

Handbook For the Politically Deceased:

Your guide to what the hell just happened in the election and what's ahead

David Sirota in *The Lever*, 08 November 2024

For liberals, [Donald Trump](#)'s victory this week prompts adjectives like scary, terrifying, depressing, and demoralizing. But one word it should not evoke is this: surprising. In a [downwardly mobile](#) country, Democrats' rejection of working-class politics — and the party's open hostility to populist politicians within its midst — was always going to end up creating prime political conditions for a conservative strongman promising to make America great again.

Trump and his cronies spun tales of [overbearing bureaucrats](#), [DEI warriors](#) and [migrant gangs](#) to weave a narrative that the government of elites is so out of touch — or focused on identity politics — they don't care about the affordability crisis ruining everyone's day-to-day lives. Democrats countered by trotting out Hollywood stars, [the Cheneys](#), and billionaire Mark Cuban to tell a story of an assault on establishment norms that is imperiling [brunch](#) and jeopardizing a *West Wing* reboot.

Shocker: The working class responded by giving Trump a decisive popular vote victory.

I've spent much of my adult life working to prevent this — both in the slog work of campaigns and in my reported articles, [books](#), and [audio series](#). One of those [articles](#) was published 20 years ago at what felt like a very similar point in American history, when a Republican running for reelection won [big swathes of the working class](#). Change the names and it reads like a description of the current moment.

Vindication is not consolation. I'm angry about what happened and how predictable it all was. I feel like Randall Mindy in our film *Don't Look Up* — specifically in the [scene](#) where he's just scream-weeping up at the sky, saying he tried to warn everyone. And I'm enraged by those still purporting to be surprised, whether it's cable TV-addled liberals personifying the [proverb about blindness](#), or pundits and politicians who embody the [famous Upton Sinclair aphorism](#).

But perhaps there's a silver lining here. Maybe the shellacking will prompt an awakening. Maybe everyone will finally tune out the pundits still claiming Democrats ran a ["flawless"](#) campaign. And maybe people will finally acknowledge, accept, and internalize realities that were obvious so long ago. And maybe from there, things can improve.

What follows here are some big questions so many people have been asking me, and my preliminary answers. Think of it as a FAQ about what just happened — a proverbial [handbook for the politically deceased](#).

What is the Democratic Party's theory of winning elections?

Just before the 2016 election, Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer [said](#): “For every blue-collar Democrat we lose in western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two (or) three moderate Republicans in the suburbs in Philadelphia, and you can repeat that in Ohio and Illinois and Wisconsin.” The key undecided swing voters, he asserted, were “not the blue-collar Democrats, they are college-educated Republicans.”

Despite that viewpoint being repudiated by the 2016 election results, Schumer was appointed to lead his party as the Majority Leader, and Democrats ran their 2024 campaign with his same operating theory in the final weeks of the race.

“In making her closing argument this month, Ms. Harris has campaigned four times with Liz Cheney, the Republican former congresswoman, stumping with her more than with any other ally,” as [The New York Times](#) described it. “She has appeared more in October with the billionaire Mark Cuban than with Shawn Fain, the president of the United Auto Workers and one of the nation’s most visible labor leaders.”

The strategy yielded [no significant swing of GOP voters](#), but a massive swing of working-class voters to the Republicans.

Why do Democrats seem unwilling to focus on persuading working-class voters?

In the Democratic Party’s Venn Diagram, there’s one circle full of policies that its corporate and billionaire donors want or can accept, and there’s another circle full of initiatives that voters want.

During campaigns, the party typically eschews stuff that working-class voters really want but that might anger donors profiting off the status quo — things like housing, health care, higher wages, and other initiatives preventing corporations from grinding the non-rich into Soylent Green. Instead, the party often chooses to campaign on items that overlap in both circles — reproductive rights, odes to democracy, Michelle Obama speeches, and Good Vibes™.

