



## **The emergence of ‘Progressive Paternalism’ and the rapidly shrinking Democratic Party base**

*The national election and Massachusetts ballot questions must be an inflection point for the progressive wing of the Democratic Party*

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*“Some people just don’t know what’s best for themselves.”*

Yes, those words were uttered to me by an activist during the later stages of the 2024 election cycle here in Massachusetts. It isn’t just a shockingly out of touch comment. If you were (rightfully) offended when President-Elect Trump said, “whether the women like it or not, I’m going to protect them”, but don’t see a problem with the first statement, this paper is for you. Aside from the shock of the first statement, it highlights the larger problem of a ‘progressive’ movement that has occupied the Democratic Party and pushed large swaths of our historic base away.

Beyond their positions (many of which I agree with), it is their approach, arrogance and unbending need for purity tests. There is a reason why the Democratic Party has had the ‘Blue Wall’ torn down and seen nearly every demographic in the country move away from us. The party is widely viewed as out of touch, elitist and coastal. It all comes down to a basic truth. **Voters are tired of being spoken to instead of heard while their everyday concerns go ignored.** How people choose to vote is very much an emotional decision. When they feel like they are being lectured, the emotional arguments are lost, as well as the opportunity to gain a vote.

While many will point to Republicans as the reason Roe was overturned and LGBTQ+ and immigrant communities are being attacked, they miss a basic point. **YOU HAVE TO WIN ELECTIONS TO GOVERN.** We were delivered a Trump presidency in 2016 because many progressives chose to sit out the election when Hillary Clinton won the Democratic Primary instead of Bernie Sanders. A

second Trump presidency was won largely because key components of the Democratic base have walked away from the party—including large segments of the rank-and-file membership of organized labor and Latino voters. Why? Because they feel taken for granted and unheard. It is a theme I hear over and over again at the many membership meetings I have spoken to in recent years.

Many of us simply can't understand how Donald Trump was elected, nevermind again. However, we must recognize the electoral reality and acknowledge why we lost the popular vote for the first time in 20 years. Perhaps the electorate hasn't changed, but we have. Donald Trump has been able to convince blue collar voters that a New York billionaire understands how they feel better than the Democratic Party. That is a serious problem we cannot ignore, and doubling down on messaging that is widely viewed as out of touch is not the answer.

**This is not just a national phenomenon.** In Massachusetts, communities with large union membership and Latino populations voted largely against Questions 4 and 5. These communities also delivered startling news about the crumbling Democratic coalition. Fall River voted for Donald Trump, marking the first time in over 100 years that it had voted for a Republican Presidential Candidate. In Lawrence, Hillary Clinton won in 2016 by 66%. Kamala Harris won Lawrence by only 17%. This is all happening because the party is viewed more and more as out of touch with the issues facing working families and those struggling just to get by.

Nationally and locally, the election results are clear. Voters from across all age, income, gender, and racial groups are focused on day-to-day economic and quality of life concerns. Beyond all else - to paraphrase the classic phrase - it is still the economy, stupid!

What has the progressive response been since November 5<sup>th</sup>? They firmly believe candidates weren't progressive enough! This position is so disconnected from reality that it has left many of us stupefied. One needs to look no further than Nika Soon-Shiong, the daughter of the owner of the Los Angeles Times and board member of One Fair Wage, who declared the paper would not endorse Kamala Harris because of the war in Gaza.

We can have policy disagreements, but when we allow someone like Donald Trump to win a Presidential election out of spite, progressives like Nika do far more harm to the very people she says she is looking to help. **We need a return to 'Pragmatic Progressivism' and to stop the emergence of 'Progressive Paternalism' in its tracks.**

In the coming days and weeks, it is clear that the Party will gather to determine a better path forward. The key problem of that impending confab is that it will undoubtedly be filled with the very people who are the problem. For Democrats to find their way back to relevance, we need to move away from the entrenched DC establishment, select consultants making tens of millions of dollars on media buys, celebrity appearances and Progressives willing to lose elections to continue their push for 100% purity.

You don't have to look far to find elected officials and campaign operatives who know how to win. We have amazing state-level talent that needs to take the reins of a Party in disarray with an identity crisis. Take Governors Whitmer and Bashear, Congressman Ritchie Torres, the recent ballot question victory in California related to shoplifting and Ballot Questions 4 and 5 here in Massachusetts, for example.

