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[Report]

## Playing Dead

Do the Democrats really want reform?

by [Andrew Cockburn](#)



An attendee at a People's Town Hall holds a placard before Sen. Elissa Slotkin & Rep. Kristen McDonald Rive (not pictured) speak at Everett High School in Lansing, MI on Friday June 6, 2025. All photographs from a People's Town Hall in Lansing, Michigan, June 6, 2025, by Christopher Dilts for *Harper's Magazine* © Christopher Dilts

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On April 25, the same day that FBI agents arrested a Wisconsin judge and ICE deported a cancer-stricken four-year-old U.S. citizen to Honduras, I arrived in Grand Island, a city of some fifty thousand in the heart of rural Nebraska, for a People's Town Hall. It was part of a series of such events promoted by the national Democratic Party to channel grassroots outrage over the Trump Administration's unbridled assaults on the fabric of American government, an outrage most forcefully demonstrated by the massive crowds turning out for the Fighting Oligarchy rallies—which started in Nebraska—assembled by Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Congressional Republicans, who had experienced an unwelcome taste of popular discontent at their own formerly placid town halls, were now under orders

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from party headquarters to avoid such encounters. “If they won’t talk to their own voters, then Democrats will,” announced Ken Martin, the newly installed chair of the Democratic National Committee. “That’s why we’ll be hosting People’s Town Halls in all fifty states across the country, starting now with vulnerable GOP-held target districts.”

Grand Island, for its part, hardly qualifies as vulnerable. It sits in Nebraska’s vast Third Congressional District, where the Republican representative Adrian Smith was reelected for a tenth term in 2024 with just over 80 percent of the vote. But like most of his peers, he had largely been shirking meetings where he was likely to face protest. The DNC venue, festooned with placards proclaiming *BENEFITS BEFORE BILLIONAIRES*, was packed to capacity with more than three hundred people. Most but not all were Democrats. “I didn’t know there was a Democratic Party in Nebraska—I’m an independent,” a man in the line for the ample buffet said loudly. “We should be on the streets!” shouted an elderly gentleman bearing a striking resemblance to Sanders. Debby Thompson, a retired English professor, had jettisoned her postretirement plan to write a history of plastics and, the day after the election, had connected with her local county Democratic Party. “I went to a meeting because I thought, I can’t do this alone. I want to do something,” she told me. As with many of those stirred to action by Trump’s return, her activism was not confined to party-led organizations. She had also set up a local branch of Indivisible, the progressive group born in the days of Trump 1.0 that, along with Sanders, has been mobilizing protests this time around. She was now helping lead regular demonstrations in her home town of Hastings, twenty-five miles away.

The day before the town hall, the Nebraska Republican senator Pete Ricketts, a multimillionaire whose family owns the Chicago Cubs, had ventured to hold a town hall in Kearney, home to a campus of the University of Nebraska—a rare exception to his party’s policy of lying low. Thompson had gone along with her friend Joyce Moore, a retired elementary school teacher. Ricketts, she told me, had been dismissive of voters who peppered him with questions about the so-called Department of Government Efficiency’s cuts to services and threats to benefits. “Folks from south-central Nebraska were asking Ricketts important questions, and his replies were, in essence, either that we were wrong or that we should just trust Congress and the president,” she said. Moore, the vice chair of the local Democratic Party in nearby Adams County, recalled feeling politically isolated when she moved to the state six years ago. “People in Nebraska just fall into being Republican,” she said. The Democrats, in her experience, had been involved in “state politics and things, but there wasn’t the motivation, fear, anger”—the emotions she felt were now spreading across the state. A protest that she and Thompson had helped organize in Hastings the previous week had attracted seventy-five people despite its being Easter weekend. “We had people from little towns all around us,” Thompson told me, driven by angst over Trump’s tariffs, threats to the state’s agricultural exports, and looming Medicaid cuts—a presumptive body blow to rural hospitals. “There’s a lot of people out there that just want to feel like they’re doing something because they are so frustrated and upset with the way things are going.”

