

# DISAPPEARING DEMOCRATS?

Rebecca Grapevine and Hannah Pinski

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Why the party lacks candidates in many legislative races

Eastern Kentucky's 94th House District has changed a lot since 2020. • The district, nestled against the Virginia border, was held by Democrats from 2007 until 2022. • But the situation has now entirely flipped, and the district is one of the 43 House districts that have not drawn a single Democratic candidate for the upcoming primary. • This year, barring any unusual circumstances, the sole GOP candidate, Mitchum Whitaker, will win in November. • It's not unusual for some state legislative seats to lack candidates in Kentucky. • What's changed is that the majority of those uncontested House seats are now Democratic seats, whereas they were nearly evenly split between the parties 10 years ago. • On the Senate side this year, eight out of 19 races lack a single Democratic candidate, while only four out of the 19 lack a Republican candidate.

*"It is never a waste of time to run. I feel that ... there are an awful lot of Democrats out there hiding in the shadows."*

*John Whipple*

*Democrat running for the state House in the 10th District*

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That poses a problem for the party, which wants to pick up more seats to influence policies coming out of Frankfort.

But how can it win seats if people don't run?

Many party members agree it's a problem but disagree about where the party went wrong and how to fix it.

Some rural party activists think the party has neglected rural voters in favor of races in Louisville and Lexington, while others blame redistricting and the rigors of running for office in a highly polarized environment for the lack of candidates.

Why aren't more Democrats running in Kentucky?

There are many reasons Democrats don't want to run, party members from

across the state told The Courier Journal.

“An awful lot of it is the redistricting,” said Angie Hatton, who formerly represented the 94th District and now sits on the state’s Public Service Commission. Hatton said her former district picked up a heavily Trump-leaning portion of Harlan County through redistricting, and that contributed to her ouster in 2022.

The state redrew its legislative districts after the 2020 Census. Though Democrats challenged the new maps as too favorable to Republicans in court, the state Supreme Court upheld the maps late last year.

“So, it’s basically impossible for a Democrat to win that district now,” Hatton said. “To put in the effort and raise the money to run a race when there’s so little chance of getting through some of those districts, it’s daunting.”

It’s hard to prove that redistricting results in one party running fewer candidates, said Joshua Douglas, a law professor at the University of Kentucky, but that could be what’s happening here.

“These maps make it harder to overcome the gerrymandering — not impossible; a political wave can do it — but it’s made a lot more difficult,” Douglas said.

There are other trends that have contributed to making certain districts safe for Republicans, said Stephen Voss, a professor of political science at the University of Kentucky. “People’s partisanship has become more geographically sorted ... so that Democrats tend to live by the Democrats and Republicans by the Republicans, so more and more districts are lopsided. And then, you know, with redistricting, they can draw the lines to accentuate that highly polarized geography,” Voss said.

Some potential candidates feel fear about running in that highly polarized environment.

“They’re putting themselves out there for attack from far right extremists,” said Blair Haydon, the executive director of Emerge Kentucky, an organization devoted to helping Democratic women get elected. “Sometimes, you know, they’re seeing their face on ... a piece of paper calling them baby killers and comparing them to Hillary (Clinton), comparing them to Nancy Pelosi, they’re getting calls to their employers about conflict of interest.”

“The political arena now is just so contentious,” said Dorsey Ridley, a longtime Democratic state legislator who narrowly lost his Senate seat in 2018. “It’s pretty brutal out there.”

That’s especially true for candidates “running in deeper red areas where maybe they’re the first or only Democrat to ever knock on someone’s door and ask for their vote,” said Amanda Litman, the cofounder and co-executive director of Run for Something, which aims to recruit young progressives to run for office.

“Oftentimes, that can be a really positive and invigorating experience, but many times it can be very scary,” Litman said.

The difficulty of serving in the state legislature and maintaining a normal job is also a disincentive, Haydon said.

Currently, state legislators are paid between around \$188 and \$203 per day of service, depending on when they were sworn in. That amounts to between \$11,200 and \$12,200 for a 60-day session like this year’s. Two bills introduced in the General Assembly this year would have dramatically increased legislator pay, but neither got a hearing.

“They have to provide for their families. They’re middle-class citizens trying to make a living like most of us,” Haydon said.

Republicans say the decrease in Democratic candidates is because of the strength of the GOP in the state. Andrew Westberry, a Republican Party of Kentucky spokesperson, pointed to rising Republican voter registrations as a sign of the party’s dominance.

Are Democrats guilty of rural neglect?

Some Democratic activists point to deeper reasons for the party’s difficulty in attracting candidates — and voters — in wide swathes of the state: They think the party has left rural Kentucky behind.

Party leaders used to reach out to county parties to identify strong local candidates, but over the past decade or so, grassroots ties have been replaced by a data-driven, top-heavy approach, said Anna Whites, a longtime lawyer for Democratic candidates who lives in Frankfort.

“We started really listening to polls and data, which was still very nascent then, and stopped listening to the county parties,” Whites said.

Whites thinks the party has focused too much on the top-of-ballot races, especially the governor's race.

"We would love to have Andy (Beshear) run for president, that really would make Kentucky look wonderful," Whites said. "But it's very much disenfranchised everyone and everything else because KDP (Kentucky Democratic Party) is now essentially the governor's checkbook.

