



Australian Political Exchange **Council**

VISIT REPORT

Individual Study Tour to the United States of America

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Executive Summary

This visit to the United States followed the 2025 Australian federal election and Labor's victory. Its purpose was to engage with senior Democratic Party operatives, campaign professionals, and political leaders to exchange insights on campaign strategy, data, communications, and organising. Over the course of the trip, I met with pollsters, strategists, digital and field organisers, senior party officials, and elected representatives. These discussions provided a detailed view of the Democratic Party's strengths, dilemmas, and strategic debates following the 2024 presidential election.

The Democratic Party is at an inflection point. A clear divide emerged in my meetings: some Democratic operatives interpreted Donald Trump's return to the presidency as a cyclical outcome, driven by economic and political headwinds typical of U.S. politics. Others regarded it as an existential threat, not only to the Democratic Party but to democratic institutions themselves. This tension is shaping the party's strategic posture ahead of the 2026 midterms and the longer contest for political legitimacy.

The Harris/Walz campaign itself was widely seen as a well-run and disciplined operation. The transition from President Biden to Vice President Harris was executed with professionalism, and the campaign rapidly consolidated messaging, strategy, and resources. Harris presented a strong generational and values-based alternative to President Trump. However, the consensus among those I met was that the die had already been cast by the political climate. Structural headwinds – including economic dissatisfaction, President Biden's favourability and a mood for change – created an environment in which even a well-executed campaign could not prevail despite a significant improvement in their position across the 107-day campaign.

A clear theme was the fragmentation of the traditional media landscape in the United States. This shift has made it increasingly difficult to establish a shared truth among voters, fundamentally altering the way elections must now be run. For Australian politics, the lesson is clear: we must preciously guard against the erosion of a shared truth. If reliance on traditional media persists without sufficient adaptation Australian parties will face a structural problem in connecting with voters. The future of political communications is digital-first, and campaigns must meet voters in the cultural spaces they already inhabit.

Several additional themes emerged across the trip:

- **Data and Analytics:** Democratic campaigns continue to invest heavily in modelling, testing, and experimentation. While this provides a high level of sophistication, some questioned whether the party has become overly reliant on polling and segmentation at the expense of political instinct and judgement.
- **Digital and Communications:** The Harris campaign's use of TikTok, podcasts, and influencers was innovative, but Democrats remain challenged by the fragmented media ecosystem and the success of the Republican digital communications ecosystem. Progressive parties globally, including in Australia, must adapt quickly to digital-first campaigning or risk irrelevance.
- **Organising:** Distributed and relational organising remain central to Democratic strategy, sustaining volunteer networks between cycles. Compared with Labor's target seat operations, the Democratic model is larger in scale but less cohesive due to fragmented party structures.
- **Fundraising:** The Democratic small-dollar donor base remains a strength, supported by platforms such as ActBlue – the Harris Campaign raised more money than other Democratic candidate. However, that was also driven by their larger donations program.
- **Coalition Management:** Harris's campaign performed strongly with younger voters, women, and some diverse communities, but Democrats are experiencing erosion among younger men.

Visit Report

Meeting with Molly Murphy

I met with Molly Murphy, President of Impact Research and the lead pollster for the Biden and Harris campaigns. We compared the Australian Labor Party's research programs with those of the Democratic Party and discussed the dynamics of the 2025 Australian federal election. Ms Murphy explained how Harris and Biden developed and delivered their messaging strategies, while also reflecting on the U.S. polling and consulting industry. She highlighted the importance of message discipline, particularly under a Democratic president, and outlined Democratic prospects for the 2026 midterm elections.

Meeting with Dan Kannien

I met with Dan Kanninen, CEO of Arc Initiatives and Battleground State Director for the Harris and Biden campaigns. We discussed the structure of battleground state operations and compared them with Labor's target seat strategy. Mr Kanninen described internal Democratic debates over funding the DNC and state parties and outlined messaging dilemmas facing Democrats under a Trump presidency.

Meeting with Jose Nunez

I met with Jose Nunez, Co-Founder of Contrast Campaigns and former Digital Organising Director for the Biden campaign. He outlined Democratic digital organising efforts in recent cycles, contrasted them with Labor's approach, and reflected on the evolution of field organising since 2012. We discussed distributed organising and ongoing innovation in progressive campaign fieldwork.

Meeting with Miryam Lipper

I met with Miryam Lipper, Deputy Chief of Staff to Senator Jon Ossoff. She explained how the Ossoff campaign designed its communications strategy, and how relational organising activated lower propensity voters in Georgia's runoff election. We discussed Democratic Senate communications under Trump, Senator Ossoff's re-election strategy, and compared Democratic and ALP communications for statewide elections.

Meeting with Meg Schwenzfeier

I met with Meg Schwenzfeier, Chief Analytics Officer for the Harris-Walz campaign. She described the campaign's data and analytics structures, large-scale experiments, and

advertising testing program. We compared Democratic and Labor polling approaches and discussed how progressives might overcome structural limitations in polling.

Meeting with Rob Flaherty

I met with Rob Flaherty, Deputy Campaign Manager for the Harris-Walz campaign. He described the challenges of digital-first communications, including influencer partnerships, TikTok, and podcasts. We discussed the risks for progressive parties in adapting to digital change and compared U.S. and Australian campaign communications strategies.