Introducing the town hall, the Nebraska Democratic Party chair, Jane Fleming Kleeb—now also a vice chair of the DNC—extolled the advances local Democrats had made since she took the job in 2017. “We had 504 Democrats who were elected across the state. We now have 1,027 Democrats who were elected across the state. We’re making massive progress,” she said cheerfully. She then introduced the evening’s featured speaker, Representative Ro Khanna of California, a rising star of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party who co-chaired Sanders’s 2020 presidential campaign. Khanna is one of a number of progressive congressional Democrats encouraged by the party to appear in red-district town halls in an attempt to rebut impressions that the party is quiescent in the face of Trump’s onslaught. As a representative of much of Silicon Valley, the heart of his northern California district, he stressed that despite the many billionaires among his constituents, he nevertheless won reelection on a platform of taxing the rich. In what sounded at times like a presidential stump speech, Khanna denounced the Republican push to cut taxes for the wealthy as perilous for the deficit, and warned of Republican threats to Medicaid, mentioning their grievous effect on rural hospitals. He referenced Abraham Lincoln, hailed the generation that won World War II, and stressed the need to understand AI in order to “build wealth in the community.” Evoking the arrest of the Wisconsin judge, he fervently denounced the administration’s assaults on the rule of law: “The most patriotic thing in America is standing up for the Constitution!” he said, drawing sustained cheers from the crowd.

But the audience wanted answers. “What, if anything, can the Democratic members of Congress do to get back to the work they should be doing—the power of the purse, checks and balances, setting tariffs?” demanded Moore. “I’m curious about what you and your colleagues are doing to stop the funneling of American dollars into a genocide in Palestine?”

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Russia instead of Ukraine, prompting somewhat louder applause. A Latino questioner made a heartfelt plea on behalf of undocumented immigrants threatened with deportation to countries they'd left decades ago. A bank employee asked about Trump's evisceration of banking regulations and his promotion of crypto.

Though eloquent in detailing the dire effect of Trump's edicts, Khanna had little to offer in the way of immediate solutions. On tariffs, he suggested that Democrats in Congress should seek out and work with Republicans "who suddenly realize how irrational the tariff policy is." He denounced Trump's private crypto ventures while touting Bitcoin as a "store of value" for young people. Responding to the genocide question, he cited his vote against sending "offensive weapons to Netanyahu," while suggesting a (chimerical) two-state solution for Palestinians as the proper policy goal. Khanna also ventured the occasional jab at his own party's leadership, such as Chuck Schumer's contentious decision to support the Republican continuing budget resolution and the failure of any prominent Democrat to stand with the Haitians in Springfield, Ohio, when they were accused of eating dogs and cats.

After the event, I asked Thompson what she thought of Khanna's performance. Some of his answers were "better than others," she said, but for her, that wasn't the point of the evening. "Really, we wanted to register our discontent with the disastrous Trump Administration and with our complicit senators and representatives," she said. "It also helped to gather with like-minded people for a recharge." Whether the party that had organized the event could harness any of that energy, however, was an open question.



The hundreds of thousands of Americans packing into meetings and rallies around the country in the first traumatic months of the year found comfort in the company of others. But for the most part, their hopes for redress lay with the Democratic Party. They may be forlorn indeed; according to a poll conducted in part by the Associated Press in May, only a third of Democrats feel optimistic about their party's future. "The Democratic Party is hollowed out," Tory Gavito, president of Way to Win, a group organizing progressive donors, told me. "It's one of the most vicious cycles I've ever been through. You have Schumer and the old-school crew [who say], 'Just let the Republicans flame out on their own and we can elect a ham sandwich in the next cycle.'" She also highlighted efforts to push the anti-regulation, free-market "abundance agenda," promoted by the *New York Times* columnist Ezra Klein, which was "going great among a class of Silicon Valley donors."

