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[Democrats' serious organizing failure led to loss](#)



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If you don't have the voters, you can't win the votes.

By Robert Weiner and Ting Cui

Amidst the Democrats' circular firing squads seeking whom to blame for their election loss, a more foundational issue has emerged: for the first time in modern electoral history, the Democratic Party registered fewer new voters than the Republicans ahead of the 2024 election. This was a fundamental failure that based on the sheer numbers likely cost Democrats the presidency. This was especially true in critical swing states like Michigan, Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Nevada-- all of which the Republicans captured.

This was the first election in our lifetimes where Republicans outpaced Democrats in registering new voters nationally. Democrats previously held that advantage, but let it slip away this time around.

The national number of [registered voters](#) in the 2024 election was roughly 161.4 million (64%), down from 168.3 million (66%) in 2020. According to the University of Florida's Election Lab, 245 million people were eligible to vote, but close to [90 million](#) did not. While Republicans executed a focused ground game, Democrats concentrated on turning out existing voters rather than expanding their base. Tapping into this pool could have potentially offset any Democratic losses due to voters switching parties and others staying home.

Nowhere was this more evident than in Michigan, where Kamala Harris lost by just 80,000 votes despite record turnout. A more aggressive Democratic registration drive targeting the remaining 300,000 unregistered eligible voters in Michigan could have changed the election's outcome. There's no guarantee that those registered voters would have voted for Harris, but you can't win at all if you don't have the votes.

This registration deficit played out across every battleground state though. In Arizona, Democrats lost 2 points of their registration advantage while Republicans captured more new voters in a 5% surge in voter rolls. Nevada saw a 22% jump in registered voters, with Republicans gaining an 8% share while

Democrats lost 4%. In North Carolina, Democrats' registration advantage shrunk from 6 points to just 1 point (31%-30%)

In analyzing the numbers, the Democrats' strategy seemed misaligned.

Perhaps most troubling was the Democratic National Committee's rejection of a Congressional Black Caucus proposal for a \$10 million voter registration campaign in swing states, confirmed by prominent Detroit News journalist, Bankole Thompson. Despite having a record billion-dollar war chest, the party declined this targeted outreach effort that would have featured Harris headlining speeches alongside bus caravans and door-to-door registration drives.

This stands in sharp contrast to successful historical registration efforts. When I directed the Democrats' youth voter registration efforts at the Watergate DNC headquarters in 1972, young voters registered with the highest percentage to this date. DNC Chair Terry McAuliffe asked me at a holiday party how we did it back in 1972. I told him, with a lot of hard work.

We launched an aggressive youth turnout campaign with posters, charts, and youth ambassadors across every state and congressional district. We recruited coordinators for states, districts, and cities, seeking recommendations from governors, mayors, congressmen, and state party chairs. We aired nonpartisan PSA radio spots on 1,000 stations and recruited celebrities and officials for major events. In 2024, while Harris received endorsements from figures like Taylor Swift, the national campaign and the DNC failed to leverage these into large-scale registration initiatives.

The Republicans, meanwhile, effectively utilized resources like Elon Musk and X (Twitter) to build their ground game. As Chuck Levin, a longtime volunteer deputy registrar and founder of The First Vote, cited by the Los Angeles City Council and the California Secretary of State for registering record numbers in California, notes, "All of the youthful excitement, enthusiasm, and tireless social media support for VP Kamala Harris was indeed real and impressive during her 110-day candidacy. But if you are the Democrats, where was your preceding 18-month-long effort to register the new XYZ generations' voters to your cause in the swing states? If that does not get done, you not only squandered time, you also reduced your chances of likely success. The basics are more essential than press releases, glitzy conventions, polls, and TV ads."

The Democratic Party's messaging challenges-- from its handling of Gaza to its tendency to exclude divergent voices-- certainly contributed to their defeat. However, no message can overcome a basic numerical disadvantage, no matter how compelling.

It turns out that the election was a lot closer than Republicans first claimed - a mere 1.6 percent difference in the [popular vote](#). With a record 1.5 billion campaign funding, failing to invest more broadly in voter registration represents a catastrophic organizational failure that must be addressed before the next election cycle. History shows that losing parties often rebound in off-year elections-- but not if the same mistake is repeated.

As Levin told us, "The circular recrimination salvos miss the real point. If you don't have the voters, you can't win the votes."

Robert Weiner was National Youth Registration Director from 1971-72 at the Democratic Headquarters during Watergate. He has also served in the Clinton and George W. Bush White House and worked for Congressman John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Ed Koch, Claude Pepper, Senator Ted Kennedy, and Four-Star Gen. Barry McCaffrey.

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