Meeting with H.E. the Hon Ambassador Kevin Rudd AC

Kevin Rudd was the 26th Prime Minister of Australia and the 23rd Australian Ambassador to the United States.

Ambassador Rudd and I discussed the current state of play in U.S. politics, the dynamics of the 2024 presidential election, and its implications for both major parties. We also reflected on the 2025 Australian federal election, drawing out points of comparison and divergence.

Meeting with Finn Croton

I met with Finn Croton, a Democratic consultant focused on data and analytics. He outlined how Democrats use data models for persuasion, targeting, and GOTV operations. We compared Democratic and ALP analytics, noting opportunities for Labor to expand its application of modelling. He also provided a debrief of the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee's use of analytics in battleground races.

Meeting with Valerie Bradley & James Booth

I held a joint meeting with Valerie Bradley, Polling Analytics Director for the Harris-Walz campaign, and James Booth, a Democratic consultant specialising in data, analytics, and paid media. They explained how the Harris campaign integrated polling, analytics, and testing, while highlighting both limitations and opportunities. We compared Democratic and Labor approaches to media consumption, messaging, and segmentation models.

Meeting with Brynna Quillin

I met with Brynna Quillin, Director of Digital Organising for the Harris-Walz campaign. She described how the campaign used digital infrastructure to recruit volunteers, activate supporters, and drive donations. We compared ALP and Harris campaign approaches, identifying areas for improvement and new technological solutions for

volunteer mobilisation.

Roundtable with Bully Pulpit International

I attended a roundtable hosted by Ben LaBolt, President of BPI and former White House Communications Director, joined by senior staff. We discussed how the communications environment has changed since 2020, the rise of non-traditional media, and the challenges this presents for Democrats. They outlined Harris's paid media strategy and analytics program, which informed campaign spending. We compared these with the ALP's 2025 paid media approach.

Meeting with Raymond Pham

I then met with Raymond Pham, former Coalitions Fundraising Director for the Biden 2020 campaign. He described the structure of DNC fundraising, the role of campaign finance laws, and contrasts with Australian practice. We also discussed the intersection between fundraising operations and political affairs functions within an administration.

Meeting with Jessica Mejia & Sebastian Rozo

Jessica and Sebastian lead 'early states' organising for the 2020 Biden Presidential Primary campaign in Arizona and California and Iowa and Pennsylvania respectively. Jessica served as Arizona State Director for the General Election. Both served in political roles in the Biden Administration.

They outlined how early primaries were structured in key states, reflecting on differences between primaries and general elections. We compared these with ALP's candidate selection systems and discussed lessons Australian campaigns might draw from primary-style supporter engagement.

Meeting with Morgan Mohr

Morgan served as Senior Advisor on reproductive rights in the Biden White House and on the Harris Campaign. She has previously served in senior campaign roles in the Buttigieg and Biden campaigns.

We discussed the role of AI in campaigns, the impact of reproductive rights post-Roe v. Wade, and the importance of diverse messengers in fragmented media environments. She also reflected on the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election and the challenge of younger men shifting toward conservative politics and if that was an enduring issue for progressive parties or a unique dynamic to the Harris v Trump contest.

Meeting with Anatole Jenkins

I met with Anatole Jenkins, Organising Director for the Biden campaign and Senior Advisor to the DNC. He described the evolution of Democratic field campaigns from Obama 2012 through Harris 2024, emphasising the integration of digital organising. We compared Democratic and Labor field structures, noting both similarities and distinctions. We discussed the utilisation of online and digital organising to persuade or Get out the vote

Meeting with Sam Cornale

Sam Cornale was Executive Director of the Democratic National Committee and severed as Governor Walz's chief of staff during his candidacy for Vice President. Sam has held senior roles on the Biden and Clinton Presidential Campaign.

He reflected on his leadership of the organisation and his role in the Harris campaign. We discussed the structure of the DNC, fundraising challenges, and contrasts between Trump and Harris's digital strategies. Our discussion also covered broader shifts in the U.S. media landscape.

Meeting with Clarity Campaign Labs

Clarity Campaign Labs is a Democratic data and analytics firm which focuses on State-wide, senatorial and congressional campaigns in the United States. I was hosted by their Partners, Cristina Sinclare and David Radloff.

They outlined the use of turnout and persuasion models in down-ballot races, and contrasted these with presidential campaigns. We discussed differences between Democratic and ALP modelling and whether U.S. campaigns rely too heavily on polling at the expense of instinct.

Meeting with Brencia Berry

Brencia was the DNC's Political Director during the 2024 Presidential cycle, she previously held campaign roles with the Warren and Clinton Campaigns in the 2016 cycle with a focus on coalitions, public engagement and advance.

She explained the role of advancers in presidential campaigns and how endorsements from celebrities and influencers were deployed. We discussed outreach to diverse coalitions, why Harris lost ground with some, and the importance of meeting voters in cultural spaces. Examples included Harris's appearances on podcasts such as *All The Smoke*.

Meeting with Michael Koziol

I met with Michael Koziol, North America Correspondent for The Age and Sydney Morning Herald. We discussed U.S.-Australia relations under Trump, his reflections on covering North America, and the Democratic Party's position in the current cycle. We compared the 2024 U.S. and 2025 Australian elections, including the role of tariffs and economic nationalism.

Tours

- United States Congress
- United States Congressional Library
- United States Supreme Court
- Smithsonian Museum of American History