"We got a couple really fantastic high-profile Dems, but we sold the rest of the party to pay for it," Whites said. "Instead of having one governor for the same money, wouldn't we rather have 50 legislators?"

She's not the only one who feels that way. Hank Linderman is the chair of the Kentucky Democratic Party's Rural Council and is also running for U.S. Congress in the 2nd District. "The strategy of protecting the Golden Triangle of Louisville, Lexington and Frankfort has been disastrous," Linderman said. Linderman thinks that by not investing in rural candidates, the party lost crucial lines of communication with rural voters. He wants to see the party adopt an 11-point "Contract for Rural and Working America" but says so far his efforts have been rebuffed.

Republican Party of Kentucky spokesperson Westberry also pointed to the Democratic focus on the Beshear race as a reason for the party's waning strength.

"The Kentucky Democratic Party was solely focused on re-electing Gov. Beshear last cycle and allocated 100% of its resources to that election. Because of that, all down-ballot races and recruitment have fallen by the wayside for the Democrats," Westberry said.

But some of the blame could also be placed on national Democratic institutions, said Litman of Run for Something.

"Many Democrats, especially Democratic donors and operatives like to really engage in investing in the presidential battleground states and then neglect places like Kentucky, thinking that because it's not a major player in the Electoral College, it's not worth the money," Litman said.

"Had we done things differently, say, investing more in running candidates for office and providing more resources locally, in 2012, 2014, 2016, we wouldn't be in this place in 2024."

## Can Kentucky Democrats mount a comeback?

It's not clear how the party plans to turn the tide, though many activists have their own ideas about what Democrats should do.

The Kentucky Democratic Party pointed to Beshear's re-election last year as evidence of the party's continued relevance.

"While GOP gerrymandering has certainly had its desired impact in making fewer and fewer seats truly competitive, Kentucky Democrats have some terrific candidates this year and are well-positioned to pick up seats," said the party's executive director Morgan Eaves in a statement. "To help make this happen, the KDP will be working closely with our candidates to ensure they have the resources to communicate our popular message to voters."

Despite the success in getting Beshear elected, the Democrats' lack of power in the state House and Senate has prevented them from blocking policies they oppose. The GOP supermajority overrode almost every Beshear veto this year, and only a few Democrat-sponsored bills passed.

Many party activists think the Dems should focus on more down-ballot races and be more present in rural parts of the state.

"They (the state party) need to do some rabble-rousing concerning economic issues," said Hildegard Pile, the chair of the Breckinridge County party, pointing to issues like medication costs, worker pay, and high gas prices.

She's not unsympathetic to social issues but feels Kentuckians would respond better to "kitchen table" issues.

Pile suggested a bus tour with "fiery speakers" who can draw a crowd and said the state party should be more visible in rural areas.

Others say candidates should narrowly tailor their messages to local issues rather than focus on national issues that could divide voters.

"It would be really important to have a local issue or several local issues to run on and to try to keep from leaning into national party politics if they're running in a rural area," said Hatton, the former state representative, about the advice she would give to a Democrat running in her area.

"The issues are different from region to region," agreed Whites, the election

attorney. She gave the example of the need to improve schools in eastern Kentucky, provide clean water in Martin County, and find alternative employment in coal regions.

The party should also invest in candidates across the state, even if they are unlikely to win.

“What I would do was look at the money that we had for all the races and what we used to do which was really evenly divide it, not, say, \$50,000 to you and zero to you, but give everybody something,” Whites said.

That’s in line with the philosophy that the party needs to “deepen the bench” by getting people to run for lower- level office first so they can run for higher office later.

That’s where organizations like Run for Something, Contest Every Race, and Emerge Kentucky come in. They try to get Democrats to run for local offices to build a deep well of candidates who can run for higher offices down the line.

“I think it’s kind of like a psychology of little wins,” said Lauren Gepford, the director of Contest Every Race. She pointed out that down-ballot races cost less and require fewer voter contacts to win. “And if you get that win under your belt, then you’re more likely to run again and again and for higher and higher office.”

That’s something Republicans have done well and Democrats should emulate, Gepford added.

But the party faces resource constraints, so continued support from outside will be important in executing that strategy, said Litman of Run for Something.

“There’s no easy answer to this one. Unfortunately, it’s going to take a lot of time and a lot of resources,” Litman said.

Most agree that even if a Democratic win is unlikely, it’s important to have candidates run for office.

“It is never a waste of time to run,” said John Whipple, a Democrat running for the state House in the 10th District. “I feel that ... there are an awful lot of Democrats out there hiding in the shadows.”

*Reach Rebecca Grapevine at [rgrapevine@ courier-journal.com](mailto:rgrapevine@courier-journal.com) or follow her on X, formerly known as Twitter, at [@RebGrapevine](https://twitter.com/RebGrapevine). Reach reporter Hannah Pinski at*

*@hpinski@courier-journal. com or follow her on X, formerly known as Twitter, at @hannahpinski.*

Former state Rep. Angie Hatton is flanked by Rep. Derrick Graham and former state Rep. Joni Jenkins. LRC PUBLIC INFORMATION

Early voters were at the polling center at Iroquois High School just after 6 a.m. on Nov.7, 2023.  
MATT STONE/LOUISVILLE COURIER JOURNAL

Linderman

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