



RIO GRANDE VALLEY Post-Election Report January 2025



PREPARED BY

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ORGANIZING FOR A NEW TOMORROW

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Executive Summary

This report, prepared by the political action committee Cambio Texas, analyzes the Democratic Party's losses in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) during the 2024 elections and proposes actionable reforms. Historically a Democratic stronghold, the RGV saw all four of its major counties (Hidalgo, Cameron, Starr, and Willacy) flip to Republicans for the first time. This shift underscores systemic Democratic failures in strategy, messaging, and organizational culture, while highlighting Republican success in cultural narratives, emotional mobilization, and voter engagement.

Key Challenges

❖ External Factors Beyond Control

- President Biden's unpopular reelection campaign and Vice President Harris's contested nomination dampened voter enthusiasm, negatively impacting down-ballot races.
- Republicans leveraged emotional appeals (e.g., "America First") and Donald Trump's cultural influence to solidify support among Hispanic voters and religious conservatives.

❖ Internal Democratic Weaknesses

- Ineffective Messaging: Democrats are widely labeled as the party of "open borders" and "baby killers," while their own messaging relies on hollow, poll-tested slogans disconnected from voters' daily lives.
- Toxic Campaign Culture: Overreliance on out-of-state consultants, misallocated resources (e.g., high consultant pay vs. underfunded grassroots efforts), and self-promotion over collaboration created inefficiency.
- Lack of Representation: Campaign staff and polling industries lack diversity, marginalizing local voices. Newcomers face barriers due to insular hiring practices favoring connections over merit.

❖ Outdated Campaign Tactics

- Large-scale paid canvassing programs suffered from fabricated data, poor oversight, and inefficiency.
- Mailers and digital ads lacked transparency and verification, leading to wasted resources.

Case Study: Michelle Vallejo's Failed Campaign (TX-15)

- Vallejo's campaign, managed by out-of-state consultants, prioritized fundraising over voter engagement. Her messaging shifted inconsistently (from progressive to centrist), alienating supporters.
- Key Failures: Reliance on predetermined recruitment (via LUPE Votes), sidelining local expertise, and prioritizing metrics (e.g., fundraising goals) over authentic voter connections led to a 14.22% loss margin in 2024.

Recommendations for Reform

1. **Invest in Local Leadership:** Replace classroom-based fellowships with hands-on community training. Empower local decision-makers and reduce dependence on external consultants.
2. **Enhance Accountability:** Audit campaign data (e.g., canvassing records), standardize vendor pricing, and allocate funds to direct voter outreach.
3. **Modernize Strategies:** Shift to relational organizing (activating personal networks) and digital innovation over outdated tactics like mass canvassing.
4. **Rebuild Authenticity:** Recruit candidates with genuine local ties and values. Focus messaging on tangible issues (e.g., jobs, healthcare) rather than abstract ideals.
5. **Promote Inclusivity:** Diversify campaign teams and polling firms to reflect community demographics. Address toxic workplace dynamics and gatekeeping.
6. **Reform Polling Practices:** Partner with community-based pollsters and prioritize qualitative insights over oversimplified data (e.g., Likert scales).

Conclusion

The 2024 elections serve as a wake-up call for Texas Democrats but also offer a path forward. Success requires humility, local empowerment, and systemic reforms centered on transparency, innovation, and authentic voter engagement. By addressing these challenges, Democrats can rebuild trust, counter Republican cultural narratives, and reclaim competitiveness in the RGV and beyond. The future of Texas—and the nation—depends on it.

About Cambio Texas

Cambio Texas is a general-purpose political action committee dedicated to increasing voter turnout and empowering new leaders who reflect the diversity of our state. Since our founding in 2016, our work has centered on canvassing, digital outreach, relational voter turnout, and leadership development through our Build the Bench program. This initiative focuses on cultivating the next generation of public servants and grassroots organizers. Cambio Texas strives to make a tangible impact across the Rio Grande Valley and beyond. By building community power and fostering political engagement, we aim to create a fairer system that works for all Texans—not just a select few.

Introduction

It's been four full election cycles since the generation of activists, consultants and issue-oriented organizations that were activated by the election of Donald Trump have entered politics. Cambio Texas being among the dozens of orgs that joined the fray after that disastrous night in November 2016. In the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), very little has changed for progressives while conservatives have had several victories, both symbolic and literal. For the first time in history, all four of the major counties that comprise the RGV; Hidalgo, Cameron, Starr and Willacy were won by a Republican. Any political operative or commentator who denies that the Valley has shifted red is either deeply misinformed, willfully blind, or has a vested interest in perpetuating the status quo. Ignoring this political reality does a disservice to both parties and the communities they seek to engage. This significant shift demands a clear-eyed assessment and a willingness to confront the underlying factors driving the change, rather than clinging to outdated narratives or partisan spin.

Traditional pundits will turn to the obvious explanations of why Texas Democrats have

gone so long with lackluster results. Texas has a storied history of being a red state with a strong conservative tradition. This has made it difficult for Democrats to gain traction and win elections. In addition, the state has a large and growing Hispanic population, which has traditionally voted Democratic, but this group has not always turned out to vote in large numbers and we don't exactly do the best job connecting with these folks either. And obviously, redistricting has given Republicans a 10-year security blanket that will be very difficult to overcome.

November 2024 felt exponentially worse than November 2016. In 2016, the country was blindsided. No one; probably not even Donald Trump himself; truly believed he was going to win. The shock was profound, a gut punch to Democrats and much of the country. But 2024 was a different beast. This time, the tragedy unfolded in slow motion, played out on social media in excruciating detail, one stitched video or viral clip at a time. It was as if the entire nation was forced to relive a nightmare they had already experienced, but this time, with the dread of knowing what was coming.

Yet, as devastating as the results were, this moment offers a bittersweet opportunity for Democrats everywhere but especially in Texas. If your job is to win red races in the United States then there are a lot more red races to win now. For Texas Democrats, this could be the moment to fundamentally rethink how we operate as a party. It's an opportunity to discard strategies that aren't working and rebuild the party around new, innovative approaches that actually resonate with voters.

In compiling this document we conducted nearly 100 in-depth interviews with consultants, activists, vendors, party officials, judges, county electeds, federal electeds, school board members, attorneys, congressional campaign staffers and state



legislative campaign staffers. All names have been changed and full anonymity was given to everyone who spoke with us so that they could speak freely and without fear of political retaliation. These conversations and data points have informed this report and shaped the criticisms and recommendations we present here. While our critiques may feel like deep cuts, they are delivered with a belief that Texas Democrats have a unique opportunity to rebuild; not just to win elections but to genuinely connect with voters in a way that fosters long-term trust and engagement.

This is not to say that the problems we face are simple. They are complex, deeply rooted, and often frustrating. But they are not insurmountable. The demographic shifts that many Democrats once assumed would naturally lead to electoral dominance in Texas have not materialized in the way we hoped. Instead, we are faced with the sobering reality that Republicans are making inroads with Hispanic voters. If we don't adapt; and adapt quickly; those gains will solidify into a new status quo, making it even harder for Democrats to compete in future elections.

