



MEMORANDUM

TO: Interested Stakeholders

FROM: George Hornedo for Congress

RE: Hollowing Out of the Democratic Party in Indiana—The Case for Rebuilding from the 7th District

DATE: May 28, 2025

Executive Summary

Over the past 15 years, the Indiana Democratic Party has suffered a sustained decline in both electoral competitiveness and party infrastructure. This decline is most evident in the state's capital and its most Democratic stronghold: Indianapolis. What was once the engine of statewide Democratic victories has become a drag on performance. The data is stark: Indiana's 7th Congressional District (the heart of Marion County) now has the lowest voter turnout of any congressional district in the state, an increasingly hollow precinct infrastructure, and a party operation that is a shadow of its former self.

While Indiana Republicans maintain supermajorities and control every statewide office, the Democratic response has been fractured, complacent, and under-resourced. Rep. André Carson, the most senior Democrat in the Indiana delegation, and Mayor Joe Hogsett, the state's most prominent Democratic executive, have not filled the leadership void. Both have presided over a period of organizational atrophy and failed to provide the fundraising or strategic capacity to counterbalance Republican dominance.

Key Takeaways:

- Turnout in Indianapolis has collapsed. Marion County's 2024 turnout (~55%) was among the lowest for a presidential year since 1988 and lags behind comparable metros in both red and blue states.
- The 7th District is the worst-performing district in the state. Once among the best in turnout, it is now last out of Indiana's nine congressional districts.
- Precinct infrastructure is in disrepair. Over 36% of precinct chair and vice chair positions are unfilled, with many appointees disconnected from grassroots engagement.
- Fundraising and political leadership are lacking. Carson raises half of what the average House member raises, with minimal small-dollar support and little reinvestment in party building.
- Indianapolis is no longer driving Democratic wins. Without a revitalized effort in the 7th District, Indiana Democrats cannot expect to win—or even compete—statewide.

To reverse this trajectory, Indiana Democrats must once again treat Indianapolis as the operational, financial, and strategic engine of the party. That requires leadership committed not just to holding office, but to building power.

This memo is part of an analysis grounded in facts and outcomes. If something here is incorrect or missing context, we'll fix it. But the deeper point stands: Indiana Democrats deserve better than stagnation.



Declining Voter Turnout in Marion County and IN-7

Key Takeaways:

- Since 2008, Marion County's turnout has deteriorated from above-average to bottom-tier. In 2024, turnout was ~55%, among the lowest for a presidential year in over three decades.
- IN-7 had the lowest turnout of Indiana's congressional districts in 2022 (34%).
- Indianapolis turnout now trails that of other red-state metros:
 - Louisville (KY): 61.4% in 2020
 - Kansas City (MO): ~60%
 - Phoenix (AZ, Maricopa County): ~80%
 - Madison and Milwaukee (WI): 83% to nearly 90%

Marion County was once a leader in voter engagement, especially during the Obama wave in 2008. Today, its underperformance depresses statewide Democratic chances and suggests a systemic failure to mobilize the base.

Full Analysis

General Election Turnout: Voter participation in Indianapolis (Marion County, which constitutes most of Indiana's 7th Congressional District) has fallen well below both state averages and comparable metros. In the 2020 presidential election, Marion County saw 59% of registered voters turn out¹—significantly lower than the 64.6% statewide turnout that year (Indiana's highest since 1992).² By 2024, Marion County's turnout slipped to ~55%, one of its lowest presidential-year rates since at least 1988.³

This is a stark contrast to performance in 2008, when enthusiasm for Barack Obama helped drive Indiana's statewide turnout up to 62.2% (Obama even carried Indiana, the first Democrat to do so since 1964).⁴ Marion County's turnout in 2008 neared the state average, reflecting a then-engaged Democratic base. Since that time, however, Indianapolis voter participation has stagnated or declined even as other areas improved.

- **Marion County vs. Other Indiana Counties:** In 2012 and 2016, Marion County turnout was 2—5 points below the statewide rate. For example, in 2016 Marion reached only 53% turnout vs. 58% statewide.⁵ By 2022 (a midterm), Marion County hit just 34% turnout, the lowest of Indiana's nine congressional districts.⁶ Many smaller or suburban counties routinely see much higher turnout; e.g. neighboring Hamilton County had 48% turnout in 2022 and over 70% in 2020, far exceeding Marion County's rate.⁷ Even traditionally low-turnout Lake County (Gary) managed about 60% in 2020, still above Indianapolis.⁹

¹https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/voter-information/files/Election_Turnout_and_Registration_20201202_052923PM.pdf#:~:text=Greene%2020%2C365%2015%2C001%2074%20,5%2C257%2012%2C766%2071

²<https://www.incontext.indiana.edu/2025/may-jun/article2.asp#:~:text=As%20it%20turns%20out%20the,of%20presidential%20elections%20since%201992>

³<https://mirrorindy.org/indianapolis-indiana-election-2024-voter-turnout-marion-county/#:~:text=Just%20under%2050,amounting%20to%20about%20324%2C709%20residents>

⁴<https://www.incontext.indiana.edu/2025/may-jun/article2.asp#:~:text=1992%2073,8,2016%2058,1>

⁵https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/voter-information/files/2016_General_Election_Turnout.pdf#:~:text=Hamilton%20230%2C786%20158%2C205%2069%20,12%2C922%205%2C054%2028

⁶https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/voter-information/files/Election_Turnout_and_Registration-2022-General.pdf#:~:text=2022%20General%20Election%20General%20Election,1%2C841%201%2C650%2047

⁷https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/voter-information/files/Election_Turnout_and_Registration-2022-General.pdf#:~:text=Grant%2044%2C071%2016%2C045%2036%20,6%2C579%204%2C910%2043

⁸<https://www.wfyi.org/news/articles/voter-turnout-dropped-in-hamilton-and-marion-county#:~:text=Hamilton%20County%2C%20on%20the%20other,Marion%20County%20in%20both%20elections>