The middle of this Venn Diagram theoretically appeals to socially liberal, economically conservative Rockefeller Republicans. Democratic leaders want to believe these are the key swing voters because that doesn’t screw up their donor-appeasement formula.

For Democrats to accept the reality that Rockefeller Republican/Never Trump Republicans don’t actually exist as a significant swing voting bloc, and for them to further accept that a much larger (and growing) working-class electorate is the *real* swing vote — would require centering a populist economic program that offends Democrats’ big donors.

But that’s a no-go as the party is currently oriented, which explains the final self-destructive weeks of the Democrats’ 2024 campaign.

Why have working-class voters been fleeing the Democratic Party for years?

When Bill Clinton rammed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) through a Democratic Congress in the early 1990s, the most Democratic trade-exposed districts in America quickly became the country's most Republican districts. As this [deep-dive study](#) shows, culturally conservative working-class voters who had been sticking with the Democratic Party because of its economic policies saw the trade deal as proof there was no reason to stick around anymore.

Then came former President Barack Obama's populist 2008 campaign raising the prospect of a real crackdown on the Wall Street villains who pillaged the working class during the financial crisis. The appeal delivered a huge electoral mandate, which Obama then used to [continue bailouts for his bank donors](#) and hand out [get-out-of-jail-free cards](#) to Wall Street executives, while [doing little](#) to help millions of working-class voters being thrown out of their homes.

The betrayal prompted a [working-class surge](#) for Trump's first presidential bid and a resurgence of right-wing populism (following a [similar pattern](#) in most countries after a financial crisis). Obama later [wrote](#) from his [Martha's Vineyard castle](#) that doing anything differently "would have required a violence to the social order, a wrenching of political and economic norms."

Only now, [16 years later](#) do Obama's acolytes seem to sorta, kinda have an inkling that their decisions converting a populist election mandate into a bankers' bailout might have shaken working class voters' faith in Democrats — and democracy.

Of course, Democrats had a third chance to staunch the bleeding with President Biden's 2021 American Rescue Plan, which was a huge and [wildly popular investment in the working class](#). But then the legislation expired, millions of working-class families saw [popular benefits ripped away](#) as inflation and poverty skyrocketed. And then came the Election Day backlash. Again.

How does all this relate to the Democratic Party's internal fights over the last few years?

Democrats [underperformed](#) among working-class voters, [young voters](#), [male voters](#), and [Latino voters](#) — the [particular voting blocs](#) that Bernie Sanders performed so well with in his presidential campaigns.

As *Breaking Points*' Krystal Ball [notes](#), one logical [conclusion](#) is that the 2024 exit polls reflect the Democratic establishment's vindictive ostracization of Sanders and his movement over the last eight years.

Indeed, marginalizing Sanders' acolytes from Democratic-aligned media, keeping Sanders-affiliated figures out of the Biden administration, pejoratively gendering supporters of his class-first agenda as "Bernie Bros," [booing him](#) for touting universal social programs rather than pandering to identity politics — it all preceded Trump this

week constructing the multiracial working class coalition that was supposed to be the Democratic Party's entire reason for existing.

Democratic leaders' hostility to Sanders-style populism extended to the Harris campaign's themes. While some of her television ads focused on economics, it wasn't a central thrust of her campaign — and that's reportedly thanks to pressure from her [donors](#) and her team of oligarchs.

“Harris began the campaign portraying Trump as a stooge of corporate interests — and touted herself as a relentless scourge of Big Business,” *The Atlantic's* Franklin Foer [reported](#) this week. “Then, quite suddenly, this strain of populism disappeared. One Biden aide told me that Harris steered away from such hard-edged messaging at the urging of her brother-in-law, Tony West, Uber's chief legal officer. To win the support of CEOs, Harris jettisoned a strong argument that deflected attention from one of her weakest issues.”

But aren't Democrats being smart by trying to be a big-tent party?