However, with every crisis comes an opportunity. The 2024 elections have laid bare the limitations of our current approach, forcing us to confront uncomfortable truths about how we communicate with voters, how we allocate resources, and how we hold ourselves accountable.

This report is not a comprehensive solution to these challenges, but we hope it serves as a supplemental guide for statewide organizations and campaigns seeking to organize in the RGV and engage with Hispanic voters across Texas.

One of the most significant takeaways from our conversations was that voters in the RGV feel overlooked and misunderstood by both parties. Many of them expressed frustration with the Democratic Party's messaging,

which they see as disconnected from their daily lives and concerns. This sentiment was echoed by the candidates and consultants we spoke with, who emphasized the need for Democrats to move beyond issues that don't connect with the majority of the electorate and to find more effective ways of commuting the issues that do.

Another critical insight from our research is the extent to which Trump's appeal transcends traditional political boundaries. His ability to connect with voters on an emotional level, offering a clear and unapologetic vision of himself and his priorities, has reshaped the political landscape in Texas and beyond. For many Trump voters, his message of "America First" and his disdain for political correctness resonate deeply, even if they disagree with some of his policies or behavior. This is a reality that Democrats cannot afford to ignore.

The first step is acknowledging that what we're doing now isn't working. The second is committing to the hard work of rebuilding; not just for the next election cycle but for the long-term future of our party and the communities we seek to serve. We hope this report provides a starting point for that process.

What Was Out of Our Control

Let's begin by acknowledging what was out of our control. The reality is that external factors played a significant role in shaping the outcome of the 2024 elections, and many of these were entirely beyond the reach of local campaigns. It's important to analyze these factors not as excuses but as critical context for understanding the challenges we faced. Overall, there was a national six-point shift toward Trump; the largest swing toward either party since Obama's 2008 victory. This shift occurred across diverse geographic areas, affecting both rural and urban regions. While Colorado, along with select counties in



Nevada and Michigan, experienced small net Democratic gains, these instances were statistical outliers rather than indicators of a larger trend.

Compounding this were the actions of the national party. Joe Biden's decision to run for reelection was a significant blow to down-ballot campaigns. His presidency was marred by moments of inefficiency, broken promises, and a general inability to inspire enthusiasm among many key Democratic constituencies. It's worth remembering that Biden had originally promised to be a transitional figure; a steady hand who would guide the country out of the Trump era before stepping aside for a new generation of leadership. By breaking that promise, Biden not only alienated many voters but also deprived the party of the chance to hold an open primary and elevate fresh voices who could have brought renewed energy to the ticket.

The decision to support Kamala Harris as the presumptive heir was also fraught with complications. The process itself felt undemocratic to many party members, especially given the lack of transparency and the apparent backroom politicking that led to her elevation. When Biden finally endorsed Harris, it came in a separate statement about half an hour after his initial announcement to drop out, fueling speculation that this was more about internal power struggles than a genuine belief in her ability to lead. Reports circulating online suggested that Biden's endorsement was a calculated move to spite Nancy Pelosi, further highlighting the dysfunction within the party's leadership.

From the perspective of down-ballot campaigns, this lack of unity and clarity at the top of the ticket was disastrous. We didn't get to choose our nominee, and yet we were forced to carry the burden of a presidential campaign that failed to resonate with many voters. While Kamala Harris enjoyed a brief honeymoon period, enthusiasm quickly

declined as voters were reminded of their pre-existing reservations about her. Her saving grace was her formidable fundraising ability, but as we will explore further, a well-funded campaign is meaningless if you don't know how to spend it.

Biden's age and the perception that he represented the "old guard" of the Democratic Party also played a role in voter apathy. Many younger voters and progressives expressed frustration that the party seemed unwilling to move forward with newer, more dynamic leadership. This dissatisfaction trickled down to local races, where enthusiasm is often directly tied to the energy of the top of the ticket. Exit poll data from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University reported Trump won young voters in Texas ages 18-29 by 4 points. And a 31 point swing from the 2020 election. In essence, the national party's decisions created a ripple effect that impacted campaigns all the way down the ballot.

Another significant factor is the Republican Party's ability to construct a political narrative largely independent of empirical constraints. Unlike Democrats, who often center their messaging around policy and factual accuracy, Republicans have refined a strategy rooted in emotional appeal and identity-driven politics. Donald Trump, in particular, benefits from a long-standing cultural presence that predates his political career. For decades, his name has been synonymous with wealth and status, as evidenced by archival footage from figures such as Tupac Shakur, who associated Trump with financial success. This entrenched position in popular culture provides Trump with a unique advantage that conventional political candidates cannot replicate. Consequently, attempts to mimic his approach are unlikely to succeed, as his influence extends beyond traditional political structures into the broader realm of cultural



symbolism.. In that respect, we must resist the urge to try to emulate Trump. We can't emulate him. No one can.

Republicans have also weaponized spite in a way that Democrats struggle to counter. Their campaigns often revolve around self-preservation and individualism, which align neatly with the broader cultural shift toward selfishness and immediate gratification. The ethos of "owning the libs" has become a rallying cry, transforming politics into the WWE. The absurdity of this phenomenon is best illustrated by the countless memes and photoshopped images of Trump; whether it's him as Rocky Balboa or Jesus guiding him in the Oval Office. While these images are often dismissed as ridiculous, they serve a dual purpose; they both amuse Trump's supporters and infuriate his opponents. For many Republicans, triggering liberals is not just a side effect; it's the main event.

This ability to turn politics into a form of cultural entertainment gives Republicans a significant advantage, particularly among voters who feel disillusioned or disconnected from traditional political institutions. By framing their campaigns as a battle against the "establishment" and offering a clear villain in the form of Democrats, Republicans have managed to galvanize their base in ways that Democrats have struggled to match.

A broader societal shift has also worked against Democrats. As a party, we campaign on empathy and collective action, emphasizing the importance of community and shared responsibility; "democracy is on the line". Republicans, on the other hand, have embraced a narrative of individualism and self-interest. This divide is evident in the way both parties frame their campaigns. While Democrats ask voters to consider the greater good, Republicans appeal to their immediate desires and fears.

This cultural shift is perhaps most evident in the declining willingness of Americans to

engage in collective action. While there are countless examples of individual kindness and generosity, these values often disappear when it comes to larger, community-wide efforts. Individuals have a great capacity for empathy, people in large groups rarely do. Republicans have exploited this dynamic by positioning themselves as the party of individual freedom, even when it comes at the expense of collective well-being. This message resonates deeply in a society that increasingly values convenience and self-interest over long-term cooperation.

This emphasis on individualism has been amplified by social media, where the performative aspects of political identity often overshadow substantive discussions about policy or community needs. Social Media Platforms, where the vast majority of voter engagement happens, reward outrage and divisiveness, creating an environment where spite and polarization thrive. For Democrats, whose messaging relies on building consensus and fostering empathy, this cultural environment poses a significant challenge.