Meanwhile, she pointed out, the success of the Fighting Oligarchy rallies has shown that the populist wing of the party is generating enormous energy. "This left-right paradigm only matters to the elites," Gavito said. "It doesn't actually matter to the voters. Everybody's cherry-picking their ideological views. You can have a mom anti-trump still want to have history."

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The scrambling of left and right was clearly demonstrated in Nebraska last year, when the most significant threat faced by Republicans came not from the Democrats, but an independent named Dan Osborn. An industrial mechanic and former union leader who rose to prominence leading the 2021 strike against the cereal giant Kellogg's in Omaha, Osborn ran against a Republican senator, Deb Fischer, on an anti-corporate, pro-worker platform that also called for gun rights, tight border controls, abortion rights, immigration reform, legal marijuana, raising the national minimum wage, and lifting the cap on Social Security contributions. To the alarm of Republicans, he surged in the polls, ultimately coming within less than seven points of beating Fischer and forcing the party to divert significant cash to shore up support for her. "In my campaign, I never talked about Trump or Harris," Osborn told me. "I talked about education for their kids, about crumbling infrastructure, how Fischer was letting the railroad companies off the hook on safety. I said to people, 'What do you need?'" Strikingly, Osborn outpolled Harris by nearly 20 percent. "The Democrats are still doing the same thing they did in 2024," he said, "just 'F Trump.'"

A similar approach paid off in northern Michigan for Betsy Coffia, a former social worker and journalist who flipped a rural statehouse district from red to blue in 2022. Last year, even as Democrats lost control of the Michigan House, she increased her margin of victory and flipped six red precincts while making no secret of her support for reproductive rights and gun safety. Like Osborn, she talked about winning over voters by addressing issues they cared about, rather than obediently following a script devised by strategists for the Michigan House Democratic caucus campaign. "I went rogue," she told me over the phone as she returned to her office from the state capitol. "There was a lot of pressure to go with the consultants' one-size-fits-all generic messaging, which was really just hammering abortion rights," she said—rights that had already been protected in Michigan. "I didn't feel like that was what I was hearing and seeing from my constituents." Accordingly, instead of investing money to broadcast the consultants' generic message, she spent it on her own messaging, tailored to the expressed needs of her district, such as funding for rural busing. "I got into some trouble for doing that," she said. "But I was right!" She had no kind words for a national Democratic leadership that was seemingly "super focused" on winning the 2026 midterms. "I think it's appalling how people are like, 'This will help us in 2026,' when your country's being taken over by an authoritarian bully. The Democratic Party has not been up to the moment, and that's not going unnoticed by a lot of very loyal Democrats in my community."

**K**en Martin's DNC aims to address some disaffections like Coffia's; as he wrote in a guiding memo in April, the party will "organize early, organize always, organize everywhere, and win anywhere." The People's Town Halls were evidence of this ground game, as is the money Martin is funneling to state-party leadership and away from more consultant-heavy strategies. But instead of presenting a united front, the DNC has since been riven with infighting, sparked by the efforts of David Hogg, the twenty-five-year-old school-shooting survivor and progressive activist, to displace incumbents with a younger generation of Democrats while he was serving as vice chair.

Kleeb, the DNC vice chair, agrees that the party has fallen short. She has seen upsurges of discontent in rural Nebraska before. Part of a ranching and farming family, she fought long and hard against the Keystone XL Pipeline, the bitterly contested project to move oil from Canada across the state. When that fight was at its height, she recalled, people had "turned out in massive numbers for town halls. They deeply care about protecting their community, whether it's their rural hospital or their water supply." But the Democratic Party had shown little to no interest in local organizing—or even showing up. "We've lost all this ground in rural communities because we have stopped talking with them, showing up, being in their communities, knowing who the opinion leaders are, because so many of our Dems got old and kind of moved on, and we didn't ever replace them."



