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Renewing the Democratic Party



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The Purpose of Party Renewal

A time comes for every political party when its policies and dominant assumptions no longer meet either the public's expectations or the needs of the times. We believe that the Democratic Party has reached one of these moments and stands in urgent need of renewal.

This renewal involves more than communications, organization, and mobilization. It will require the party to ask itself hard questions about the reasons for its dwindling support among groups it has long taken for granted, to reflect on declining public confidence in government as a vehicle of progress, and to think anew about its policy agenda in an era of rapid change, at home and abroad. This process will be neither quick nor easy, which is why it must begin now.

The purpose of Democratic renewal is not only to win the next election. It is to build a party that can command a sustainable majority over a series of elections based on an agenda that successfully addresses the central issues of our time.

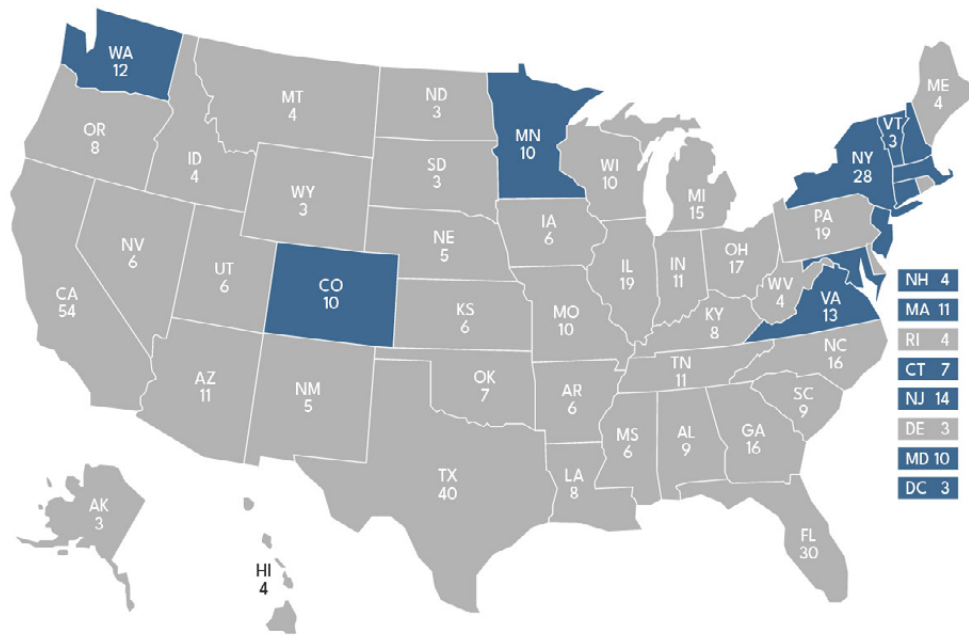
The Key Challenge to a Sustainable Democratic Majority: Losing the Working Class

As the 2024 election has made clear, the populist revolution that Trump has spearheaded within the Republican Party is reconfiguring the coalitions of both parties, to the Democrats' disadvantage.

For the first time since the mid-20th century, the central fault line of American politics is neither race and ethnicity nor gender but rather class, determined by educational attainment. But in the intervening half century, the parties have switched places. Republicans once commanded a majority among college-educated voters while Democrats were the party of the working class. Now the majority of college educated voters support Democrats. Meanwhile, the troubled relationship between the Democratic Party and white working-class voters that began in the late 1960s now includes the non-white working-class as well, as populist Republicans are expanding their support among working-class Hispanics¹ and an increasing share of African American men. Making matters worse, several groups of Asian Americans shifted to the right as their concern mounted about crime in public spaces and attacks on test-based admissions to elite public high schools.²

The sorting of partisan preferences based on educational attainment is bad news for Democrats, demographically and geographically. Fewer than 38% of Americans 25 and older have earned BAs, a share that has plateaued in recent years after increasing five-fold between 1960 and 2020.³ And so, it appears, has the Democratic share of the college graduate vote (57% in 2020, 56% in 2024) even as the Republican share of the non-college vote surged from 51% to 56%. Meanwhile, non-college voters still make up 57% of the electorate, a figure that rises to 60% in the swing states.⁴

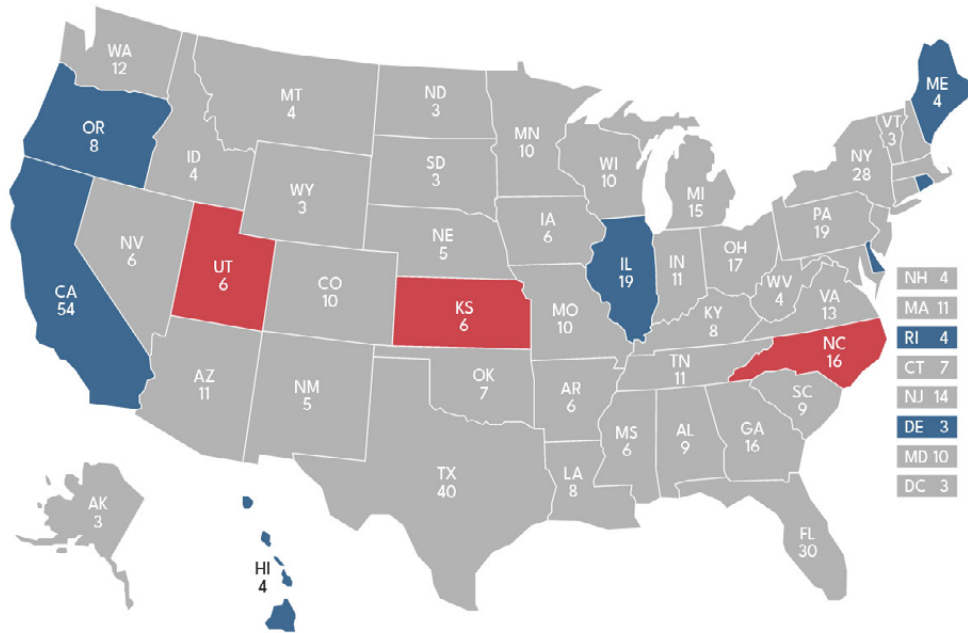
2024 Presidential Election by State Bachelor's Degree Attainment Rate (40% and over)