The central question in every political campaign — the question by which voters end up judging candidates — is the one from Pete Seeger's song: [Which side are you on?](#)

No matter how dishonest and fraudulent his answer to that question was, Donald Trump at least pretended to offer a clear one — his answer was: America First.

Democrats, by contrast, refused to seriously entertain the query. Under the banner of being a “big tent,” the party instead chose to depict a fantasy world where villains other than Trump are rarely named, and nobody has to choose who has power, money, authority, and credibility — and who doesn't.

In their telling, there are no zero-sum choices and always third ways. It is a world where a president can “bring together labor and workers and small-business owners and entrepreneurs and American companies,” as Harris [promised](#) — without ever having to pick a side.

It is a world where warmonger Dick Cheney, pop singer Taylor Swift, and Sanders are all equally meritorious validators, as Democratic vice-presidential nominee Tim Walz [insinuated](#) — and no moral judgments should be made.

It is a world where Democrats [schedule](#) a Bernie Sanders convention speech bashing billionaires, [immediately followed](#) by a speech from a billionaire bragging about being a billionaire, and then a speech by a former credit card CEO declaring that Democrats' presidential nominee “understands that government must work in partnership with the business community.”

It is, in short, a world where Democrats never have to choose between enriching their donors and helping the voters who those donors are fleecing.

Americans know this world doesn't exist, which is why candidates and parties that pretend it does so often lose, even to right-wing con men.

What were Republicans' most effective tactics to court working-class voters?

Trump pulled a Ross Perot and campaigned for tariffs — a [popular idea](#) designed as both a policy proposal and a callback to Democrats' original NAFTA betrayal. And — of course! — Democrats took the bait by [slamming](#) the initiative, rather than countering with something smarter.

Trump and his Republican machine also put [tons of money](#) behind morally repugnant anti-trans ads. No doubt this was a specific appeal to transphobic bigots, but the framing of the ads were also designed to portray Harris and Democrats as (to use [their term](#)) “weird” — that is, too focused on social causes and identity politics rather than on kitchen-table issues like inflation.

The ads' cynical tagline reiterated the Trump campaign's which-side-are-you-on [message](#): “Kamala is for they/them. Trump is for you.”

Why weren't Democrats able to sell working-class voters on their economic record?

America's macroeconomic performance remains strong. Many of Joe Biden's policies [contributed](#) to that performance, and also — for the first time in decades — [actually challenged](#) some of the worst corporate predators in the economy. So why didn't that persuade more working-class voters to stick with Democrats?

Some pundits have depicted the working class as an unthinking mob misled by a [negaholic media](#) that refuses to transmit good economic news. There's probably truth to the media critique, but Americans aren't dumb — the macroeconomy may be robust, but for the non-rich, the day-to-day experience of that macroeconomy is [brutal](#). After 40-plus years of a [master plan](#) that shredded the New Deal and the social contract, it's become a morass of [ever-increasing costs](#) and [red tape](#) to obtain the most basic necessities of life.

In four out of the last six presidential elections — and three of the last three — Americans have expressed their understandable anger at this reality by exercising one of the few democratic powers the public still retains: voting the incumbent party out of the White House. And this time, the incumbent was the Democratic Party.

Adding to this structural problem were Biden's own limitations. Earlier this year, White House aides [depicted](#) Biden's cognitive troubles as not interfering with his ability to do the job — but that misportrayed what the job actually is. Being president is far less about sitting in the Oval Office making decisions and far more about selling an administration's policies. Biden proved that a political party cannot sell an economic agenda without a salesman. Democrats also proved that [despite Obama's scolding to the contrary](#), there's no honor in deliberately refusing to sell the party's accomplishments.

Why did Americans decide to vote against “saving democracy?”

Trump won the majority of votes from those who told exit pollsters that democracy is threatened. So even as Democrats tried to cast themselves as the One True Defender Of Democracy, many Americans believed the opposite — hardly surprising considering the party’s presidential candidate became the nominee without a single vote cast, and without even an open convention.

