# To Win Michigan, Harris Needs a New Message; Anti-Trump Narrative Isn't It

In Michigan, a critical swing state where political winds shift with the economy and kitchen-table issues, Kamala Harris' warnings about Donald Trump's authoritarianism seem to be slipping into the background. While she has sounded the alarm on Trump's rhetoric and potential threats to democracy, her message risks falling flat among voters whose primary concern is the economic uncertainty facing their communities. The paradox is striking: despite the gravity of her message, the voters she needs most are not only tuning it out but growing impatient with it.

Harris' strategy is clear. Faced with Trump's escalating rhetoric and his disdain for democratic norms, she's calling him what his critics believe he is: a danger to the country. Yet, as she invokes these warnings across Michigan, it's evident that a different kind of discontent is growing. "It doesn't play well in communities that are struggling to make ends meet," said Sherry Gay-Dagnogo, a former state representative and Detroit school board member backing Harris. "They're talking to the wrong people. We can't keep campaigning on modes of fear."

Her campaign's decision to confront Trump on his authoritarian streak may resonate on a national stage, but in Michigan, where economic concerns remain front and center, voters feel differently. Many have heard the same warnings since 2016, and while they haven't dismissed Trump's threats, they've been overexposed to them. "Democracy's on the line" is a refrain voters have been hearing for nearly a decade; at this point, the assertion is not news but a deeply polarized reality. In Michigan, there is a divide between abstract threats and tangible concerns, and Harris' campaign must find a way to bridge it.



Kamala Harris shakes hands and takes photos after speaking at a campaign stop at Wings Event Center on Oct. 26 in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Michigan has long been a political battleground, with each election cycle exposing the vulnerabilities in both parties' traditional bases. In Detroit and across key suburbs, Democrats fret over the familiar cracks appearing again in their coalition. And Harris' stance has Democrats questioning whether her rhetoric is reaching the audience she needs. In Portage, at a recent rally, Karen Lancendorfer, a Democrat, observed that "it's risky to go negative, because sometimes independents don't like negativity." For many Michigan voters, the specter of Trump is one they're already familiar with. What they want to hear are concrete solutions to today's issues, not warnings about future ones.

Amid the drumbeat of warnings about Trump's authoritarianism, Harris has also championed abortion rights—an issue that has galvanized her supporters. But for some Democrats, that message has been diluted by her fixation on Trump's record. When Harris took the stage in Kalamazoo, she warned about Trump's plans to consolidate power, but activists and voters alike wondered whether she was losing sight of the core issues she should be focused on. In a state where the Dobbs decision mobilized waves of voters, the power of Harris' abortion message cannot be overstated. When she has leaned into that issue, she has reignited her base's passion and drawn in key demographic groups. "We're going to shame people by saying 'how dare you stay home and Donald Trump gets elected' rather than give people a reason to get off their couches to vote," Democratic organizer Carly Hammond said, capturing the frustration of those on the ground.

And it's not just abortion rights that voters want to hear about—it's economic policies and bread-and-butter issues that affect their lives. Michigan's economy, which remains inextricably tied to manufacturing, has long been a barometer for voter sentiment. Harris' efforts to address these concerns, like her recent visit to a semiconductor plant in Saginaw, underscore the importance of her message on economic resilience. But is she talking about it enough?

Senator Debbie Stabenow's comment that Harris has been "laser-focused on manufacturing, strengthening the economy, and lowering costs" could reassure concerned voters—if they actually hear that message. There is a fine line between condemning Trump's extremism and speaking directly to Michigan's economic concerns, and Harris will need to find a better balance if she hopes to sway undecided voters. One auto-industry worker, skeptical but open to Harris, summed it up simply: "I want to hear more about the candidates' business policies."

It's a sentiment echoed across Michigan as Republicans pummel Harris over inflation and crime, issues that resonate deeply in towns and cities grappling with rising costs. While Harris

may believe her dual focus on democracy and the economy is a winning combination, the reality on the ground is that voters want her to be sharper on pocketbook issues and bolder on what she'll do for them in the here and now.

The challenge Harris faces is not unique to Michigan, but it may be most acute here. She must transcend the Democratic echo chamber and make a case that feels immediate and essential to voters. If she can refocus her campaign's energy on how she plans to tackle today's biggest challenges—costs, jobs, and healthcare—she has the potential to forge a coalition that does more than defeat Trump. She can build one that reimagines the Democratic Party's future in a state where that future is often in question.

Harris must not abandon her warnings about Trump. But to win in Michigan, she'll need more than a cautionary tale. She'll need a story of hope and resolve, one that gives Michigan voters a reason not just to vote against something but to believe in something better.