

How do Iowa Dems recover from election?

Consultant: Iowa Democrats have ‘profound’ messaging, base problems

By Tom Barton and Erin Murphy, Gazette Des Moines Bureau

Iowa Democrats suffered another bruising election cycle, losing seats in the Iowa House and Senate and failing to flip U.S. House seats in the state.

Former President Donald Trump carried Iowa again in the Nov. 5 election by his largest margin yet.

Republicans also extended their grip on the Iowa Legislature and retain control of the state’s federal delegation, though a few races are headed to recounts.

The wins — should they stand — will give Republicans a 35-15 majority in the

Senate and a 67-33 majority in the House when legislators convene next year. They’re the largest



Terri Finley and Joan Cook, both of Iowa City, look on as election results are announced on television during an election night watch party Nov. 5 for Democratic nominee for Iowa’s 1st Congressional District Christina Bohannon at Big Grove Brewery in Iowa City. (Nick Rohlman photos/The Gazette)



Iowa Democratic Party Chair Rita Hart speaks during a news conference March 5 at the headquarters of the Iowa Democratic Party in Des Moines.

Democrats/‘ An absolute gut punch’

majorities the party has held in the Iowa Legislature since 1970.

Republicans picked up two seats in the Senate but lost one notable incumbent: Sen. Brad Zaun, an Urbandale Republican who was seeking a sixth term.

House Republicans had flipped Democratheld seats in Ankeny, Dubuque, Marshalltown and Mason City and held off Democratic challengers in the Des Moines metro. Democrats picked up a seat left by Republican Rep. Luana Stoltenberg of Davenport, who chose not to seek re-election. Republicans did not field a candidate in that race.

As of now, Republicans retain their state lawmaking trifecta of power, controlling agenda-setting supermajorities in both chambers and the governorship.

Having suffered even more losses in yet another election cycle begs the question: Where do Iowa Democrats go from here?

IOWA DEMOCRATIC PARTY CHAIR: ELECTION ‘AN ABSOLUTE GUT PUNCH’

Rita Hart, the Iowa Democratic Party chairwoman since 2023, declined to be interviewed for this story. A party spokeswoman pointed to the lengthy statement Hart issued the day after the election.

In that statement, Hart acknowledged the election results as “an absolute gut punch” to Democrats in Iowa and nationally. Hart said some of the election results were out of Iowa Democrats’ control and part of a national trend. She said Iowa Democrats “will be part of the conversation to help determine how Democrats can win again in this country.”

The spokeswoman said the Iowa Democratic Party is in the “very early” stages of having internal conversations about how the party should move forward.

“We start by listening to each other and our friends and neighbors, even if we disagree,” Hart said in her statement. “As Barack Obama tells us, this is ‘how we’ll keep building a country (and state) that is more fair and more just, more equal and more free.’”

KONFRST: DEMOCRATS NEED TO GRIEVE, PROCESS AND FOCUS ON REBUILDING

Iowa House Minority Leader Jennifer Konfrst said she's frustrated and disappointed over the recent election results, but said there's insufficient data to draw "stark conclusions and definitive answers" about the results and voter behavior in the state.

The Windsor Heights Democrat was reelected this month to lead the caucus during the upcoming Iowa legislative session. She emphasized the need to reassess Iowa Democrats' messaging and focus on understanding voter demographics and precinct-level turnout.

"I think it's irresponsible of me to make sweeping decisions and changes when we don't even have the voter file data back yet," Konfrst told The Gazette. "... Anybody who says they know for sure what happened on election night doesn't know. And I know everybody wants answers, but we don't have enough information yet to fully understand underneath the hood what happened."

Konfrst said she was surprised by the results. She said Democrats saw widespread public dissatisfaction with Republicans' agenda and an opportunity to win back some critical seats.

Polling data showed voters cared about reproductive freedom, cost of living, the economy and public education, Konfrst said. With that in mind, House Democrats crafted their "People Over Politics" legislative agenda focused on lowering costs of health care, food, child care and utility bills; reversing restrictions on abortion; investing more state money in public schools; and legalizing marijuana.