Trump's influence goes beyond politics; he is a pop culture phenomenon. His larger-than-life persona, cultivated over decades through television, business, and tabloid headlines, has made him a household name. This cultural ubiquity gives him a level of recognition and relatability that most politicians can only dream of. The fact that Trump has been a fixture in American culture for so long means that he occupies a unique space in the public imagination. He's not just a politician; he's a brand, a character, and for many, a symbol of aspiration or rebellion. This duality allows him to connect with a wide range of voters, from those who see him as a champion of their values to those who simply enjoy his ability to disrupt the status quo. For Democrats, countering this cultural dominance is no small task. Traditional campaign strategies, focused on policy proposals and outdated voter outreach,



often feel inadequate in the face of Trump's media-savvy, attention-grabbing antics.

Another critical element working in Republicans' favor is the preconditioned belief systems of their base voters, particularly among the religious right. From an early age, many hyper-religious individuals are groomed to view doubt as a challenge to their faith. They are taught that their duty to God involves standing firm in their beliefs, especially when those beliefs are questioned or ridiculed. This conditioning creates a mindset where evidence contrary to their worldview is not only dismissed but actively resisted as a test of their faith.

This dynamic is strikingly evident in the unwavering support for Trump among evangelical Christians and other religious conservatives. It doesn't matter how many scandals, convictions, or controversies arise; for his supporters, these challenges become opportunities to demonstrate their loyalty. In this framework, the more outrageous the accusations against Trump, the greater the opportunity for his base to show their fealty by denying the validity of those accusations. This cycle reinforces Trump's hold over his supporters, turning every new piece of evidence against him into a rallying cry for deeper devotion.

This faith-like devotion creates a nearly impenetrable barrier to traditional campaign strategies that rely on presenting evidence or logical arguments. For these voters, rejecting such evidence is not a sign of ignorance but a badge of honor that signifies their commitment to Trump.

Democrats don't Know How to talk to People

How many volunteers, aspiring community organizers, and would-be supporters have shown up to a meeting, unsure of what to expect, only to walk away completely disillusioned with what they saw? The full impact of moments like these is incalculable,

but it's clear that their significance cannot be overlooked. Take the case of Taylor, a 24-year-old college graduate, who decided to attend their first Democratic campaign volunteer meeting in the summer of 2024. Taylor wasn't entirely sure what to expect, but was engaged enough to want to get involved.

What Taylor encountered, however, was far from the inspiring, action-oriented environment they had imagined. The meeting, which was supposed to discuss canvassing efforts, devolved into what felt more like a gathering of insiders caught up in their own unspoken hierarchies and dynamics.

The focus of the meeting was preparing for a weekend canvassing effort. As part of the preparation, the organizers introduced the script that canvassers would use when knocking on doors. The script included a range of questions designed to engage voters, including one about abortion rights. When Taylor read through the script, they were struck by the phrasing of the abortion question; it was assertive, almost confrontational, and didn't leave much room for nuance. The script instructed canvassers to lead with a question about whether voters supported access to abortion and, if the answer was negative, to pivot immediately to a prepared statement defending reproductive rights.

Taylor, aware of how contentious the issue of abortion could be, raised his hand and asked, "Are we supposed to read this word-per-word? I feel like this could be off-putting." The room went quiet for a moment, and Taylor said they felt the weight of judgment in the air. One of the senior organizers who had been introduced earlier as some sort of canvass coordinator. "We try to not let cis men dictate how we talk about abortion." they said sharply. "Women are perfectly capable of deciding how this issue should be discussed."



Taylor was taken aback. No offense was intended, nor had they implied that women shouldn't lead on this issue. Taylor tried to reframe their statement but another volunteer interrupted, saying, "If you're uncomfortable with the script, maybe you should sit this one out."

The staffer leading the meeting quickly moved on, shutting down any further discussion about the script. Taylor spent the rest of the meeting in silence, feeling unwelcome and deeply embarrassed. In the space of a few minutes, they were made to feel like an outsider, as though their perspective didn't matter simply because of their identity. This experience wasn't just disappointing; it was disheartening. It prompted Taylor to question whether the Democratic Party, which prided itself on inclusivity, was truly a space where diverse perspectives were valued.

Anecdotal evidence like this may seem trivial in the grand scheme of a campaign, but their cumulative effect is devastating. Every disheartened volunteer represents a lost opportunity to build momentum, foster leadership, and strengthen the movement. For a party that champions inclusion, this kind of gatekeeping is counterproductive and undermines the very values it seeks to uphold.

The problem isn't the passion or dedication of the organizers; it's the culture of rigidity and exclusion that has taken root in some corners of Democratic politics. In the rush to prioritize certain voices and perspectives, campaigns can inadvertently silence others, creating an environment that feels hostile to newcomers. Dismissing the Taylors of the world weakens that coalition and reinforces the perception that the party is out of touch with the communities it claims to represent.

It's worth asking; What if Taylor's experience had been different? What if the question about the script had been met with curiosity instead of defensiveness? Campaigns are

only as strong as the people who power them. If volunteers walk away after one bad experience, the movement loses more than just a set of hands; it loses ideas, energy, and the potential to build lasting connections within the community. This doesn't mean compromising on values; it means recognizing that the strength of the party lies in its ability to unite diverse perspectives around a common goal.

Now let's talk about larger messaging issues. Some topics in the political arena have become so deeply embedded in the public consciousness that they're almost immutable. At this point, Democrats are widely perceived as the party of "open borders" and "baby killers." These labels, however inaccurate or unfair, have been effectively weaponized by Republicans and amplified by media echo chambers. Democrats have, in many ways, lost these particular messaging battles. Trying to fully reverse these entrenched perceptions is difficult but that doesn't mean we can't critically examine our own messaging apparatus. We encountered numerous voters who expressed feeling alienated by the increasingly polarized nature of our political discourse. While their initial explanations for their voting decisions often referenced specific policies, deeper conversations revealed that their motivations were more closely tied to personal affinity. This suggests that the driving factor behind their decisions may not be the substance of the policy itself but rather the manner in which issues and candidates are presented. This insight highlights an important conclusion: it is not solely *what* we communicate but *how* we communicate that shapes voter perceptions, and this is a factor entirely within our control.

So much of what Democrats talk about and how we talk about it comes from polling. Polling has long been the cornerstone of campaign messaging, and for good reason;



data can tell us what voters care about, what issues resonate, and what language might win people over. But there's a flip side to this reliance on polling; it has also become a crutch. When used poorly, polling can create messaging that feels calculated, hollow, and disconnected from the lived experiences of voters. Instead of crafting narratives that feel authentic and emotionally resonant, campaigns often rely on focus-group-tested phrases that may score well in theory but fail to land in the real world.

