Thursday, Nov. 7, 2024 / Pin the fail on the donkey

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL KING (host): Kamala Harris gave a concession speech at Howard University yesterday, so I sent Sean down to ask her supporters two questions.

SEAN: What do you think went wrong last night?

PERSON 1: Everything.  
  
SCORING IN – TK

PERSON 2: I don't think anything went wrong. I think that Donald Trump represents what America values, and I think that sucks.

PERSON 3: I think a lot of things went wrong, but not necessarily just last night.

PERSON 4: This Gaza war.

PERSON 5: She really didn't have a lot of time.

PERSON 6: There's a lot more unity on the Republican side of things.

PERSON 7: But you know Biden was not physically and emotionally and mentally up to the task.

PERSON 8: Democrat voter turnout.

PERSON 9: I just think our male voters let us down.

SEAN: Where do you think the Democratic party needs to go from here?

PERSON 10: More engagement. I mean, I think Democrats need to inform themselves better of the stakes.

PERSON 11: Clear, concise stances on policy.

PERSON 12: We need to find the people cause we're the ones who help people. He's not the one who helps people.

PERSON 13: And I think we need to become a little bit, when they go low we need to go under the ground!

SEAN: [laughs]

SEAN: We’re gonna pose those same two questions to two people who have been thinking a lot about the Democrats on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: Eric Levitz, you're a senior correspondent at Vox covering politics and policy. We know Kamala Harris lost, the whole world noticed. But how bad a night was Tuesday for Democrats across the board?

ERIC: It was not good, Sean. You know, not only did Harris lose, you know, pretty substantially in the Electoral College, but it looks like Donald Trump is going to win the popular vote for the first time. And in the Senate, as of this recording, it looks like Republicans will have at least 53 Senate seats, possibly 54. The House is not decided yet, but Dave Wasserman of the Cook Political Report, who is pretty prominent on social media as a prognosticator of election results based on partial returns, says that he sees many more paths for Republicans to get a majority at this point than Democrats. So this obviously is not what Democrats were hoping for.

SEAN: Democrats did poorly across the board, You're saying. Who did they do poorly with?

ERIC: Yeah, So the data that we have right now tells a pretty clear and interesting story.

SCORING IN—ghost of spider monkeys

ERIC: So according to the Associated Press Vote Cast — a survey that measures kind of how different demographics voted on Election Day; it's more sophisticated than an exit poll — Trump's margin with non-college-educated voters went from being four points above the Democratic nominee in 2020 to 12 points above the Democratic nominee in 2024. Meanwhile, Harris actually mostly held her ground with college educated voters. She was about a point below Biden. Then among white voters, Harris's margin also basically about as well with white voters as Biden did four years ago. The problem was that her margins with black and Latino voters really went down substantially. So in 2020, Biden won the black vote by a margin of 91% to 8%. Harris won it, according to AP vote, cast 83% to 15%.

*<CLIP>* [*CONGRESSMAN BYRON DONALDS:*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRBiAfgTJIY) *What people have seen is they mistreat him day in day out but he’s still fighting for the American people. Black men see that and say ‘Man, if he can go through that maybe he’s saying the truth!*

ERIC: Among Latinos, Biden wins 63 to 35% in 2020. Four years later, Harris is winning that 56 to 44.

[*<CLIP> DAVID TORRES, TRUMP VOTER IN PHILLY:*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFl08jRLrro) *We got little barber shops man, the economy hurt them. Little stores, the economy hurt them. We need to…*

ERIC: So these really large declines with non-college-educated voters, black voters and Hispanic voters are what ultimately leads the Democrats from going from a narrow electoral majority, Electoral College majority with Biden to Harris’ loss.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Why do Democrats have such a bad night, Eric?

ERIC: I think there are a lot of different factors.Right now. The way that I've been organizing. Them in my mind is to kind of think of two broad buckets. One, you know, a set of explanations that adds up to something that is relatively optimistic for the Democrats going forward and another that adds up to a sort of pessimistic or, you know, nightmare scenario for what this means for the Democratic Party and its future.

SEAN: Okay, Quite the spectrum there, quite the gamut we're running. Let's start with your optimistic case, because it doesn't seem like a lot of people share that view right now. How how do you think this was just not that bad a night for Democrats and more of like a an unfavorable cycle kind of issue?

ERIC: Basically, if you look across industrial democracies, worldwide, parties that have held power have all been doing really badly.