But, with Republicans holding an agenda-setting majority in the House, their proposals went nowhere, and the message either failed to reach or resonate with Iowa voters.

Konfrst, though, said she's proud of the agenda and issues on which House Democrats ran, but acknowledged the need to pinpoint and close the disconnect with Iowa voters on those issues.

"We remain committed to fighting for reproductive freedom, the economy and public education. That isn't going to change. Iowans, I believe, still feel strongly about those things," Konfrst said.

She rejected criticism about the Democratic Party's failure to offer a compelling workingclass agenda. She noted Iowa House Democrats put forward proposals cracking down on wage theft in the state, enshrining collective bargaining in Iowa's constitution, freezing the cost of college tuition, and boosting apprenticeship programs for young people.

"The second-most talked about issues in all of our communication were economic issues," Konfrst said. "We talked about those things. We've introduced legislation. I don't know yet what were on voters' minds when they got to the ballot box."

Konfrst acknowledged frustrations among Democrats in the state. She said she reminds Democrats of past resurgences and the need to grieve, process and focus on rebuilding, including reaching out to disaffected voters who did not vote.

"In 2008 everyone said the Republican Party in Iowa was dead," she said. "In 2016 everyone said the Democratic Party in Iowa was dead, and they'd never come back. And I was elected in 2018 and so were a lot of us. So I remind them it's cyclical," Konfrst said. "... And looking to 2026 it's not easy. It's not fun. And all I can say is that there are still just as many Iowans who need and deserve representation that aren't being heard at the Capitol right now."

She said party leaders need to develop a comprehensive plan to strengthen the party's grassroots infrastructure, including candidate recruitment, volunteer mobilization and local organizing efforts, she said.

The party also needs to craft a unifying, people-centered message that transcends partisan divides and speaks to the shared values and everyday challenges of all Iowans, not just the party's base, she said.

"We picked up five seats that Donald Trump won, which shows that we outperformed the top of the ticket," Konfrst said. "Not that that's everything, but it did give us some data that showed us that what we did to some extent worked, and gives us an opportunity to learn from those."

WAHLS: DEMS HAVE FORGOTTEN HOW TO TALK TO WORKING IOWANS

State Sen. Zach Wahls, D-Coralville, said the Iowa Democratic Party needs to demonstrate a genuine understanding and responsiveness to the economic realities and priorities of middleclass and working-class Iowans.

Wahls, who last year was ousted as the leader of Senate Democrats in a surprising move for someone seen as a young rising star within the party, criticized the party for not listening to voter concerns about economic hardships, rising costs and the state's workforce challenges.

"For years, I've been saying that Iowa Democrats need to listen to voters, and unfortunately, they have not been doing that," Wahls said. "I think you've got too many people in Iowa's Democratic establishment who are so busy blaming voters that they aren't bothering to actually listen to what voters are telling them."

He mentioned the success of local efforts like the "No Off Years" campaign in Johnson County, which focused on economic issues and voter engagement, leading to record turnout and increased support for Democratic candidates.

"Together, we have built the foundation for what comes next in the 2025-2026 election cycle," Wahls wrote in an email to supporters last week. "The truth is, change and progress don't happen overnight. Iowa Democrats are facing a difficult road back to power — and while it is understandable to be daunted by the road ahead, giving up is simply not an option."

He said the party needs to foster a new generation of leaders who can connect with middle-class and working-class Iowans and address their concerns, rather than just relying on traditional party messaging and approaches.

"I think the reality is that we have seen, obviously, a rightward shift in the last decade or so since Donald Trump really came onto the political scene," Wahls said. "He's delivered a very populist message, and that has resonated with a lot of Iowans. And so I think the reality is that I think that Trump's popularity in Iowa is an indication that voters saw both major parties having failed Iowans. And I would say that if any Democratic politician disagrees with that, they have their head in the sand."

