedure Act," which was passed in 1946 at the behest of nervous anti-New Deal businessmen to check the public sector's wartime economic powers. Time and time again, Ramamurti says, it was fear of lawsuits filed by corporate interests under the APA that thwarted government action.

In the new BBB, the Republicans have created an obvious foil to liberal and progressive values: a bill that empowers the rich and makes the government less effective, while actively punishing struggling American families. Democrats can offer an alternative, but it will be more than a matter of deciding which set of slogans to use. If they win again—on either populism or abundance—they will need to deliver on both. We should reform zoning laws to expand the housing supply and remove chokepoints in the construction of green energy and transit. But this will require more populist confrontation than the abundance folks have bargained for. It's more than a matter of reversing a few onerous rules. It will require taking on corporate power and—there's no getting around the old saw—making the oligarchs scared again.

Any Democratic future will require more confrontation with corporate power than moderates have bargained for.