

Can the abundance movement save the Democrats?

By Nafali Bendavid

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The idea of building, fixing and providing more is sweeping the Democratic Party. But some critics say that in the era of Trump, it entirely misses the point.

Vehicles navigate Interstate 95 southbound in a construction zone in Philadelphia on Feb. 4, 2024. The state rapidly rebuilt a section of the interstate after a collapse. (David Maialetti/AP)

By Naftali Bendavid When top Democrats convened a “WelcomeFest” event recently to discuss “abundance” — the hot new idea circulating in the Democratic Party — some critics on the left dismissed it as “Abundance Coachella,” a reference to the music festival often seen as trendy and performative, prompting an angry pushback from participants.

In New York City, a progressive mayoral candidate was pressed on whether he had been “abundance-pilled” — that is, embraced the “abundance” worldview. The candidate, Zohran Mamdani, who is poised for a major upset win in the city’s Democratic primary, said, “There’s a lot that conversation has brought.”

The Nation, a progressive publication, even created an “Abundance-Mania!” section focusing on the topic, featuring such articles as “Why the Abundance Agenda Could Sink the Democratic Party.”

Welcome to the often heated, sometimes personal debate among Democrats over “abundance” — an argument unfolding in a party still hungry for answers following President Donald Trump’s decisive victory and Democrats’ accompanying fear that they may have lost parts of the electorate for good.

Follow “It’s given many in the Democratic Party a vocabulary for articulating something we’ve been feeling for a long time but have not been able to find the words,” said Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-New York). “There is a sense that the government is broken ... There is an intellectual vacuum in the Democratic Party, and movements like abundance have a historic opportunity to fill that vacuum.”

Rep. Jake Auchincloss (D-Massachusetts) added: “It’s an economic textbook for the Democratic Party. It moves past the stale debate between government and business.”

Rep. Jake Auchincloss (D-Massachusetts), left, and Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-New York) talk as a special House committee dedicated to countering China holds a hearing at the Capitol in February 2023. (J. Scott Apple-

white/AP) The debate has been fueled by a recent book, “Abundance,” by journalists Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson. Well-meaning Democrats, it argues, have embraced so many complex rules and time-consuming procedures that government has all but lost its ability to produce — or get private companies to produce — obvious needs like affordable housing or high-speed rail.

Some Democrats say that they — and the U.S. government — were once known as builders, from the Grand Coulee Dam in the 1930s, one of the largest structures ever built, to the Pentagon, the world’s biggest low-rise office building constructed in just 16 months in 1941-1943. Now, some concede, they are instead often known as the party of bureaucracy and delay.

But as Democrats wrestle over who they should be in the age of Trump, the abundance idea has plenty of opponents. Many on the party’s left flank say fans of abundance gloss over the very questions at the heart of their argument: Exactly which environmental and labor protections should be jettisoned? And who gets to decide?

“In the abstract it’s very easy to say, ‘We’re in favor of smart regulations but not dumb regulations,’” said Bharat Ramamurti, who was a senior economic adviser in the Biden White House. “But some of the barriers to building or doing things more quickly are things most people think are good ideas — worker safety protections, making sure we don’t pollute the water or air, making sure we abide by reasonable labor standards.”

Progressive Democrats also say abundance ignores the central, destructive role of powerful corporations that are bending society to their will. And it is a mistake, they say, to focus on things like environmental reviews at a time when Trump is trying to destroy the American system of government altogether.

“What is most conspicuous to me is that in the classic way, they get a lot of things wrong, and they always get them wrong in the same direction — to discount or not acknowledge the role that corporate power is playing in our economy,” said David Segal, vice president for public policy at Yelp and a longtime progressive activist.

Parties that suffer major electoral blows often react by looking for ways to reshape their identities. Democrats are struggling to rebuild not just from a dispiriting loss but also from a defeat that seemed to rewrite the rules of politics, as many voters embraced a figure who, to Democrats, seems openly autocratic and proudly corrupt.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont), left, joins Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-

Cortez (D-New York), onstage before speaking at a rally March 20 in North Las Vegas, Nevada. (Ronda Churchill/For The Washington Post) If Sen. Bernie Sanders’s rip-roaring rallies against oligarchy are one response, the embrace of abundance is another.

Its advocates call for things like shortening review times for big projects, eliminating duplicative rules and reducing opportunities for anti-growth activists to sue. Citing such floundering projects as a delayed high-speed rail line in California and the federal government’s struggle to build EV chargers, they say Democrats have become wedded to process instead of results.

President Joe Biden pushed through an array of bills aimed at spurring construction of roads, microchip factories and other projects, but relatively few of them had materialized by the time he left office, as abundance advocates note. And while Vice President Kamala Harris touched on the need for America to build more during her presidential campaign, it was hardly a major emphasis.

The urgent question for the abundance movement is whether it can excite voters in a way that actually helps Democrats. For now, the idea has seized some of the party’s leaders and thinkers in Washington, but it is not clear how candidates can run on it.

Rahm Emanuel — a former Chicago mayor, White House chief of staff, ambassador and a potential Democratic presidential contender — said he supports the idea of abundance, but that it must be conveyed in powerful language to transform it from an airy theory into a politically resonant message.