"Democrats need to stop being afraid of embracing change and start thinking seriously about how we reconnect with the middle-class and working-class voters who used to be at our base and who have moved toward Donald Trump's Republican Party."

Trump won the national popular vote for the first time in three cycles, gaining across all demographics, and especially significant gains in both margins and percent in rural areas.

Wahls said the party needs to prioritize leaders who make a concerted effort to meet voters where they are, engage in direct outreach and actively listen to their concerns.

He argues corporate interests have hollowed out Iowa's middle class and that Republican leadership in the state has embraced policies that have pushed Iowans out of the state and out of the workforce, resulting in

higher prices for goods and services.

“I think more Iowans than ever are feeling like it is harder to get ahead,” Wahls said. “And until Democrats have a clear message about why that’s the case” they’ll never make up ground.

“And I do think that Democrats have been very good on a lot of issues that are important to organized labor, but you continue to see a lot of working-class Iowans move away from us,” Wahls said. “And if you’re not willing to honestly ask the question, ‘Why is that happening?’, and listen to voters when they tell you the answer, then you shouldn’t be in office. It’s that simple.”

IOWA CITY ORGANIZER: THE FIGHT GOES ON

Dan Feltes and Sharon Lake of Iowa City said Iowa Democrats need to focus on continuously engaging and listening to voters, noting that people are tired of politics and feel unheard.

Lake comes from a political family in Detroit, Mich., and has been involved in campaigns for decades.

The retired supply chain manager served as a precinct captain for Democrat Barack Obama’s successful 2008 presidential campaign in Iowa.

In 2017, following Trump’s win in 2016 and Iowa Republicans securing a lawmaking trifecta, Lake began building a team of volunteers for door-to-door canvassing in Johnson County.

The team started holding canvassing training in 2017 to address a lack of continuity in volunteer engagement. Volunteers had been deployed without adequate training, and systematic canvassing didn’t begin until late summer or fall before elections. Far too late in Lake’s mind.

This last election cycle, Lake’s team started canvassing in the fall of 2023 and extended its reach to Scott County, about an hour’s drive away. Lake said the team focused on no-party voters and infrequent Democratic voters to understand their issues.

Feltes, an Iowa native, served three terms in the New Hampshire Senate, including serving as the youngest Senate majority leader. He also was the 2020 Democratic nominee for governor in New Hampshire.

He moved his family back to Iowa City in 2021 and quickly became involved in local politics. He joined forces with Lake and helped develop the early door-knocking plan, with an initial emphasis on listening to voters’ concerns rather than campaigning for specific candidates.

When it came time to persuade them to turn out to vote for Democratic candidates, thousands of voters had already talked with a friendly neighbor working as a volunteer about what issues were important to them, Feltes said.

Volunteers knocked on more than 58,000 doors throughout Johnson County in the 2024 election cycle, a nearly threefold increase from 2022, according to Lake. In Scott County, volunteers knocked on more than 39,000 doors compared to about 7,000 doors knocked in the Iowa Quad Cities in 2022.

The efforts led to record voter turnout in Johnson County. More than 87,000 people in the Democratic stronghold voted in this last election.

Iowa City Democrat Christina Bohannon received a record-breaking 35,226 more votes than Republican incumbent U.S. Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks in Johnson County.

The margin is the second-largest for a federal office in county history, just ahead of Democratic former Iowa

U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin's landslide re-election in 2008, and only behind President Biden's election in 2020. Her recordbreaking margin in Johnson County, though, was still not enough to topple Miller-Meeks, who maintains a roughly 800-vote lead out of about 414,000 votes counted in the race. Bohannon has requested a districtwide recount.

Bohannon outperformed the top of the ticket in the 20-county district. She received more raw votes and a higher vote share than Vice President Kamala Harris. In addition to Johnson County, Bohannon carried Scott and Jefferson counties, which Trump won.