⁹https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/voter-information/files/Election_Turnout_and_Registration_20201202_052923PM.pdf#:~:text=Greene%2020%2C365%2015%2C001%2074%20,5%2C257%2012%2C766%2071



- Indianapolis vs. Peer Metros:** Marion County's voter turnout now significantly trails that of similar urban areas, whether in red or blue states. In Louisville (Jefferson County, KY), 61.4% of registered voters cast ballots in 2020.¹⁰ Kansas City, MO (within Jackson County) saw about 60% turnout in the city that year.¹¹ Meanwhile, urban counties in more competitive states show dramatically higher engagement: Milwaukee County, WI had 83% turnout in 2020, and Dane County (Madison, WI) was near 90%—"sky-high turnout" fueled by intensive local organizing.¹²¹³ Even Phoenix's Maricopa County—a large metro in a traditionally red state—achieved about 80% turnout in 2020 and 2024.¹⁴ These comparisons underscore that Indianapolis is underperforming: barely half of registered voters voted in recent elections, whereas peer cities often mobilize two-thirds to four-fifths of their voters. Marion County's 2024 turnout (~55%) was labeled "among the lowest since 1988" for a presidential year, a troubling metric for Indiana Democrats given Indy's importance as the largest Democratic stronghold.¹⁵

Primary Election Turnout: The decline is also evident in primaries. The May 2023 Indianapolis municipal primary saw only 11% of registered voters participate.¹⁶ Statewide party primaries have also seen waning Indianapolis engagement since the peak of 2008. In the 2008 presidential primary (Clinton vs. Obama), Indiana's turnout hit record highs (over 60% of registered voters statewide).¹⁷ Marion County's primary turnout likely exceeded one-third of voters in 2008, reflecting intense interest. By contrast, in the 2016 primary—despite contested races in both parties—Marion County turnout was just 33% (220k voters out of ~676k registered).¹⁸ That lagged the 38% statewide primary turnout in 2016. It also trailed suburban counties like Hamilton (47% in 2016).

The 2020 primary and 2022 primary continued this low-turnout trend in Indianapolis (both under 20%). In short, what was once an engaged electorate in the Democratic primary (2008's participation was unprecedented) has become relatively apathetic. Democratic organizers note that by 2022, only ~13% of Marion County's registered voters cast votes in the primary.¹⁹ This diminished primary turnout points to an erosion of grassroots enthusiasm and mobilization in the Indianapolis Democratic base.

Bottom Line: Voter turnout in Indiana's 7th District/Marion County has declined from its late-2000s highs to some of the worst in the state. Once a competitive, high-participation county (vital to Democrats' statewide successes like 2008), Marion County is now characterized by low enthusiasm and underperformance. In 2024, Indianapolis' turnout rate not only dropped ~4 points from 2020 but also fell below virtually every comparable city—a clear indicator of weakened Democratic engagement.²⁰ Party officials openly expressed disappointment at Marion County's "less-than-stellar voter turnout" and are calling for change.²¹

¹⁰<https://elect.ky.gov/Resources/Documents/2020G%20Turnout%20by%20County.pdf#:~:text=056%20JEFFERSON%20632%2C848%20388%2C564%2061,8>

¹¹<https://www.sos.mo.gov/CMSImages/ElectionResultsStatistics/Nov2020OfficialVoterTurnout.pdf#:~:text=Howell%2027%2C330%2018%2C650%2068.24,Laclede%2024%2C089%2016%2C793%2069.71>

¹²<https://spectrumnews1.com/wi/milwaukee/news/2024/10/29/milwaukee-county-officials-prepare-for-election-#:~:text=In%202020%2C%2C%20Milwaukee%20County%20had%2083,numbers%20for%2C%20this%20election%2C%20A0are%2C%20A0close%20to%20that>

¹³<https://thebadgerproject.org/2024/08/20/liberal-dane-county-keeps-growing-and-voting-in-droves-can-republicans-still-win-statewide-races-in-wisconsin/#:~:text=In%202016%2C%20when%20Donald%20Trump,for%20the%20Democrat%20Hillary%20Clinton>

¹⁴<https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2024/11/21/maricopa-county-highlights-voter-turnout-2024-election-results-canvass/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe%20had%20a%20turnout%20of,%E2%80%9D>

¹⁵<https://mirrorindy.org/indianapolis-indiana-election-2024-voter-turnout-marion-county/#:~:text=Just%20under%2050,amounting%20to%20about%20324%2C709%20residents>

¹⁶<https://indianapolisrecorder.com/voter-turnout/#:~:text=Recent%20local%20elections%20saw%20low,the%202023%20municipal%20primary%20election>

¹⁷<https://www.953mnc.com/2016/05/20/voter-turnout-may-2016-2/#:~:text=presidential%20candidates%20were%20,%E2%80%9D>

¹⁸https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/voter-information/files/2016_May_3_Primary_Turnout_and_Absentee_Information.pdf#:~:text=County%20Registered%20Voters%20Voters%20Voting,14%2C198%205%2C925%2029

¹⁹<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:~:text=Nearly%2050%2C000%20people%20voted%20Democrat,the%20party%20they%20voted%20for>

²⁰<https://www.wfyi.org/news/articles/voter-turnout-dropped-in-hamilton-and-marion-counties#:~:text=Marion%20County%2C%20the%20state%E2%80%99s%20most,it%27s%20not%20the%20final%20total>

²¹<https://mirrorindy.org/marion-county-democratic-party-indianapolis-annette-johnson-challenge-chair-myla-eldridge/#:~:text=Annette%20Johnson%2C%20the%20Pike%20Township,more%20to%20increase%20>



Party Infrastructure Collapse in Marion County

Key Takeaways:

- Marion County has 621 precincts, but fewer than half are filled with elected Democratic precinct chairs.
- As of 2024:
 - Only 46% of precincts have an elected Democratic PC.
 - Over 170 precincts (27%) have no Democratic representation at all.
 - Only 17% of precincts have an active vice chair.
- The Marion County Democratic Party budget is a fraction of its prior size and lacks full-time organizing staff.

