

Dems try various messaging strategies

Party aims to find its footing months after loss to Trump

Phillip M. Bailey
USA TODAY

Tim Walz acknowledges that many voters remain unsure if the Democrats have what it takes to effectively oppose President Donald Trump’s relentless use of executive authority.

The Minnesota governor has trekked across a half dozen states in recent weeks, visiting places as close as neighboring Wisconsin and as far south as Texas, hosting town halls in conservative-leaning congressional districts.

He’s heard a mixture of emotions, whether fury about cutting jobs at the Department of Veterans Affairs; anxiety about gutting the office that oversees Pell Grants or people mocking the president’s call to “get Greenland.”

But it’s unclear if that will result in a rising tide for a party that less than one-third of voters view favorably, according to polls.

“There was no misunderstanding when I was growing up that the Democratic Party stood for supporting programs that helped the working and middle class in labor,” Walz said in a one-on-one interview. “If you ask a large number of Americans now, they’re not certain of that.”

“They see us as, you know, defending the bureaucracy – maybe elitist,” he added. “We have to figure out why is our message not resonating with folks who stay home now.”

Democrats are looking everywhere for their missing mojo to regain voters’ confidence despite there being little consensus about how to resurrect the party or who is leading the resistance as their base grows increasingly frustrated.

Prominent figures, such as Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., are going with a mea culpa, saying the party is partially to blame for Trump’s success. Others, such as Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., tell USA TODAY it is past time for them to make more noise as their voters convey their frustration.

Yet five months after the gut-punch 2024 presidential election loss humbled Democrats, Walz, the former vice presidential nominee, said he’s encountering a newfound energy at those public assemblies.

The people venting their concerns are doing a much better job at crafting an urgent message than the party apparatus or potential candidates, he said.

“If I teach a class and half the kids don’t get it, I don’t assume half the kids aren’t very bright,” Walz, a former high school teacher, told USA TODAY.

‘Volume problems’

Democrats are going to places that their establishment hasn’t normally visited, whether online or in-person.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom launched a podcast featuring MAGA-aligned guests where he admits the party’s brand is “toxic” while a few other governors also on the 2028 presidential short list are ripping a page out of Trump’s winning playbook by showing up on radio and online programs to give their hot takes on sports.

Others maintain that massive protests that give people direct action is the better option while hundreds of thousands this past week eagerly embraced Booker’s marathon floor speech, which, coupled with the Wisconsin judicial race, gave Democrats their first confidence boost since Trump returned to office.



Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz said that after a bruising defeat for Democrats and a period of soul searching for the party he’s encountering a newfound energy at recent public forums. LILY SMITH/THE REGISTER

But even in that talkathon, the New Jersey Democrat said the party “has made terrible mistakes” that gave Trump a lane to the White House.

Adam Green, co-founder of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, an influential progressive group, said the venue and messenger doesn’t matter as much as having a forceful and consistent governing theme.

“I don’t know if that message always comes through, but the idea of fighting for the little guy and being willing to challenge power in order to improve lives should be a pretty clear message that people associate with the Democratic Party,” he said.

Two contrasting examples happened within a week in March, first when Rep. Al Green, D-Texas, was removed from the House chamber after heckling Trump’s joint address to Congress, which more moderate Democrats balked at, citing decorum.

A more intense fire within the party came against Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., who said he would vote to advance the Republican government funding extension. The move avoided a shutdown but infuriated the activist left that saw a moment to leverage Trump and the GOP.

Since then, Progressive Change Campaign Committee and other left-leaning groups have been urging the party, particularly Senate Democrats, to throw out “the old rules of collegiality,” Green said.

Those organizations had been prodding lawmakers to enter their opponent’s backyards, citing how Republican leaders instructed their members not to hold open public forums as the events began to boil over with frustrated attendees.

That strategy is now part of a DNC campaign to hold events in competitive Republican-held districts and swing states across the country in order to push back on Trump’s policies and remind voters of the impact of his proposals not only in Democratic areas, but in conservative strongholds.

“We’re going to raise hell in Republican districts,” said Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman, D-N.J., who was among the Democrats to hold in-person town halls in GOP areas.

For example, Warren, held a town hall this month in part of Republican Rep. Andy Ogles’ district in deep red Tennessee. She told USA TODAY the party must “use every tool in the toolbox” to oppose Trump’s agenda, which will pivot to its larger legislative goals in the coming weeks.

Those options are limited given GOP control of Congress, including the House, where every vote passes by a simple majority. But in the Senate, a 60-vote threshold is needed to advance most legislation, which gives Democrats some leverage should they use the filibuster to effectively shut down Trump’s legislative progress.

It doesn’t make sense to reveal their plans right now during the early messaging phase, Warren said, but she said the overall approach is clear.

“We use our oversight tools, our investigation tools, and our voting opportunities, and our public platform to fight back at every point,” the Massachusetts Democrat said.

Asked whether there’s an area in which the party has fallen short on communicating with voters, Warren, a former presidential candidate, told USA TODAY: “I don’t think of this as a message problem, I think of it as a volume problem.”

Other segments of the party apparatus seem to have heeded that call and have shifted to a more plain-spoken tone that employs coarse language.

