

OPINION
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Governors Should Be the Face of the Democratic Party

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Laura Kelly, the Democratic governor of Kansas. Elise Kirk for The New York Times

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By Michelle Cottle

Ms. Cottle, who writes about national politics for Opinion, reported from Topeka, Kansas.

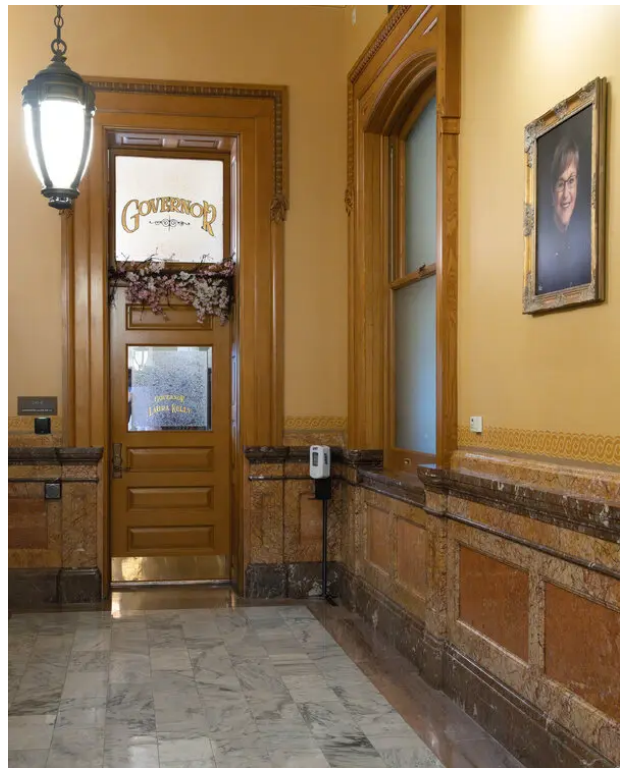
Laura Kelly, the Democratic governor of Kansas, jump-started a recent Tuesday afternoon with a crash course in heavy-duty tires — for tractors, for semis, for Humvees, tires that top six feet and weigh 13,000 pounds.

At the Goodyear distribution center in Topeka, Ms. Kelly received a mini-tour from a gaggle of large men decked out in black golf shirts and khakis. Diminutive and crisp in a navy sweater and slacks and sensible black pumps, the governor looked out of place yet totally at ease as she admired the next generation of M.R.T.s. (That's medium radial truck tires.)

Ms. Kelly is, by now, a pro at these kinds of visits, visual manifestations of her administration's impressive record of economic development. Focusing on the economy is how she won the governorship for the first time in 2018, and it has defined her two terms. Under her leadership, Kansas, a deep red state that President Trump won by 16 percentage points last year, has gone from a fiscal disaster — the casualty of blunt-force tax slashing by her predecessor Sam Brownback — to [winning](#) national [kudos](#) for its [comeback](#). Capital and jobs have flowed in. In 2021 and 2022, Kansas had the [most private business investment](#) per capita of any state. In 2020, Ms. Kelly [signed](#) a 10-year state transportation infrastructure plan.

The education system, which the Kansas Supreme Court ruled was unconstitutionally underfunded, has been fully funded for seven years running. And she achieved all this while contending with a Republican-dominated State Legislature.

And yet Ms. Kelly gets little notice beyond Kansas. She is not a national name like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Chuck Schumer. She has never been a regular on the political media circuit like Adam Schiff and Pete Buttigieg. Nobody buzzes about her as a presidential possibility, as happens with Gavin Newsom and Gretchen Whitmer. Even as the current head of the Democratic Governors Association, she flies largely below the radar.



Credit...Elise Kirk for The New York Times

It's time for that to change. As the party scrambles to find its path forward and identify the faces and voices who can lead the way, the most prominent leaders, like Mr. Schumer, Ms. Ocasio-Cortez and Mr. Newsom, have not proved to be the answer. Some are seen as too lefty or too establishment, too partisan, too out-of-touch, too old — or simply too enmeshed in the national political circus that has turned off so many voters. Spotlighting governors, their stories of leadership and of delivering for their states, may be the party's best shot at reconnecting with the American people.

"We've had a number of years now where the core of the Democratic Party has been focused inside the Beltway. That's not where the solutions are going to lie in this moment," said Jesse Ferguson, a longtime Democratic strategist. "Being governor removes you from theoretical political debates and grounds you in the tangible."

This is not to dismiss partisan warriors and political firebrands. Especially within the Democratic base, many voters are desperate for leaders to show more fight against a rampaging Trump administration. But to win back the legions of voters who aren't hard partisans, or who feel that Democrats have abandoned the working class — not to mention people inclined to tune out politics altogether — Democrats need to convince the public that they care about kitchen-table issues and, most basically, that they can deliver.

This feels like a heavy lift for members of Congress, an institution currently defined by its raging dysfunction. But governors? "Governors really don't have a choice but to get things done," said Ms. Kelly.

Far from the Washington circus, Democratic governors are constantly test-driving a smorgasbord of concrete solutions. Ms. Whitmer established the Michigan Achievement Scholarship, expanding affordable access to college. In Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro did away with the college-degree requirement for many state jobs. Wes Moore in Maryland established a [one-year public service program](#) for high-school graduates. In Arizona, Katie Hobbs started a microbusiness loan program. And on it goes.

