

NBC News NOW's *Top Story with Tom Llamas*

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TOM LLAMAS: Now, to the deepening divisions within the Democratic Party and the long-awaited release of the so-called 2024 election autopsy. The report was commissioned by Democratic National Committee Chairman Ken Martin. Its purpose? To help the party understand why former Vice President Kamala Harris lost to President Donald Trump. Martin got an independent consultant to write it, but then put off its release, saying it was badly done. After pressure from other Democrats, today, the DNC chair published the 192-page draft that he says is still littered with typos and inaccuracies. The paper argues that Harris wrote off rural voters and failed to attack President Trump with sufficient negative firepower. The DNC adding disclaimers that the autopsy doesn't reflect the committee's views. Our political pros are here to discuss. Ashley Etienne is a former communications director to VP Harris and Corbin Trent is a former aide to AOC and Bernie Sanders. I thank you both for being here. Ashley, you were one of the people pushing for this report's release. And just hours ago, you told our good friend Kristen Welker that Ken Martin — Ken Martin should step down. Explain why.

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Breaking News; DNC Releases 2024 Report on the Democratic Party]

ASHLEY ETIENNE: Well, I think this is a complete failure of leadership. Ken Martin really has two jobs, really is to run, to raise money and to win elections. He chose to, instead of releasing a forward-looking document that lays out a vision on how to rebuild this party, how to win elections going forward from the state level to the national level. Instead, what he released is a pre-decisional document with critiques in it to cover his hide. That's really what's at play here. Unfortunately, we've got a situation with democracy on the line. We've got the party is having a struggles fundraising. Its polling at 28 percent. And Ken Martin made this entire autopsy debate about himself rather than about the party, about how to rebuild the party and how to bring back what we're seeing — a bleeding support among the party's base vote voters.

LLAMAS: So, do you think that publishing this document was unfair to your former boss, Vice President Harris? I mean, it is called an autopsy. And Democrats lost the election, so it was going to be tough regardless, wasn't it?

ETIENNE: Well, I think she's vindicated in this document. And she wrote a book about, you know, the *107 Days* — and in the book, she made, you know — made assertions that she didn't get the level of support from the campaign, that the campaign had significant failures in terms of messaging, in terms of its aggression on messaging towards Donald Trump. And that's what this document actually lays out. So, she's — she's fairly vindicated here. But let me just say this. You know, the Democratic Party, the backbone of the Democratic Party is black voters and Ken martin and the Democratic Party owes an explanation to black voters who have been substantially destroyed and attacked from our political power to our economic power by this particular administration, over 600,000 jobs, we've lost 8.5 percent unemployment. And we've

— in the past two weeks have lost we've seen 400 years of black political progress undermined with the gutting of the Voting Rights Act. The party has to explain what happened to the money. That's what's missing from this actual report, is what's happened to the money. And my understanding. And I said this on *Meet the Press* a couple of weeks ago, is that decisions were made to line people's pockets rather than win the election. And I take a particular offense to that.

LLAMAS: Give me an example to that. That's a that's an incredible statement. Give me give me an example.

ETIENNE: Sure. A good example of that. And this was also reported in *The New York Times*, is that decisions were made by campaign leadership to throw money on television. The way that campaigns work is when you put money on television, you get a kickback from putting the money on television. They decided to put the money on television so they could get a kickback from it, rather than investing the money to turn out voters in Pennsylvania on the ground. I mean, these things are documented, but — but the party failed to put that in the actual autopsy. And that really is the challenge is — is how are we spending our money? We're getting outmatched by Republicans on the ground. They're building modern-day information ecosystems. We're not making those investments. And part of that is because I've been in the party for 25 years. The same five to eight people have been making all the decisions and been making all of the money, and it's at the expense of building the infrastructure of the Democratic Party and innovating in a way to really modernize how we engage and turn out voters.

LLAMAS: Yeah. Corbin, what about you? What did the autopsy tell you about the DNC in this moment?