Precinct leaders are critical to voter contact and GOTV efforts. Their absence means neighborhoods are untouched and turnout remains stagnant.

Full Analysis

Precinct Organization and Grassroots Presence: The health of a local party can be gauged by its precinct-level organization. Marion County has 621 precincts, each entitled to a Democratic Precinct Committeeperson (PC) and an appointed vice-committeeperson. Ideally, that's over 1,200 neighborhood-level party officials mobilizing voters.²² In practice, the ranks have thinned dramatically:

- In recent party elections, only 46% of precincts had a Chair elected at all.²³ This means over half of Indianapolis precincts did not even have a Democrat on the ballot to serve as the local party contact. Even after the county chair filled some vacancies by appointment, 170 precincts (27% of the total) remain completely without a Democratic precinct representative.²⁴ Many others have only a single official when they should have two. As of 2024, only 17% of precincts have a Vice Chair in place to help share the workload.²⁵
- By contrast, in the past Marion County Democrats maintained a more robust precinct network. Longtime party leaders (e.g. the late Congresswoman Julia Carson) cultivated block captains and precinct workers to drive turnout. While exact figures for pre-2008 precinct staffing are hard to find, anecdotal evidence suggests a far higher fill rate. In 2008, the Democratic wave year, local observers recall a strong ground game in Indianapolis—the kind of operation that now is “rotting at the roots,” as one Democratic activist lamented.²⁶ The decline to less than half of precincts being organized is a sharp drop in party infrastructure.

This lack of neighborhood-level engagement is self-reinforcing. Precinct volunteers are supposed to register voters, knock doors, and “operate an election day organization” among other duties.²⁷ With so many precinct slots empty, those activities simply don't happen in large swaths of the city, contributing to lower turnout. Notably, Marion County's Democratic chair is empowered to appoint PCs to vacancies, and the current chair did appoint 164 people to fill empty slots. However, many of those appointees are political insiders (e.g. city employees or officials) rather than grassroots neighbors, and large gaps remain.²⁸ Even after appointments, roughly 1 in 4 Indianapolis precincts still lack full leadership.²⁹ This represents a major organizational weakening since the pre-2008 era, when the party could count on a precinct structure to turn out votes.

²²<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:text=Right%20now%20at%20the%20grassroots%2C,and%20the%20roots%20are%20dead>

²³<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:text=Right%20now%20at%20the%20grassroots%2C,and%20the%20roots%20are%20dead>

²⁴<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:text=Right%20now%20at%20the%20grassroots%2C,and%20the%20roots%20are%20dead>

²⁵<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:text=Right%20now%20at%20the%20grassroots%2C,and%20the%20roots%20are%20dead>

²⁶<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:text=Right%20now%20at%20the%20grassroots%2C,and%20the%20roots%20are%20dead>

²⁷<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:text=Right%20now%20at%20the%20grassroots%2C,and%20the%20roots%20are%20dead>

²⁸<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:text=Right%20now%20at%20the%20grassroots%2C,and%20the%20roots%20are%20dead>

²⁹<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:text=Right%20now%20at%20the%20grassroots%2C,and%20the%20roots%20are%20dead>



Budget and Staffing: A party's budget and paid staff reflect its capacity. Here too, Marion County Democrats appear diminished. While exact budget figures before and after 2008 are not publicly itemized in news sources, there are indicators of a relatively meager and shrinking operation:

- **The Marion County Democratic Party's fundraising is modest.** For example, one large Indiana employer's political contribution report shows just a \$1,000 donation to the Marion County Democratic Party in recent years—suggesting the local party committee isn't attracting big money. By contrast, state-level Republican committees often raise hundreds of thousands of dollars.³⁰ The Marion County party's reliance on the controversial slating system (charging candidates for endorsements) used to be a revenue source, but that practice was halted in 2022 after internal backlash.³¹ Ending slating (which Mayor Joe Hogsett himself called for) may have been ethically laudable, but it also deprived the county party of a traditional fundraising stream.
- **Paid staff are minimal.** The party chair and vice chair are essentially volunteers (often holding other jobs or public office). In 2008, the party benefited from the Obama campaign's massive field operation and state party resources, but locally it did not maintain a large permanent staff. Today, the county party has at most a handful of paid roles. Chair Myla Eldridge noted they "hired a Get Out The Vote coordinator" for the 2024 cycle—implying that hiring such dedicated staff was noteworthy (and perhaps not routine in prior cycles).³² No permanent executive director or year-round field organizer staff is evident. By comparison, a robust county party in a city of nearly 1 million might have multiple full-time organizers; Marion County's appears under-resourced.
- **Financial reports to the FEC (for any federal activity) show relatively small sums.** The county party's federal committee (if active) has limited receipts. As an example, during the 2012 cycle the Marion County Democratic Central Committee reported less than \$160,000 total receipts (this figure gleaned from a political activity report).³³ Such a budget is very small for the primary Democratic engine in the state's largest county. It suggests the party lacks funds for large-scale voter outreach, mailings, or paid canvassing—activities that were better funded in the past, either by the party or coordinated campaigns.

Conclusion: Marion County's Democratic organization has atrophied since before 2008. The number of active precinct leaders has dropped to roughly half-strength or worse, and many grassroots volunteer positions are unfilled, leaving huge holes in neighborhood outreach.³⁴ The county party's budget and staffing are lean, limiting its ability to register and mobilize voters. In short, the infrastructure that turns out votes—people on the ground and dollars for voter contact—has hollowed out. Longtime Indianapolis Democrats point to this weakened apparatus when explaining why a deep-blue city is now struggling to turn out its vote.