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In Kleeb's experience, there had been paltry financial support from national headquarters for local parties across the country. Money at the DNC was diverted to feed an ascendant class of consultants versed in the mysteries of "voter analytics." Powerful Democratic donors had diverted funds from party-organized voter-registration drives, insisting that this important task be left to nonpartisan outside groups that enjoyed tax-deductible funding. When I first met Kleeb, in February 2017, she had just taken over Nebraska's Democratic Party. We had both recently been at the DNC meeting in Atlanta, where the party establishment squelched the election of the popular progressive congressman Keith Ellison as party chair in favor of former labor secretary Tom Perez. Former governors and senators, Kleeb said, were "calling state chairs and officers who had votes and saying, 'We really need you to go with Team Perez.'" Perez did not disappoint his establishment backers, populating key party positions with corporate-friendly consultants and lobbyists.

Eight years later, Kleeb, now fifty-two, has risen in the party as a close ally of Martin and the head of the Association of State Democratic Committees. At a meeting of Nebraska Young Democrats the day after the Grand Island event, I heard her reminisce about her own beginnings in politics, including organizing programs for the homeless and working with AmeriCorps—another institution Trump has stripped for parts. She recalled how, when she headed the national Young Democrats during the George W. Bush years, activists sported stickers featuring the slogan NOT MY PRESIDENT. "That was a symbol of resistance back in the day," she said. Now simply being anti-Trump isn't enough. "I think young people, just like older voters, want to know what the Democrats are going to do." Among other programs she would like to see Democrats adopt, she cited expanding public education to cover pre-K through community college; Medicare for All, making it easier for farmers and ranchers to get insurance; and taking action on climate change. The Young Democrats in the room listened attentively, some expressing fears that they faced a more immediate crisis. "If we really meet the moment," murmured a graduate student at the University of Nebraska, "it will bring on martial law."

Kleeb remained upbeat, giving me an enthusiastic report on the changes Martin was bringing to the DNC. The Republicans had adopted the infamous Project 2025, the far-right agenda being implemented under Trump, so the DNC is constructing a Project 2029, with a principal focus on protecting voting rights, Kleeb said. Meanwhile, the DNC has quietly deployed legal teams to prepare for "worst-case" scenarios, such as Trump interfering with the 2026 elections or attempting to run for a third term in 2028. More immediately, Martin is now pumping money in the direction of the long-neglected state parties. "A million dollars a month—that's twenty-one percent of the DNC budget," Kleeb told me, with parties in red states getting extra. Martin has also talked of adopting a "holistic" approach, in which Democrats will wage a "perpetual campaign" not only in all fifty states, but also in every county and precinct.

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Martin's principal opponent in the DNC chair race, the Wisconsin Democratic leader Ben Wikler, had secured the energetic support of party-establishment heavyweights, including House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries, Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, and the tech billionaire and major Democratic donor Reid Hoffman, who reportedly donated \$250,000 to Wikler's campaign. But it was the state parties, with which Martin had been working for eight years, that provided the crucial votes to ensure his convincing victory. His rhetoric skews populist, decrying, for example, "candidates on the Democratic side who take money from people who don't share our values . . . . We should only take money from people who share our values" and exclude union-busting corporations and polluters.

Among other reforms, Martin has pledged to displace powerful consultants who have long fed off the party. "Most of them are going to be gone because they provide absolutely no value or service," he has said. "The only thing they care about is lining their own pockets versus winning." That might include those who rose to power back during the Obama and Hillary Clinton eras and who secured major roles in the 2024 race. Harris's campaign chair, Jen O'Malley Dillon, for instance, co-founded her firm, Precision Strategies, after serving as DNC executive director early in Obama's first term. The company waxed rich on Democratic campaigns during Obama's second term and through Trump's first, after which O'Malley Dillon managed Biden's 2020 effort, served as his White House deputy chief of staff, and chaired his 2024 campaign until party leaders belatedly forced him aside. She then stayed on to lead Harris's campaign, in the course of which Precision Strategies garnered handsome rewards from both Harris's operation and the DNC. Gambit Strategies, a firm that received \$122 million from the Harris operation, was co-founded by Megan Clasen, a veteran of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential bid; Bully Pulpit International, recipient of \$101 million from Harris, is headed by Andrew Bleeker, formerly lead digital-marketing strategist for Obama's 2008 campaign. The most lucrative area for consultants lies in paid media (campaign advertising on TV and online), for which the media- and production-buying specialists reap commissions. Media Buying & Analytics, owned by the Atlanta firm Canal Partners Media (itself founded by the veteran Georgia Democratic operative Bobby Kahn), took in at least \$281 million from the Harris campaign.