One possible reason for this disconnect is the mechanics of the polling industry itself. While Democrats have made tremendous strides in diversifying campaign teams, replacing white staffers with people of color, one area that still has significant room for improvement is the polling industry. If you're wondering why we have such a hard time connecting with people, part of the answer lies in the fact that the messengers crafting these messages often have very little in common with the people they are trying to reach. This gap isn't just about race or ethnicity; it's about class, geography, culture, and life experience.

The polling industry is one of the most insular industries in politics. A handful of major polling firms dominate the field, and while there does exist intentionality in hiring people from more diverse backgrounds, they remain overwhelmingly homogeneous at the ownership level. These firms are still largely owned and operated by individuals who, no matter how well-meaning, often lack the lived experiences needed to truly understand the communities they're polling.

This lack of diversity at the top affects everything, from the questions that pollsters ask to the way they interpret data. Consider, for example, how polling often relies on a Likert scale; questions where respondents are asked to rank their agreement or support on a scale, such as from "strongly oppose" to "strongly support." While this approach might seem to allow for more nuance than a

binary question, it has significant deficiencies when applied to complex issues like, say, student loan debt cancellation. Asking voters to place themselves on a scale of support for canceling student loan debt may yield a data set that appears comprehensive, but in reality, it oversimplifies the spectrum of opinions and emotions surrounding the issue.

This lack of clarity can lead to flawed interpretations of polling data and, ultimately, ineffective messaging. Campaigns may see that a majority of respondents "somewhat support" student loan forgiveness and interpret this as a mandate for broad cancellation, only to alienate voters who had very different understandings of what they were endorsing. Similarly, those who choose "somewhat oppose" may be lumped together with those who strongly oppose it, even though their concerns could be addressed with targeted policy tweaks or better communication. In both cases, the Likert scale masks the underlying diversity of thought, leaving campaigns with an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of public opinion.

The issue becomes even more pronounced when considering how Republicans capitalize on such simplifications. By distilling the conversation around student loan forgiveness into overly broad categories of "supporters" and "opponents," they can frame the debate as yet another zero-sum conflict; where one group's gain must come at another's expense. This fits perfectly into their broader narrative about individualism and fairness, where policies like student loan forgiveness are portrayed as handouts to an undeserving few at the expense of hardworking taxpayers.

When polling and messaging are disconnected from the realities of voters' lives, the consequences are significant. Misaligned messaging can reinforce the perception that Democrats are out of touch with everyday Americans. This perception is



especially damaging in places like the RGV, where many voters already feel overlooked by national campaigns. When a campaign's message doesn't resonate, it's not just ineffective; it can actively push people away.

What can be done? The Democratic Party could benefit not just from engaging smaller, regionally based polling firms with deeper community ties but also from strengthening its reliance on grassroots organizers and local leaders to inform messaging. While national polling provides a broad overview, it often fails to capture the hyperlocal concerns that truly drive voter behavior. Community members who are actively engaged in organizing—whether through neighborhood associations, civic groups, or informal networks—have a firsthand understanding of the specific frustrations that mobilize their neighbors. Whether it's an unfixed road, rising utility costs, or job instability, these day-to-day issues often resonate more than broad policy discussions. For example, while abortion rights polled well nationally, many voters were far more motivated by tangible, immediate concerns that campaign messaging largely overlooked. A well-organized grassroots infrastructure, where local voices actively shape campaign priorities and collaborate across communities, could provide a critical feedback loop. Integrating this kind of local intelligence into campaign strategy would create messaging that is not only data-driven but also deeply reflective of the lived experiences of voters.

Democrats also need to rethink how they use polling data. Instead of treating it as the gospel truth, campaigns should view it as one tool among many. Data should inform messaging, but it shouldn't dictate it entirely. There's a difference between being data-driven and being data-obsessed. The former allows for flexibility and creativity, while the latter can lead to sterile, cookie-cutter campaigns that fail to inspire.

Finally, campaigns need to prioritize authenticity in their messaging. This means elevating local voices and telling stories that reflect the lived experiences of voters. It means moving away from one-size-fits-all slogans and crafting messages that feel personal and relevant. We may never fully shake the labels of “open borders” and “baby killers,” but we can build a messaging strategy that resonates with voters on the issues that matter most to them.

Messaging isn't just about winning elections; it's about building trust, fostering connection, and showing voters that we understand their lives and their struggles. It's about proving that we're not just the party of abstract ideals, but the party of real people working for real change. That work starts with rethinking how we talk to voters; and more importantly, who gets to do the talking.

The Campaign Industrial Complex

It's been 48 years since a Democrat running for president won Texas and 30 years since any Democrat has won a statewide race. This pattern of defeat has led to a scarcity of operatives with experience in winning such races, creating a void in strategic leadership. In Texas politics, many professionals find themselves navigating careers with limited upward mobility through no fault of their own. Campaign work is inherently binary; you either win or lose; and given the high frequency of electoral losses, practitioners often seek alternative metrics to define success.

Over the past three decades, this has contributed to the development of a professional culture where the quality of campaign execution is emphasized over electoral outcomes. While there is validity to the idea that well-executed campaigns can exist independent of winning, as external factors often play a significant role, this mindset risks normalizing defeat. Over time, the focus on process rather than results may



diminish the urgency of pursuing strategies designed explicitly to secure victory.

Many individuals enter political campaign work driven by a genuine desire to effect positive change. However, the current system often exploits these noble intentions. A select group of consultants and vendors benefit financially from campaigns, sometimes prioritizing their profits over the success of the candidates they serve. This dynamic creates a misalignment between the goals of the campaign and the strategies employed.

The predominant method of leadership development for progressives in Texas operates through what is commonly referred to as the "fellowship" model. Broadly speaking, these programs begin with organizations issuing calls for applicants interested in politics, often disseminated through exclusive channels such as private group chats, specialized job boards, or informal networks of friends and acquaintances already connected to the political sphere. As a result, the applicant pool tends to be composed largely of individuals who have the advantage of preexisting connections or access to these networks.

Once selected, participants typically engage in programming that spans 4–6 months, meeting once or twice a month in conference rooms, with some intensive programs requiring a week-long commitment at a central location, often Austin. The content of these programs generally includes guest speakers; frequently veterans of progressive campaigns in other states; presenting slide decks and fielding a few questions. While the stated purpose is leadership development, the structure often leans more heavily toward networking than substantive skill-building.

To its credit, this model has produced many capable individuals who have gone on to successful careers in politics. However, the

limited accessibility of these programs, coupled with their emphasis on networking over comprehensive training, raises questions about their overall effectiveness as tools for fostering equitable and sustainable leadership pipelines within progressive politics in Texas.

But our over-reliance on these classroom-based initiatives means that participants are offered very little, if any, on-the-ground experience actually working on campaigns. Instead participants gain more practice maneuvering the insular world of progressive politics which is a skill that has near zero overlap with the kind of community organizing we need to execute to turn Texas blue.

