

Trump Knows Dominance Wins. Someone Tell Democrats.



Credit...Kimberly Elliott

By M. Steven Fish

Mr. Fish is the author of “Comeback: Routing Trumpism, Reclaiming the Nation, and Restoring Democracy’s Edge.”

Donald Trump [once called](#) Bill Barr, his former attorney general, “Weak, Slow Moving, Lethargic, Gutless, and Lazy.” When Mr. Barr recently endorsed Mr. Trump, rather than

express gratitude or graciousness, the former president [said](#), “Based on the fact that I greatly appreciate his wholehearted Endorsement, I am removing the word ‘Lethargic’ from my statement. Thank you Bill. MAGA2024!”

This is the sort of thing Mr. Trump is known for, even with people who [came around and bent the knee](#). It is a critical part of his politics — and it’s an area that pollsters aren’t fully measuring and Democratic strategists rarely take into consideration.

Politics is a dominance competition, and Mr. Trump is an avid and ruthless [practitioner of it](#). He offers a striking contrast with most Democrats, who are more likely to fret over focus-group data and issue ever more solemn pledges to [control prescription drug prices](#).

What these Democrats seem to have forgotten is that they have their own liberal tradition of dominance politics — and if they embrace it, they would improve their chances of defeating Trumpism. But unlike Mr. Trump, whose lies and conduct after the 2020 election were damaging to democracy, leaders like Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. exerted dominance in liberal ways and to prodemocratic ends. They obeyed the law, told the truth, and honored liberal values.

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Psychologists [have noted](#) the effectiveness of [dominance](#) in [elections and governing](#). [My recent research](#) also finds that what I call Mr. Trump’s “high-dominance strategy” is far and away his most formidable asset.

High-dominance leaders shape reality. They embrace conflict, chafe at playing defense and exhibit self-assurance even [in pursuit of unpopular goals](#). By contrast, low-dominance leaders accept reality as it is and shun conflict. They tell people what they think they want to hear and prefer mollification to confrontation.

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Today’s Republicans are all about dominance. They embrace [us-versus-them](#) framing, double down on [controversial statements](#) and [take risks](#). Today’s Democrats often recoil from “othering” opponents and [back down](#) after [ruffling feathers](#). They have grown obsessively [risk-averse](#), [poll-driven](#), allergic to engaging on hot-button issues (except perhaps abortion) — and more than a little boring.

Polling even dictates whether Democrats proclaim their own good news. Republicans [never quit crowing](#) about the economy on their watch. Democrats tend to [fear doing so](#) unless [surveys show](#) that everyone is already feeling the benefits. So in defiance of [much of the evidence](#), voters think Mr. Trump’s economy [was better](#) than Barack Obama’s and Mr. Biden’s.

Politicians’ language reflects their dominance orientations. Mr. Trump uses [entertaining](#) and [provocative](#) parlance and calls opponents — and even allies — [weak](#), [gutless](#) and [pathetic](#). Still, neuroscientists [monitoring listeners’ brain activity](#) while they watched televised debates found that audiences — not just Mr. Trump’s followers — delighted in the belittling nicknames he uses for his opponents. His boldness and provocations held audience attention at a much higher level than his opponents’ play-it-safe recitations of their policy stances and résumés.

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Mr. Trump is also often crude and regularly injects [falsehoods](#) into his comments. But these are not in and of themselves signs of dominance; it's just that the Democrats' inability to effectively respond makes them appear weak by comparison.

For their own part, Democrats typically refrain from transgressive language and often present themselves as [vulnerable](#) and [menaced](#). When Kamala Harris was asked in January if she was scared of a second Trump term, [she said](#), "I am scared as heck!" and added that "we should all be scared."

To voters, that fear smells like weakness. In a 2022 [CBS News survey](#) on parties' traits, the most frequently cited description of the Democratic Party was "weak." In a recent [Gallup poll](#), 38 percent regarded Mr. Biden as "a strong and decisive leader," compared with 57 percent for Mr. Trump.