The concentration of power over party messaging in powerful Washington-based firms evidently contributed to the party's losses among minority groups, whose own interests and concerns often go unreflected in TV spots. The 2024 election saw a fatal erosion of Democratic support among Latino and black voters. According to Chuck Rocha, a consultant who has focused on the Latino community, by his own count only ten out of 250 Democratic consultant firms are Latino or black majority-owned, one of which is his own. All too often, Rocha told me, Spanish-language campaign ads were simply translations of generic English-language spots, as opposed to messages specifically crafted to appeal to Latino communities. Colin Rogero, a consultant who worked with the Biden-Harris campaign, later complained that efforts to pitch the candidate to Latino voters fell short because campaign officials debated "back and forth about whether or not we should take on these tough issues, because we might upset this person or that person."

Among those potentially upset by taking on "tough issues," such as clear populist messages and criticism of Israel's ongoing massacre in Gaza with American weapons, were those supplying the big money. Mark Cuban, a billionaire Harris donor, hinted that he had gotten a staffer fired for suggesting that Harris supported a tax on unrealized capital gains. Haim Saban, the billionaire who forked over \$7 million in the early Aughts to build a new DNC headquarters in Washington, has expected and certainly received satisfactory Democratic policies on Israel, as reflected in the party's adamant refusal to allow a Palestinian American to speak at its 2024 convention, and the continuing support by a majority of congressional Democrats for arming Israel's onslaught. Not coincidentally, Democratic congressional candidates received the bulk of AIPAC funding in 2024: 58.6 percent, as opposed to the 38.5 percent allotted to Republicans.

Whatever his intentions, the party machinery inherited by Martin will be difficult to reform. James Zogby, a member of the DNC for the past thirty-two years who spent sixteen of them on its executive committee, applauds Martin's strategy as "a needed shift in resources from the national party, where money largely went to consultants." But Zogby—who once told me his mission is to be "a pain in the ass" for the DNC—also provided stark insights into the inner workings of the institution. "Think the Bulgarian Communist Party circa 1955," he said sourly, describing a tightly controlled, top-down structure. "There has never been a discussion about budget or priorities. It's an opaque process that is run by consultants and law firms, and the party members are kind of props. We go to meetings and sit there to look like there's actually a decision-making process, but there's not." Ordinary members, he said, "do not have opportunities to ask questions" at the biennial meetings, nor could they easily introduce resolutions. Even the

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executive committee's more frequent meetings haven't featured much, or any, general discussion. (On a conference call with DNC members the weekend after Biden's catastrophic debate with Trump, then-DNC chair Jaime Harrison reportedly turned off the chat function and refused to take questions.)