Authoritarian antidemocratic tendencies certainly exist in parts of the electorate. And if Americans’ lived economic experience worsens and the government is seen as complicit, those tendencies will probably intensify, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt warned.

“Democracy has disappeared in several other great nations, not because the people of those nations disliked democracy, but because they had grown tired of unemployment and insecurity, of seeing their children hungry while they sat helpless in the face of government confusion and government weakness through lack of leadership,” he said in a 1938 radio address. “Finally, in desperation, they chose to sacrifice liberty in the hope of getting something to eat.”

What could Democrats have done to win the election?

Harris deliberately ran as a generic Democrat, wagering that risk aversion would be enough to defeat an unpopular Trump. But risk aversion is itself risky for an incumbent party amid simmering discontent.

One alternative could have been Harris betting the campaign on one or two major, easy-to-understand proposals whose benefits would be undeniably clear to working-class voters. For instance: Just before being put on the ticket, Gov. Tim Walz said Democrats’ top priority should be universal paid family leave — a wildly popular idea. But once Walz was the vice presidential nominee, that was the last anyone heard of it.

Another strategy could have been Harris channeling the McCain 2000 presidential campaign and going all-in on an anti-corruption crusade. Leaning into her law-and-order brand, there could have been promises to increase public corruption prosecutions and pass new ethics and campaign finance laws — all implicitly spotlighting Trump’s corruption. But a campaign whose biggest donor was a dark money group decided not to do that.

Still another strategy could have been Harris betting the whole race on a promise to fix and overcome the unpopular, flagrantly corrupt, Trump-packed Supreme Court. We’re talking court expansion, judicial term limits, ethics rules — anything and everything that would highlight the court becoming a weapon of the corporate and far-right master plan. But again... that didn’t happen.

And of course, Harris could have staked out a far different position from Biden on Israel's war in Gaza, making clear that continued unconditional support of the Netanyahu government is unacceptable.

These are all counterfactuals, so we can't know if they would have made a difference. But considering [how close the election was in the key swing states](#), it's entirely possible that a different strategy would have resulted in a far different outcome.

How did both parties approach the media during the election?

Conservatives have built a robust independent media ecosystem that Republicans regularly engage with, and that Trump [exploited](#) to reach large audiences of disaffected swing voters.

Liberals, by contrast, [trust](#) and fetishize traditional corporate media, leaving non-MAGA independent media meagerly resourced (all while Democrats' big donors have [bankrolled](#) political groups pretending to be independent news outlets). Democratic politicians don't like to engage with or cultivate independent media that might ask them uncomfortable questions. Instead, they focus on getting booked on MSNBC to communicate with affluent liberal voters who already vote for Democrats. Consequently, Harris spent much of the campaign [hiding](#) from media generally, and avoiding independent media specifically.

This asymmetry between Republicans and Democrats is likely to become an even bigger political liability for the latter as corporate media loses audience share amid its credibility crisis.

What do we do now?

This is always the [big question](#) after elections. Take a deep breath. Meditate. Hug your friends and family. Stay calm and remember nothing has ever been under control.

— the national Democratic Party, which decided to be the [Cheeto lock](#) between us and authoritarianism. Its operatives kept Biden in the race until it was too late for a contested primary, and then they made millions off losing another campaign to Trump. Channel your anger into fixing and taking over that party so this never happens again.

Don't disengage. Run for local office. Pressure your local officials to use whatever power and platform they have to obstruct Trump's extreme agenda. Join a civic group or a union. Build community. Look at the victories of direct democracy in [Nebraska](#), [Maine](#), and [Missouri](#) — and then run a ballot measure in your own state.

Diversify your sources of information so that you are exposed to more than just oligarch-owned news that continues to [look like an Orwell parody](#), even after the election. Encourage your family and friends to stop sealing themselves inside a bubble of corporate media and its punditry. Forward them this article and encourage them to

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