Source: Mapped: Share of College Graduates in Each U.S. State, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/-mapped-share-of-college-graduates-in-each-u-s-state/>

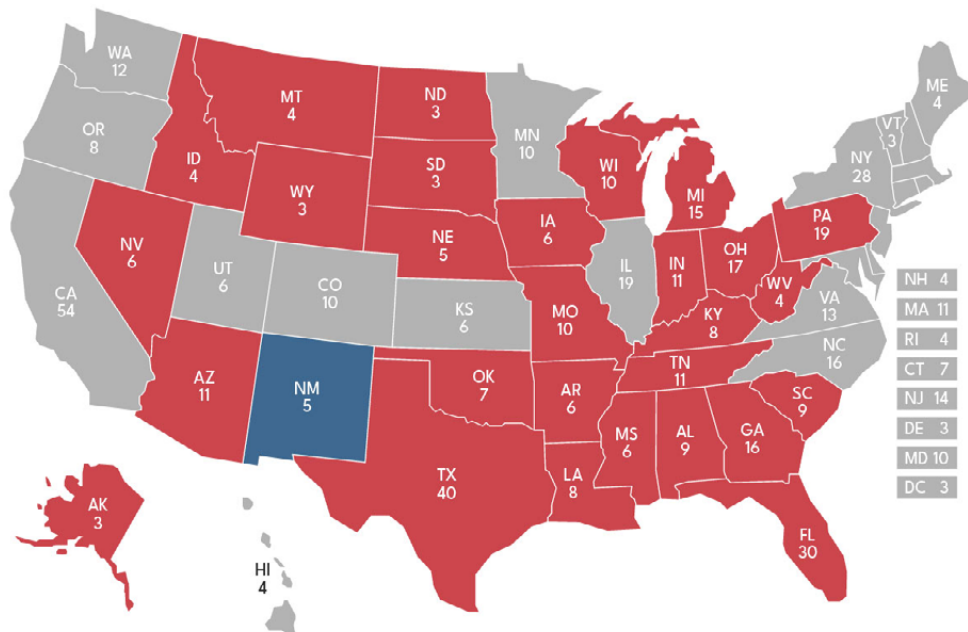
If Democrats cannot build a broader cross-class alliance, one that includes a larger share of non-college voters, their future is not bright. At the presidential level, they could end up confined to states with high densities of college-educated voters, leaving them far short of an Electoral College majority. Although Democrats won all the states with shares of BA degree holders at 40% or higher in 2024, there were only 12 of them, none swing states. By contrast, Democrats won only one of the 29 states with BA shares at 35% or lower while prevailing in seven of the 10 states with college attainment between 36 and 39%.⁵ And because ticket-splitting between presidential and senatorial races has become more infrequent, the new class-based politics bodes ill for Democrats' U.S. Senate prospects as well.

2024 Presidential Election by State Bachelor's Degree Attainment Rate (36% to 39%)



Source: Mapped: Share of College Graduates in Each U.S. State, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-share-of-college-graduates-in-each-u-s-state/>

2024 Presidential Election by State Bachelor's Degree Attainment Rate (35% and under)



Source: Mapped: Share of College Graduates in Each U.S. State, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-share-of-college-graduates-in-each-u-s-state/>

The new class-based politics is reinforced by the fact that prosperity in twenty-first century America is concentrated in metropolitan areas where the workforce is educated, innovation is strong, and the information economy dominates. Our Brookings colleagues looked at all the counties in America and found that in 2024 the richer counties voted for Harris while the poorer counties voted for Trump.⁶ As the table below, taken from their recent report, illustrates, this trend has been going on for some time. Today, 60% of America’s wealth is concentrated in only 382 of the country’s more than 3000 counties. These wealthy counties are densely populated, which explains why Harris’ popular vote was competitive, but they are found in either deep blue states or as islands of high education and prosperity in deep red states.

Counties candidates won and their share of the GDP in 2016, 2020, and 2024

Year	Candidate	Counties won	Total votes	Aggregate share of US GDP
2016	Hillary Clinton	472	65,853,625	64%
	Donald Trump	2,584	62,985,106	36%
2020	Joe Biden	512	80,074,447	71%
	Donald Trump	2,548	73,249,263	29%
2024*	Kamala Harris	427	73,857,304	62%
	Donald Trump	2,633	76,264,661	38%

Source: Brookings analysis

Note: *2024 figures have been updated on December 13, 2024 to reflect unofficial results from 100% of counties. Figures represent results for 3060 counties for which GDP is available.



Beyond the Democrats’ Working-Class Woes: A Defeat on Many Fronts

National Trends

Donald Trump won a surprisingly broad-based victory in 2024. He received 3.1 million more votes than he did in 2020 and, contrary to the expectations of many, won the popular vote by 2.3 million. He bettered his share of the popular vote by 3.1 percentage points, coming within 0.1 point of winning an outright majority while sweeping all seven swing states, some by substantial margins. Meanwhile, Kamala Harris’s share of the popular vote was 3 points lower than Joe Biden’s in 2020.

Compared to Biden’s performance in 2020, Harris lost ground in almost every demographic group, with especially severe losses among young adults⁷ and non-white voters, particularly Hispanics and Black men. Moreover, Harris’s non-stop efforts to mobilize women on the abortion issue fell well short of its goal, even though large majorities continued to vote for the pro-choice position on

referenda. Indeed, Harris’s margin among suburban women, a major campaign target, was 4 points lower than Biden’s had been four years earlier.⁸

To be sure, Trump’s victory fell well short of the landslide he often claims. Kamala Harris won 48.4% of the popular vote, falling short of Trump’s share by just 1.5 points. Some Democratic leaders are trying to put a sunny spin on this result.⁹

But the fact remains that Trump has improved his vote total and vote share in both presidential elections since his surprise Electoral College victory in 2016, disproving pundits who spoke confidently about the “low ceiling” of his popular support. And he is winning the public argument about the issues on which he has run consistently for decades—trade, globalization, and immigration.