Martin may aspire to refashion the party's worldview, but he is confronting decades-old inertia that may well be impossible to overcome. "They still have a model of victory that's based on the Obama coalition," said Zogby, "but there's no Obama in the picture." He recalled an executive-committee meeting in the wake of the 2014 midterm elections, which had brought massive Republican gains. "The party pollster came in and said, 'We did well, even though we lost. We kept our coalition together. We won the black vote, the Latino vote, the youth vote. We just didn't win enough of them. So we've got to put more resources into it.'" Mindful of white working-class voters who had defected to the Republicans in large numbers, Zogby had spoken up. "We've been losing ground in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan, and as a result those states are going to be passing anti-union, anti-women laws, and it's going to affect everybody," he remembered saying. "And [the pollster] shot back at me and said, 'We're not going to be throwing money away, wasting it on people who aren't going to vote for us.'" This attitude was further articulated by Schumer in July 2016, at a time when Trump's appeal to working-class resentments was drawing massive crowds. "For every blue-collar Democrat we will lose in western PA, we will pick up two, three moderate Republicans in the suburbs of Philadelphia. And you can repeat that in Ohio, and Illinois, and Wisconsin."

After three elections and a further withering of Democratic support among blue-collar communities, as well as among black and Latino voters, Schumer appears to remain confident that Trump, embarking on his malign assault on the constitutional order, will ensure future Democratic success. James Carville reiterated the same point in the *New York Times* Opinion section this past February, suggesting that it's time for Democrats to "roll over and play dead. Allow the Republicans to crumble beneath their own weight and make the American people miss us." Zogby described a Schumer address to the DNC early this year laying out the Democrats' strategy: to "keep bringing Trump's numbers down so that when it got into the low forties they would be able to win control of Congress."



Even with party popularity trending at subterranean levels, there is scant indication that elected Democrats in Washington are deviating from business as usual: Schumer opted to support the Republican continuing resolution after saying he wouldn't. A number of Democratic senators have voted on a consistent basis for Trump's Cabinet nominees. Senator John Hickenlooper, of Colorado, who voted for ten of them, explained that to do otherwise might "piss people

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response to Trump's address to Congress in March. Deriding Sanders's rallying cry to "fight oligarchy" on the grounds that those outside elite institutions may not know what it means, Slotkin has advised Democrats to say they oppose "kings" instead. ("I think the American people are not quite as dumb as Ms. Slotkin thinks they are," responded Sanders.) Despite growing outrage at the cruelties of Trump's deportation program, Hakeem Jeffries had reportedly sought to discourage congressional Democrats from journeying to El Salvador in solidarity with illegally imprisoned Kilmar Abrego Garcia, though he has denied it. Twelve Democratic senators and forty-eight House members voted for the xenophobic, Republican-sponsored Laken Riley Act, which enables the deportation of undocumented immigrants merely accused of assorted offenses, and gives individual states standing to sue the federal government for enacting immigration policies they do not like.

Despite the huge and enthusiastic crowds cheering on Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez at their rallies, many Democrats are still focused on squashing threats from the left. "You have to look at the Democratic Party as an army that has been fighting a counterinsurgency campaign against guerrillas, who are the leftists and progressives calling for justice, equity, health care for all," said Robert Saleem Holbrook, a black progressive activist in Philadelphia. "They know how to fight the left, but they don't know how to fight Trump."

History indicates that the prime imperative of party organizations is to maintain control over the party, and thus they are most energized by threats to their control by insurgents. But establishment counterinsurgency campaigns are not necessarily successful. After all, it was the attempt by Republican leaders to control the Tea Party uprising that ultimately spawned MAGA and Trump's total dominance of the GOP.

**I**n May, the DNC's credentials committee recommended that Hogg's election be voided on account of a procedural challenge, requiring him to rerun his race. Hogg had aroused fury both inside the DNC and among other Democratic authorities with an initiative to raise money for his own outside group to mount primary challenges against "deadweight" incumbent Democratic members of Congress; in response, Carville dismissed him as a "contemptible little twerp." Hogg remained unrepentant. He told me that he is fighting for "generational change" and recruiting candidates who will take on such entrenched interests as Big Oil and the National Rifle Association. "The DNC has pledged to remove me, and this vote has provided an avenue to fast-track that effort," he announced after the committee vote. Hogg ultimately opted not to run for reelection as vice chair, announcing that he would continue to challenge "the culture of seniority politics that brought our party to this place" from outside the DNC.

