

How Much Do Democrats Need to Change?

Peter Slevin

The mood among Democrats on a December morning in the Wisconsin state capitol was celebratory. Ten Assembly candidates—among them a school administrator, a tavern owner, an accountant, and a county politician—had flipped Republican seats after the state Supreme Court threw out a heavily gerrymandered map. “I am super excited. Who else is super excited?” Representative Lisa Subeck, the caucus chair, said. Some of the newly elected spoke about what they hope to deliver: affordable housing, broadband, clean energy, and more money for public schools. One said he wants to show “that government can be a force for good.”

In addition to the Assembly candidates, four Democratic state Senate candidates won Republican-held seats. Though the G.O.P. still controlled the state legislature, its margins narrowed significantly. Further up the ticket, Senator Tammy Baldwin, a widely liked Democrat, won a third term. Though Kamala Harris lost her Presidential bid, the popular vote, and seven swing states to Donald Trump, the message—even in Wisconsin, which Harris lost—is not so straightforward. The same is true in North Carolina, where Harris was defeated by Trump but Democrats swept the other six statewide races. Of the five battleground states where a Senate race was on the ballot, Democrats won four, losing only [Pennsylvania’s](#), and that one by a mere fifteen thousand votes, or 0.2 per cent. Looked at another way: Donald Trump won the national popular vote, but if one hundred and fifteen thousand of the eight million Trump voters in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania had voted instead for Harris, she would be headed to the White House.

“I’m not setting fire to any playbooks around here,” Ryan Spaude, who flipped a Republican Assembly seat near Green Bay, told me. “We nudged this district to the left on a day when the whole country was moving to the right.” Spaude, who is thirty, was until this month a county prosecutor. Buoyed by the new maps—a product of Democrats winning a pivotal Wisconsin Supreme Court race last year—he said he knocked on roughly four thousand doors, including a hundred in the hours after President Biden dropped out, when he was feeling ebullient about his chances.

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Campaigning in a small district to be one of ninety-nine members of the Wisconsin Assembly, Spaude touted specifics that he knew voters would recall. When he heard voters talking about hard times, he told them that he favored holding down middle-class taxes, expanding Medicaid, raising the seven-dollar-and-twenty-five-cent minimum wage, and supporting child-care providers. “Just tell working folks how you’re going get more money in their pockets,” he said. “I don’t think an ideological pivot is what we need.”

Listening to him, I was reminded of a series of Trump yard signs that kept catching my eye as I reported in Wisconsin this year. In a billion-dollar Presidential campaign, where slickly produced advertisements ballooned on television and social media, the signs were plain, uncluttered, and clear: “Trump Safety Kamala Crime,” “Trump Low Prices Kamala High Prices,” “Trump Secure Border Kamala Open Border,” “Trump Low Taxes Kamala High Taxes.”

The signs were not grounded in fact, much less in policy, but they were as simple as a nursery rhyme, and just as easy to remember. Spaude put it this way: “You had Harris not really offering a direct solution to people’s pain, their top problem, and you had Trump who was peddling snake oil. It’s snake oil, but at least somebody was offering them something, and they bought it.”

Rebecca Cooke saw the same forces at work in rural western Wisconsin, where she challenged Derrick Van Orden, an incumbent member of Congress and Trump admirer [who attended](#) the January 6th rally. Raised

on a dairy farm, she worked as a political fund-raiser before opening a shop in Eau Claire and creating a nonprofit that offers grants to women-owned businesses. She now works as a waitress at an upscale restaurant in Eau Claire. During the campaign, Cooke said, she avoided making unrealistic promises that she feared could feed into voter mistrust and cast herself as “somewhere in the middle,” a [Blue Dog](#) Democrat who would avoid extremes. She lost by three points, but in a mostly rural region where Trump scored his biggest gains in the state, she fared considerably better than Harris. She is strongly considering another run, anticipating a midterm election cycle that is likely to be more favorable to Democrats.

Cooke believes that there is a problem with the national Party’s image, which was reinforced by Harris’s messaging choices. “The Democratic Party brand is far left right now, when that’s not the majority of the country,” Cooke said. “We don’t have an agenda that really tells people what we’re going to do, how we’re going to make things better, and how we’re going to improve people’s lives.” She went on, “There was a lot about joy, but there are a lot of people that aren’t feeling joy in their lives right now.” It didn’t help to tell voters that the economic numbers were getting better when they weren’t feeling it. Nor, from the vantage point of her mostly working-class district, did Cooke think Harris’s courting of celebrities was wise. “Most people can’t afford to go to a Beyoncé concert,” she said.

On the Saturday night before Election Day, Bill Hogseth and his wife went to dinner at the restaurant where Cooke works. She was on duty, taking orders and delivering plates of walleye, smoked ham, and steak. The two are longtime friends, with similar perspectives on Democrats’ struggles in the district. Four years ago, Hogseth, a wildlife biologist, chaired the Democratic Party in neighboring Dunn County. Afterward, he became a full-time organizer, focussed most recently on affordable housing. What struck him most as he knocked on doors this year was how few voters even mentioned the Presidential race. “I can count on my hand the times where I heard people say, ‘Well, hopefully So-and-So gets elected and then this will change,’ ” he told me. “More often than not, it was, ‘Something needs to happen in my local community,’ ‘We need to take on the landlords,’ or ‘There needs to be rent control.’ ”

I heard a similar sentiment from Greta Neubauer, the minority leader of the Wisconsin Assembly, who has represented Racine for seven years. Door-knocking across the state, she said she was struck by “how many people simply did not want to talk to me, do not like politics, do not believe it will change their circumstances.” She believes Democrats have solid values and strong policies that they have failed to express clearly. “Pick some very easily communicated, bold economic policies that we can talk about,” she suggested.

That said, Wisconsin’s voter turnout was the highest in the country, at nearly seventy-seven per cent, and Harris received thirty-eight thousand more votes than Biden did four years ago, only to lose to Trump by twenty-nine thousand. “What is clear to me is there are a lot of voters who are not hearing our message right now,” Ben Wikler, the state Party chair, told me. “We need to ramp up the intensity, but also the places and ways that we communicate. When we operate in every square inch of the state, and we have a ton of messengers going to lots of different places, and we’re fighting for our values in a really visible way on a year-round basis, we can overperform national trends.”

Wikler, who is campaigning to chair the Democratic National Committee, has built the most formidable state operation in the country. Since taking over, in 2019, his office has raised and spent two hundred and thirty million dollars, expanding the Party’s support of down-ballot candidates. The permanent staff stands at fifty, after a campaign in which Democrats operated fifty-nine offices across the state. Harris was nonetheless defeated, in Wikler’s view, by “a wall of ads” with a common theme: “The idea that Democrats don’t get it. They don’t care about what’s happening in your life. They’re not focussed on you, they’re focussed on someone else.”

Scott Krug, a Republican who has represented a rural assembly district in central Wisconsin since 2011, credits Trump’s victory and the continued G.O.P. control of the statehouse to a strong ground game and a focus on economic issues. “We overperformed,” he told me, saying that Republicans are “trying to pass wide-scale tax cuts for income taxes, and for seniors to have a tax-free retirement. People wanted to be able to know that they’re going to have money in their pocket.” In a state where five of the past seven Presidential elections have been decided by less than a percentage point, Krug does not see a big political swing coming, “unless there’s some massive blowback of some sort against Donald Trump or a wave election. Wisconsin is pretty insulated from big shifts.”