The strategy crafted by Lake, Feltes and Bohannon's staff to break the bank in Johnson County and win Scott County to cut into Miller-Meeks' margins in the other rural counties almost worked, but wasn't quite enough to overcome a Republican landslide in a state that has turned redder in the last decade.

If Iowa Democrats are to reverse their political skid, Lake said the party needs to focus on early and consistent canvassing and showing up for voters, even in challenging areas. She noted her team focused on areas often neglected



Iowa House Minority Leader Jennifer Konfrst speaks Jan. 8 during the opening day of the Iowa Legislature at the Statehouse in Des Moines. (Cody Scanlan/Des Moines Register via Associated Press)



State Sen. Zach Wahls, D-Coralville, speaks during the Iowa Capitol Press Association's legislative seminar Jan. 4, 2022, at the Statehouse in Des Moines. (Charlie Neibergall/Associated Press)

Democrats/ Problem structural, consultant says

by campaigns, such as Solon, Hills, Tiffin, and Swisher.

She said about 90 people turned out for a 30-minute canvass training session this spring, surprising and inspiring Scott County Democrats. The event jump-started grassroots efforts in Scott County, leading to increased participation and enthusiasm.

Lake said she and her team aim to extend their grassroots door-knocking efforts to other parts of the state. She and Feltes said canvassing and face-to-face interactions with voters is crucial for Iowa Democrats to break through social media's polarizing effects.

"We knocked on a door in North Liberty and the person who answered the door said, 'You are the first Democrats to come to my door in the six years that I've been living here,'" Lake said. "OK, that's unacceptable, right?"

Despite the heartbreak of this election, Lake said she is excited about Iowa Democrats' future.

"How we can start now to create bigger armies of canvassers so that we're in a readiness position to start early again and to get out there and meet people and let them know that the Democrats actually are the party of the working class, even though that's not the perception?"

GAYMAN: DEMOCRATS NEED TO DO BETTER REACHING DISAFFECTED VOTERS

Elesha Gayman was a Democratic member of the Iowa House of Representatives from 2007 to 2011 and served as an assistant majority leader.

The former Scott County Democratic Party chairwoman, who teaches political science at Eastern Iowa Community College, also served as regional political director of Obama's 2008 Iowa campaign.

For Gayman, one of the most glaring takeaways from the election was not which block of voters broke for a particular candidate, but who didn't vote.

"Trump, as of Wednesday morning, won the presidency and the popular vote with fewer votes than what he got in 2020," she said. "And so for me as a political scientist and former Democratic officeholder, I saw that as a huge glaring issue that we have so few people engaged in what's happening, and I think turned off by the partisan rhetoric that that needs to have a really serious look at."

Gayman also stressed the need for a unified Democratic message and better local candidate recruitment and support. She pointed out the success of Bohannon in Scott County and the importance of community organizing.

Gayman said party officials need to do better in reaching out to independent voters and cultivating a compelling working-class agenda.

She said state and local party officials need to maintain a consistent presence and dialogue with voters, rather than just during campaign season, and dedicate resources to building long-term relationships and trust with independent and working-class communities, rather than just short-term transactional interactions.

LINK: IOWA DEMOCRATS' PROBLEM STRUCTURAL

Jeff Link, a Democratic consultant, has been through election waves of both political stripes.

Link managed former Iowa U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin's 1996 and 2002 re-election campaigns and worked as Harkin's chief of staff, was state director of Al Gore's presidential campaign in 2000 and a member of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign staff. He also worked on Fred Hubbell's unsuccessful 2018 campaign for Iowa governor.

Link said one of the most pressing issues facing Iowa Democrats is structural: their voter registration deficit to Iowa Republicans. Link pointed out that in 2008, after Obama won his first presidential election, Democrats outnumbered Republicans among Iowa registered voters. That advantage has since flipped significantly.

In December 2008, the first month after Obama's victory, there were nearly 709,000 registered active Democrats in Iowa and just shy of 599,000 Republicans for a Democratic advantage of more than 110,000 voters.

