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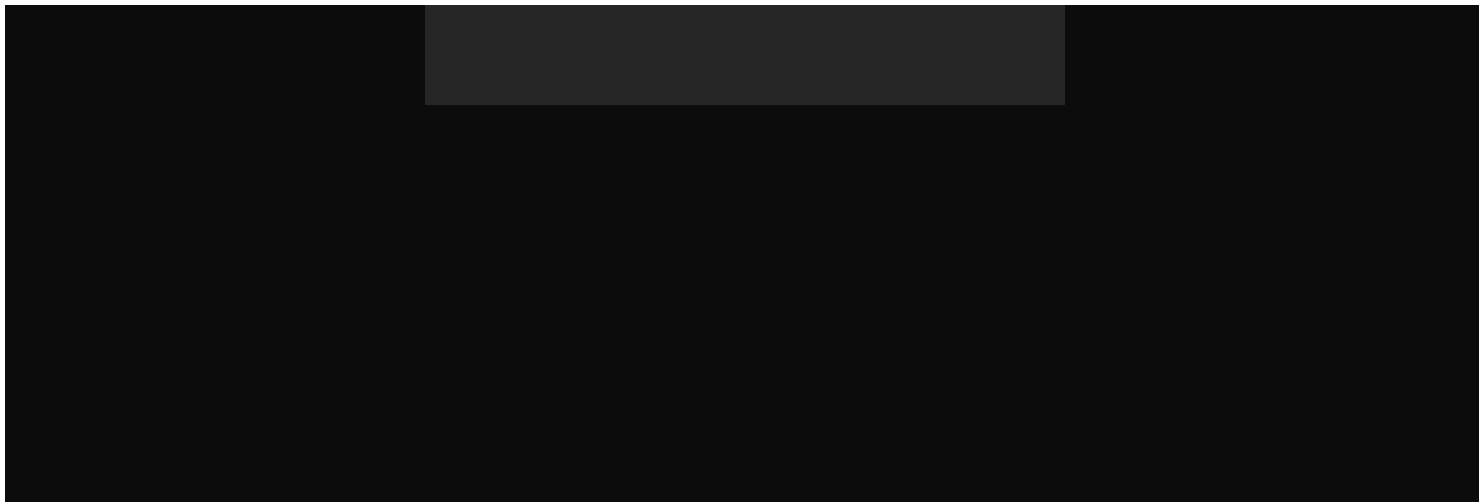
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# Hill Democrats say their warnings about the party's shortfalls on the border were ignored

By Sarah Ferris and [Annie Grayer](#), CNN

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But they say they were ignored by others in their party — and now the dam has broken with Donald Trump's second White House win.

"It just busted this year," said Rep. Henry Cuellar, a south Texas Democrat who overperformed Vice President Kamala Harris by double digits in key parts of his district, told CNN, saying that "Democrats have lost the working class," and even "little old ladies" at church are pressing him on the border.

"I was sensing something after the 2020 election. I said, 'Guys, there's something going on,'" Cuellar said, describing private conversations he's had with fellow Democrats about the potency of the border crisis.

The Texas Democrat has personally warned members of his party that they were headed for big losses if the party didn't fix its message to working people, including on immigration and the economy.

And he wasn't the only one: Senior House Democrats, including Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, had urged Biden-Harris administration advisers for months to come up with a stronger economic message, according to two people familiar with the discussions.

Cuellar and others feel that their pleas, particularly on the border, have gone unanswered, according to interviews with nearly two dozen Democratic lawmakers and senior aides.

Democrats lost the White House and the Senate majority in the November elections. CNN has not yet projected which party will control the House. Republicans are increasingly bullish about holding onto the chamber, though top House Democrats believe there is still a chance to win the majority.

Many battleground Democrats are now fuming as they feel that the party has failed to speak clearly on the issues that matter to the working class — the voting bloc that once made up the

clearly on the issues that matter to the working class — the young bloc that once made up the core of the party's base. CNN exit poll data shows Trump won voters without a college degree by 14 points over Harris, 56% to 42%. Four years earlier, he won the group by 2 points over Biden.

Some Democrats have taken issue with President Joe Biden's handling of immigration policy.

"Biden mismanaged the border," Rep. Susie Lee, a Democrat who overperformed Harris in her Las Vegas swing seat, told CNN.

In Congress, Lee was among dozens of centrist Democrats who repeatedly spoke out against Biden's border strategy and pushed their own immigration reform bills. But Biden, she said, "sort of ignored it until this summer."

Now, Lee said Democrats need to think deeply about how to convince people in districts like hers to come back to the party: "We need to have an honest reckoning."

Senate Democrats did try to pass a border security measure this year, with Biden's support, as part of a broader foreign aid package. The bill was negotiated on a bipartisan basis, but Trump attacked the measure and it failed on the floor. Even so, swing-district Democrats say any push on a border bill needed to happen long before this February, just months before the election.