³⁰[https://s202.q4cdn.com/665319960/files/doc_downloads/past_reports/2021_Anthem_Political_Giving_and_Related_Activity_Report_FINAL-\(2\).pdf#:~:text=,Marion%20County%20Republican](https://s202.q4cdn.com/665319960/files/doc_downloads/past_reports/2021_Anthem_Political_Giving_and_Related_Activity_Report_FINAL-(2).pdf#:~:text=,Marion%20County%20Republican)

³¹<https://www.wfyi.org/news/articles/marion-county-democrats-do-away-with-slating#:~:text=Marion%20County%20Democrats%20will%20stop,Tyler%20Fenwick%20Indiana%20Recorder>

³²<https://mirrorindy.org/marion-county-democratic-party-indianapolis-annette-johnson-challenge-chair-myla-eldridge/#:~:text=term>

³³[https://s202.q4cdn.com/665319960/files/doc_downloads/past_reports/2021_Anthem_Political_Giving_and_Related_Activity_Report_FINAL-\(2\).pdf#:~:text=,Marion%20County%20Republican](https://s202.q4cdn.com/665319960/files/doc_downloads/past_reports/2021_Anthem_Political_Giving_and_Related_Activity_Report_FINAL-(2).pdf#:~:text=,Marion%20County%20Republican)

³⁴<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:~:text=Right%20now%20only%2046,this%20most%20important%20party%20role>



From Best to Worst: The Decline of IN-7

Key Takeaways:

- The 7th District once ranked among the best-performing districts in Indiana.
- In 2008, Marion County turnout surged with Obama on the ballot; in 2024, it dropped below the state average.
- In 2022 and 2024, IN-7 ranked last in turnout among all nine Indiana districts.

This reversal from a turnout leader to the lowest-performing Democratic base area underscores the failure of current political leadership to sustain engagement.

Marion County's Democratic organization has atrophied since before 2008. The number of active precinct leaders has dropped to roughly half-strength or worse, and many grassroots volunteer positions are unfilled – leaving huge holes in neighborhood outreach. The county party's budget and staffing are lean, limiting its ability to register and mobilize voters. In short, the infrastructure that turns out votes – people on the ground and dollars for voter contact – has hollowed out. Longtime Indianapolis Democrats point to this weakened apparatus when explaining why a deep-blue city is now struggling to turn out its vote.

Full Analysis

Indiana's 7th Congressional District (entirely within Marion County/Indianapolis) was once a leader in voter participation, but it has now fallen to the bottom:

- **Currently the Worst in Indiana:** By multiple measures, IN-7 has the lowest turnout of the state's nine U.S. House districts. In the 2022 general election, the 7th had about 34% turnout of registered voters, far below the state's 39.6% average.³⁵ This was indeed the lowest percentage among all districts (for comparison, the adjacent 5th District in the Indy suburbs was well into the 40s). Similarly, in 2020, the 7th District's ~59% turnout lagged every other district—many of which were in the mid-60% to 70% range due to competitive races and active rural voters. The Indianapolis Star and other observers have noted that Indianapolis now regularly underperforms the rest of the state in turnout. Party insiders openly acknowledge it: Marion County's turnout in 2024 "disappointed" Democrats and spurred calls for new leadership to avoid remaining the lowest in the state.³⁶
- **Previously Among the Best:** Historically, the Indianapolis-centered district was a bright spot for turnout when Democrats had a strong local machine. Under Congresswoman Julia Carson (who represented Indy from 1997 until her death in 2007), the 7th District often punched above its weight in turnout. For example, in 2006, Marion County turnout (~44%) was around the statewide average in a midterm, buoyed by Carson's organization and a close Indiana races. In 2008, Marion County turnout spiked with Obama on the ballot—roughly 60%+ of registered voters voted, which likely made IN-7 one of the higher turnout districts in Indiana (indeed, that year urban and college counties led the turnout rankings). Even in 2010, a difficult year, Marion County's turnout (around 40%) was not the lowest. Indianapolis was once known for relatively high civic participation relative to other parts of Indiana (which historically had poor turnout). The decline since the late 2000s is apparent: today's 7th District turnout is not only low in absolute terms but also low relative to Indiana's other districts, a complete reversal from a decade or two ago.

³⁵https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/voter-information/files/Election_Turnout_and_Registration-2022-General.pdf#:~:text=2022%20General%20Election%20General%20Election,1%2C841%201%2C650%2047

³⁶<https://mirrorindy.org/marion-county-democratic-party-indianapolis-annette-johnson-challenge-chair-myla-eldridge/#:~:text=Annette%20Johnson%2C%20the%20Pike%20Township,more%20to%20increase%20voter%20turnout>



One specific data point: as of the 2020 election, Marion County's turnout rate ranked 9th out of 9 districts. In contrast, back in 1992 or 2000, Marion County/Indianapolis turnout was middle-of-the-pack or better (in 1992, a high-interest year, Marion County's turnout topped 70% of registered voters, helping Indiana lead the nation in turnout).³⁷ Such context underscores that Indianapolis' current last-place turnout standing is not a foregone conclusion of urban living—it is a contemporary phenomenon linked to weakened party mobilization.

Conclusion: Indiana's bluest district now has the state's poorest voter turnout. This is a dramatic change from prior cycles where a strong Democratic Indianapolis turnout was crucial to competitive statewide races. The 7th District's fall to the bottom of turnout rankings is both a symptom and a cause of the party's struggles in Indiana (few votes coming out of its base). Democratic activists note with alarm that Marion County went from driving Democratic wins (e.g. delivering Obama's 2008 margins) to underperforming so badly that it drags down statewide results. Indeed, if Indianapolis had simply turned out at the same rate in 2020 as it did in 2008, tens of thousands more votes would have been cast.

Carson's Fundraising: Complacency by the Numbers

Key Takeaways:

- Carson raises an average of ~\$1,000,000, less than half the House average.
- Over 56% of his funds come from PACs, just 4% from small donors.
- His leadership PAC contributed just \$6,000 total to federal candidates in the 2024 cycle.

While safe-seat incumbents have the opportunity to fundraise for the broader movement, Carson has not used his position to strengthen the party locally or nationally. He neither builds a national profile nor contributes significantly to colleagues or infrastructure.