A single statistic sums up the Democratic Party’s decline. Between 1976 and 2020, Democrats consistently led Republicans as a share of the presidential electorate. Republicans won elections only when they garnered significant support from Democrats, as Ronald Reagan did in 1980 and 1984 and George H. W. Bush did in 1988. The 2024 election interrupted this longstanding trend: Republicans constituted 35% of the electorate compared to just 31% for Democrats. Donald Trump got only 4% of votes cast by Democrats, but this poor performance didn’t come close to costing him the election.¹⁰

This break with the past reflected more than the sharp 2024 decline in Democratic turnout. During the past three years, Republicans have led Democrats in party identification for the first time since 1991.¹¹ If they can mobilize their base and do reasonably well among independents, they now can win elections without reaching across party lines. Whether or not Donald Trump was aware of this trend, he sensed that turning out the party faithful would be enough to win. To this end, he pursued a relentless strategy of intensifying rather than broadening his support, and it worked.

The Swing States Versus the Rest of the Country

Drilling down below the national aggregates, we find that the 2024 election was actually two separate and very different contests—one in the seven swing states, the other in the rest of the country. In the latter, where advertisements and voter mobilization were scarce, support for Harris collapsed from the high-water mark Biden had established, especially in blue states. In the swing states, by contrast, the Harris campaign came very close to equaling Biden’s performance in the aggregate. This wasn’t enough, however, because Trump improved significantly from his 2020 showing.

Table 1: Difference in Total Votes in the Swing and Non-swing States, 2024 and 2020 (%)

	Harris	Trump
Swing states	-0.3	+6.2
Non-swing states	-9.4	+3.6
Total	-7.7	+4.4

Source: Authors’ calculation.

In many of the blue states, Trump’s vote total expanded modestly if at all while Harris’s collapsed relative to Biden’s performance four years earlier. In Illinois and New Jersey, Harris received about 400,000 fewer votes than Biden. In New York, Harris fell short of Biden by 600,000. And in California, the shortfall reached an astonishing 1.8 million votes, a drop of 16.5% from 2020.

By contrast, Harris performed well in most of the swing states. She got more votes than Biden in three swing states (Georgia, North Carolina, Wisconsin), fewer than Biden in three swing states (Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania), and virtually tied him in Nevada. Her vote total in the swing states trailed Biden’s by just 47,000—three tenths of one percent. But fatally for her presidential prospects, Trump improved on his 2020 showing in the swing states by nearly one million votes—6.2%.¹² While Harris lost them all, it would be more accurate to say that Donald Trump won them, with a message strong enough to overcome the Harris campaign’s edge in funds and organization.

Table 2: Votes in the Swing States, 2024 versus 2020 (In Thousands)

	2024		2020		Change, 2024 v. 2020	
	Harris	Trump	Biden	Trump	Harris	Trump
AZ	1,583	1,770	1,672	1,662	-89	+108
NV	705	751	704	670	+1	+81
GA	2,548	2,663	2,473	2,461	+75	+202
NC	2,715	2,896	2,684	2,759	+31	+137
MI	2,737	2,817	2,804	2,650	-67	+167
PA	3,423	3,543	3,458	3,378	-35	+165
WI	1,668	1,698	1,631	1,610	+37	+88
Total	15,379	16,138	15,426	15,190	-47	+948
(% change)					-0.3	+6.2

Source: Secretaries of state reports.

The implication of the swing state outcomes is clear: as Democrats ponder the way forward, their challenge is not only to repair their weaknesses but also to develop an agenda and message appealing enough to counter the strength that Republicans showed in 2024.

As President Trump began his second term, he enjoyed substantial support from the American people, and so did his party. In contrast, the Democratic Party hit new lows in public approval. At the end of January 2025, only 31 percent of the people had a favorable opinion of the party, compared to 57 percent unfavorable. Among Independents, the favorable/unfavorable split was 22/59; among men, 22/67. After an intensive Democratic outreach throughout the Biden administration, the party scored only 39 percent approval among women, barely better than the Republicans’ 37 percent. The party cannot hope to recover until unless it finds a way to improve its brand.¹³

Why Harris Lost

Optimists may argue that Kamala Harris's defeat stemmed from a series of unfortunate events without broader significance for the future of the Democratic Party. If Joe Biden had not, in 2024, engaged in a presidential debate in which he appeared to have aged substantially, if he had honored what many Democrats thought was a tacit promise to serve only one term, if he had announced his intention not to run after the 2022 election, if there had been a presidential primary that gave the winner not only public exposure but also time to plan for the general election, if Harris had found more effective ways of distancing herself from President Biden and explaining why she had abandoned her past positions—the 2024 contest could well have turned out differently.

These arguments have merit—up to a point. For example, a wide-open primary in 2023 and 2024 may have attracted candidates free to tackle the key issues of inflation and immigration more aggressively and without the constraints that a sitting vice president faces.

But these might-have-beens do not absolve Democrats from the disagreeable but necessary task of facing their underlying weaknesses and their opponents' strength. In 2024 an attractive if flawed candidate lost to a former president with legal woes and personality defects who had been impeached twice and defeated for reelection, allowing a former incumbent to return to the White House for the first time since 1892.

If President Trump fails to fulfill the promises that drove his campaign, Democrats could defeat his successor in 2028. But this would merely perpetuate the destructive status quo of narrow, ever-shifting majorities that undermine successful governance. Democrats must work to build a sustainable majority. This means more than playing better the cards they now hold. They need a reshuffled deck and a new deal.

A year after the Biden presidency began, the authors of this memo published “The New Politics of Evasion: How Ignoring Swing Voters Could Reopen the Door for Donald Trump and Threaten American Democracy.”¹⁴ In that article, we warned Hispanic voters could continue to move away from the Democratic Party. We noted Democrats' weakness among working-class voters, especially in the swing states. We suggested that contrary to the belief of many Democratic leaders and activists, Joe Biden's victory in 2020 did not herald a new progressive era in either economics or culture. “For reasons of education, income, and geography,” we argued, too many Democrats were “far removed from the daily experiences and cultural outlooks of non-college voters.” And we showed that Democrats' weakness among working-class Americans threatened to overwhelm their gains among voters with college degrees.

The 2024 election results confirmed our fears and revealed structural weaknesses in the Democratic Party as serious as those that were revealed in George H. W. Bush's victory over Michael Dukakis in 1988. They require an equally comprehensive response.

In this context, we turn to a more detailed analysis of the factors that undermined Kamala Harris's chances.