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Breaking News; Report Details What Went Wrong for Democrats in 2024]

CORBIN TRENT: I think the autopsy sounded a lot like what I just heard, which is that we need to have better plumbing. We need to have a better way of messaging it. What they were doing in this autopsy is talking about how Biden-nomics didn't resonate because it was too tied to Joe Biden. They didn't recognize in this autopsy, they didn't recognize in any of the last decades that I've been involved in this process is that the Democratic Party's policies aren't working. What we've been doing isn't working. People have been suffering from a lack of affordability. Our country's been suffering from a lack of accountability in our democracy. It's not that we need to save our democracy. It's something we're going to have to restore. The reason the save our democracy argument didn't work is because people fundamentally realize that the things broken to start with, people don't believe in the outcome of the 2020 election. A lot of people didn't believe in the outcome of the 2024 election. I mean, you know, we've got things that are — the depth of the problems that we have in this country were not seriously thought about in this autopsy, but they they're also not been seriously dealt with since then. Because if you look at *The New York Times*, their poll that they did with Siena, that shows that 55 percent of Democrats are unhappy with the Democratic Party. We're not making the steps towards solving the problems that led us to the loss in 2024. We're not making steps towards solving the ones that almost lost us the election in 2020, that lost us in 2016. These problems have been deep and systemic for a

long time. I live in Tennessee. We used to have five representatives from this state that were Democrat out of nine, five out of nine. Now, we got zero. Now, some of that is due to gerrymandering. Some of that's due to the destruction of the VRA, right? But a lot of that is due to the fact that the Democratic Party got in bed with Wall Street and got out of bed with working people. And that's just the way it is. And we've got this party is consumed by this idea of neoliberalism and that everything's actually fine if you squint right. But it's not. Things are not good. And this autopsy, it doesn't do anything to have a little bit of like, of a come to Jesus moment. There's none of that. You know, Ken Martin — you say Ken Martin's covering his. But if this is him covering his butt, then he definitely needs a different job because he's not even good at that. It's not, you know, it's an embarrassing report. It's embarrassing that they did it. It's embarrassing that, you know, it's foolish.

LLAMAS: And, I mean, you can argue that the Democrats biggest mistake was letting President Joe Biden run for reelection. It made it very hard for Vice President Kamala Harris to run an effective campaign. But the candidate is the soul of the campaign. So, Corbin and Ashley, I ask you both how much of this is on Kamala Harris as well?

ETIENNE: Corbin, you want to go first?

TRENT: I think it's all ultimately on Kamala Harris. She was the candidate. But the problem is, is that she wasn't running in a let's change this thing completely kind of campaign. She wasn't running in a transformative way. The funny thing is, is that Democrats keep looking back and seeing how they can be more like Donald Trump. You know, they keep saying, we need to move to the center, move to the right, be more Trumpian, be more like the Republicans in some ways, right? But what they don't understand is what drew people to Donald Trump was the fact that they thought they had found somebody that was willing to tear down institutions, willing to go at the very fabric of what was making their lives hard, and he didn't do that. Obviously, that's not what that never was his game plan. But the Democratic Party thinks that they can get some sort of technocratic, better management system in there and that people will magically do better. The systems are what need to be changed. And she was in no way a systems changer.

LLAMAS: Ashley.

ETIENNE: No, I think the failure is the systems within the Democratic Party that don't allow for innovation, that aren't bringing more voters to the table to engage in as partners in how we message, how we do turnout, how we engage. You know, I think she does bear some responsibility. But if you've got a broken system with a broken infrastructure, and we've been divesting in it since 2012, it's really not her fault. And that's really why I think this report is so damaging and disappointing, is that Ken Martin had an opportunity to make recommendations on how we rebuild this party so that we can start winning again and in a sustained fashion. And he failed to do that. So, I think the party and the system within the party is broken. This — this report does nothing to call that out and makes no recommendations on how to fix it.

LLAMAS: Ashley and Corbin, we thank you both for this conversation. I'm sure we'll talk about this a lot more in the days ahead.