Opinion
NCR Voices
Trump

Republican President-elect Donald Trump addresses supporters during his rally at the Palm Beach County Convention Center in West Palm Beach, Fla., Nov. 6 after being elected the 47th president of the United States. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)



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The Democratic Party has a choice. It can change or it can find a different country. When you can't beat a convicted felon, lose really excellent public servants like Senators Bob Casey and Jon Tester, and watch your margins shrink in virtually every demographic, you need to do some serious soul-searching.

Currently, the Democrats are engaged in a round of finger-pointing and counterfactuals. What if Joe Biden had not dropped out? Can't know for sure, but my bet is the country would have tired of the anxiety that swept the nation every time he went to a microphone. What if he had dropped out earlier and the Dems had found a different candidate? Looking at the losses in down-ballot races, it is hard not to conclude that the problem is the brand.

There is one person who should not be blamed: Vice President Kamala Harris. She was thrown into this campaign under extraordinary circumstances. She made some mistakes but, by and large, she projected a pragmatic version of Democratic ideals. Yes, the Harris of 2024 was stalked by the Harris of 2020, which the GOP had on tape. But I have no patience for people who think throwing Harris under the bus will help the Democrats restore their fortunes. The problem for the Democrats is larger than any missteps Harris made.

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We should be suspicious of monocausal explanations for the defeat, but the largest reason seems to be that the Trump campaign successfully placed their candidate on the winning side of the "diploma divide." As David Brooks noted at The New York Times about the people on the working-class side of the diploma divide: "They don't speak in the right social justice jargon or hold the sort of luxury beliefs that are markers of public virtue." Donald Trump traffics in a vulgar and visceral kind of hate, but the condescension Democrats display toward the working class is also a kind of hate.

Collectively, these working-class voters said "enough." And the anger was not limited to Christian nationalists or white racists in red states. Harris beat Trump by only 5 points in Virginia and New Jersey and Trump increased his margins in deep blue states like Massachusetts and Connecticut. He did better among Latinos, Black men, women, young people and urban voters than four years ago.

I am very sympathetic to the related analysis of Sen. Bernie Sanders.

"It's a Democratic Party which increasingly has become a party of identity politics, rather than understanding that the vast majority of people in this country are working class. This trend of workers leaving the Democratic Party started with whites, and it has accelerated to Latinos and Blacks," he told The New York Times. "Whether or not the Democratic Party has the capability, given who funds it and its dependency on well-paid consultants, whether it has the capability of transforming itself, remains to be seen."

It is the connection between the issues and the donors that is key. Democratic donors on Wall Street, in Silicon Valley and in Hollywood, and among special interest groups don't want a party that champions populist economic policies. They wanted the Harris campaign focusing on abortion, not on raising the capital gains tax.

A trader wears a hat at the New York Stock Exchange in New York City, Nov. 6 in support of R

A trader wears a hat at the New York Stock Exchange in New York City, Nov. 6 in support of Republican President-elect Donald Trump, after Trump was elected the 47th president of the United States. (OSV News/Reuters/Andrew Kelly)

The problem isn't just donors. Campaign staff are increasingly drawn from the collegiate milieu that can only think in terms of identity politics, overemphasizes not just the significance of race, gender and sexuality, but does so in a way that is unintelligible to most Americans. David Shor raised the issue with the "privileged college kid problem" years ago and the party needs to find a way out of the corrosive effects that syndrome places on them. Hint: People who rise through the ranks of labor unions don't usually sound like they just emerged from the faculty lounge! Hire staffers from the building trades not Harvard University.

The problem now is that Trump has claimed the populist mantle and I am not sure how the Democrats claim it back. If he fails to deliver for working-class voters, there will be an opening if Democrats are willing to take it. In turn, if Democrats shed their cultural condescension they might reclaim Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Those are three big "ifs."

The Democrats won't jettison their support for abortion rights, but could they return to the argument that abortion should be "safe, legal and rare"? Can they acknowledge that the horrors of history exist alongside the grandeur of history and tell left-wing activists to go pound sand when they want to tear down a statue of Christopher Columbus? Can Democrats admit that parents should have some say about when their children are exposed to content about human sexuality, and what that content is?

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In the short term, there is one immediate thing the Democratic Party needs to do: Elect a chair of the party who will recommit to the "50-state strategy" Howard Dean began when he took over the party after John Kerry's 2004 loss. That strategy forced the party to find out what was on people's minds in flyover states, to help Democrats get elected to local and state office, and paved the way for Barack Obama's win in 2008. The Democrats should also select a party chair who is from the center of the country, who represents a district or state that was lost because of the defections of working-class voters.

Trump is not a demigod. He won convincingly but it was not a landslide like Ronald Reagan's victories were. He will offer the Democrats plenty of chances to call attention to the ways his policies do not help his voters. The U.S. Constitution will be battered in the coming years but I don't think it will break. But unless the Democrats find a way to win back working-class voters, they need to start country shopping.