SCORING IN—VECTOR MODE

ERIC: Basically, if you happened to draw the long straw of being on the throne when the bill for Covid came due in the form of inflation, you were not very well liked by your voters. When inflation hit, you saw ruling parties in Britain …

[*<CLIP> GUARDIAN: “*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dh2pZlyINv8)*bang bang] And as Big Ben strikes ten the exit poll predicts a labor landslide…*

ERIC: … in Germany, in Austria and Japan …

[*<CLIP> BLOOMBERG:*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Am76YmOQHw0) *Shocker of a result over in Japan, markets continuing to digest what took place over the weekend…*

ERIC: … in Italy.

*<CLIP> REUTERS: “Italy is on course to cementing a historic result, cementing its most right wing government since WWII…”*

ERIC: Almost every country either lose seats in their parliaments or just lose power altogether. And so from this perspective, this is just really unfortunate timing. Almost nothing the party could do. In fact, Democrats came closer to retaining power than a lot of these parties. And so maybe the fact that even this was a close race, given what they were up against, maybe that says something, you know, somewhat positive about the party's overall health. So that's one factor that you can put in the optimistic bucket. You know, you combine that with the kind of extraordinary circumstance of for the first leg of the general election, having a rhetorically incompetent octogenarian president who really can't form sentences reliably, making the case for your party, that's not a good situation to be in.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: Come on. Come on, folks.*

ERIC: And it's not a situation that you would expect the party to be in again. And then finally, I think and perhaps the most important factor, frankly, for most of the past eight years, Donald Trump has been the cause of and solution to all of life's problems for the Democratic Party. Right. Like it's the backlash to his governance in 2018 that brings the blue wave. It's his unpopularity that helps Biden win in 2020. And if Trump does what he says, he's about to do a lot of really unpopular, disruptive things. So you might think that just fundamentally Trump is going to generate enough backlash over the next four years. The Democrats are going to be okay by 2028, just, you know, through the electorate's distaste for what they've just signed up for.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Okay. So in short, the optimism comes from the fact that Joe Biden wasn't the best president. And Donald Trump will probably be a bad president. Tell me about the pessimistic case.

ERIC: Yes, that case really rests on the demographic trends that I talked about earlier so that the two big ones were Democrats losing ground with non-college educated voters and losing ground with nonwhite voters. Now, those are two things that obviously I think to an extent were influenced by the factors I listed just a second ago inflation, Kamala Harris's imperfections, etc. These things definitely mattered. But the fact that it took this pattern. There's another way of reading it, which is that this was a trend that was already happening before 2024. These trends are potentially rooted in something a lot deeper and harder to fix than just disadvantages based on this particular election cycle. Put that all together and then just consider what is it going to look like when Republicans nominate someone who is not Donald Trump? In other words, someone who is not so blatantly vulgar, anti-intellectual. Disrespectful of democracy. It's hard to imagine that the next Republican nominee is going to be more offensive to college educated voters than the current one. And at the same time, they're probably not going to be as openly racist either. And so it just seems like that Republican nominee could, on the one hand, gain back some of the party's losses with college educated voters while continuing to build on its gains with these, you know, conservative-leaning nonwhite voters.

SEAN: Okay. So you've given us an optimistic case. You've given us a pessimistic case. When do you think it is exactly the Democrats are going to sit down and figure out how much they need to change? Is that already happening? Is that going to happen in two years? It feels like Biden waited too long to figure out how the party needed to change this time around.

ERIC: I don't think we're going to know for sure until 2028, frankly, because we're not going to know until then what our politics looks like when Donald Trump is not at the very center of it. His conquest of the GOP has been, you know, the dominant story of politics for most of the last eight years and arguably triggered these major shifts in the coalition. So until Republicans put up their new standard bearer, their first new one in 12 years. And we see how the electorate reacts to that in polls. We're not really going to know how much of the Democrats' problem was and wasn't Trump. How much of it was related to factors that were a one off in 2024 versus these deep structural trends?

SCORING IN—BUTTHOLE CHAKRA (BREAKMASTER CYLINDER)

ERIC: That said, what we do know right now is that Democrats do not have a coalition that makes it easy for them to compete for control of the U.S. Senate. Right now, they are looking at being down, I think, at least six seats in that body. And it's very hard to see how they regain a majority even in the next couple of cycles, or at least it's going to be an uphill fight because to do that, they're going to have to win seats in more than one race in places that Biden and Harris lost. That's a really big problem for the party. And so I think that would would make the argument for we need to figure out some way to make our coalition broader. We need to find a way to appeal to a wider variety of of Americans.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Read Eric Levitz at Vox dot com, si vous plait.