#### **Question 4 – The legalization of certain psychedelics**

***How it started:*** A national advocacy organization filed two ballot questions in preparation for the 2024 election in Massachusetts. Each question would allow for the consumption of five different psychedelic drugs at centers that could open and be governed by a new commission modeled after the Cannabis Control Commission. The key difference between the two questions they filed was that one of them would allow the home growth of psychedelics. In the end, the version allowing for home growth was chosen to move forward by the proponents.

***The campaign gets underway:*** Public and private polling showed this as a toss-up election, but a well-run YES campaign could have easily led to passage due to the larger turnout and more progressive leanings of a Presidential Election year electorate.

***The Messaging:*** The proponents argued that this would help veterans with PTSD, patients with end-stage cancer and those with severe psychosis. They launched a multi-million-dollar media campaign that utilized this messaging while ignoring the home growth provision in the question.

Working with the NO campaign, messaging directly contradicted the proponents with statistics and facts from the two other states that have legalized psychedelics (Oregon and Colorado). We immediately led with the fact that we were not questioning the potential medicinal value of psychedelic usage. Our opposition came from the significant flaws in the ballot question itself. Those flaws included:

- Allowing 144 square feet of home growth for personal consumption and distribution to friends and family.
- No requirement for a medical professional on site at the facilities that would open after passage.
- No price controls to protect the very people the proponents were using in their advertising. It was clear based on the results in Oregon that these facilities would be far too expensive for people in desperate need of help; the proponents were pushing false hope and it was shameful.
- The inability of local municipalities to regulate the facilities beyond basic zoning.
- The clear lack of basic safety guardrails that would be expected during a legalization process such as this one.

***The Closing Days:*** As the proponents ramped up their media buys, polling showed a tight race that was leaning their way. However, every newspaper that endorsed chose to endorse NO and a last-minute contribution allowed us to place a small television and social media buy, as well as a targeted text message.

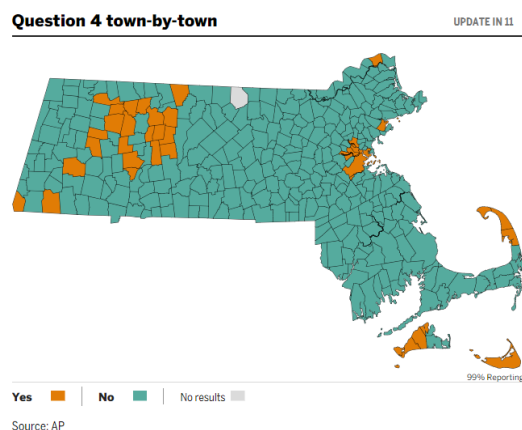
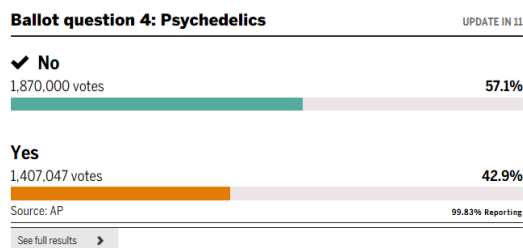
The proponents continued what we called 'panic fundraising' in the closing days of the election and made a critical mistake. Not only had over two-thirds of their contributions come from venture capital firms and people with a direct financial stake in getting Question 4 to pass, they accepted a last minute \$500,000 contribution from an organization with a founder who said publicly that they use veterans for their public relations value.

We jumped at their mistakes and garnered a significant amount of earned media attention. Not only had the proponents been funded largely by profiteers delivering false promises to those in need, they had accepted a major contribution from an organization with an offensive take on veterans, and they were making their closing pitch that signaled any flaws in the ballot question could be fixed by the Legislature.

We argued that after over \$8 million in spending, the question should have been ready for primetime and relying on the Legislature to fix it was a dangerous risk to take. It was clear our arguments were starting to land...but would it be too little, too late?

With a week left, a poll had us down, but it was critically flawed and failed to sample an accurate breakdown of the Massachusetts electorate. We felt that with the high number of undecideds, our last-minute media buy and some momentum from the newspaper endorsements we would have a chance.

**The Results:** After being outspent \$8.5 million to \$130,000, the 'NO' campaign won with 57% of the vote. Why? Because we listened to voters' concerns and addressed them while the proponents attacked our campaign team personally, often saying we must not understand psychedelics or their effects. They clearly hadn't met many of us in college or paid attention to our personal stories that all included close family with PTSD, end-stage cancer and other ailments they said could be helped by psychedelics!