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President Joe Biden speaks with US Customs and Border Protection officers during a visit to the US-Mexico border in El Paso, Texas, in January 2023. Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

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In Michigan, where Trump won the state back by over 79,000 votes and Republicans flipped a key House race, Rep. Debbie Dingell told CNN that she knew Democrats were struggling to land an economic message that broke through.

“I was not as stunned as everybody else was because I work my district,” Dingell said. “I think we all have to do some soul searching.”

As reeling Democrats struggle to comprehend the scale of Harris' loss, there are some bright spots for down-ballot candidates who've worked hard to distance themselves from the top. House Democrats in the toughest two-dozen races overperformed Harris by 5 percentage points, according to one party operative.

In New York, Democratic Rep. Tom Suozzi — whose campaign focused heavily on overhauling the US immigration system — held onto his Long Island swing seat even as voters in Nassau County swung 15 percent from Biden in 2020 to Trump in 2024.

In one district in western Wisconsin, Trump carried the seat by roughly 8 points while the GOP incumbent, Rep. Derrick Van Orden, only survived reelection by 2.7 points. Democrats believe that if Harris had simply performed as well as Biden did in 2020, Democrats' candidate, Rebecca Cooke, would have pulled off the upset.

But down-ballot Democrats say there's only so much they can do to tackle the issue of immigration in their districts if the national party does not prioritize it. And they say it's not just a failure to respond to attacks on the border: these Democrats argue the party has also had an inadequate response to voters' deep concerns about skyrocketing costs and cultural issues.

Democratic Rep. Dean Phillips faced party-wide scorn this year as he attempted to force a last-minute conversation about Biden's unpopularity a year ago.

But inside the party, he had been raising concerns about party weaknesses for far longer, including a trip to the border in 2019. In his first year in Congress, Phillips took a trip to McAllen, Texas where he recalled being “horrified” by the conditions of the holding facilities there.

“I remember trying so hard to call attention to that among my colleagues. But it was completely dismissed and irrelevant at the time,” said Phillips, who is retiring from Congress after his failed primary bid against Biden.

And it's not just Democrats in battleground turf who say they've sounded the alarm.

Rep. Ritchie Torres, the first out gay Afro-Latino member of Congress, watched Trump gain supporters among Latinos even in his deep-blue district that includes the Bronx since 2020 amid public backlash to the far-left's "defund the police" rallying cry that summer.

Torres said the megaphone of the party's left-wing inhibited Democrats' ability to craft an immigration message that countered Republican attacks. He said it was "political malpractice" for the Biden administration to take too long to respond to the migrant crisis.

"My basic concern is that we as a party should stop listening to the far left, which is more representative of Twitch, TikTok and Twitter than it is of the real world. And start listening to the working class people of color who increasingly feel alienated from the party," he said.



Rep. Ritchie Torres speaks during a news conference on Capitol Hill July 17, 2023 in Washington, DC.

Drew Angerer/Getty Images

Vermont independent Sen. Bernie Sanders, who has been a longtime leader of the progressive movement and caucuses with Democrats, said in a statement after the election: "It should come as no great surprise that a Democratic Party which has abandoned working class people

would find that the working class has abandoned them.”

To be clear, most House Democrats remain loyal to their party's legislative priorities. Besides the border, there were few other areas Democrats who spoke with CNN were willing to call policy failures. Instead, they said it was a failure to communicate their wins and prioritize the issues that voters cared about the most.

One huge problem, multiple Democratic lawmakers said, is a widespread perception that the national party cared more about “culture war” issues than boosting paychecks.

As Trump and the GOP flooded the airwaves with anti-trans ads focusing on kids' sports, national Democrats focused heavily on the issue of abortion, which remained powerful with women across the country. But, in many cases, there wasn't a specific message for men, who flocked to Trump.

“We have to really be sensitive to how we approach the culture wars. We have turned off a lot of people we can't turn off if we expect to be a national party,” said Rep. Scott Peters of California, who flipped a GOP seat to come to Congress and has long warned about Democrats' losing message in swing states.

Congressional Democrats have seen other warning signs that Trump was pulling away blue collar voters from their party.

Former congresswoman Cheri Bustos led the House Democrats campaign arm in 2020, watching firsthand as Trump lost but the GOP still held onto dozens of battleground seats in the House. Republicans snatched up once-blue seats comprised of mostly working-class voters and picked up seats in south Florida.

With that in mind, Bustos went to a group of national Democrats this year with a plan to help win some of those voters back in 2024.

“I had, what I considered, a great proposal that I presented to, I'll just say, the national Democrats about a rural strategy,” Bustos said. She wanted to go into tiny towns in the center of the country that had been ignored for years. But it never happened.

As for the Democratic Party's reckoning this year, Bustos was blunt: “I think it's gotta be a deep, deep, deep dive on the whole Democratic Party frankly. I almost think we need to start from scratch.”

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