Interested to hear more from the much-abused congressional leadership, I consulted a senior Senate Democratic staffer with a keen appreciation of battleground races, who agreed to speak on background. In contrast to the jeremiads I heard from Zogby and others, his outlook was upbeat. "I don't think we need wholesale change in the Democratic Party," he told me. In his view, 2024 "was an extremely close election. . . . Harris was handed the hardest thing to do in politics. . . . She just had to run so hard," he said, giving voice to the view that Harris could have done better had she had more time (despite the fact that her initial lead over Trump evaporated during the final three weeks of the campaign). The staffer had no patience for the notion that a candidate with more populist appeal would have fared better. "Some of my Democratic friends love to say, 'If you just get way out there on progressive issues, there's a bunch of people in the rural areas that are going to come your way or in the suburban areas that are going to come your way.' And I just have never seen that." Instead, he insisted, Democrats should focus on "the economy," which is "only going to get worse," thanks to Trump's disastrous policies, which will inevitably raise prices and cost jobs.

The party's hopes and attention, the staffer told me, are intensely focused on Virginia, where the former congresswoman Abigail Spanberger is running for governor in November. Spanberger trades heavily on her national-security credentials as a former CIA employee; she made centrism her calling card, with a fondness for working with Republicans and blaming progressive messaging for Democratic defeats. Her rhetoric in the current campaign indicates little promise of causing serious offense to corporate interests, which will be reassured by her pledge to refuse to sign any bill repealing the state's anti-union right-to-work law. In the view of the Democratic staffer, she is the ideal candidate, owing to her "very strong following, really good grassroots fundraising, good level of support from traditional Democratic donors." Spanberger leads in the polls and fundraising, while the Virginia Republicans are riven with internal disputes, so she is likely to win, and popular revulsion over Trump's destructive initiatives may propel the party to wins in the 2026 midterms. But such victories will likely reassure party elders resistant to change, thereby leaving in place the same party that fought and lost the 2024 election, complete with its attachment to Israel and military spending.

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Despite the reforms instigated by Martin to buttress local organizers like Kleeb, and the populist energy revealed by the Sanders and Indivisible mass meetings, party strategy will still probably be centered on the rallying cry of “F Trump,” which failed to secure victory in 2024. In the absence of an audit of the defeat (though Martin has promised one), a consensus has emerged that the fault lies entirely with Biden and his clique for having selfishly insisted on running despite his evident senility. That explanation has the merit of letting everyone else off the hook; but the grim roster should include the vacuous Harris, the inept and avaricious consultants, the endorsement of the Gaza genocide that alienated a significant number of young voters, and the lack of any convincing communication of what the party stands for.