## **Question 5 – Eliminating the tipped minimum wage and expanding tip pooling**

***How it started:*** For five straight legislative sessions, a California-based organization called One Fair Wage (OFW) had pushed legislation to eliminate the tip credit and to allow restaurant-wide tip pooling in Massachusetts. After failing in each session, they moved on to a ballot question.

***The campaign gets underway:*** Although OFW stated that they were in Massachusetts at the urging of tipped employees, we were suspicious. Why did this organization, widely described as an activist group, need to pay over \$700,000 on signature gathering if servers, bartenders and other tipped employees were their core constituency? Where was the volunteer base that any valid organization would have built over ten years?

Regardless of their volunteer capacity, the public polling was not in our favor. The wording of the ballot question was clearly creating confusion among voters. They saw a minimum wage increase and leaned heavily to YES. OFW described Massachusetts to their donors as a 'layup' and released polling from Lake Research, a widely respected Democratic pollster, showing YES at 58% and NO at 24%. Internally, our polling showed a similar result.

***The Messaging:*** Our first task on the campaign was to work with a research company to actually ask servers and bartenders how they felt about the current system and the various aspects of the ballot question proposal. The results were astonishing.

- 86% thought the current tipping system worked for them.
- 90% believed that if tipped wages were eliminated, tipped employees would earn less.
- 88% opposed a mandatory tip pool where tips are shared with the kitchen and other non-service staff.
- 91% said they preferred the current system with a lower base wage and tips that provide the ability to earn more than the minimum wage.

We then polled the general public and found that many of the tipped employee concerns were warranted. People were 8 times more likely to say

they would tip less if they knew their server or bartender was making the full minimum wage already. They were also 3 times more likely to say they would tip less if their server or bartender were part of a mandatory tip pool.

We also knew two major things related to the electorate.

- 1) We could not allow this election to become partisan.
- 2) Both campaigns would almost certainly say they were on the side of servers and bartenders. We HAD TO win the public perception battle of which side was ACTUALLY on the side of these employees.

All of our efforts for endorsements and outreach focused on bipartisanship and the people most impacted. If we could create a wide-ranging coalition urging a NO vote, we felt confident we could succeed.

Armed with this data, we had everything we needed to begin organizing a statewide campaign that would eventually lead to Question 5's defeat. Servers and bartenders immediately became our core focus and the face of the public campaign.

***The Organizing:*** For the first several months of the campaign, we focused our efforts exclusively on organizing servers and bartenders across the state. We presented during 'pre-meals', hosted webinars, made phone calls, sent emails and canvassed restaurants directly. Our ask was simple. When the time is right, will you hand out No on 5 materials, hang posters and allow staff to engage patrons about why Question 5 would do significant damage to the restaurant industry and the tens of thousands of employees within it?

Throughout all of these outreach activities one thing became clear to us. OFW had never actually asked tipped employees how they felt about the system. They had come to the conclusion themselves that it needed to be changed and were attempting to implement their out of touch policies on the very people they said they were here to help. Why? Because *"Some people just don't know what's best for themselves."*

A key part of our strategy also involved asking tipped employees to show their support by making a small contribution to the campaign, signing our petition and volunteering outside of work hours. This strategy became meaningful

because it showed who really had the support of servers and bartenders. To this day, OFW has not received a single contribution to their campaign from a Massachusetts tipped employee while our committee has received dozens. It was a key differentiator during debates, media appearances and forums and would lead to several major newspaper endorsements. In the end, we also had over 1,000 petition signers and hundreds of volunteers who attended rallies and stand outs across the Commonwealth.

***The Closing Days:*** As the summer came to an end, we had a critical decision to make. When could we launch our paid media campaign and kick off our public education activities? Fundraising was struggling, but we knew that even a small media buy would supplement the organization we had spent months putting together. The Thursday after Labor Day was our first time on TV and we never came down. With small buys each week, our education campaign within restaurants beat all of our expectations with roughly 2,000 restaurants participating. Many of them even printed their own materials and t-shirts urging customers to ask about why restaurant employees were urging NO on 5!

With a limited budget, we consistently had to make strategic decisions on how to best move voters to NO. One week our tracking polls showed weakness in Western Mass, so we pulled down digital ads and went up in the Springfield market. Another week we found that college-educated women were still lagging behind the rest of the voting public. We utilized the incredible endorsement by Governor Healey and sent it out via text message. These strategic decisions were a key contributing factor to our trajectory and eventual victory.

