

Kamala Harris's Path to Winning North Carolina: Lessons from Obama's 2008 Strategy

A Data-Driven Analysis of Voter Mobilization and Demographic Trends - Week 9-10 Challenge -
Block A – Year 2

Rafał Stańczyszyn 234778

15.11.2024

Abstract

This report examines Kamala Harris's potential to replicate Barack Obama's 2008 success in North Carolina during the 2024 presidential election. Focusing on voter mobilization and demographic trends, it investigates Harris's ability to engage minority voters, particularly African Americans, and her overall campaign strategy. Obama's 2008 victory highlighted the critical role of African American voter turnout and a gave the message of hope in securing Democratic wins in battleground states. However, Harris's 2024 campaign faced challenges, including declining African American voter engagement, economic concerns, and perceptions of her as an establishment candidate.

Analysis reveals that while Harris's strategy was similar to Obama's in some aspects, it failed to adapt to the contemporary political and economic climate. Key findings include a decrease in African American voter turnout, limited resonance of her message, and the GOP's grassroots organization. Strategic recommendations emphasize the need for more applicable economic messaging, deeper voter engagement, and maintaining high turnout to compete in North Carolina's evolving political landscape. The report concludes that reclaiming the state remains a challenge for the Democrats as recent shifting demographics and political dynamics increasingly favor Republicans.

Introduction

The United States presidential election has a global significance, as it determines the leader of the free world. North Carolina, with its 16 electoral votes (in 2024), is one of the key battleground states where both Democrats and Republicans heavily invest. This unique state, comparable in some respects to Georgia, features a complex political landscape. It combines a large population of white conservative evangelicals, who predominantly vote Republican, with a significant African American population, roughly 20% of its residents, who tend to vote Democratic.

Before 2008, North Carolina was a reliably Republican state. George W. Bush secured the state with a 12% margin in 2004. However, Barack Obama's historic victory in 2008 changed this trend. Obama's campaign made voting easier for first-time voters, introduced a hopeful and unifying message of "Hope and Change," and achieved unprecedented voter mobilization. African Americans overwhelmingly supported Obama, with 95% voting in his favor, according to exit polls. Despite comprising about 21% of the state's population, they represented 23% of all voters in the election, driving a historic surge in voter turnout. In fact, North Carolina led the nation in the largest increase in voter turnout compared to the 2004 election.

Since Obama's win, North Carolina has reverted to being a Republican stronghold in presidential elections. However, Biden's narrow 1.5% loss in 2020 and his victory in Georgia—a southern state with a comparable African American population—demonstrated that Democratic success in the region is possible with the right strategy. Georgia, where 32.6% of the population is African American, had not voted for a Democratic president in 28 years before 2020.

North Carolina's political identity is often described as "purple." While the state has predominantly supported Republicans in recent presidential elections, it has a history of electing Democratic senators, such as John Edwards and Kay Hagan, and has frequently chosen Democratic governors in this century, with exceptions like 2012. This dynamic nature made both parties focus on North Carolina in 2024.

The question arises: could Kamala Harris, as the Democratic presidential nominee, reclaim North Carolina? As a woman of partial African descent, Harris might resonate more deeply with African American voters. Her campaign has already reassembled Obama's 2008 strategy, emphasizing the message of unity and hope. However, the critical challenge remains: are there enough African American voters left to mobilize to secure a Democratic victory?

This report investigates the factors that could enable Kamala Harris to win North Carolina in 2024, building on the hypothesis that her campaign could replicate Barack Obama's 2008 success by effectively mobilizing minority voters. The analysis is grounded in three sub-hypotheses: first, that Obama's win in North Carolina was largely due to his ability to inspire and turn out minority voters; second, that other Democratic candidates' failures to win the state were partly due to their inability to sustain this level of engagement; and third, that Harris, with her shared traits and strategies similar to Obama's, could potentially rejuvenate this coalition. By analyzing historical turnout data, demographic and electoral trends, this report aims to identify the most impactful strategies for Harris's campaign while evaluating why other Democratic approaches in the state have been less effective.

Findings

1. Key Factors Behind Obama's 2008 Success

Voter Mobilization and Accessibility: Obama's campaign made voting easier, particularly for first-time voters, with policies such as Same-Day Registration and early voting. African Americans made up 33% of new registered voters and 36% of those who used Same-Day Registration. Their turnout rate of 72% surpassed that of white voters for the first time.