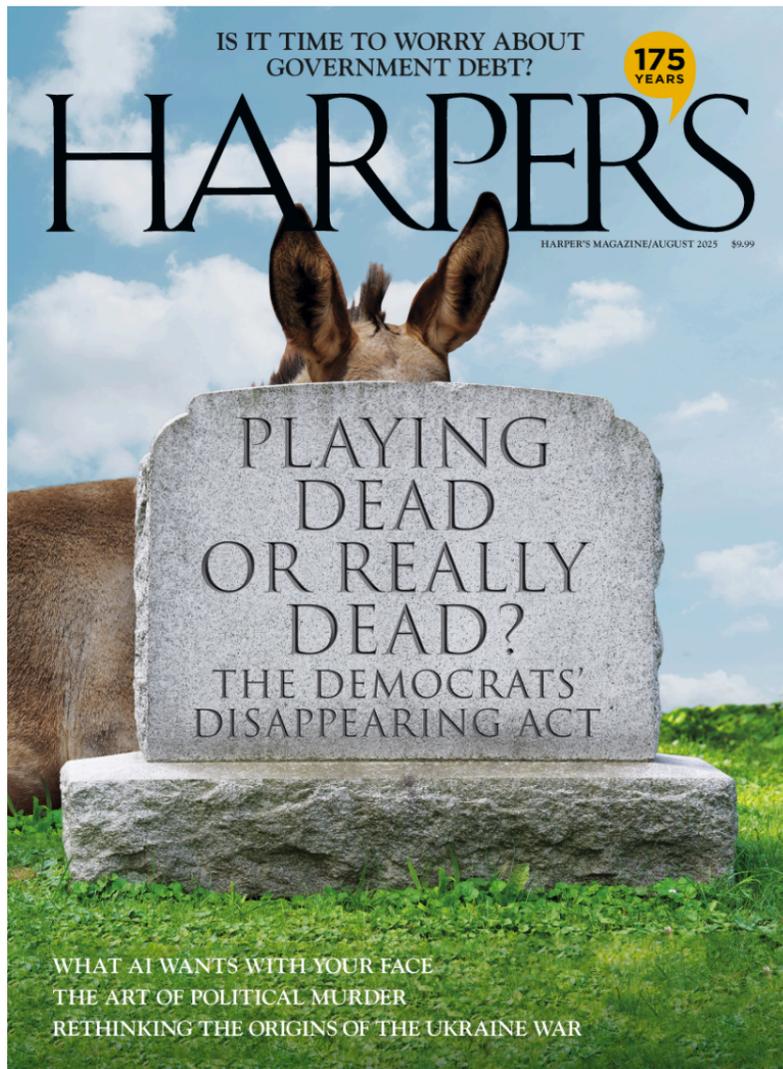
Meanwhile, the bulk of Americans struggle with mounting debt, deficient health care, crumbling infrastructure, and decaying public services and education. Martin may pledge to energize the grass roots with support for state and local parties, but those with long memories may recall that the former DNC chair Howard Dean promised a similar effort in the early Aughts, only to see it wither within a few short years. It would certainly be noble if the party were to reject cash from those “who don’t share our values,” but might that include Blackstone, the private-equity giant previously active, for example, in fighting rent-control initiatives and mass-evicting tenants? The company was Schumer’s leading contributor from 2019 through 2024. Or AIPAC, whose interventions in Democratic primary campaigns to defeat incumbents have far exceeded the wildest dreams of David Hogg? Martin may be funneling extra funds to state parties, but what happens to them there is another matter. Rocha complained to me that the same consultants who harvested the bulk of the \$2 billion spent by the Harris campaign are now working for leading Democratic candidates in the 2026 and 2028 races.

**B**ack in Nebraska, Kleeb’s efforts have borne fruit with a massive swing in Omaha, where a Democrat, John Ewing Jr., defeated a three-term Republican mayor in May. Meanwhile, Osborn is mulling another independent campaign for Senate on a populist platform, this time against the incumbent Ricketts. Osborn told me that he will call out the dominance of wealthy and corporate donors across both parties—and refuse to accept any corporate PAC donations. Given that in 2024 he won nearly 20 percent more votes than Harris with an explicitly anti-corporate platform, and given the Democrats’ oft-professed desire to “reconnect with the white working-class vote,” his willingness to take on issues that weigh most heavily on Americans’ minds might provide a better lodestar for Democrats than centrist platitudes.

For those still striving to understand what it is that those lost voters really want, the truth is out there, sometimes revealed in surprising places. I talked with Margie Omero, a seasoned pollster and veteran of many Democratic races who, in recent months, has been conducting focus groups with working-class voters, most of whom voted for Trump. Despite Democrats’ hope and expectation that Trump’s economic mismanagement will crater his working-class support, she reports that many voters accept his promise that, although his policies may create pain in the short term, there will be tremendous gain down the road, “a golden future.”

“Well,” Omero asked them, “what’s on the other side?” What long-term gains might Trump deliver? The focus groups’ answers were telling indeed. “People say things that Trump isn’t promising, like universal health care and addressing income inequality,” she said. “People are filling it in with what they want, what they need.”

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