“If the Republicans’ slogan is ‘Drill baby drill,’ ours should be ‘Build baby build,’” Emanuel said. “It’s how you take the philosophy of abundance and turn it into a message with muscularity, instead of a discussion on an Aspen Institute hike with the [“Abundance”] book in your NPR logo-ed tote bag.”

Then-Ambassador Rahm Emanuel in the library room at the U.S. ambassador’s residence in April 2023 in Tokyo. (Taro Karibe/For The Washington Post) Progressives, he said, should support the idea of making government more effective. “If people believe the government can’t organize a one-car parade, it’s very hard to have progressive politics,” Emanuel added.

Republican strategist Matt Gorman said Democrats are making an obvious idea — that it’s too hard to build things in America — needlessly elaborate and jargon-laden.

“Go into areas and talk to men, whether it’s men of color or White men, about the ‘abundance agenda’ and their eyes will glaze over,” he said. “

... They have to dress all this common-sense stuff up in ridiculousness, and people just lose the plot.”

Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro, another Democratic presidential prospect, does not talk about “abundance,” but he is pushing an image as a can-do leader. He has described his governing philosophy as “GSD,” or “Get S— Done.” He has boasted that it takes three days to get a business license in his state when it used to take eight weeks.

He won plaudits when a stretch of Interstate 95 in Philadelphia was repaired just 12 days after a fiery collapse. “The playbook we developed shows that Americans can do big things again,” Shapiro wrote in *The Washington Post* after the repair.

Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro (D) and Philadelphia Mayor James F. Kenney walk to speak to members of the media near a collapsed portion of Interstate 95, caused by a large vehicle fire, in Philadelphia on June 11, 2023. (Kena Betancur/AFP/Getty Images) This is in some ways the latest version of the clash between centrists and leftists that gets replayed endlessly in the Democratic Party. This time, though, many progressives are endorsing at least parts of the “abundance” argument, notably its idea that government should be empowered to do more and act faster.

Mamdani, a democratic socialist, praised the abundance movement during his New York mayoral campaign. “I find a lot of the discussion around abundance to be quite compelling,” Mamdani said on the “FYPod” podcast. “There are a lot of regulations and rules, and even fees and fines, that we do not have a huge justification for any longer.”

Citing Shapiro’s example approvingly, Mamdani vowed to slash the requirements for opening a barbershop in New York City, for example, which he said now takes 23 forms, 12 activities and visits to seven agencies.

Yet many on the left view the abundance movement with suspicion, if not hostility, concerned that liberals are being unfairly scapegoated for burdensome regulations. Ramamurti, the former Biden official, said big companies often have their own reasons for keeping supply low that have nothing to do with government regulations.

“They will point to countries like China and say, ‘Why can they build high-speed rail or housing or solar panels?’” Ramamurti said. “The reason is that the government there can direct private industry to build things far beyond the point of profitability.”

Bharat Ramamurti, then the deputy director of the National Economic Council, during the daily news briefing at the White House in August 2022.

(Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post) Auchincloss, the Massachusetts congressman, responded that the abundance message is that obstacles should be tackled whether they stem from bureaucratic overreach or corporate greed. The left, he said, often ignores the first problem.

“We shouldn’t be ideological about it. We should just be, ‘What’s happening here?’” Auchincloss said. “I think there is a crew of people who have a hammer, so everything looks like a nail. I would just say, ‘Here’s a wrench.’”

At the recent centrist “WelcomeFest” gathering in Washington, the biggest buzz was about abundance. As organizers opened the event, they were so resigned to more progressive protesters that they sarcastically offered “official WelcomeFest protester” T-shirts.

When the protesters inevitably appeared — during Torres’s presentation — organizers were ready: They blasted Carly Simon’s “You’re So Vain” over the loudspeakers, while a photo of the singer appeared on-screen at the front of the hall. As it happened, the protesters were more focused on Israel than abundance, but the moment captured the tension between the Democrats’ progressive and centrist factions.

The divisions are not always clear-cut. Gillian Pressman, managing director of YIMBY Action, which pushes for affordable housing, praised the ideas of abundance adherents. But she said they often neglect the importance of organizing to make them happen, which can be the hard part.

“It’s not a policy problem, really — it’s a politics problem,” Pressman said. “This is where I think the abundance discourse is missing things a little bit . . . It’s not enough to be right. You have to be powerful.”

Some critics of abundance, like Jeff Hauser, executive director of the left-leaning, public interest-focused Revolving Door Project, believe that energy companies are a major force behind the abundance movement. They are seeking quick and easy permits to build natural gas pipelines, he said, especially in preparation for the massive energy demands of artificial intelligence.

Beyond the policy specifics, many Democrats hope the abundance movement can restore the party’s image as one that accomplishes things, a contrast to what they say is Republicans’ negativity and offering an identity that goes beyond opposing Trump.

“I am confident we are going to win the midterms in 2026. The question is why we will win,” Torres said. “Will we win because of Donald Trump’s weakness, or because of our strength? It’s better to win because of our strength.”