

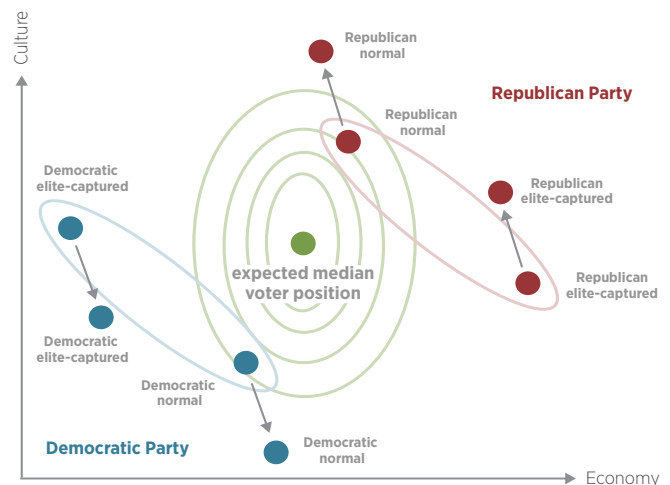
# Multidimensional Signaling and the Rise of Cultural Politics

Based on BFI Working Papers 2026-34, “*Multidimensional Signaling and the Rise of Cultural Politics*,” by Daron Acemoglu, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Georgy Egorov, Northwestern University; and Konstantin Sonin, University of Chicago

Though voters primarily care about economic issues, this paper offers a theoretical explanation for why cultural issues (immigration, nationalism, etc.) have become so central to modern politics, and how cultural issues signal a politician’s economic policies.

In 1992, then presidential candidate Bill Clinton’s political strategist, James Carville, famously coined a phrase to keep his candidate on message, which tidily summarizes the long-held view that voters care most about pocketbook issues: “It’s the economy, stupid.” While that assessment still holds, this research suggests that Carville’s maxim could be rephrased as, “It’s the messaging, moron,” suggesting that the best way to address voters’ economic anxieties is by exploiting cultural issues like immigration and nationalism. The authors theoretically examine this political phenomenon, which is prevalent throughout western democracies, by constructing a novel model that allows for multidimensional political signaling.

Figure 1 • Observing Policy Through the Fog of Culture



This figure is daunting at first view but rewards study, as it illustrates the authors’ canonical application with two-dimensional policies, one corresponding to economic policy and the other to cultural policy. There are two types of candidates from each party (Republican or Democratic), and each candidate is either an “elite-captured” type or a “normal” type. Elites have policy preferences on both the economic and cultural dimensions that are further away from those of the expected median voter position and are thusly held in relative disfavor, while normal types more closely align with median voters. Candidates from both parties would like to signal that they are not elites.

Since the two types of politicians differ on their cultural preferences, an effective way for candidates to signal that they are not elites is to “pander” to voters on the cultural dimension, which may involve taking even more extreme cultural positions, as the arrows in the figure indicate. Note that while those positions deviate only slightly from politicians’ preferred policy on the economic dimension, they diverge significantly on the cultural dimension.

**Bottom line:** Even though voters care most about economic issues, culture becomes the main political signal, encouraging candidates of both parties to embrace extreme cultural rhetoric.

Economic policy is often difficult for politicians to communicate and for voters to interpret, owing in part to globalization, technological change, and general policy complexity. Cultural messaging, by contrast, is simple and understandable. For example, a politician may take the time to explain the complexities of labor markets by discussing such issues as skills mismatches, technological disruption, imperfect information, and structural shifts, among other factors. Or she may simply proclaim that illegal immigrants are taking all the jobs.

The authors' model incorporates such political signaling. While other models assume that political signals are perfectly observed by uninformed voters, the authors' framework assumes that voters, in effect, are not that observant. The authors apply their framework to a case with two-dimensional policies, one corresponding to economic policy and the other to cultural policy, wherein voters care about economic issues. Their model reveals the following insights:

- Even when economics drives voter preferences, politicians rationally emphasize culture because cultural signals are more legible to voters.
- This can produce a paradox: economic policy converges between parties while cultural rhetoric diverges sharply, and drifts away from what the median voter wants.

- Despite that divergence, cultural politics can still win elections, because its clarity makes it electorally effective.
- Both popular and unpopular candidates use signaling, but for opposite reasons: the frontrunner to differentiate themselves, the underdog to appear more like the frontrunner.

Finally, this work points to further avenues of research, notably including the role of media. A high-quality press that clarifies economic information could reduce the appeal of cultural politics, while sensationalist or social media that amplifies extreme cultural rhetoric would intensify it, a dynamic with obvious real-world relevance.

#### READ THE WORKING PAPER

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