In November 2024, just before this year's elections, there were more than 669,000 registered active Republicans in Iowa and just shy of 496,000 Democrats for a Republican advantage of more than 173,000.

Link claimed part of Iowa Republicans' registration gains have been bolstered by recent changes to state elections laws — written by Statehouse Republicans — that shortened the state's early voting period and accelerated the process by which voters' registration status is changed from active to inactive and ultimately removed from the voter rolls.

Iowa voters with inactive status can vote normally, and unregistered voters in Iowa can vote on Election Day at the polls.

"I think you certainly have had a shift (in Iowans' voting patterns), but on one side you poured gas on the shift with the registration changes, and on the other side you put a wet blanket on the shift with restricting early voting," Link said.

PAUL: IOWA DEMOCRATS HAVE 'PROFOUND' MESSAGING, BASE PROBLEMS

Matt Paul has worked for arguably the two most politically successful Iowa Democrats of the 21st century: former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack — who went on to serve three, four-year terms as U.S. agriculture secretary — and former Iowa U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin. Paul ran Harkin's last re-election campaign in 2008, which is the last time an Iowa Democrat won a U.S. Senate election. Paul also was Iowa director of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign.

In a recent appearance on "Iowa Press" on Iowa PBS, Paul said Iowa Democrats need to restart from scratch.

"I think we need to go back to the drawing board as a party and rebuild the drawing board," Paul said on the show. "We have a base problem. We have a profound messaging problem. It wasn't just that voters didn't hear us, it's that we were talking on the wrong channel. We need to rethink how we message, especially around the economy. Democrats need to rethink how we talk about jobs and the future and talk about kitchen-table issues that impact people on a daily occurrence."

In an interview last week, Paul expanded on those thoughts, describing Democrats' challenges as "a profound merchandising problem."

"It's not just the message that's the challenge. It's deeper, in that voters are very skeptical of economic messaging that we've executed on the economy," Paul said in the interview. "We've got to shift from

statements like, ‘Building an economy from the middle out,’ and focus more on economic issues at the kitchen table: a family’s financial security, they’re getting a good job, buying a house, putting their kids through school.

“But voters aren’t going to hear us on these issues until they think more of the Democratic brand. And I think we’ve got to learn from this.”

Paul said he will be looking to the lower levels of government — mayors, county commissioners and school board members — to lead Democrats in the coming years. He said the impacts of President-elect Donald Trump’s second administration will be felt most directly at the local level, so it is those Democrats who will be able to craft a message that will resonate with voters starting with the 2026 elections, Paul said.

“This is not going to be a quick, microwavable fix to these political problems. And it’s going to have to come from a number of sources and a new generation of leaders,” Paul said. “And I think what happens at the local level is incredibly important. I think what happens with school boards, county commissioners, mayors and governors provide the best opportunity for us to begin to start to make some headway. They’re closer to home.”

DOTZLER: DEMS NEED TO DO BETTER TALKING ABOUT IOWANS’ POCKETBOOKS

Bill Dotzler, a state senator from Waterloo, was first elected to the Iowa Legislature in 1996. When the 2025 session begins, he will be the longest-serving current state legislator in the building.

Dotzler said he believes the 2024 election came down to pocketbook issues, and that Democrats were not talking about those issues enough.

“My instincts tell me that the election was really based on economic security and pocketbook issues,” Dotzler said. “I think one of the things that Democrats really have to do a better job on is do a better job talking about people’s pocketbooks. And we need to show our fellow Iowans that we understand everyday hardships and we understand the high grocery bills. We’re the ones that are supposed to be a party of working-class people.”

Dotzler said he feels Democratic candidates talked too much about abortion and women’s reproductive rights at the expense of connecting with voters on economic issues.

“I think during our election we relied too much on our messaging about women’s rights,” Dotzler said. “When it came right down to voting, I think we did gain on a lot of that, but people are still thinking about their pocketbooks.”

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Sunday, 11/17/2024 Page .A01

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