On social media, for instance, the DNC was mocked by left-leaning activists in February for sharing a laundry list of “what Democrats did.” In recent weeks they’ve caught up with the times and adopted a more youthful touch, using memes mocking opponents and other messaging formats.

“Every time Republicans are in power they tank the economy,” the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the House minority’s political arm, said in an April 4 post on X. “Every (expletive) time.”

Dems lean into Musk criticism

One area where Democrats believe voters are more willing to hear their pitch is the role of Elon Musk, the world’s richest person, who as the head of the Department of Government Efficiency has become the face of Trump’s mass layoffs in the federal workforce.

In the aftermath of the Wisconsin Supreme Court election, for instance, Democrats gleefully piled on the billionaire tech innovator, who spent roughly \$20 million in support of the conservative-leaning candidate who lost decisively.

“Enough said. Musk is a loser,” DNC Chairman Ken Martin said in an April 2 post on X, which featured a giant block of cheese – a nod to the NFL’s Green Bay Packers – crushing one of Musk’s Tesla Cybertrucks, which have been hit by a rash of vandalism.

Ahead of the Wisconsin’s judicial race, Blueprint Polling, a Democratic-aligned messaging and research firm, released data showing Musk to be deeply unpopular compared to the president.

The survey of 1,400 registered voters shows Trump with a -6% net approval versus a -16% net approval for the tech mogul’s job performance with DOGE.

“Musk is becoming a drag on Trump, and his role in these cuts and where he wants to direct them are becoming a liability and a vulnerability for the administration,” Evan Roth Smith, the group’s lead pollster, said.

Within the GOP, the Blueprint survey shows a significant gap between Trump and his tech ally.

Among Republicans, for instance, Musk’s job approval is rated at 59% whereas the president holds a 79% approval rating, which Democratic strategists see as a wedge to exploit.

Voters’ worries about Musk and DOGE’s potential cuts to programs more than his personal life or actions. Roughly 64% of respondents, for example, said they were concerned about reports of firing Social Security Administration employees versus 22% who said the same about Musk fathering more than a dozen children.

Similar majorities in the poll expressed concern about mass firings at key agencies and DOGE having access to American’s personal data.

Contributing: Riley Beggin, Deborah Berry

Funding

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On Sunday night, Frankfort Mayor Lane Wilkerson urged residents to evacuate in anticipation of the Kentucky River’s crest on Monday.

It appeared to crest Monday morning at 48.3 feet, the second highest on record.

However, for many areas in Kentucky — including Louisville — the water is still rising. The commonwealth has been hit by widespread flooding from the week’s batch of storms and heavy rainfall, with cities from Paducah to Carrollton impacted.

On Friday, President Donald Trump approved Beshear’s request for an emergency disaster declaration.

“President Trump and Secretary (Kristi) Noem have been really good in their response to the natural disasters we’ve had in this term,” Beshear said, referencing previous flooding in February. “They very quickly signed the documents. Their FEMA group in Eastern Kentucky is doing some of the best I’ve ever seen a FEMA group doing. In the last several years, they’ve really improved their processes, and you hear many fewer complaints and many more people being helped.”

Still, Beshear said these improvements are why Trump should not “break or dissolve” FEMA and other federal agencies, raising concerns over emergency disasters on both the state and national levels in an interview with The Courier Journal while visiting the temporary shelter.

Beshear seeks out federal, local assistance for floods

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has had search and rescue teams out during the emergency phase, Beshear said.

“We already have our major disaster declaration from the president, but we’ll be applying for individual and for public assistance,” he said. “That’s something that I expect we’ll reach all the thresholds for, so my hope is that more help is on the way.”

These floods are an example of why federal agencies must not dissolve and why the state should not have capped Kentucky’s emergency relief funding, Beshear said.

His comments come amid the Trump administration’s federal government overhaul, which has included a slew of executive orders that significantly reduce the capacity of many federal agencies. Hundreds of employees have been fired from FEMA, and Trump previously suggested shutting down the agency. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has also received significant cuts.

“When you look at the National Weather Service, one of the reasons that we haven’t lost more people is that they’re there,” Beshear said. “They’re doing the forecast. They’re helping our meteorologists and us in the state, they helped us be prepared.”

Cuts to the National Weather Service, which is a part of the NOAA, “will cause people to lose their lives,” Beshear said.

His funding woes extend locally — where he criticized the Kentucky General Assembly for implementing a funding cap for emergency disasters. In the biennial budget, the General Assembly restricted Beshear’s spending, allowing him to allocate \$50 million for emergency responses in the first year of the two-year budget and \$50 million in the second year.

The legislature later approved Beshear accessing the second \$50 million early — allowing him to spend \$100 million total in the course of two years.

Beshear said the state will need to bypass that cap before the next budget “for certain.”

“What it likely means is it will hit a point where a natural disaster will cause us to call a special session, just to be able to have the basics to respond, much less to provide extra help to people,” he said.

Sen. Gex Williams, R-Verona, also visited the Franklin County High School shelter. He said he believes a special session could be possible, depending on the damage, but that more information is needed.

“So if we go over that (amount), (Beshear) calls in for a special session and we can allocate more,” Williams said. “But I don’t think that’s imminent. Again, you’re really not going to know all the damage until the water goes down.”

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