Inflation and Immigration

There is wide agreement that inflation and immigration hurt Harris's chances, but the administration's defenders argue that both higher prices and mass migration were global phenomena over which

President Biden and Vice President Harris had little control. We disagree. Several well-known economists who served in prior Democratic administrations—for example, Larry Summers and Jason Furman—argued that Biden’s stimulus bills were excessive and therefore inflationary, a point recently conceded by the president’s chief economic advisor.¹⁵ To be sure, these bills were passed in the shadow of a national trauma—the COVID-19 epidemic—and the impulse to spend money was powerful. The Biden administration acted quickly to ease the COVID- induced interruption of supply chains, the one concrete action they could take to ease inflation. But as President Jimmy Carter found many decades ago, the president’s toolbox for dealing with rapid inflation once it has begun is pretty bare.

Given the lack of effective policy options, the administration was too slow to acknowledge the pain being felt by Americans beset by high grocery store and gasoline prices. Because so many Democratic voters now come from the upper middle class, the Administration overlooked the fact that inflation hits working-class voters, who live from paycheck to paycheck and spend most of their income on necessities, especially hard. In this context, the administration’s ill-conceived effort to sell “Bidenomics” was a fiasco that succeeded only in making the president and the party appear out of touch.

While there is some uncertainty whether Biden could have done more on inflation once it emerged, there is none on the question of immigration.

Between 2020 and 2023, migration and arrivals at the border surged.¹⁶ Several factors were no doubt responsible, but among the most important was that Democrats had been staunch critics of Trump’s border policies, especially his policy of family separation. In a world of instant communications, even in the poorest countries, the change in American leadership and policy after the 2020 election was not lost on people trying to escape poverty and violence, and they came to the United States in record numbers. As immigrants overwhelmed the border, opposition by progressive advocacy groups to tougher border enforcement or asylum reforms helped deter the president from acting until the political costs of inaction became prohibitive.

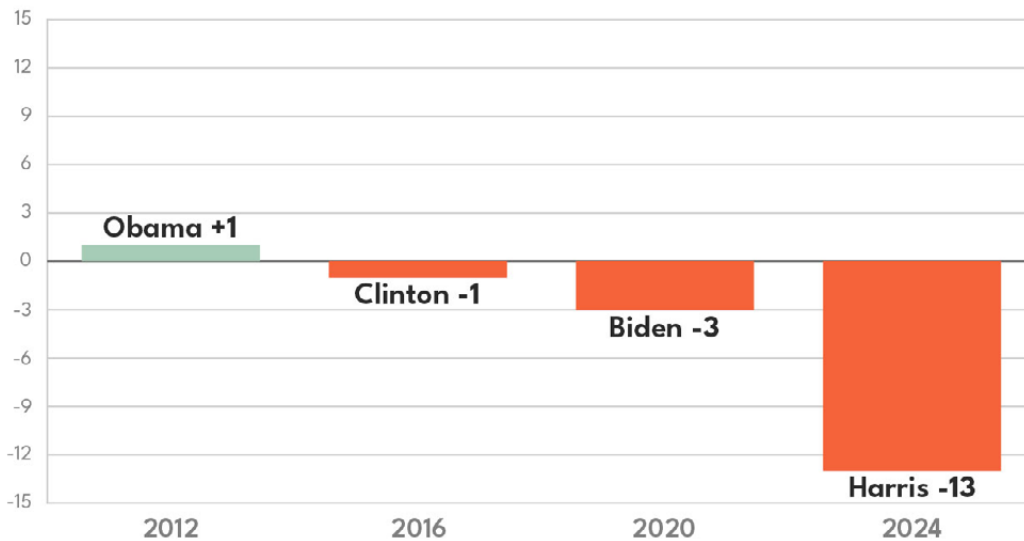
Unlike inflation, where President Biden’s policy tools were weak, he had plenty of authority to act at the border. The effective immigration restraints Biden implemented in 2024 could have been put in place years earlier.¹⁷ In fact, as the border was being overrun, Democrats in Congress, seeing the chaos and the effect on their constituents, agreed with Republicans on one of the toughest immigration bills ever. Once Trump torpedoed the bill, Biden’s insistence that he couldn’t act because he didn’t have the legal authority to do so only added to the public perception that he was weak, and his shift toward a tougher stance in 2024 undermined the claim that he lacked legal authority.

Democrats need to understand just how badly the Biden administration’s mishandling of immigration hurt Kamala Harris’s chances in 2024, not only among white voters, but across the board. Political scientist Michael Tesler has shown that between 2020 and 2024, the percentage of Hispanic and Black voters who agreed that “immigrants drain national resources” increased dramatically and that this shift moved voters of color to Trump.¹⁸ A Progressive Policy Institute survey found that by a narrow margin, working-class Hispanics actually preferred Trump to Harris on immigration.¹⁹ A *Financial Times* survey found that while 80% of white progressives believe that

“immigration to the US should be made easier,” only 30% of Hispanics agree.²⁰ Even in deep-blue California, 63% of Hispanics now consider unauthorized immigrants to be a “burden,” contributing to the large shift of Golden State Hispanics toward Trump.²¹

Nowhere has the impact of shifting Hispanic opinion been more dramatic than in Florida, a former swing state. In 2012, Barack Obama carried Florida by 1 point. In 2016, Hillary Clinton lost it by 1 point. In 2020, Joe Biden lost by 3 points. In 2024, Kamala Harris lost the Sunshine State by a stunning 13 points, 56-43, mainly because Hispanics deserted her for Donald Trump. In 2020, Joe Biden carried Florida’s Hispanics by 7 points, 53-46. This year, Harris lost them by 14 points, 56-42.

Democratic Presidential Performance in Florida, 2012 to 2024



Source: Florida Division of Elections.