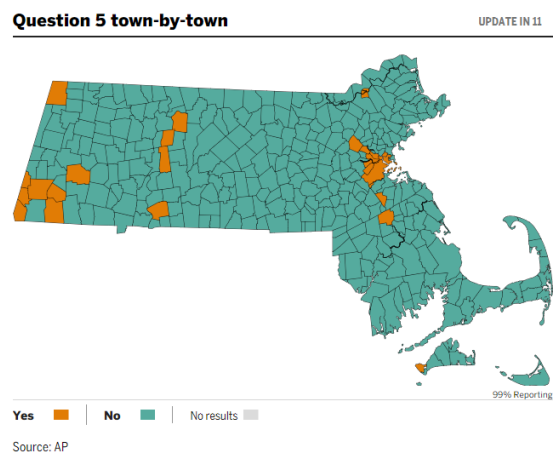
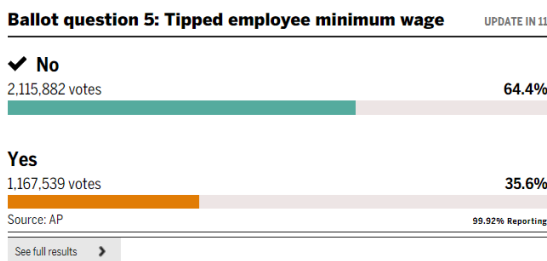
Our efforts continued to pay off with a large influx of endorsements that made clear our coalition was truly bipartisan. We received endorsements from one of the most conservative mayors in Massachusetts AND several of the most liberal. Governor Healey came out with a full-throated endorsement, as did the Massachusetts Republican Party. Dozens of State Representatives and Senators followed. In an effort to blunt our momentum, OFW rolled out an endorsement from Hillary Clinton and tried to tie the overall decision of Yes vs No to the Presidential Election choices. By then, it had become too late. Voters knew that this was not a partisan decision.



To say the public polling and studies released by universities was atrocious is an understatement. UMass Amherst released a poll that had us down nearly 30 points with less than a month to go. The University had also released a 'study' that attempted to show the impacts of Question 5 would not be as bad as anticipated. What the academics failed to realize was that a study wasn't needed, this was happening in real-time down in Washington, D.C.. In the first year since DC implemented their version of Question 5, 95% of restaurants had increased prices. 76% had implemented service charges. 10% of the workforce left their jobs or were fired due to cutbacks and closures. The devastating impacts in DC provided us a critical real-life comparison to show the public.

While all of the public studies and polling showed varying stories, our internal polling showed something completely different. We were closing the gap quickly and took the lead with about 2 and a half weeks to go. We were winning voters who had seen, read or heard something about Question 5 by 12 points. We were winning voters who had spoken to a server or bartender by an incredible 70-20 margin. The strategy was working and we needed to finish strong.

**The Results:** Not only were we victorious, but we were also able to call the election early in the night to the surprise of even the press in attendance. In the end we had lost only 20 of the 351 communities across Massachusetts. We even won the City of Boston and other communities that we had previously believed to be out of reach! The final results were an incredible shift from 58% to 24% to 35.6% to 64.4% in favor of NO.



**CONCLUSION:** What do the previously mentioned elected officials and campaigns all have in common? They listen to voters. They engage voters. They talk about issues that impact large majorities of the population. And they do it in a way that is inclusionary, not condescending.

The overall results for Questions 4 and 5 speak for themselves, but as you dig into the community-by-community voting, it is evident that a frayed Democratic Party is expanding. Question 4 won in 'Pragmatic Progressive' enclaves like Brookline and Newton. Question 5 outperformed both Senator Warren and Vice President Harris significantly. Both questions won in union-heavy communities, as well as areas with significant minority populations including Everett, Fall River, Framingham, Gloucester, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lowell, Lynn, Malden, Methuen, New Bedford, Peabody, Pittsfield, Quincy, Revere, Waltham and Worcester (just to name a few).

Voters across the country have spoken. If 'Paternalistic Progressives' continue to ignore them, they do it at their own (and the country's) peril. And if the Democratic Party continues to allow it to happen, we will continue to bleed support with no end in sight.

*\*Question 5 was previously listed by both Politico and Bloomberg as one of the key ballot questions to watch nationally.*