When progressives talk about "inclusivity" in their spaces they don't necessarily mean meeting people where they are, they want to tell them where they should be. They want people who can pass the "purity tests", speak the latest ideological language, and craft personal narratives centered on overcoming oppression. But in the pursuit of ideological perfection, they overlook one of the most powerful tools of persuasion—plain language. Authentic, straightforward communication is what truly resonates with people. If the goal is to build bridges and expand the movement, clarity isn't just important—it's essential. Take what happened to Taylor when they attended a campaign meeting. Additionally, while most Texas based organizations we have crossed paths with in the last ten years go out of their way to ensure that people of color are awarded these fellowship positions, it hasn't exactly translated to campaigns that include people of color in leadership positions.

Even beyond the lens of racial or class disparities, it is evident that individuals who staff political campaigns frequently come from privileged backgrounds, often bolstered by preexisting political connections. In the hiring process for senior staff positions, the



focus is less on measurable success, such as campaign victories, and more on personal networks and educational pedigree. Promising candidates are often dismissed outright if they lack an insider to advocate for them, creating a gatekeeping culture that can be deeply discouraging. As a result, countless talented young staffers have left the political field, not due to a lack of ability, but because they didn't attend the "right" schools or form the "right" connections. This dynamic perpetuates a significant challenge for progressive campaigns in Texas, where the exclusion of fresh, diverse perspectives continues to hinder long-term progress and innovation.

In an ideal world, political campaign staffers would mirror the electorate they aim to engage, bringing a wide range of experiences and perspectives to the table. While much has been written about the various reasons Democrats have experienced declining support among Hispanic voters, one crucial but underexplored factor is the background and composition of campaign staff themselves.

As noted earlier, access to opportunities like political fellowships; and by extension, campaign jobs; often depends on a certain level of privilege. This issue is thoroughly examined in Daniel Laurison's 2022 book, *Producing Politics*, which offers a detailed, data-driven analysis of the inequities within the political staffing industry. Over a 15-year period, Laurison compiled extensive data on staffers working in U.S. Senate and presidential campaigns across both major parties. His findings reveal startling imbalances: political staffers are overwhelmingly male, predominantly white, and disproportionately come from elite educational backgrounds.

Laurison's research sheds light on the structural barriers that shape the makeup of campaign teams. These barriers include a narrow pool of candidates, unconscious bias

or outright discrimination in hiring, and systemic challenges in education and other industries that make it difficult for individuals from less advantaged backgrounds to gain the skills and experience necessary for campaign roles.

When progressive messaging fails to resonate with Texas voters, the problem often lies with the messenger. Winning elections requires a willingness to engage with people outside one's own social or political comfort zone. It demands patience with those who may not align with progressive ideals and, above all, the cultural competence to connect with voters on their terms, earning their trust and respect.

Then there's campaign culture itself which can be extremely toxic. There's an old adage that seems to especially apply to campaign work culture: *what is deemed urgent is hardly ever important, and what is important is hardly ever deemed urgent.*

Political campaigns are inherently high-pressure environments, often leading to challenging and, at times, toxic work conditions. Several factors contribute to this dynamic, with one of the most prominent being the demanding nature of campaign life. Campaign staffers frequently face long hours, irregular schedules, and extensive travel, all of which can take a significant toll on mental and physical well-being. However, what is less frequently discussed is the sheer amount of time campaign staffers spend on activities that have little to do with the core goal of earning votes. This misallocation of effort often accelerates burnout and fosters resentment among team members.

Campaigns are frequently shaped by a culture of self-promotion, where individuals are rewarded not for hard work or meaningful contributions but for their visibility and perceived influence. This dynamic can create a divisive atmosphere, encouraging competition among staff members rather than collaboration. Within



this culture, a clear distinction often emerges between "workhorses" and "show ponies." The latter are individuals who focus on amplifying their own importance, often by exaggerating minor challenges into crises, and then claim credit for "resolving" them.

This behavior manifests in various ways, such as devoting excessive time to social media drama or engaging in lengthy email threads about arbitrary policies implemented by managers. These activities rarely align with the ultimate goal of campaigns: earning votes. If a task cannot be clearly connected to voter outreach, persuasion, or turnout, it likely represents an unnecessary drain on time and energy. Addressing this inefficiency requires a cultural shift within campaigns, prioritizing meaningful work and fostering an environment where the focus remains squarely on what matters most: winning elections.

Raising and Spending

There is an epidemic failure within progressive politics to really understand what is happening and this leads people who run progressive campaigns to misjudge their metrics and mismanage their campaigns. Many campaign leaders focus narrowly on candidate name recognition and fundraising capacity, often treating these as ends rather than means. However, the ultimate goal of a campaign is not simply to craft a compelling narrative or accumulate funds; it is to earn votes. And earning votes requires direct, consistent, and intentional voter engagement, including the essential step of explicitly asking people for their support.

Since the *Citizens United* ruling, campaign budgets have ballooned to unprecedented levels. While the flow of money in politics is unlikely to change soon, what stands out is how much of that funding is allocated to activities that are not directly tied to voter outreach or persuasion. This misalignment is particularly evident in progressive campaigns across South Texas, where spending

priorities often reflect a disconnect from the campaign's primary objective.

A troubling pattern emerges in how these funds are distributed: consultants and senior staff are often paid generously, while organizers, fellows, and those on the ground receive minimal compensation. Additionally, campaigns frequently spend heavily on out-of-town media, compliance, and digital firms, creating a financial ecosystem that prioritizes external services over grassroots operations. In many cases, senior staff have vested interests in steering resources into these pipelines, resulting in predictable recommendations; mail consultants advocating for more mail, or digital firms pushing for additional ad buys. While such behavior is expected within the industry, this model has repeatedly failed to produce electoral success for progressives in Texas.

This approach underscores a systemic inefficiency that hampers the ability of campaigns to connect meaningfully with voters. Real progress requires a reallocation of resources toward efforts that directly engage and mobilize the electorate, ensuring that campaigns are not just well-funded but also well-directed toward achieving their core mission.

The Hard Truth About Canvassing and other common Campaign Practices

This is a difficult topic to address because it touches on something *Cambio* has always valued deeply: door-to-door canvassing. For years, canvassing has been considered the gold standard for voter outreach. A decade ago, it truly was; but the landscape has shifted. "Grassroots" organizing has largely been replaced by "astroturf" operations, and the results are increasingly problematic. Paid field programs are expensive, and as they scale, so do the challenges.

In the 2024 cycle, one of the largest organizations in Texas launched a multi-county paid canvass, opting to manage



it in-house instead of hiring a vendor. It didn't take long for the inherent issues in canvassing to surface. First: finding, training, and retaining qualified canvassers is incredibly difficult. Canvassing is grueling; it's hot, especially unforgiving in the Texas heat, the people you are trying to talk to are often hostile or uninterested, and canvassers deal with everything from being attacked by dogs to being harassed by police. As a result, campaigns often hire whoever they can, with little time to vet whether candidates are a good fit. Canvassing requires outgoing, social individuals who excel at persuasion, which is the most challenging form of rhetorical engagement. Unfortunately, such people are rare; out of 17 profiles identified by the Predictive Index Behavioral Assessment, which evaluates individuals' workplace behaviors to align them with suitable roles and enhance team dynamics. "Persuader" is the rarest. The reality is, we are often sending the wrong people to knock on doors.