NOEL: Coming up: Bernie would have won this. Will be wild.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: Late yesterday, as Kamala Harris was conceding, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who WON his race on Tuesday, released a damning statement about the Democratic Party. “Democrats, led by big money interests and well-paid consultants, abandoned the working class, he wrote. And now the working class has abandoned the Democrats.” Ooof. So we called up Jeff Weaver: political consultant and long, longtime associate of Senator Sanders.

JEFF WEAVER (POLITICAL CONSULTANT, DEMOCRAT): I was started my political life as Bernie Sanders driver back in 1986 after having been expelled from Boston University for anti-apartheid protesting. I came to Washington with him in 1990 when he won his election to Congress. I served in his congressional office. I ran his Senate campaign in 2006. I was the Senate chief of staff for a couple of years. I left to start my comic book business and he called me back in 2015 to run his presidential campaign. And I have not been able to escape politics since.

NOEL: What were you thinking on Tuesday night as it became clear that Kamala Harris was likely not going to win?

JEFF: You know, people talk about Kamala Harris and, you know, she did not win, obviously. But this should not be laid at the feet of Kamala Harris.

NOEL: Hm! Whose feet should it be laid at?

JEFF: We left, we lost the Senate. It looks like we're not going to regain the House. This is a much deeper systemic problem than Kamala Harris running or not running a great campaign. You know, there are some some really deep seated problems with the Democratic Party's relationship with voters and particularly working class voters. It used to be white working class voters, but now increasingly, it's voters of color. And if we keep doing the same thing we've been doing, we're going to be in the permanent minority.

NOEL: What are those problems, Jeff?

JEFF: Yeah, well, look, this party was the dominant party in America for 30 years when it was the champion of economic populism that came out of the New Deal. And when it started to abandon that, you know, lost faith with working class people, Bill Clinton is really just started this with, you know, NAFTA and most favored nation status for China, you know, going after a poor people with this welfare reform bill, which allows, you know, some people, the administration even quit. And, you know, since then, neoliberal politics, which has really hurt working class people in this country with so, you know, open trade, free trade and other pro-business policies. You know, the Democratic Party is no longer seen as the party of the working man. And shockingly, the Republican Party has become the party of working class people. And that's a very distressing. So we have got to get back to our roots in many ways on economics, and we've got to put those front and center and be unabashed and full throated about whose side we are on. Mark Cuban should not be the face, the poster boy for the Democratic Party, he’s a bad face for the Democratic Party. You know, and then on the social and cultural issues, you know, when I first came to Washington with Bernie Sanders back in 1990, there were quite a few pro-life Democrats in the Congress. They were economically populist, but they happened to be pro-life for one reason or another. There were anti-gun control Democrats who were pro-gun control Republicans. You know, these issues have all become part of the partisan makeup of our country now. If you're a Democrat, you have to be pro-choice. You have to be for this or that. You're a Republican. You have to, you know, follow the orthodoxy in that particular party. And we need to get back to more of a position, I think, of social libertarianism in the party. The party is, you know, there's a lot of word checking and virtue signaling in the Democratic Party, which is off-putting to a lot of regular people. You know, there's a lot of, you know, college sociology terms are now made their way into the lexicon. And they're, they're for a lot of people they're off putting.

NOEL: All right. Let's dig in to what you mean by economic populism, because Kamala Harris tried a version of appealing to a middle and working class, right? Yes. She had plans to help homebuyers. She had plans to give parents tax credits. She had plans to cap prescription drug prices. She had plans to raise the minimum wage. Those seem like populist measures to me. Why didn't they seem like that to voters?