Full Analysis

Since winning the seat in 2008, Rep. André Carson's campaign fundraising has been modest—well below the House average—and he has not significantly funded broader party efforts. Key points:

- **Total Funds Raised:** Carson raises and spends under \$1 million most cycles, reflective of a safe-seat incumbent who faces little serious opposition. For example, in the 2022 cycle Carson's campaign committee raised about \$820,000 and spent a similar amount.³⁸ In 2020 he raised roughly \$820,000 (per FEC data), and in 2024 he raised \$843,000 and spent \$1.08 million (drawing down some reserves).³⁹ These figures are far below the average U.S. House incumbent. In the 2022 cycle, the median amount raised by House incumbents was around \$2 million, and many competitive-seat members raised well above that. Carson's ~\$800k is roughly half of what the typical House member raises, and ranks him near the bottom of Democratic fundraisers. (For context, Indiana's 1st District Democrat raised ~\$1.4 million in 2022 to defend a competitive seat, and even some Hoosier Republican incumbents raised well over \$1M.)⁴⁰

³⁷<https://www.incontext.indiana.edu/2025/may-jun/article2.asp#:~:text=As%20it%20turns%20out%2C%20the,of%20presidential%20elections%20since%201992>

³⁸<https://www.opensecrets.org/races/election?cycle=2022&id=INS2#:~:text=Andre%20Carson%20,0%20District%2008%20%20%241%2C568%2C676>

³⁹<https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress/andre-carson/summary?cid=N00029513#:~:text=Campaign%20Committee%20Fundraising%2C%202023%20,2024>

⁴⁰<https://www.opensecrets.org/races/election?cycle=2022&id=INS2#:~:text=Andre%20Carson%20,0%20District%2008%20%20%241%2C568%2C676>



- **Donor Base—Heavy PAC Reliance:** Carson’s fundraising base skews toward PACs and large donors, with relatively little grassroots small-dollar support. In the current cycle, over 56% of his campaign funds come from PAC contributions, and another ~38% from large individual donors.⁴¹ Just 4% of his funds come from small individual donations (<\$200). This indicates Carson has not cultivated a broad small-donor network, unlike many high-profile Democrats who energize grassroots contributors. Instead, he relies on contributions from corporate PACs, unions, and Indianapolis-area business interests. (His top contributing industry in 2023-24 is Health Care, and top donors include local firms like Bose McKinney law firm and Elevance Health’s PAC at ~\$10k each.)⁴² This profile—safe incumbency funded by PACs—has kept him solvent but not particularly flush with excess cash.
- **Below-Average Fundraising Effort: Carson’s war chest is relatively small because his campaigns have not** needed massive spending to win in a D+15 district. However, this also means he has not been a financial engine for the party. In cycles when many House Democrats raise \$2-5 million (either for tough races or to help others), Carson has often stayed in the six figures. Carson is far from the top (members of similar seniority in safer seats often still raise more to build influence or contribute to the party). His cash-on-hand at the end of 2024 was about \$449k—again, not unusual for a low-demand seat, but indicative of a minimal fundraising posture.⁴³
- **Contributions to Other Democrats/Party:** One telling sign of a leader is whether they use their fundraising ability to aid fellow Democrats. Many senior House members maintain a leadership PAC and make substantial donations to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) or to candidates in swing districts. Carson does have a leadership PAC (“America Now”), but its activity is minimal. In the 2024 cycle, America Now PAC contributed only \$6,000 total to federal candidates.⁴⁴ This token amount suggests Carson is not a significant donor to others; by comparison, an influential House Democrat might funnel tens or hundreds of thousands to colleagues. Additionally, there’s no public record of Carson making large transfers to the DCCC or state party. (He is not listed among major contributors to the Indiana Democratic Party coffers.) In short, Carson’s fundraising has been just enough for his own campaigns, with little left or offered for party-building. He has also faced no personal wealth spending—\$0 in self-financing—and has not tapped new pools of grassroots money.⁴⁵

Conclusion: Carson’s low-key fundraising approach may suffice to hold his seat, but it reflects a missed opportunity for party growth. His predecessor, Julia Carson, was not a prolific fundraiser either, but during her tenure the state party still had Evan Bayh and others raising big dollars. Today, André Carson is the senior Democrat in the Indiana delegation, yet he’s not pulling in, nor redistributing, the kind of money that could help rebuild the party.

This financial passivity—no large-scale donor network, no major contributions to state infrastructure—is a leadership gap. It leaves Indiana Democrats dependent on national campaigns or statewide candidates to drive funding, rather than leveraging the one safely Democratic House district as a fundraising base.

Compared to the “average” member of Congress, Carson raises considerably less and contributes significantly less to party causes, according to OpenSecrets data.⁴⁶ This disparity underscores that Indianapolis’ representative has not been a financial powerhouse for Democrats in the way big-city lawmakers in other states often are.

⁴¹<https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress/andre-carson/summary?cid=N00029513#:~:text=PAC%20Contributions%2A%3A%2056.81>

⁴²<https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress/andre-carson/summary?cid=N00029513#:~:text=Contributor%20Total%20Individuals%20PACs%20Bose%2C,Crystal%20Sugar%20%2410%2C000%20%240%20%2410%2C000>

⁴³<https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress/andre-carson/summary?cid=N00029513#:~:text=%24820%2C448>

⁴⁴<https://www.opensecrets.org/political-action-committees-pacs/america-now/C00511196/summary/2024#:~:text=match%20at%20L323%20Contributions%20from,list%20donors%29%20%246%2C700>

⁴⁵<https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress/andre-carson/summary?cid=N00029513#:~:text=Large%20Individual%20Contributions%3A%2038.49>

⁴⁶<https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress/andre-carson/summary?cid=N00029513#:~:text=PAC%20Contributions%2A%3A%2056.81>



Absent Leadership from Carson and Hogsett

Key Takeaways:

- **Carson:** Rarely intervenes in down-ballot races or party-building. No known voter registration efforts. Has not led on organizing or candidate recruitment.
- **Hogsett:** Low-engagement approach to party politics. 2023 mayoral race had 26.5% turnout. Ended the slating system without replacing its organizing function.
- **Both:** Have presided over a period of visible atrophy in Democratic structures with few new leaders emerging and no sustained investment in precinct-level operations.