When it comes to cutting through partisan dysfunction and getting stuff done, Ms. Kelly provides strong proof of concept.

In 2018 she won office as part of the backlash to the infamous "Kansas experiment" conducted by Mr. Brownback, a Republican who muscled through sweeping income tax cuts in 2012. This supply-side fling led to sluggish economic growth, rising state debt and steep cuts to core public services, most notably education. By 2017, even Republican legislators felt compelled to vote to reverse course. The following year, Kansans elected Ms. Kelly, then a state senator with a reputation for pragmatism, to restore stability. They wanted "no drama," she told me during a recent interview at the state Capitol.

The new governor hunkered down — and made sure voters understood that she understood their challenges. As inflation bit into her state, Ms. Kelly crusaded against the state tax on food. Adopting “Axe the Food Tax” as a slogan, she took to showing up at grocery stores [wielding an ax](#). In 2022, she signed a bill phasing out the tax.

For Ms. Kelly, it was a clear example of building policy off the real concerns of the voters. “If you really ever want not only to take back the majority but to re-establish that trust, then go talk to people and hear them,” she said.

“She knew what she needed to do was focus on those strong fundamentals,” said Gov. Tim Walz of Minnesota, her predecessor as the head of the Democratic Governors Association. “I think there’s maybe a lesson here nationally for all of us.”

Even as the national party shifted leftward, Ms. Kelly leaned into her image as a moderate pragmatist. Her 2022 re-election campaign team even created an [ad](#) featuring her standing in the middle of a road boasting about it. Margie Omero, a pollster for the campaign, recalled one participant from a focus group saying of the governor, “She’s a Democrat, but in California she’d be a Republican.” Ms. Omero added, “People just saw her as Kansas.” (Ms. Omero helps run political focus groups for Times Opinion.)

Straightforward and steady, with a wry wit and an air of efficiency, Ms. Kelly indeed seems classically of the heartland. Mr. Walz said: “She’s unflappable. She’s in the moment. She has one speed, and it’s calm, but there’s a fierce passion and drive behind it.”

But Ms. Kelly is not, in fact, a native Midwesterner — or a lifelong Democrat, for that matter. Raised in a Republican, military family, she moved around as a child, spending much of her youth on Staten Island. She followed her husband to Kansas nearly four decades ago and dug in. An early job involving the Kansas Recreation and Park Association sent her to “every little town” in the state, she said. “So I really got to know Kansas and know the people in Kansas.”

As she sees it, you don’t need to be born and bred somewhere to understand it. “I’m from New York City, for crying out loud,” she said. But you do need to be “flexible” and willing to listen, she stressed.

As the head of the Democratic Governors Association, Ms. Kelly is thinking a lot lately about how governors can help the party regain its mojo. “We have been working with other groups that are interested in electing Democrats and telling them what we’re doing that’s working,” she said. She noted that in 2024, Democratic governors fared well, “as opposed to the rest of the Democratic Party that got slaughtered.”

Some of the takeaways from her experience echo common themes in the conversation among Democrats. She believes the winning path is “to stay focused on the issues that matter to everybody” regardless of party. “Which is exactly what we did. We focused like a laser on the economy. ‘It’s the economy, stupid!’” she said, citing the Clinton-era slogan. “That still is true. It probably always is, because pocketbook issues are what drive people.”

During her 2018 campaign, for instance, Ms. Kelly pushed a plan for establishing an Office of Rural Prosperity. “We put down all these things — and they were all somehow tied to economic development, whether it was child care, housing, roads — and campaigned on that, particularly in our rural areas,” she said. “We didn’t talk about all the hot-button issues that drive people to their corners. We talked about the things that bring people together. I think that’s what works, and I think that’s what Democrats ought to do as we’re going forward.”

This is the nature of the job for governors, she said. “We have to keep the trains running.”

Going forward, Democrats would do well to spotlight those trains and the governors driving them. Among other moves, party leaders should be aggressively promoting their outside-the-Beltway players across a range of platforms.

This could mean getting Mr. Moore talking to Joe Rogan about his love for Ravens football, and for public-service programs. Getting Andy Beshear on Theo Von’s podcast chatting about Kentucky becoming the nation’s leader in access to addiction treatment, Jared Polis of Colorado on TikTok talking Taylor Swift and renewable energy, Ms. Kelly on talk radio discussing her Office of Rural Prosperity. Whatever their sweet spots, the governors are well suited to drive the message that Democrats are out there getting stuff done.

Considering the sorry state of the national party, Ms. Kelly and her fellow governors could well be the ones to lead Democrats toward a Kansas-style comeback.

Michelle Cottle writes about national politics for Opinion. She has covered Washington and politics since the Clinton administration. [@mcottle](#)

https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/14/opinion/kansas-governor-democrats.html?unlocked_article_code=1.WU8.t0c-.3sy8WJhhb6AN&smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare

It is so simple. Apparently, it’s not easy politically, too much and too many interests vested and would-be vesting.

Women in Kansas seem to have more sense than anyone. See Sarah Smarsh:
<https://sarahsmarsh.com>