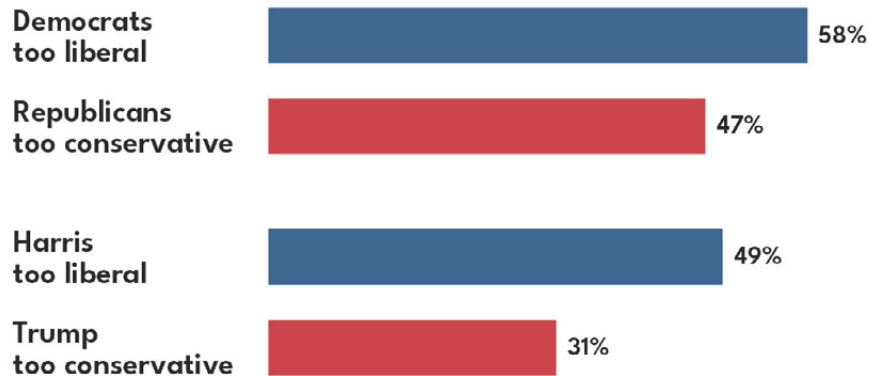
Without regaining an edge among Hispanics, who now constitute almost one-quarter of Florida’s voters, Democrats have no chance of recapturing Florida in the foreseeable future. But to do so, they must discard obsolete ideas about the interests and preferences of this increasingly influential bloc, the majority of whom are now native-born citizens. Years ago, we predicted that Hispanics would turn out to be the Italians of the 21st century, and now it is happening.

Perry Bacon Jr., a prominent progressive columnist, argues that “centrist Democrats should stop blaming progressives for Harris’s loss.”²² To be sure, there’s blame to go around. Harris’s failure to explain her shifts on major policy issues since her 2019 presidential campaign or to specify how a Harris presidency would differ from Biden’s was harmful, and her campaign was not able to translate its large cash advantage into enough votes to make a difference. Still, it was progressive groups whose opposition to tougher border security discouraged Biden’s policy shift on immigration until it was too late, and it was progressive economists backed by a progressive foundation who laid the foundation for the Biden administration’s belief that huge federal outlays would not increase inflation.²³

Cultural Issues

For many decades, Democratic presidential candidates have been tripped up by issues that put them at odds with the values of most Americans and convinced voters that Democrats are outside the mainstream. The 2024 election was no exception.

Perceived Ideological Extremism, Candidates & Parties, 2024



Source: YouGov / Progressive Policy Institute.

As in previous elections, working-class voters saw a difference between the parties. Fifty-eight percent of these voters thought that Democrats had moved too far left, compared to 47% who thought Republicans had moved too far right. In part because Harris did not separate herself from her party's excesses, 49% saw her as "too liberal" while only 31% thought that Donald Trump was "too conservative."²⁴

At the congressional level, the Democrats are not a far-left party, as the Brookings Institution has shown consistently in research dating back a full decade. In our 2024 study, for example, we found that out of 868 Democratic candidates for Congress, only six (or .007%) were affiliated with Democratic Socialists, only 13 (or .015%) mentioned defunding the police in a favorable way, and only four candidates (or .005%) favored open borders.

But, as Democrats keep discovering, it only takes one hot button cultural issue to move elections. In addition to the border, in 2024 the Trump campaign brought the issue of transgender rights to the fore, aided by an uncomfortable clip of then-Senator Harris stumbling through a question concerning federal taxpayer dollars being used for gender-affirming surgeries in federal prison. In the 2024 primaries, just under 50% of the congressional candidates in each party took a position on transgender rights. Fifty-six percent of the Democratic candidates who mentioned the issue did so with vague statements about supporting the rights of transgender people, while 45% of Republicans who mentioned the issue expressed some sort of opposition to health care for transgender people and/or participation in sports.²⁵

The progressive claim that Harris's 2019 positions on transgender issues had nothing to do with her defeat contradicts direct evidence to the contrary. The Trump campaign's ad with its now-famous tag line, "Kamala Harris is for they/them; Donald Trump is for you," was seen more often by more

people than any other anti-Harris ad, voters brought it up spontaneously in focus groups, and it shaped their opinions on both Harris and the Democratic Party. Among swing voters, it was the most frequently cited reason not to choose Kamala Harris.²⁶ A PBS study found that “from Oct. 7 to Oct. 20, Trump’s campaign and pro-Trump groups spent an estimated \$95 million on ads, more than 41% of which were at least in part anti-trans.”²⁷ These ads reinforced a core narrative of the Trump campaign: Democrats are neither *like you* nor *for you*.

We cannot end our discussion of culture without confronting the issue of gender. For the second time in the past three elections, Democrats chose a woman as their presidential nominee. Both lost. Did Kamala Harris lose because she is a woman?

It is impossible to offer a definitive answer to this question. As did Hillary Clinton before her, Harris ran as the candidate of a Democratic Party burdened by most of the issues discussed in this report. And unlike Joe Biden, she did not benefit from the anger at Trump’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis and the huge Democratic mobilization that four years of Donald Trump sparked. It is entirely possible that a male candidate would also have lost to Trump in 2024.

Both women and their campaigns understood that it is difficult for a woman candidate to be perceived as tough and strong while remaining likeable, a problem that male candidates do not face to the same extent. Both women addressed this problem as well as they could. Clinton had extensive experience in defense and foreign affairs. Harris had prosecuted and jailed criminals, and she offered a strong, fervently patriotic vision of America in her convention speech. And yet neither one of them could beat Trump. In fact, Harris did even worse among women as well as men than Clinton had eight years earlier.

We do have some hints as to how gender may have played a role in her defeat. In a Pew survey, 30% of respondents said that being a woman would hurt Harris’ chances, 40% said it would help, and 30% said it wouldn’t matter.²⁸ Some portion of those who said gender would hurt Kamala may well have been indirectly revealing their own opinions.

Perhaps the most telling evidence that gender mattered is offered by the choices the Trump campaign made. The 2024 Republican convention made a non-stop appeal to men by featuring martial arts and wrestlers in comic book outfits in prime time. Before and after the convention, Trump spent a great deal of time on podcasts, such as Joe Rogan’s, that cater mainly to young men.

In 2016, Trump bet that he could tap into anger and resentment among working class Americans without driving away traditional “country club” Republicans. He won that bet. In 2024, similarly, he bet that he could tap into feelings of male displacement without triggering a backlash among female voters. He won this bet as well.

It may well be that what is true for many Latinos and young adults is true for many women as well: the Democrats’ understanding of their interests and concerns is inaccurate in politically consequential ways and needs an undogmatic, evidence-based reexamination.

The Democratic Party Brand

For some time, Democrats have argued about the relative importance of economic issues versus cultural issues in their election losses. But what becomes clear with every loss is that the two

interact. This is especially important in today’s media culture where news is often disseminated through podcasts and social media channels that attract people with similar values. In today’s world, cultural issues are important because they play into broad public impressions of the political parties, especially among working-class voters, for whom the Democratic brand has become nearly toxic. The following table shows working class impressions of the two parties along five dimensions.