Beyond recruitment, canvassing is largely unsupervised and the moment a canvasser feels they aren't being monitored, accountability slips. On the backend, the predominant app used for canvassing; Minivan, an add-on to NGP VAN's campaign management platform; is effective but not foolproof. Even with features like Minivan Manager, which tracks canvassers' movements and activity in real time, it's not uncommon for canvassers to fabricate data. They'll log interactions with people they never spoke to or houses they never visited.

Canvass managers work hard to maintain the integrity of this data by analyzing timestamps, conducting spot checks, and verifying supporter marks through follow-up calls or neighborhood visits. But it is unequivocal that canvassing data on a large scale is extremely vulnerable to manipulation. From top to bottom, there are few incentives for transparency in these operations. Leadership is under pressure to meet deliverables, so they're inclined to

overlook discrepancies. Canvassers do not have a vested interest in the outcome of the campaign so it is an acceptable risk to falsify data, especially if they think they won't get caught. Even when they are caught, firing them isn't always an option; replacements are hard to find, so letting them go would jeopardize the program's metrics.

VAN itself complicates things further: you can't delete individual bad entries, only entire batches, which could set the program back significantly. Reporting tools like Looker Studio used to generate flashy metrics dashboards simply regurgitate whatever data is in the system, without identifying glaring inconsistencies; like a canvasser marking 10 doors in five minutes, something physically impossible under the best conditions.

Every campaign manager and candidate we interviewed across a dozen campaigns, expressed frustration with their canvassing operations. During Early Vote, one candidate attempted to phonebank a list of supporters identified through canvassing who had not yet voted. The number of individuals on that list who claimed no one had ever knocked on their door was surprisingly high. This is a disappointing outcome, especially when campaigns are investing six-figure sums in paid canvassing programs.

The problem is not limited to canvassers themselves; it is a systemic issue. Even a basic review of raw data often reveals significant inaccuracies, yet campaigns rarely take the time to analyze this information critically. Vendors running these programs often maintain strong reputations with decision-makers, benefiting from professional credibility or personal relationships that shield them from scrutiny, even when their results are subpar.

Canvassing still holds value in certain contexts and should not be abandoned completely. In smaller, localized races such as city council or school board elections, it can



still be an effective strategy when executed properly. However, for larger campaigns, the traditional approach to canvassing is no longer a cost-effective method for building voter support or achieving win numbers.

Instead, canvassing for larger campaigns could be reimagined as a tool for content creation to enhance digital programs. Funders and social media audiences respond well to visual evidence of campaigners actively engaging in the field, such as photos or videos of volunteers. Canvassing can also play a role in team building and boosting morale among staff and volunteers. However, as a direct voter turnout strategy, its utility has declined, and campaigns should consider redirecting resources toward more impactful methods of voter engagement.

The future of voter turnout strategies lies in digital innovation and relational organizing. Campaigns can no longer rely on strangers convincing other strangers to vote. Instead, the focus should shift to leveraging personal connections, with friends and acquaintances turning out their own networks. Modern tools now allow campaigns to analyze how many voters a volunteer or staff member knows within a district, enabling them to prioritize outreach to these networks in a calculated, verifiable fashion without the canvasser ever having to leave their couch to ensure those individuals cast their ballots.

Similar systemic issues likely affect other traditional campaign strategies, such as direct mail. Campaigns often fail to demand proper verification from vendors, and there is no reliable system to confirm that every mailer is sent as promised. When it comes to other expenditures, accounts from campaign staff frequently included reports of literature being clandestinely discarded, yard signs left uninstalled, and vendors billing for work that was never completed. The lack of transparency in campaign billing practices exacerbates these problems, as opaque processes often prevent accountability and

leave campaigns vulnerable to inefficiencies, outright misuse of resources, or vendor billing practices conducted in bad faith.

An interesting case that highlights such an example came from examining two proposals from the same firm. Two state legislative campaigns shared proposals they had received from the same prominent polling firm with national recognition.

For the first candidate, who was running in a high-profile race with significant party backing, the firm proposed a 30-question survey with 300 respondents at a cost of \$16,000. A few weeks later, the same firm sent a proposal to another candidate running in a lower-profile district. This time, the offer was a 35-question survey with 400 respondents, priced at just \$8,700.

This discrepancy illustrates a common campaign idiom that “Pricing depends on your budget.” The subtext was clear; their pricing model is determined not by the actual cost of delivering services but by their perception of what the candidate is willing or able to pay.

This disparity illustrates how consultants often tailor their pricing based on the perceived financial resources of the client rather than the level of effort required. The first candidate, with access to a larger donor network and institutional support, was seen as an opportunity to extract higher fees. Meanwhile, the second candidate, assumed to have fewer resources, was offered a steep discount; without even having to negotiate.

This pricing model exemplifies why campaigns should approach vendors with caution when conversations begin with, “What’s your budget?” Such an approach indicates that pricing isn’t being determined by the actual work required but by what the vendor believes they can charge. For candidates running in challenging districts with limited resources, every dollar counts. When vendors engage in these tactics, they



erode the trust and transparency that campaigns rely on to function effectively.

A vendor's inability to provide clear and upfront pricing is a red flag that campaigns cannot afford to ignore. It signals the potential for inflated costs and misaligned priorities. Candidates should operate under the assumption that every consultant and vendor may prioritize their own interests over the campaign's success. If someone's advice or services do not directly contribute to securing votes, it's fair to reevaluate their role. Campaigns deserve partners who are as committed to their success as they are.

The underinvestment in building local grassroots organizing, local vendors, firms, and consultants is, in our view, one of the primary reasons Texas Democrats have struggled to gain traction. Over time, the party has fostered a generation of local activists who are rarely given the autonomy to design and execute their own outreach strategies. Instead, they are often instructed to follow the direction of out-of-town consultants who are touted for their "experience." This reliance on external guidance not only stifles local talent but also overlooks the invaluable insights and connections that local operatives bring to their communities.

Nowhere was this disconnect more evident than in one particular race in South Texas, which seemed to embody many of the challenges we've outlined.

Texas Congressional District 15

In the 2020 election, Republican Monica de la Cruz came within just 2.88 percentage points of flipping Congressional District 15. Following the election, it was evident that while the Gonzalez campaign engaged in some paid phone banking and sent some direct mail, the level of campaign activity was minimal.

However, the narrow margin of victory gave Gonzalez pause. Recognizing the shifting political landscape, Gonzalez, known for his tactical approach, made the strategic decision to run in neighboring CD34 after Filemon Vela announced his retirement. Publicly, there was talk of Gonzalez unwillfully being "gerrymandered" out of CD15, but private conversations no doubt took place that led to the drawing of Gonzalez's residence in McAllen as the westernmost boundary of CD34. Texas Republicans, viewing this as an opportunity, were more than willing to accommodate. They did not anticipate a Republican could win CD34, and clearing out a well-funded incumbent from CD15 to create an open seat aligned with their broader goals. From their perspective, it was a win-win scenario.