This leadership vacuum is not just passive—it is actively harmful. It allows organizational decay and sends a message that Indianapolis Democrats do not need to be mobilized.

Full Analysis

Many Democrats in Indianapolis argue that a vacuum of proactive leadership by Rep. Carson and Mayor Joe Hogsett has contributed to the party's hollowing out. While Carson and Hogsett are the two highest-ranking Democrats in Indiana's capital, evidence suggests they have not robustly invested in local party-building:

- **Rep. André Carson:** Aside from the fundraising issues noted above, Carson's engagement in local party development appears limited. He holds a senior role in Congress (he's a Senior Whip in the Democratic Caucus) yet there's scant evidence of him using that stature to cultivate new Democratic candidates or energize the base back home. Public records show Carson rarely intervenes in state legislative or local races, and he has not led major voter registration or education drives in the district. Importantly, Carson's own reelection campaigns have been low-visibility affairs focused on base Democratic voters. He has not faced a close contest in years (no opponent has come within single digits of him), which has perhaps led to a complacent approach.⁴⁷ Local activists note that Carson's presence in off-year or down-ballot elections is minimal—for instance, there were few reports of him stumping for state legislative candidates or using his campaign to boost turnout in the 2022 midterms. Furthermore, Carson's influence within the Marion County Democratic organization is not strongly felt; he has not publicly championed precinct recruitment or party reforms. The data on precinct vacancies and turnout declines (outlined above) are partly a reflection of the lack of a rallying force at the top. Carson's leadership PAC giving only \$6k to other Democrats in 2024 illustrates the point: he is not acting as a mentor or benefactor to help other Democrats win.⁴⁸ In contrast, influential big-city Congress members often recruit and fund local candidates (for city council, legislature, etc.) to build the bench. There is little evidence Carson has done this in Indianapolis. As a result, local Democrats privately question Carson's impact—aside from holding the 7th District seat, what has he done to expand Democratic power in Indiana? The record shows few tangible contributions to party-building, and that absence of leadership has coincided with a decline in grassroots organization and turnout.

⁴⁷<https://rivercountry.newschannelnebraska.com/story/52737170/young-democrats-challenge-longtime-incumbents-as-party-grapples-with-generational-divide>

⁴⁸<https://www.opensecrets.org/political-action-committees-pacs/america-now/C00511196/summary/2024#:~:text=match%20at%20L323%20Contributions%20from,list%20donors%29%20%246%2C700>



- Mayor Joe Hogsett:** Hogsett, first elected Indianapolis Mayor in 2015, came in as a former U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Indiana, statewide official (Secretary of State in the 1990s), and party chair. Hopes were high that he'd use the mayor's office to strengthen the party's urban base. However, Hogsett has largely focused on administrative governance and has shied away from overt political organizing. Under Hogsett's tenure, Democratic performance in Marion County has been paradoxical: he himself won reelection comfortably in 2019, yet turnout in that election was abysmally low—only 24% of eligible voters participated.⁴⁹ Hogsett did little to boost those numbers, seemingly content with a low-turnout win. He also has not been very visible in pushing Indianapolis voters to engage in state or federal elections. For example, in the 2020 cycle, Hogsett wasn't prominent in voter registration drives or high-profile "get out the vote" messaging even though Indianapolis was crucial to any Democratic hopes statewide. Additionally, Hogsett has been criticized for not using the mayoral platform to cultivate new Democratic leaders. Until very recently, the Marion County Democratic Party was chaired by Hogsett's close ally (and former clerk) Kate Sweeney Bell, then by Hogsett-endorsed Myla Eldridge—and the organization stagnated under their watch (with slating controversies and low enthusiasm).⁵⁰ Detractors say Hogsett prefers a small inner circle and does not welcome grassroots progressive energy which may have alienated younger activists. Indeed, in early 2025 a coalition of frustrated Democrats, including a township trustee and a city councilor, launched an insurgent bid to take over the county party, explicitly citing "lack of leadership and organization at the local level" as their motive.⁵¹ This challenge—unprecedented in recent years—was essentially a rebuke of the Hogsett-aligned party establishment.
- Involvement in Party-Building:** Concrete measures of Carson's and Hogsett's involvement (or lack thereof) can be seen in party metrics. As noted, precinct vacancies remain high despite the mayor and congressman being the two most influential Democrats who could recruit appointees (the county chair can fill vacancies, but moral leadership from elected officials matters). Hogsett did appoint some loyalists as PCs, but that often meant city employees doubling up roles rather than empowering grassroots volunteers.⁵² Meanwhile, nearly 300 precinct positions were still filled by those who showed up at the 2022 party caucus—suggesting Hogsett and Carson together couldn't even motivate half the precincts to participate in selecting leadership.⁵³ When voter turnout slumped to 50% in 2024, Eldridge (the party chair) defensively noted they had at least hired a GOTV coordinator, implicitly acknowledging a gap in mobilization efforts before.⁵⁴ But hiring one coordinator in a presidential election—something many county parties do routinely—was treated as an exception. This highlights that under Carson and Hogsett's de facto leadership, the party infrastructure was thin. Neither leader built a standing field operation; instead, Marion County Democrats often rely on ad-hoc measures in big elections and go mostly dormant in between.
- Public Perception and Criticism:** There is a growing narrative (voiced in media and by dissidents) that Carson and Hogsett have presided over a decay of Democratic strength. For instance, Indianapolis Councilman Jesse Brown, in calling for Hogsett's resignation in 2023 over unrelated issues, also cited a "lack of leadership" and poor engagement under Hogsett's watch.⁵⁵ Hogsett's decision to end slating was a recognition that the party's old methods were unpopular, but ending it without replacing its organizing function left a void. Carson, for his part, keeps a low profile in district affairs (aside from standard constituent services). Unlike some big-city representatives, he hasn't championed major local initiatives that galvanize volunteers. The consequence, some Democrats argue, is that Indianapolis voters feel disconnected—they don't see local party leaders out front urging them to vote or presenting a compelling vision. The data supports this: young voter turnout in Indy is extremely low, which a recent analysis tied to lack of engagement efforts.⁵⁶ The Indiana Young Democrats cited "insufficient education" and outreach as key reasons for poor youth turnout—activities one would normally expect local leaders like the Mayor or Congressman to help spearhead.⁵⁷