JEFF: Well, because she'd been part of an administration which had not taken inflation seriously enough. I mean, and by that I mean in their messaging. I do think the administration was working to bring down inflation. But when you talk to people in the administration or you saw them on a cable news show and you said the economy is not doing great, you were hit with a barrage of admittedly rosy macroeconomic numbers, but because of the gross income and wealth inequality in America, those numbers are meaningless to many, many people whose lives are not reflected in those numbers. The fact that, you know, Mark Cuban makes three times more money is not helping you know, an autoworker in Michigan who's making less money, you know, the average wages of working people in this country, the average worker in this country is making less in real dollars than they did 50 years ago. And that's not Kamala Harris's fault, but it is the Democratic Party's fault. You know, Donald Trump offers a narrative for why things are the way they are and why you may be doing well or not doing well. It's a false narrative about immigrants and social wokeness, but the Democrats don't have a counter-narrative. You know, if you listen to the president, Joe Biden, you know, there's good Republicans. Business is good, labor is good, the Congress is good, and somehow bad things happen to good people. While that's not satisfactory. You need to have a counterbalancing narrative which explains what is really happening in people's lives, which is wealth and income is being shuttled to the top in this country. The corporate elites, you know, are looting the bank accounts of of American consumers. And until you were willing to say that and just say you are on the side of working people against those forces, you were going to continue to have these results. You know, the truth is, without Covid, you know, Trump might have won reelection. So, you know, what everybody viewed as a repudiation of Trump in 2020 may just have been a flight to some kind of. Safety of normalcy that people wanted in Joe Biden because of Covid. But without Covid, I think people there is a populist trend in America. You saw it in 2016 on the Democratic side with Bernie Sanders, the left populism you saw. Right. Both as a faux populism, but a faux populism with a Donald Trump on the right. And that instinct has not gone away. You know, Covid interrupted it. But, you know, people understand that there are many institutions and powerful actors who are against them or against their interests. And until you are willing to stand up and point fingers and say who that is, you are going to be unsuccessful. You know, Star Wars is not a good movie without Darth Vader. And your story has to have a villain.

NOEL: The Democrats did have a villain. They had Donald Trump. What did I Miss?

JEFF: What happened was Donald Trump had been president. You know, Donald Trump, because he was erratic as a president, really didn't accomplish all that much, frankly. You know, a horrendous tax bill. But beyond that, his legislative accomplishments were relatively minor. I think you're going to see a very different and concerted effort by forces of reaction in this country to try to capitalize on his reelection, to do many of the things that they were unable to do in the first go round so that they could be much more problematic. But people said, look, we had Donald Trump. We still have a democracy, even though Donald Trump was president for four years. But, you know, price of eggs are, you know, crazy high. Everything's high. Interest rates are high. And that wasn't that way when Donald Trump was there. So, you know, we'll put up with his antics and that's a price they're willing to pay to have a bit more economic security. You know, I bristle when I hear, you know, some in the party call it economic anxiety, like it's some kind of neurosis that people are really doing well, but they just don't understand it. They're not doing well.

NOEL: So what do the Democrats do about that? How do they re engage Americans who say we are not doing well? You haven't done anything for us and we have thrown you bums out. What's the next step here?

JEFF: Well, the next step is to retool the agenda, retool the messaging. You know, that's a very high level that is very clear, full throated around economically populist issues and against the corporate elite. Inside the party there needs to be … I mean, that's a whole you know, we can have a four hour program on what has to happen within the party.

NOEL: Give me the top line.

JEFF: Look, you need to bring new voices into the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party needs to democratize itself. Whenever the Democratic Party moves away from democracy and they take the Democratic had a Democratic Party, we get kicked in the teeth. The people who are least competent to make decisions about where this country should go, what the messaging should be are Democratic Party insiders in Washington, D.C. Those people could not get elected anywhere other than in a Democratic Party. And many of them are actually appointed by the president. They're not even elected. Those folks are completely out of touch and unreliable. And, you know, we need some new blood in the Democratic Party. We need to democratize the party so that these new voices actually have a role. That's what we need to do.

NOEL: You worked with Bernie Sanders for a long time.

JEFF: I did.

NOEL: Bernie Sanders is an older gentleman.  
  
JEFF: <laughs> yes.

NOEL: In many ways, Bernie Sanders did change the conversation in this country, but he is in his 80s, if I'm not mistaken.   
  
JEFF:Yes.

NOEL: Do the Democrats need a next Bernie Sanders or one hundred of them?

JEFF: Well, yes, 100 would be good if we had 435. We could ,we could have one in every House district. But look, I'm a person who believes that leaders don't make history. History makes leaders.

SCORING IN <The Night Is Good For Mourning (instrumental)>

JEFF: You know, we'll have an open Democratic primary process next time and there will be people on that stage who will be articulating different visions for going forward. And a decision will be made about which way the party should go in 2024. We circumvented that process and we saw the result. You know, now we will have people there will be people articulating an economic populist approach to politics that I think would be very popular with working class people.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Jeff Weaver is Bernie Sanders’ former driver, and then later his advisor.

SEAN: Miles Bryan and Hady Mawajdeh made our show today.

NOEL: Matt Collette edited Laura Bullard and Amanda Lewellyn fact-checked

SEAN: we were mixed by Andrea Kristinsdottir and Rob Byers, and hosted by Noel King and ME!

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**