Filemon Vela's early retirement triggered an unexpected special election, throwing local Democratic institutions into disarray as national, state, and local party leaders scrambled to identify a viable candidate. Within the Democratic National Committee (DNC), the prevailing logic was that investing resources into the special election wasn't worth the effort. Even if they lost, the assumption was that the district would easily return to Democratic control in November. While this calculation ultimately proved correct—Vicente Gonzalez decisively defeated Republican Mayra Flores in the general election—the approach came with significant consequences.

Mayra Flores emerged victorious in the special election, becoming the first Republican to represent CD34, the first woman to do so, and the first Mexican-born U.S. citizen to hold the seat. Her win provided Republicans with a highly publicized victory, lending credibility to their long-standing rhetoric about "Turning the Valley Red." For years, Republicans had worked to make inroads in South Texas, and now they had a tangible success to celebrate, energizing



their base throughout the summer months leading into the November elections.

On the Democratic side, the eventual nominee for CD15 was Michelle Vallejo, who was specifically recruited by LUPE Votes, the political arm of La Unión del Pueblo Entero. Known for its strong history in advocacy and issue-focused organizing, LUPE Votes was a newly created entity designed specifically to venture into electoral politics. Vallejo's candidacy marked a bold step for the organization, signaling a new approach to blending grassroots activism with electoral engagement in a district that was becoming increasingly competitive.

The process LUPE Votes used to select Michelle Vallejo as the Democratic nominee for CD15 mirrored the approach Justice Democrats employed two years earlier to select Jessica Cisneros as their candidate for CD28. This similarity was no coincidence, as several individuals who had been involved in Cisneros's earlier campaign, including her first campaign manager and a number of organizers and volunteers, had transitioned to working with LUPE Votes. Unsurprisingly, many of the same decision-makers who had shaped Cisneros's campaign also played key roles in the early days of Vallejo's candidacy.

LUPE Votes announced an open call for "nominations" and pledged to fully support their chosen candidate. Although they received numerous applications and conducted interviews with several individuals, multiple former LUPE Votes staffers privately acknowledged that Vallejo had been their preferred choice from the outset.

Michelle Vallejo's journey from small-town flea market manager to federal candidate is a compelling one. Our first encounter with Vallejo dates back to 2019, when she served on the inaugural board of the New Leaders Council South Texas Frontera alongside Cambio's Executive Director.

At the time, Vallejo expressed more centrist views. "I consider myself a Democrat, but sometimes I think their policies don't really benefit small business owners," she remarked during conversations. Her background at that point included a few semesters at Columbia University before she returned home to help manage her family's business, *Pulga Los Portales*. She also ran *Hustle and Socialize*, a yearly conference for women entrepreneurs in San Antonio. While she often spoke about running for local office in her hometown of Alton, Texas, Vallejo never filed to run, despite several election cycles passing.

Her eventual entry into electoral politics came through personal connections within LUPE Votes. Even before the nomination process had concluded, Vallejo, having been assured by insiders at LUPE Votes that she was their favorite, began assembling her campaign team. While she fielded pitches from some local consultants and political workers, her senior campaign staff was primarily composed of individuals from outside the Rio Grande Valley who lacked experience with local elections or had backgrounds limited to issue-based organizing.

In conversations with Vallejo campaign staffers and members of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) who worked on the campaign, a recurring theme was the significant influence that senior-level decisions were often made by individuals with no cultural or personal ties to the RGV. Vallejo herself frequently deferred to these out-of-town consultants on critical matters, including the management of her schedule and the allocation of campaign funds.

One individual mentioned repeatedly in interviews was a fundraising consultant referred to as "Alex," who had also played a prominent role in staffing Jessica Cisneros's 2020 campaign.



Throughout the early stages of the 2022 campaign, multiple Vallejo staffers expressed frustration with Alex's outsized role in shaping decisions across various departments, including areas where they had little or no expertise. This dynamic not only fueled internal tension but also contributed to a sense that the campaign's strategic direction was being driven by individuals disconnected from the local context and the unique needs of the RGV electorate.

One key decision that proved to be consequential was the hiring of a campaign manager. Vallejo initially interviewed a handful of local candidates for the position, but, reportedly at the urging of her fundraising consultant Alex, she ultimately hired "Jordan", a political operative from outside the RGV. Public records indicate that at the time, Jordan had worked on seven major races, none of which resulted in a victory.

Jordan's management of the campaign was a persistent point of contention among local stakeholders throughout both the primary and general election cycles. Concerns were frequently raised regarding the strategic direction of the campaign, with many questioning the extent to which Jordan's approach was aligned with the overarching electoral objectives and the priorities of the local electorate.

One incident during early voting in 2022 exemplified these concerns. In the presence of phone-banking volunteers, Jordan was overheard saying, "I don't even care if we win, I just want to hit our fundraising goal." This statement, widely regarded as tone-deaf and dismissive, reinforced the perception that the campaign prioritized financial benchmarks over meaningful voter outreach and engagement. In a region like the RGV, where personal connections and trust are paramount to building voter support, such a misstep was particularly damaging and underscored a broader disconnect between

the campaign's leadership and the community it sought to represent.

Following Michelle Vallejo's 2022 defeat by 8.48 percentage points, many expected her campaign to reassess its strategy and leadership in preparation for another run. However, Vallejo surprised observers by retaining the same campaign manager for her 2024 race; a decision that left many baffled and ultimately contributed to an even wider loss margin of 14.22 percentage points.

Evaluating candidate quality is inherently delicate, as it involves subjecting oneself to criticism that few individuals are willing to endure. Running for office demands immense courage, and those who step forward deserve acknowledgment. That said, successful candidates are those who run for the right reasons, present a genuine vision, and bring authenticity to their campaigns—not merely those who can deliver polished talking points crafted by advisors. Vallejo was widely liked by her team and highly regarded by national consultants, many of whom commended her campaign's structure and narrative. One DC-based consultant remarked, "We really like her; she did such a good job."

However, these national perspectives were at odds with local sentiment. Vallejo's campaign faced widespread criticism for its tactics and decision-making, much of which marginalized local voices. Instead of leveraging the insights and expertise of those familiar with the RGV, the campaign relied heavily on out-of-town consultants who lacked a nuanced understanding of the region's cultural and political complexities.

Additionally, Vallejo herself spent a disproportionate amount of time fundraising, which often came at the expense of direct voter engagement. Late in the race, the campaign made several questionable messaging decisions that further alienated potential supporters. These missteps underscored a broader disconnect between



the campaign's operations and the community it aimed to represent—a factor that significantly hindered Vallejo's ability to build meaningful connections with voters and secure their trust.