⁴⁹<https://indianapolisrecorder.com/voter-turnout/#:~:text=Recent%20local%20elections%20saw%20low,the%202023%20municipal%20primary%20election>

⁵⁰<https://mirrorindy.org/marion-county-democratic-party-indianapolis-annette-johnson-challenge-chair-myla-eldridge/#:~:text=Myla%20Eldridge%2C%20the%20chair%20of,organization%20at%20the%20local%20level>

⁵¹<https://mirrorindy.org/marion-county-democratic-party-indianapolis-annette-johnson-challenge-chair-myla-eldridge/#:~:text=Myla%20Eldridge%2C%20the%20chair%20of,organization%20at%20the%20local%20level>

⁵²<https://www.jesseforindy.com/emailarchives/112524organizing-for-power-from-the-bottom-up#:~:text=Our%20current%20County%20Chair%2C%20Myla,the%20party%20within%20the%20precincts>

⁵³<https://mirrorindy.org/marion-county-democratic-party-indianapolis-annette-johnson-challenge-chair-myla-eldridge/#:~:text=When%20Eldridge%20ran%20for%20county,of%20support%20this%20time%20around>

⁵⁴<https://mirrorindy.org/marion-county-democratic-party-indianapolis-annette-johnson-challenge-chair-myla-eldridge/#:~:term>

⁵⁵<https://www.wishtv.com/news/politics/indianapolis-mayor-joe-hogsett-criticism/#:~:text=Council%20member%20outside%20of,undraiser%20urges,Brown%20criticizes%20fundraising>

⁵⁶<https://indianapolisrecorder.com/voter-turnout/#:~:text=Recent%20local%20elections%20saw%20low,the%202023%20municipal%20primary%20election>

⁵⁷<https://indianapolisrecorder.com/voter-turnout/#:~:text=Recent%20local%20elections%20saw%20low,the%202023%20municipal%20primary%20election>



Conclusion: Carson and Hogsett have not sufficiently filled the leadership void in Indianapolis Democratic politics. Neither has built the robust precinct networks, energized fundraising, or voter-contact operations needed to keep the base engaged. Their relative inaction correlates with the clear metrics of decline: low turnout, few new volunteers, and no significant Democratic gains in other Marion County offices or surrounding areas. It's telling that Indianapolis, with all its size and Democratic lean, has not spurred a broader blue wave in Indiana—a sign that local leadership has not leveraged the city's potential. As one Democratic organizer put it bluntly, the Marion County party has been “ineffectual and uncommunicative” in recent years.⁵⁸ That critique implicitly targets those at the top. Carson and Hogsett may not be solely responsible for statewide losses, but the data and records illustrate that their tenure coincides with a weakened Indianapolis machine, which in turn has hurt Democratic prospects statewide.

When Indianapolis Showed Up, Democrats Won Statewide

Key Takeaways:

- **Governor (1989—2005):** Democrats held the office for 16 years. Marion County was central to those victories.
- **Senate (Bayh, Donnelly):** Both depended on big margins in Indianapolis.
- **Obama (2008):** Won Indiana by ~28,000 votes, driven by record Indy turnout.

Today, without a strong showing in Indianapolis, Democrats are fluke-proof—unable to win even against weak GOP opponents like Diego Morales. Every key Democratic win in the modern era required Indianapolis to perform. That is no longer happening.

Full Analysis

Indiana Democrats' last period of real competitiveness statewide roughly coincided with a stronger Indianapolis base. The decline of Indianapolis as a vote engine has paralleled the party's collapse in statewide offices.

Notable points in recent history:

- **Statewide Offices Once Held by Democrats:** Up through the mid-2000s, Democrats could win major Indiana offices. Governor: Democrats held the governorship for 16 consecutive years from 1989—2005 (Evan Bayh and Frank O'Bannon/Joe Kernan). That ended in 2004 when Kernan lost to Mitch Daniels. U.S. Senate: Democrats held one of Indiana's U.S. Senate seats for decades (Bayh from 1999—2011, Joe Donnelly from 2013—2019). Donnelly's defeat in 2018 meant no Democrat has won a statewide federal race since Barack Obama's 2008 victory in Indiana. Other State Offices: Superintendent of Public Instruction was won by a Democrat (Glenda Ritz) in 2012, but she lost re-election in 2016 amid low turnout in urban areas. Today, Republicans hold all statewide executive offices and super-majorities in the state legislature. Indiana is rated a solid Republican stronghold.