Message Resonance: Obama's message of "Hope and Change" produces excitement among voters across demographics, particularly African Americans. This message stood out in a politically charged environment and appealed to a sense of progress and renewal.

Historic Increase in Turnout: North Carolina led the nation in voter turnout increase from 2004, driven largely by African Americans, who represented 23% of the electorate in 2008 despite being only 21% of the voting-age population.

2. Challenges Kamala Harris Faced in 2024

Time Constraints: Harris stepped into the race in July, which limited her ability to develop a North Carolina-specific strategy. In contrast, Trump's campaign had been actively preparing for years, with strong grassroots presence and momentum.

Decline in African American Voter Engagement: According to the exit polls African Americans represented only 19% of voters in 2024, a noticeable decline from previous elections. Furthermore, only 86% of Black voters supported Harris, compared to 95% for Obama in 2008, signaling a decrease in enthusiasm among a key demographic.

Economic Concerns: Voters' focus on economic issues overshadowed Harris's campaign message of unity and progress. It's possible that many African American voters viewed Harris as an extension of the current administration rather than a candidate who could deliver transformative change.

Establishment Perception: Unlike Obama in 2008, Harris's position as the sitting vice president contributed to an image of her being part of the establishment. This undermined her ability to replicate Obama's narrative of "Hope and Change." Ironically it might be the outsider's message of change that Trump provided that swung some of the democratic voters to republicans instead.

Rural Black Voter Weakness: Harris underperformed with rural Black voters in southern Virginia, eastern North Carolina, and southern Georgia, trailing behind Biden's 2020 pace. Signaling that sometimes the Urban/Rural divide proved to be even stronger than class divide in this election.

3. Insights from Data Visualizations

Black Voter Mobilization Correlation: Surprisingly, counties with higher Black voter mobilization showed a negative correlation with Democratic outcomes. While this is likely not causal, it suggests that focusing solely on turnout may not be enough without appealing to broader demographics.

Mixed Partisanship in Urban Counties: High-population counties in North Carolina are politically diverse, with some leaning Democratic and others strongly Republican. This highlights the challenge of relying on urban centers alone to secure a win.

Strong Democratic Support in Rural Black Communities: Even in sparsely populated areas, particularly in northeastern North Carolina, predominantly Black rural voters consistently supported Democrats. However, the limited population in these regions restricts their overall electoral impact.

Comparison to John Kerry's 2004 Performance: According to the exit polls Harris's support among African American voters resembled John Kerry's in 2004, rather than Obama's in 2008, indicating a regression in mobilizing this critical base.

4. Broader Observations

Voter Sentiment in 2024: Harris's message of "Hope and Change" failed to resonate in the same way as Obama's, particularly as economic concerns and anti-establishment sentiments dominated the political narrative. As one local observer noted, "I had had a feeling that the momentum was going towards Harris, but I don't think that the message of hope and change resonated the way the resentment did."

GOP Preparedness: The Republican campaign, particularly Trump's, displayed sustained grassroots organization and long-term voter engagement efforts, as evidenced by widespread Trump 2024 signs visible since 2020.

5. Speculative Insights

Harris's inability to replicate Obama's success suggests that her campaign strategy, while thematically similar, was not suitable to the current political climate. Economic challenges and her role as vice president likely diminished the perception of her candidacy as a fresh and transformative option. This raises questions about whether rhetoric alone is sufficient to mobilize voters in a polarized and economically focused environment.

Strategy Recommendations

1. **Focus on Economic Messaging for Low-Income Communities**

Harris's campaign should address the economic concerns of low-income voters, including African Americans and rural populations, by emphasizing policies aimed at reducing inequality, increasing job opportunities, and combating inflation. This would align with the primary concerns of voters in 2024. In other words "It's [still] the economy, stupid", or at least people's perception of it.

2. **Engage, Don't Just Mobilize, Black Voters**

While increasing turnout is essential, it is equally important to address the declining support among Black voters for Democratic candidates. Outreach efforts should go beyond standard mobilization to include policy proposals and messaging that resonate deeply with the African American community's current priorities.

3. **Maintain High Turnout**

Democrats' chances in North Carolina depend heavily on maximizing turnout. Efforts such as facilitating early voting, expanding access to registration, and ensuring grassroots outreach are critical to remaining competitive in the state.