Table 3: Working-Class Impressions of the Political Parties (%)

	Democratic Party	Republican Party
Competent	38	56
In touch	34	52
On my side	36	50
Patriotic	40	62
Strong	32	63

Source: YouGov/PPI Working- Class Voters survey, Nov. 11-15, 2024.

Against this negative backdrop, Harris’s failure to separate herself from what many Americans saw as the Democratic Party’s excesses proved to be a drag on her campaign. Only 40% of working-class voters thought that Harris was able to stand up to the extremists within her party, while 51% concluded that she couldn’t. By comparison, 65% of these voters thought that Trump was able to stand up to Republican extremists, perhaps because, in the middle of the campaign, he aggressively distanced himself from anti-abortion hardliners. While some Democrats were pleading with Harris to plan a “Sista Soulja” moment and take a stand against some group of party activists, Trump actually had one, and it seems to have paid off.²⁹

This problem extended beyond the working-class. A post-election survey conducted by Third Way found that voters in the swing states placed themselves significantly closer to Trump than Harris on a left-right ideological scale. And when voters were asked, in an open-ended question, to select the one of two words that best described the candidates, the most frequently cited words for Trump were “strong” and “leader.” For Harris, a single word predominated: “liberal.”³⁰

These ideological perceptions are consistent with the outcome of the election. Harris did about as well as Biden had among voters who called themselves liberal. But she carried moderates by only 18 points, compared to Biden’s 30 points. Similarly, her margin among Independents was just 3 points, down from Biden’s 13, a difference magnified by the 8-point jump by 2020 and 2024 in Independents’ share of the total vote cast.³¹

The Third Way survey also identifies the issues that boosted Trump in the swing states. Trump was trusted over Harris on border security, crime, the economy, and the cost of living. Questions about Social Security, Medicare, and threats to democracy yielded ties, suggesting that Democrats’ efforts to persuade voters that Trump would cut entitlements and govern as an authoritarian were unsuccessful. Harris was trusted more only on abortion and climate change, which weren’t the main drivers of voters’ choices.

Nor did Harris's promise to go after grocery stores and other businesses over price-gouging succeed. By 52-44, swing state voters saw excessive government spending rather than corporate price-gouging as the principal driver of inflation, countering the Biden administration's insistence that its fiscal policy was not responsible for high prices.³²

Overall, Trump did better than Harris in persuading swing state voters that his views on key policies were correct. Eighty percent of Trump voters backed him primarily because they agreed with him on the issues, compared to just 41% of Harris voters. Twenty-nine percent of Harris voters backed her because they didn't like Trump or didn't want him to be in power, while only 8% of Trump voters cited these negative factors as their main reason for supporting him.³³

Led by Sen. Bernie Sanders, some left-wing populists argue that the Democratic Party could have satisfied the demand for change by shedding the limits of "Bidenomics" and embracing an all-out attack on economic oligarchs and policies to build a European-style social democracy. Whatever the policy merits of this recommendation, it is hard to find evidence that it would have been politically effective in 2024—or anytime soon.³⁴ On the contrary, the available evidence suggests its political vulnerability. By a margin of 51-38% voters believed that the Biden agenda promoted handouts and economic dependency over opportunity and work, according to an April 2024 Third Way poll.³⁵ Support for one of the pillars of Sanders' program, Medicare for All, declines sharply when voters are presented with the most common objections. For example, they do not favor the elimination of private insurance, the issue that tripped up Harris's presidential campaign in 2019, and selling mistrustful and hard-pressed working-class voters on the massive tax increase need to pay for government-funded national health care will be next to impossible anytime soon.³⁶

What Should Democrats Do to Halt the Losses and Revitalize their Party?

Stem the Tide of Losses in the Electoral College

For better or worse, the Electoral College will continue to determine the outcome of presidential elections. The Democratic Party's position in this institution has declined significantly during the past generation and will continue to do so for some years to come. As recently as the 2000 election, Democrats were competitive in Florida, Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, and West Virginia, but these states, with a total of 67 electoral votes, have since moved beyond their reach. Only two states, Colorado and Virginia, with 23 electoral votes, have moved in the reverse direction. Net, Democrats' electoral college ceiling has fallen by 44 votes, the equivalent of the Blue Wall. And it will only get worse. Based on current demographic trends, blue states will lose 11 votes and red states will gain 10 after the 2030 census.

In the long run, Democrats need to become competitive in more states. This won't be easy. In fact, it will take a political revolution. Aside from the swing states, the margin of every Democratic loss in 2024 exceeded 10 points. In Texas, where Democratic hopes spring eternal, the Republican margin was 14 points. In the medium term, Democrats must focus on rebuilding their appeal in the swing states while ensuring that the alarming erosion of their margin in the blue states does not continue. In 2024, Donald Trump reduced the Democratic margin of victory in New Jersey by

16 points to just 6; in New Mexico, from 11 points to 6. Democrats cannot afford any more losses in their Electoral College base.

Rebuild the Democratic Party's Working-Class Support

Building a sustainable Democratic majority will require significantly increasing support among working-class voters. What will this take?

Working class voters tend to be patriotic and religious, even if they don't attend church regularly. They believe in the traditional family, even if they are not living in one. They cherish the places where their families have lived, often for generations, and they are reluctant to leave them or find that they can't leave them because of the huge disparity in housing prices between their homes and the housing prices in prosperous parts of the country.

They believe in opportunity and hard work and prefer jobs with a future to government guarantees. They want upward mobility for themselves, and especially for their children. They have lost trust in government as an instrument of economic progress, and they don't want anyone—especially government—telling them how to live their lives.

They believe that the Democratic Party is dominated by elites whose privileges do not serve the common good and whose cultural views are far outside the mainstream and lack common sense. They believe that educated professionals look down on them and that the professional class favors policies that give immigrants and minorities unfair advantages at their expense. They believe that educational institutions preach a set of liberal values that are out of the mainstream and that parents, not schools, should be teaching values. They reject the assertion that slavery and discrimination have made it difficult for Black Americans to work their way out of the lower class and believe that Black Americans can and should rise “without special favors,” as other groups experiencing prejudice have done.³⁷

Unlike educated elites, most working-class families live from paycheck to paycheck and have limited capacity to meet emergencies. They do not have the luxury of waiting for policies to produce results a decade from now; when they experience economic privation, they look for rapid and tangible remedies.