A reputation for weakness may be a singularly damaging liability. In a 2016 [exit poll](#), more than twice as many voters said they wanted a "strong leader" than one who "shares my values" or "cares about people like me." In another poll, Mr. Trump was regarded as the "[stronger leader](#)."

The American National Elections Studies has [polled voters](#) on presidential candidates' traits since the 1980s, and the candidate who rated higher on "strong leadership" has never lost. The one who more people agree "really cares about people like you" loses about half the time.

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High-dominance messaging necessitates unfailingly asserting your side's moral superiority. But the psychologists [John Jost and Orsolya Hunyady](#) find that liberals feel compelled to give equal credence to conservative intuitions. They struggle to adopt the us-versus-them framing that is crucial to rousing supporters and confronting opponents who decidedly do not honor the legitimacy of liberals' opinions — or even necessarily the results of free elections. Psychologists have also shown that Democrats [are conflicted](#) about the appropriate use of aggression.

Such crippling qualms are recent problems. Roosevelt, Kennedy, Johnson and King owned the Republicans. Their high-dominance styles enabled the creation of every progressive program their low-dominance successors are struggling to salvage today.

On the eve of his first re-election, [Roosevelt thundered](#): "I should like to have it said of my first administration that in it the forces of selfishness and of lust for power met their match. I should like to have it said of my second administration that in it these forces met their master." Kennedy hammered home that the Republicans' [limp social welfare policies](#) and tepid approach to civil rights failed to show the world what [America was made of](#), and he never hesitated to aggressively [trumpet triumphs](#).

Johnson mixed [bigot-busting rhetoric](#) with [ferocious arm-twisting](#) to muscle [voting rights](#), [colorblind immigration policy](#) and [Medicare](#) into law. He did enjoy Democratic congressional majorities, but he also faced the necessity of bringing around the segregationist wing of his party, and his high-dominance style was key to his legislative victories.

Few were [less solicitous of prevailing opinion](#) than King. With reference to the 1964 Republican presidential nominee, Barry Goldwater, [King said](#) that he could “go halfway with Brother Goldwater” on the idea that legislation couldn’t solve racism. With tongue planted firmly in cheek, he then smoothly eviscerated Goldwater’s stance: “It may be true that the law can’t make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me.” King’s reference to “Brother Goldwater,” who opposed all manner of civil rights legislation, bore no hint of sarcasm. But he also knew that he was owning his opponent by wielding what he always called “the weapon of love” and using language that expressed self-assurance and faith in the nation to establish moral superiority.

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There are contemporary Democrats with a high-dominance style. Gov. Andy Beshear of Kentucky stands up for [trans](#) and [abortion rights](#), [proclaimed](#) June Pride Month in the state, and [chided the unvaccinated](#) during the pandemic. When a Republican lawmaker displayed a photo of Mr. Beshear with drag queens at a gay rights rally and accused him of corrupting kids, [the governor shot back](#) that the participants “are as much Kentuckians as anybody else.”

The Republican tucked his tail between his legs, whimpering: “My problem is not with the gay movement. I didn’t say anything about the ‘Pride Celebration.’” Mr. Beshear won re-election by five points in a state Mr. Trump carried by 26 points in 2020.

Mr. Biden’s Republican-owning 2024 State of the Union address and the briny language he [uses to describe Mr. Trump](#) in private [delighted the Democrats](#) — and won rare kudos from Republican strategists. But these are just flashes of dominance — and flashes aren’t nearly enough.

A dominance advantage is no guarantee of victory, as Mr. Trump’s 2020 loss to Mr. Biden showed. What’s more, Mr. Trump may sometimes pay a price for his extreme dominance style, whether it’s by [turning off some voters](#) or [incurring the wrath of impatient judges](#) in his seemingly endless court cases.

Still, Mr. Trump’s high-dominance style remains the most formidable tool in his arsenal. Taking on Mr. Trump’s party in its area of greatest strength would leave it beatable in national elections.

Mr. Biden could even counter the perception that his age has rendered him feeble by taking a page from his higher-dominance predecessors, the mighty leaders who mobilized dominance to promote freedom, equality and progress.

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