Conclusions

1. **North Carolina Remains Elusive for Democrats**

Despite Kamala Harris's historical candidacy, her campaign struggled to secure enough support to win North Carolina. The declining engagement among African American voters and their increasing support for Trump highlight challenges that extend beyond turnout to issues of trust and policy appeal.

2. **Minority Vote Is Not Guaranteed**

The assumption that African American voters will consistently favor Democrats is dangerous. Harris's inability to maintain Obama-level support among rural Black voters indicates a deeper issue of outreach and alignment with voter priorities.

3. **Messaging Must Reflect the Times**

Harris's reliance on a message of "Hope and Change" similar to Obama's 2008 campaign did not resonate in a political and economic environment defined by voter resentment and financial hardship. This underscores the importance of tailoring campaign messaging to the specific challenges and sentiments of the electorate.

4. **North Carolina May Be Drifting Further Right**

While the state had shown signs of drifting left in the past, growing Republican inroads among minority voters make flipping North Carolina increasingly difficult. Unless Democrats can reclaim minority votes, their path to victory in the state remains tenuous.

5. **Risk of Worse Outcomes Than Pre-Obama Era**

If Democrats fail to reverse the trend of minority voters shifting toward the GOP, they may face even greater challenges than those seen before Obama's 2008 victory. Without the ability to count on a reservoir of potential minority votes through turnout efforts, their chances of winning battleground states like North Carolina will continue to diminish.

Limitations

1. **Lack of Comprehensive Data on Ethnic Mobilization**

Detailed data on voter mobilization efforts by ethnicity in 2024 was unavailable at the time of analysis, limiting the ability to assess the effectiveness of Harris's outreach efforts fully.

2. **Potential Overestimation of Democratic Support**

Exit polls and pre-election surveys often overestimate support for Democratic candidates, making it difficult to gauge the true impact of Harris's campaign strategies.

3. **Limited Assessment of Candidate Image and Charisma**

The report did not analyze how Harris's personal characteristics compared to Obama's in 2008, which may have influenced voter perceptions and enthusiasm. It is hard to do that based on pure data.

4. **Incomplete Election Data**

The analysis was conducted while votes were still being counted, and official 2024 election databases were inaccessible.

References:

2008 Recap: Same-Day Registration & Other Successes. 2008.

<https://democracync.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/WrapUpYearofVoterPR2008.pdf>

Booker, Brakkton, et al. “We Talked to Black Voters in 5 Battleground States. Here’s What They Said. - POLITICO.” *POLITICO*, Politico, Nov. 2024,

www.politico.com/news/2024/11/05/black-voters-swing-states-turnout-00187258.

Bureau, U.S Census. “North Carolina Gained around 900,000 People Last Decade.” *Census.gov*, 8 Nov. 2024, www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/north-carolina-population-change-between-census-decade.html#race-ethnicity. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.

“County Population Totals.” *Nc.gov*, 2023, demography.osbm.nc.gov/explore/dataset/county-population-totals/table/?disjunctive.county&disjunctive.region&disjunctive.cog&disjunctive.msa&disjunctive.vintage&disjunctive.estimateprojection. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.

Gleason, Sarah. “How Donald Trump Won North Carolina for the Third Time.” *Wilmington Star-News*, Wilmington StarNews, 6 Nov. 2024, eu.starnewsonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/11/06/is-north-carolina-still-a-battleground-state-after-trump-won-again/76087858007/. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.

Mahtesian, Charlie. “What the Electoral Map Tells Us about Kamala Harris’ Loss - POLITICO.” *POLITICO*, Politico, Nov. 2024, www.politico.com/news/2024/11/06/donald-trump-win-map-kamala-harris-00187805.

“North Carolina - Election Results 2008 - the New York Times.” *Nytimes.com*, 2023, archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/elections/2008/results/states/exitpolls/north-carolina.html. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.

Schneider, Elena. “Black Turnout Is Lagging in North Carolina, a Warning Sign for Harris - POLITICO.” *POLITICO*, Politico, Nov. 2024, www.politico.com/news/2024/10/30/black-turnout-is-lagging-in-north-carolina-a-warning-sign-for-harris-00186387.

Staff, CNN. *CNN*, 5 Nov. 2024, edition.cnn.com/election/2024/exit-polls/north-carolina/general/president/0. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.