If this picture of working-class Americans is roughly right, what must Democrats do and how must they change to make the party more acceptable and appealing to them?

Work conducted during the past two years by organizations such as the Progressive Policy Institute and Third Way offers a point of departure for developing a working-class policy agenda. A Third Way survey found that a set of policies that “grow the economy so that everyone has the opportunity to earn a good life where they live” beat the Bidenomics prescription of policies that “grow the economy from the middle out and bottom up” by a two-to-one margin and among every demographic group and ideology.³⁸

A separate post-election survey found that proposals “strongly supported” by majorities or near-majorities of working-class voters include making it easier to start small businesses; expanding alternatives to college for acquiring marketable job skills; reducing the budget deficit; tackling high medical costs; lowering taxes on working families; making additional investments in the U.S. military; building more housing, roads, and rail; and reinventing government. In contrast, strong

support for measures such as raising taxes on corporations, creating a taxpayer-funded national healthcare system, and engaging in more redistributive spending stood below 30% among working-class voters.³⁹

A PPI survey conducted in late 2023 cast light on the broader views of working-class voters. Asked which changes in priorities they most wanted the Democratic Party to make, 29% said “get tougher on illegal immigration,” followed by giving greater priority to economic growth (16%), spending tax dollars more efficiently rather than expanding government programs (16%) and standing up to “woke progressives” (12%). Only 19% favored a large federal government that focused on issues such as inequality and the distribution of wealth. A near-majority felt that government should focus its industrial policy on a few sectors essential to national security while leaving the others alone.

Members of the working class who focused on inflation and prices outpacing wages were asked why these problems had become so urgent. Twenty-nine percent endorsed the Biden administration’s position that demand for goods and service exploded as the COVID pandemic wound down, and the supply of goods couldn’t keep up. Another 16% cited supply-chain bottlenecks. But 55% said that “government went overboard with stimulus spending, overheating the economy.”

Asked about student loan relief, 56% of working-class voters said that it wasn’t fair to the majority of Americans who don’t get college degrees and would raise costs for taxpayers. Asked about the proposal most likely to help working people get ahead, 15% choose a federal push for stronger labor unions, but five times as many—74%—preferred increased public investment in apprenticeships and related measures to help non-college workers get better skills. Only 13% believed that their children would find the best jobs and career opportunities in traditional manufacturing plants producing physical goods, compared to 44% who opted for the communications/digital economy in jobs such as writing code, managing data, and e-commerce.⁴⁰

In short, working-class voters are clear-headed about the policies they believe would benefit them and those that don’t. They are equally blunt about government and contested social issues. Not all of their views are consistent with those of the educated professionals whose outlook dominates the contemporary Democratic Party. The real question is more political than substantive: is the party willing to make the changes needed to accommodate the clear preferences of working-class voters?

Initiate a Pennsylvania Project

To achieve the fullest possible understanding of what needs to be done to rebuild a Democratic majority, we propose what we call the “Pennsylvania Project” [For more on this see Appendix B]. Of all the swing states, Pennsylvania comes closest to being a microcosm of the country. It has big cities, populous suburbs, and huge swathes of small town and rural areas. Its population is diverse, as is its economy, and its share of college-educated voters matches the national median. Unsurprisingly, Donald Trump carried the state by 1.7 points in 2024, almost identical to his 1.5 point national edge. And it was the tipping-point state in 2016 and 2020 as well as 2024.

Pennsylvania is a proxy for the national challenge Democrats face. Only twice since World War Two have Democrats won the national popular vote without carrying Pennsylvania. If Democrats can figure out how to turn Pennsylvania reliably blue, they will be well on their way to regaining a sustainable national advantage.⁴¹

Conclusion: The Next Four Years

The success of these three related initiatives—stemming Democratic losses in the Electoral College, rebuilding the Party’s working-class support, and creating a Democratic majority in Pennsylvania—will take nothing less than a searching reexamination of the party’s commitments and policies. Party reformers should begin discussions designed to produce a declaration of the party’s fundamental beliefs and aims, along the lines of—but differing in content from—the Democratic Leadership Council’s 1991 New Orleans Declaration. Party reformers should organize unconstrained, open-minded debates on the policy questions that will define the face the party turns to the electorate in 2028 and beyond, and they should begin conversations with their activists in order to find ways to discuss sensitive cultural issues that are consistent with the Democratic Party’s longstanding commitment to the rights of minorities but do not drive away more traditional and moderate voters. And it is not too early to initiate discussions with a new generation of reform-minded Democratic elected officials and candidates who can help rebuild sustainable majorities at every level of our federal system.

These challenges sound daunting, and they are. But Democrats should be confident that they can surmount them because they have done so in the past when their party faced comparable challenges. In their own ways President Clinton and President Obama overcame these challenges, and each governed for two full terms. But neither was able to build a solid and functioning Democratic majority. Doing so will require shedding outdated ideas, understanding the sentiments of the new American electorate, and fighting for change in the party. Party unity based on unchallenged premises and outdated ideas will not get the job done. Democrats need a robust debate, starting now and moving into high gear as they begin the process of selecting the national candidates who will lead the party and the country into the next era of American politics.

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Appendix A: What Happened in the Country

Table 1: Vote Shares of the Candidates by Group, 2020 and 2024

	2020			2024			Change
	Biden	Trump	Margin	Harris	Trump	Margin	
18-29	61	36	+25	51	46	+5	-20
College	57	41	+16	56	42	+14	-2
Non-college	47	51	-4	43	55	-12	-8
White	43	55	-12	43	56	-13	-1
Black	91	8	+83	83	16	+67	-16
Hispanic	63	35	+28	55	42	+13	-15
Urban	66	33	+33	63	35	+28	-5
Suburban	54	44	+10	52	46	+6	-4
Sub. men	49	48	+1	46	52	-6	-7
Sub. women	59	40	+19	57	42	+15	-4
Rural	38	60	-22	36	63	-27	-5

Source: AP VoteCast, 2020 and 2024.

