Harris's Loss Triggers Soul-Searching, Recriminations Within Democratic Party

Failure to defeat Trump for second time in three elections will prompt calls for party to shift directions

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Updated Nov. 6, 2024 5:42 pm ET

A gathering of Harris supporters in Washington, D.C., had emptied out by the early hours of Wednesday. Photo: Kyodonews/Zuma Press

WASHINGTON—[Kamala Harris](#)'s defeat generated swift condemnation and soul-searching among Democrats, who are [handing the White House back](#) to a Republican they see as deeply flawed after their party failed to connect with voters preoccupied by inflation and illegal immigration.

The loss stunned Democrats, who felt confident going into Election Day that they had energy and momentum on their side. Instead, voters across several swing states delivered a clear rebuke by shifting in favor of President-elect [Donald Trump](#).

The immediate reaction from party leaders was despondency. Asked who was to blame for the loss, one senior Democrat simply said "everyone." The party lost ground with chunks of voters who used to be core to their coalition, including [working-class voters](#) and minorities, and lost rural areas in big numbers and failed to make up that deficit.

"This is a historic disaster of Biblical proportions. The Democratic Party, as it is, is dead. This is a historic realignment. There were Reagan Democrats. Now there are Trump Democrats," said Chris Kofinis, a Democratic strategist and former chief of staff to centrist Sen. Joe Manchin (D., W.Va.).

Donald Trump was elected president, defeating a resurgent Democratic nominee in Vice President Kamala Harris. WSJ's Molly Ball and Vivian Salama examine the moments that mattered most during his campaign. Photo: Evan Vucci/Associated Press

"The elites of this country alienated voters everywhere because they didn't want to hear what working- and middle-class voters were screaming for four years—focus on us and our problems, not your agenda to destroy Trump," Kofinis said.

Trump made significant gains among Black and Latino voters, particularly among men, and was on track to sweep the battleground states, including Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Georgia, and narrowed the margins in typically safe Democratic states such as Illinois and New Jersey.

Privately, Democrats were quick to point their finger at President Biden for running for re-election as an octogenarian and then, after a disastrous debate in June, stepping aside only after a tortured process. They now

will spend four years pondering the vice president's inability to defeat Trump despite his significant vulnerabilities, including 34 felony convictions.

Trump's victory sets off a period of anxiety and second-guessing within the Democratic Party, reminiscent of the stretch after his narrow win over Hillary Clinton in 2016. Clinton's earlier defeat emboldened progressives within the party to join "the resistance" and was embodied by women who launched the women's march to protest Trump's inauguration.

It also supercharges deep questions that have been swirling on whether the party has become too elite and has lost its ability to appeal to the working-class voters who traditionally have backed Democratic candidates. "Something is definitely wrong with the Democratic brand," said Matt Bennett, a founder of the center-left think tank Third Way. "Everyone believes there is a problem. But we diagnose the problem quite differently."

The party's center-left contingent wants to see Democrats take on issues like the economy, crime and the immigration in a more direct way while avoiding some of the cultural issues, like rights for transgender people, that they feel turned off middle-of-the-road voters.

But the progressive wing of the party sees it differently, arguing that Democrats need to move further to the left to excite a new batch of voters or take other steps to try to lure back the types of voters who have moved to Trump in recent years.

"It should come as no great surprise that a Democratic Party which has abandoned working class people would find that the working class has abandoned them," Sen. Bernie Sanders (I., Vt.), a leader of the party's progressive wing, said in a statement Wednesday.

"Those of us concerned about grassroots democracy and economic justice need to have some very serious political discussions," Sanders added. "Stay tuned."

Liberals believe the party could turn out swaths of new voters if it embraces a more populist approach that delivers tangible benefits.

Trump has served as a unifying figure for Democrats, tamping down this intraparty debate. He has also been a boon to both parties in organizing and in fundraising, but the Democratic Party must now reckon with how it lost to him in two of the three past presidential elections despite high disapproval ratings and anger over the overturning of the Roe v. Wade decision by a Supreme Court that Trump helped construct.

And it is unclear that Trump will continue to motivate Democrats, some of whom are fatigued by nearly a decade of outrage.

Still, in the immediate near term, Democratic leaders will again band together to try to block policies from the Trump White House. Trump will have a slender majority in the Senate, giving him a freer hand in confirming appointments.

Now in the wilderness, the Democratic Party will need to choose a new chair of the Democratic National Committee while an array of governors and senators will look to make the case for how Democrats should respond to Trump's return to power.

Harris's defeat immediately elevates a large field of potential presidential candidates in 2028, including governors such as Gavin Newsom of California, Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania and Wes Moore of Maryland. It wasn't immediately clear if Harris would run again.

Progressive leaders such as Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D., N.Y.), Jamie Raskin (D., Md.) and Ro Khanna (D., Calif.), a longtime ally of Sanders, could also emerge as contenders from the left.

But the second defeat of a female standard-bearer to Trump—a candidate whom Democrats viewed as uniquely flawed—could also scare the party from elevating another woman to the top of the ticket in the immediate future. "If the Democrats lose, they will believe it's because we had a nonwhite woman and people just couldn't vote for her," said James Carville, who was the top political strategist to President Bill Clinton, speaking a few days before Election Day. "We are more unified. We have more money. He's had a disastrous close."

Biden's decision to [initially seek a second term at the age of 80](#) and the party establishment's aggressive efforts to discourage primary challenges last year will linger within the party in the aftermath of Trump's victory. The president's damaging debate performance against Trump in June led to waves of criticism about his mental fitness to lead and pressure within the party, ultimately leading to Biden's decision to withdraw from the campaign on July 21.

Biden quickly endorsed Harris, who swiftly lined up support in the party and locked down the nomination within days, averting a primary process. Democrats said Biden's decision-making deprived the party of an open competition that may have resulted in a stronger candidate.

And the timing meant that Harris had just over 100 days to pull together a campaign. She quickly unified the party and raised more than $1 billion within months.

There have already been questions about whether Harris made the right choice in Minnesota Gov. [Tim Walz](#) as a running mate, or whether another pick would have helped her more. But some Democrats say the vice presidential choice likely mattered little in the scheme of things, given Harris's broad loss across swing states.