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Sanders' wing of the party terrifies moderate Dems. Here's how they plan to stop it.

Party members and fundraisers gathered for an invitation-only event to figure out how to counteract the rising progressive movement.

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COLUMBUS, Ohio — If Sen. Bernie Sanders is leading a leftist political revolt, then a summit here of moderate Democrats might be the start of a counterrevolution.

While the energy and momentum is with progressives these days — the victory of rising star Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York, buzz about Democratic Socialism and the spread of the "Abolish ICE!" movement are a few recent examples — moderates are warning that ignoring them will

lead the party to disaster in the midterm elections and the 2020 presidential contest.

That anxiety has largely been kept to a whisper among the party's moderates and big donors, with some of the major fundraisers pressing operatives on what can be done to stop Sanders, I-Vt., if he runs for the White House again.

But the first-ever "[Opportunity 2020](#)" convention, organized here last week by Third Way, a moderate Democratic think tank, gave middle-of-the-road party members a safe space to come together and voice their concerns.

"The only narrative that has been articulated in the Democratic Party over the past two years is the one from the left," former Delaware Gov. Jack Markell told NBC News.

"I think we need a debate within the party," he added. "Frankly, it would have been better to start the conversation earlier."

Pragmatism may be a tougher sell in the Donald Trump era, but with the 2020 presidential race just around the corner, moderate Democrats know they are running out of time to reassert themselves.

The gathering here was just that — an effort to offer an attractive alternative to the rising Sanders-style populist left in the upcoming presidential race. Where progressives see a rare opportunity to capitalize on an energized Democratic base, moderates see a better chance to win over Republicans turned off by Trump.

The fact that a billionaire real estate developer, [Winston Fisher](#), co-hosted the event and addressed attendees twice underscored that this group is not interested in the class warfare vilifying the "millionaires and billionaires" found in Sanders' stump speech.

"You're not going to make me hate somebody just because they're rich. I want to be rich!" Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, a potential presidential candidate, said Friday to laughs.



Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, arrives for a House Democratic Caucus meeting on Capitol Hill in Washington on Nov. 30, 2016. Susan Walsh / AP file

The invitation-only gathering brought together about 250 Democratic insiders from key swing states. Third Way unveiled the results of focus groups and polling that it says shows Americans are more receptive to an economic message built on "opportunity" rather than the left's message about inequality.

"Once again, the time has come to mend, but not end, capitalism for a new era," said Third Way President Jon Cowan.

For the left, Third Way represents the Wall Street-wing of the party and everything wrong with the donor-driven wet blanketism they've been trying exorcise since 2016. Thom Hartmann, a liberal talk radio host and Sanders friend, [once called](#) the group's warning about Sanders "probably the most stupid thing I've ever heard," before ticking through all the investment bankers on Third Way's board.

But some elected officials in relatively conservative areas say progressives are clueless about what their agenda would mean for Democrats outside major cities and the coasts.

"We will be a permanent minority party in this country," said Iowa state Sen. Jeff Danielson, a firefighter who represents an area that saw one of the biggest swings from Barack Obama to Trump during the 2016 election.

Single-payer, government-run health care may be a popular party plank in New York City, where Ocascio-Cortez, a Democratic Socialist, recently won a high-profile primary, Danielson said, but added, "it does not work in the rest of America ... and I'm tired of losing."

Moderates said they feel they're being drowned out by louder voices on the left.

Rep. Cheri Bustos, D-Ill., a member of the House Democratic leadership who represents a district Trump won, invoked Richard Nixon's "silent majority."

"If you look throughout the heartland, there's a silent majority who just wants normalcy. Who wants to see that people are going out to Washington to fight for them in a civil way and get something done," she told reporters.

"There's a lot of people that just don't really like protests and don't like yelling and screaming," she added.

And they worry the angry left will cost Democrats a rare chance to win over those kind of voters, including Republicans who no longer want to be part of Trump's GOP.

"Republicans have chosen the far right, which means that they have ceded a good portion of the middle of the road," said former New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu, who is considering a presidential run. "The Democrats, in my opinion, would make a big mistake if they decide to run a base election and just say, 'Our base is bigger than your base.'"



New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu speaks in Washington on race in America and his decision to take down Confederate monuments in his city on June 16, 2017. Jacquelyn Martin / AP file

With much of the recent policy innovation on the Democratic side happening on the left, the "Opportunity Agenda" unveiled here tries to equip moderates with their own big ideas.

Some of the key initiatives are a massive apprenticeship program to train workers, a privatized employer-funded universal pension that would supplement Social Security and an overhaul of unemployment insurance to include skills training. Other proposals included a "small business bill of rights" and the creation of a "BoomerCorps" — like the volunteer AmericaCorps for seniors.

Meanwhile, they say the progressive agenda is out of date. They dismiss, for instance, a federal jobs guarantee as a rehash of the New Deal. "Our ideas must be bold, but they must also fit the age we are in," Cowan said. "Big isn't enough. If it's bold and old — it's simply old." Matt Bennett, Third Way's senior vice president for public affairs, acknowledges that Sanders "had a big head start."

Many of the party's biggest stars, including Sens. Kamala Harris of California, Kirsten Gillibrand of New York and Cory Booker of New Jersey, have already signed on to Sanders-backed policies like single-payer health care. But Bennett said he thinks they'll reconsider when they examine the details. "I think they were a little hasty," he said. Notably, the proposed moderate agenda does not take issue with the party's broad consensus in favor of abortion rights, LGBT equality, stricter gun control and support for immigrants and a path to citizenship for the undocumented.

In a twist, the agenda is based largely on geography, rather than class or race, which are more popular on the left. It focuses on trying to address the fact that cities are thriving as rural areas fall behind. Clinton was pilloried earlier this year for bragging that she "won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward," but Democratic losses in the rest of America have been politically disastrous for the party.

The difficulty will be selling this approach in the Democratic presidential primary to a base that has seemed to move in the opposite direction. Rep. Jim Himes, D-Conn., the chair of the New Democrat Coalition, said members of his side are not "naturally arbiters of emotion and anger." "How we tell our story and put forward our policies in a way that makes people want to mount the barricades is one of the biggest challenges we have," said Himes, a former Goldman Sachs banker who represents Fairfield, Connecticut.

He pointed to calls to "Abolish ICE," for instance, which he characterized as emotionally understandable but politically illogical. "It hurts us in areas where we need to win," Himes warned of "Abolish ICE" in the midterms. "You have now made life harder for the 60 or 70 Democrats fighting in districts where we need to win if we ever want to be in the majority."

"We're going to figure it out, though," he added, looking down at his tie printed with little blue waves. "We're going to figure it out."