Table 2: Vote Shares of the Candidates by Group, 2020 and 2024

	2020			2024			Change
	Biden	Trump	Margin	Harris	Trump	Margin	
Independents	54	41	+13	49	46	+3	-10
Moderates	64	34	+30	58	40	+18	-12
Asian	61	34	+27	55	40	+15	-12
Men	45	53	-8	43	55	-12	-4
Women	57	42	+15	55	45	+10	-5
Hispanic M	59	36	+23	44	54	-10	-33
Hispanic W	69	30	+39	58	39	+19	-20
Under \$50K	55	44	+11	48	50	-2	-13
Over \$100K	42	54	-12	51	47	+4	+16
White college	55	43	+12	56	42	+14	+2
White non-college	32	67	-35	32	66	-34	+1

Source: CNN exit polls, 2020 and 2024.

Table 3: Shares of the Electorate, by Group

	2020	2024	Change
Democrats	37	31	-6
Republicans	36	35	-1
Independents	26	34	+8
Liberal	24	23	-1
Moderate	38	42	+4
Conservative	38	35	-3
White	67	71	+4
Black	13	11	-2
Hispanic	13	11	-2
Asian	4	3	-1
College	41	43	+2
Non-college	59	57	-2

Source: CNN exit polls, 2020 and 2024.

Appendix B: What Happened in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania has been the pivot state in each of the past three presidential elections, in part because it has become a microcosm of the country. Compared to 2020, Harris’s vote in the Keystone State fell short of Biden’s by only 35,000 (1.0%) while Trump’s rose by 165,000 (4.9%). As was the case in four other swing states (Nevada, Georgia, Michigan, and Wisconsin), Harris’s Pennsylvania vote in 2024 exceeded Trump’s in 2020. If Trump had not expanded his swing state appeal in 2024, Harris would have won five additional states with more than enough electoral votes to give her the majority.

The following tables show why Trump was able to pull off a comfortable victory in Pennsylvania, a state Biden had won by 80,000 votes four years earlier.

Table 1: PA Vote Shares of the Candidates by Group, 2024 and 2020

	2024			2020			Change
	Harris	Trump	Margin	Biden	Trump	Margin	
18-29	55	44	+11	62	35	+27	-16
Independent	45	52	-7	52	44	+8	-15
Moderate	56	43	+13	58	41	+17	-4
White	44	56	-12	42	57	-15	+3
Black	89	10	+79	92	7	+85	-6
Hispanic	59	41	+18	69	27	+42	-24
Men	41	58	-17	44	55	-1	-6
Women	56	44	+12	55	44	+11	+1
College	60	39	+21	57	42	+15	+6
Non-College	41	58	-17	45	54	-9	-8
Urban	69	30	+39	74	24	+50	-11
Suburban	47	51	-4	48	51	-3	-1
Rural	32	67	-35	30	69	-39	+4

Source: CNN exit polls, 2020 AND 2024.

As Table 1 shows, Harris improved on Biden’s showing among white voters, the college educated, and even rural Pennsylvanians. She lost ground among young adults, independents, moderates, non-college voters, men, blacks, and urban Pennsylvanians while suffering a massive erosion of Hispanic support.

As Table 2 shows, the composition of the electorate changed in ways that weakened the Harris campaign. Although the ideological composition of the electorate did not change, Democratic party identifiers’ share of the vote fell by 4 points from 40 to 36% while independents rose from 19 to 23%. Tellingly, the Black share fell from 11 to just 8%, explaining the falling support Harris experienced in Philadelphia.

Table 2: PA Vote Shares by Group, 2024 and 2020 (%)

	2024	2020	Change
18-29	12	13	-1
Democrats	36	40	-4
Republicans	40	41	-1
Independents	23	19	+4
Liberal	25	24	+1
Moderate	41	42	-1
Conservative	34	34	-
Black	8	11	+3
Non-college	59	60	-1

Source: Secretaries of state reports.

Outside of Philadelphia, however, Pennsylvania featured hard-won incremental improvements for the Trump campaign and modest losses for Harris. Harris held her ground in Pittsburgh and fell short of Biden’s showing in the populous suburban (“collar”) counties by only 13,000 votes out of more than 1.5 million cast. The two counties that flipped from Trump to Biden in 2020 (Erie and Northampton) flipped back by small margins.

Even in Luzerne County, which came to symbolize the working-class revolt against the contemporary Democratic Party, moving into Trump’s column after six straight Democratic victories between 1992 and 2012, Harris fell only 2,000 votes short of Biden’s strong, if losing, performance in 2020. But here as elsewhere in the swing states, Trump continued to expand his working-class base, improving on his 2020 total by 5500 votes (more than 6%).

Since 2012, Trump has expanded the Republican vote in Luzerne County by nearly 60%, from 58,000 to 92,000, even as the county’s population has remained almost unchanged and Harris’s vote was only marginally smaller than Obama earned in his 2012 victory over Mitt Romney. Here as elsewhere, the story is less Democratic erosion than Republican mobilization.

Table 3: PA Vote by Candidate and Key Jurisdiction, 2024 and 2020 (Thousands)

	2024		2020		Harris change	Trump change
	Harris	Trump	Biden	Trump		
Pennsylvania	3,423	3,543	3,458	3,378	-35 (-1.0%)	+165 (+4.9%)
Philadelphia	569	144	604	132	-35	+12
Allegheny	430	284	431	282	-1	+2
“Collar counties”						
Bucks	198	199	204	187	-5	+12
Chester	184	137	182	129	+2	+8
Delaware	201	123	207	119	-6	+4
Montgomery	317	198	320	185	-3	+14
Total	900	657	913	620	-13	+37
Swing counties						
Erie	67	69	69	67	-2	+2
Northampton	87	90	85	84	+2	+6
Luzerne	63	92	65	87	-2	+5

Source: Wikipedia, 2024 presidential elections in pa and 2020 presidential elections.

Comparing 2024 to 2020, Republican registration increased in all 67 Pennsylvania counties, Trump received more votes in 66 counties, and his margin improved in 54 counties, all outside the more educated and upscale “Acela Corridor” running through southeast Pennsylvania.⁴²

Trump’s victory in 2024 occurred against the backdrop of a long-term improvement in Republican registration in Pennsylvania relative to Democrats. The Democratic registration edge was more than 1.2 million in 2008. As late as the 2016 election, it stood at more than 900 thousand. By January 2024, it had fallen to 343,000; by October, to 325,000. It now stands at just 189,000.⁴³

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