In 2022, Michelle Vallejo positioned herself as a progressive firebrand, branding herself as “the Pueblo's candidate.” With endorsements from Bernie Sanders and comparisons to members of “The Squad,” her campaign embraced a strong progressive identity. However, by 2024, Vallejo's messaging took a puzzling turn. Late in the campaign, she released a centrist ad on immigration, a sharp departure from her earlier rhetoric. Ironically, this shift brought her closer to the Vallejo many had known before her candidacy: an entrepreneur with moderate views on small business and economic issues. Insiders observed that this inconsistency reflected Vallejo's tendency to adopt positions dictated by advisors rather than articulating her own vision. This deference earned her a reputation for frequently needing to “check with her team” before making decisions.

Michelle Vallejo's trajectory serves as a cautionary tale that highlights key issues that undermine our success. Vallejo was recruited for her candidacy based on connections and privilege rather than grassroots support or demonstrated authenticity. Her campaign relied heavily on out-of-town consultants to run operations, sidelining local voices and expertise. Much of her spending was concentrated on activities unrelated to direct voter contact.

Compounding these issues, Vallejo's campaign faced scrutiny from the FEC over coordination with LUPE Votes, including payments for a poll, further reinforcing instances of poor management of resources. Rather than embodying authenticity, Vallejo's candidacy appeared to be more about connections than conviction. Her staff, perceived as elitist and out of touch,

prioritized metrics that did little to earn votes, while Vallejo herself focused much of her time on activities that failed to engage the electorate meaningfully.

A Path Forward

The 2024 elections were a sobering reminder of the systemic challenges facing Texas Democrats. Despite the demographic trends that once seemed poised to tip the state blue, the Republican Party has successfully entrenched itself in regions like the RGV, capitalizing on cultural, emotional, and ideological divides. Yet, within this moment of crisis lies an opportunity; a chance to reimagine and rebuild a party that can meaningfully connect with voters and reclaim the trust it has lost.

This report has earnestly sought to outline a range of factors contributing to Democratic losses, from structural barriers like redistricting to internal shortcomings in messaging, resource allocation, and accountability. While some challenges; such as the lingering influence of Donald Trump, are beyond our control, many of the issues we face are self-inflicted and entirely solvable. To recap how we got here:

1. A Disconnect Between National Leadership and Local Realities

The Democratic Party's national leadership has often failed to account for the unique cultural and political dynamics of regions like the RGV. Decisions at the top of the ticket, such as Joe Biden's reelection campaign and Kamala Harris's elevation without a competitive primary, left down-ballot candidates carrying the burden of a disengaged or disillusioned electorate. National consultants and messaging strategies often miss the mark, alienating local voters rather than energizing them.

2. Ineffective Messaging

Republicans have successfully



branded Democrats as the party of “open borders” and “baby killers,” narratives that have become deeply embedded in the public consciousness. Meanwhile, Democratic messaging often feels hollow and disconnected, relying on focus-group-tested slogans that fail to resonate with voters’ lived experiences. Polling methods, particularly the insular nature of the polling industry, exacerbate this problem by producing data that fails to capture the complexities of voter attitudes.

3. **A Culture of Inefficiency and Toxicity in Campaigns**

The campaign industrial complex has fostered a culture of inefficiency, where financial incentives for consultants and vendors often overshadow the actual goal of earning votes. Campaigns are plagued by toxic work environments, a focus on phantom metrics, and the prioritization of self-promotion over genuine voter engagement. Decisions like outsourcing key roles to out-of-state operatives with little understanding of local dynamics further undermine campaign effectiveness.

4. **Barriers to Inclusivity and Representation**

While progressive organizations have made strides in promoting diversity, the political ecosystem remains largely inaccessible to individuals without the “right” connections, education, or cultural capital. Fellowship programs and hiring practices often reinforce existing hierarchies rather than fostering meaningful inclusion. This lack of diversity at every level of campaign operations contributes to messaging

and strategies that fail to connect with the electorate.

5. **Outdated Campaign Practices**

Traditional campaign strategies, such as large-scale paid canvassing, has proven increasingly ineffective. While these methods once yielded results, they are no longer suited to the modern political landscape. Issues like fabricated data, poor oversight, and a lack of accountability further erode the efficacy of these programs. Similarly, other campaign practices, such as mail and digital advertising, suffer from a lack of transparency and verification.

Solutions for Rebuilding for the Future

1. **Invest in Local Leadership and Talent**

The Democratic Party must prioritize the development of local talent. This means moving beyond classroom-based fellowships and networking events to provide hands-on, community-based training for aspiring operatives and organizers. Local leaders who understand the cultural and political dynamics of their communities are best positioned to craft effective strategies and messages. National consultants should play a supportive role, not a directive one, and decision-making should be decentralized to empower local campaigns.

2. **Prioritize Accountability and Transparency**

Campaigns need to demand accountability from consultants and vendors. This includes setting clear expectations, regularly reviewing deliverables, and verifying the work being done. Campaigns should implement systems to audit



canvassing data, track mail distribution, and ensure that funds are being spent effectively.

Transparency must also extend to pricing structures for services like polling and media buys to prevent exploitative practices.

3. **Modernize Campaign Practices**

Campaigns must adapt to the realities of the modern political landscape. This means shifting resources from outdated strategies to more innovative approaches, such as relational organizing and digital engagement. Relational organizing, where volunteers activate their personal networks to turn out voters, has proven to be a cost-effective and impactful method of voter outreach. Digital strategies should focus on creating content that resonates with voters and builds trust over time, rather than relying solely on paid advertisements.

4. **Rebuild Trust Through Authenticity**

Democrats need to focus on rebuilding trust with voters. This means prioritizing authenticity in both candidate recruitment and messaging. Candidates should be encouraged to speak from their own experiences and values, rather than parroting talking points provided by consultants. Messaging should emphasize shared values and tangible benefits, such as economic opportunities, healthcare access, and education, rather than abstract ideals or identity-based appeals.

5. **Foster a Culture of Innovation from Unlikely Places**

Campaigns must create spaces where diverse perspectives are genuinely valued. This means actively recruiting individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, not just to fill quotas

but to bring new ideas and perspectives to the table. Campaign culture should prioritize collaboration, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to the goals of the movement. Toxic dynamics, gatekeeping, and infighting must be addressed head-on to create a healthier and more effective working environment.

6. **Diversify the Polling Industry and Rethink Data Use**

Campaigns should seek out partnerships with smaller, community-based polling firms and invest in hiring pollsters who reflect the diversity of the communities being surveyed. Additionally, campaigns must use polling data as a tool to inform, not dictate, messaging strategies. Authenticity and emotional resonance should take precedence over focus-group-approved soundbites.

The 2024 elections should be a wake-up call for Texas Democrats, but they also represent a moment of transformation. Change will not come overnight. It will require humility, hard work, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths. But the stakes could not be higher. The future of Texas; and by extension, the nation; depends on our ability to rise to this moment and build a Democratic Party that truly represents the people.