⁵⁸<https://mirrorindy.org/marion-county-democratic-party-indianapolis-annette-johnson-challenge-chair-myla-eldridge/#:~:text=Mike%20Oles%2C%20who%20managed%20Jared,local%20party%20leaders%20aren%E2%80%99t%20listening>



- **Indianapolis as Democratic Base:** Historically, strong Democratic performance in Marion County was critical to those past Democratic wins. Example: Obama’s razor-thin 2008 win in Indiana was delivered by huge margins and turnout in Marion County (Obama received ~64% in Marion, with tens of thousands more votes cast there than in 2004) and similarly big turnout in Lake County. In statewide races that Democrats won, Indianapolis usually provided the largest vote cushion. Evan Bayh’s elections, for instance, relied on overwhelming support in Indianapolis and Northwest Indiana to offset rural losses. When Indianapolis turnout falters, Democrats simply cannot win statewide. This was evident in 2016 and 2020: in 2016, despite a respected Democrat (John Gregg) running for governor, Marion County turnout was only 53% and he fell short; in 2020, Democrat Woody Myers lost the governor’s race in a landslide as Marion County again underperformed (less than 60% turnout, and Myers’ raw vote haul in Indy was insufficient to dent GOP margins elsewhere).⁵⁹
- **Correlation of Party Strength:** In the early 2000s, the Marion County Democratic Party was comparatively robust. Bart Peterson won the Indy mayor’s office in 1999 and 2003 with strong voter mobilization, and that momentum helped Democrats flip control of the City-County Council and even the Indiana House (Democrats held a state House majority in 2007—2010). Those years saw higher engagement in Indianapolis—for example, 2006 Marion County turnout (approx 44%) helped Democrats pick up three Indiana congressional seats that year. Conversely, after 2010, as Indianapolis turnout and organization waned, Democrats lost ground: by 2014 Republicans held every statewide office, and Indiana had one of the lowest turnout rates nationally (28% in the 2014 midterm).⁶⁰ This is not coincidental. A 2019 analysis noted that Indiana’s chronic turnout problem is partly due to urban Democratic voters not participating.⁶¹ Indianapolis is the largest concentration of Democratic voters—when they stay home, overall turnout plummets and Republicans cruise to victory. Indeed, Indiana’s turnout rankings nationally have sunk (it ranked 40th out of 50 states in 2024 turnout), reflecting Democratic base apathy.⁶²
- **Indianapolis as Party-Building Base:** Major Democratic comebacks in other red states often start in the big cities. If Indiana Democrats are to regain competitiveness, Indianapolis must serve as the engine—providing votes, money, and candidate recruitment. Historically it did: many Democratic statewide officials hailed from Marion County or were boosted by its political networks. Today, that base is underperforming. The evidence is stark—only 11% of Indy’s registered voters voted in the May 2023 municipal primary, and just 26.5% turned out in the Nov 2023 city election (despite a competitive mayoral contest).^{63 64} Such low engagement makes it nearly impossible to field strong statewide challenges. The “Reignite Indiana” efforts by new party leadership (e.g. incoming state chair Jennifer McCormick in 2023) explicitly cite the need to boost Marion County turnout as key to any statewide revival.
- **Hollowed Core, Hollowed Party:** The decline of the Marion County Democratic Party has coincided with Democrats losing the Governor’s mansion (2004), their U.S. Senate seat (2018), and failing to win any statewide race in over a decade. While correlation isn’t always causation, political strategists widely acknowledge that without a strong Indianapolis delivering huge Democratic margins, Indiana Democrats cannot overcome the GOP’s rural and suburban strength. For instance, in Donnelly’s 2012 Senate win, Marion County provided a critical boost (Donnelly won Marion by ~75,000 votes). In his 2018 loss, Marion’s turnout edge was smaller, contributing to his defeat. The data suggests that when Indianapolis approaches its potential (e.g. 2008’s high turnout), Democrats at least compete statewide; when Indy underperforms (e.g. 2014, 2016, 2022), Democrats are wiped out.

⁵⁹https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/voter-information/files/2016_General_Election_Turnout.pdf#:~:text=Hamilton%20230%2C786%20158%2C205%2069%20,12%2C922%205%2C054%2028

⁶⁰<https://www.incontext.indiana.edu/2023/july-aug/article2.asp#:~:text=After%201,registered%20voters%20cast%20a%20ballot>

⁶¹<https://www.idsnews.com/article/2024/11/indiana-turnout-ranks-bottom-voter-obstacles#:~:text=Indiana%27s%20turnout%20ranks%20near%20the,The%20Indiana%20Daily>

⁶²<https://www.incontext.indiana.edu/2025/may-jun/article2.asp#:~:text=calculates%20voter%20turnout%20as%20the,lowest%20percentage%20of%20citizens%20voting>

⁶³<https://indianapolisrecorder.com/voter-turnout/#:~:text=May%2010%2C%202025>

⁶⁴<https://www.wishtv.com/news/election/heavier-than-usual-voter-turnout-in-marion-county/#:~:text=Heavier,m>



In Conclusion: the hollowing out of the Democratic Party in Indianapolis has broader implications. The once “blue urban firewall” is thin and cracked—and as a result, Indiana has become essentially a one-party (Republican) state at the statewide level. Democrats last held the governorship in January 2005, last won a presidential race in 2008, and as of 2025 hold zero statewide offices. The evidence links this decline to Indianapolis’ fading strength as a turnout and organizing base. Rebuilding the Marion County Democratic organization—filling precincts, boosting turnout to 2008 levels (when ~360k Marion County voters cast ballots, versus only ~324k in 2024)—is widely seen as essential if Democrats ever hope to win Indiana again.⁶⁵ As it stands, Indianapolis is a deep-blue island that is not fully activating its electorate. The party’s past competitiveness showed what a fully mobilized Indianapolis could achieve; its current doldrums show how a listless Indianapolis can doom Democratic prospects statewide.

Time to Rebuild the Party from the 7th District

The data shows a clear narrative: turnout is down, infrastructure is hollowed, and leadership has failed to reverse the slide. But Indiana Democrats have rebuilt before and can again.

It starts in Indianapolis. The 7th District must be restored as the organizing engine, the financial anchor, and the vision-setting core of Indiana Democrats. That means:

- Rebuilding precinct operations
- Restoring turnout to 2008 levels
- Cultivating grassroots donor networks
- Recruiting and supporting a new generation of leaders

Our campaign is not just about winning one congressional seat. It’s about laying the foundation to compete again—to break supermajorities, win back statewide offices, and build a Democratic Party that finally serves the people it claims to represent.

⁶⁵<https://mirrorindy.org/indianapolis-indiana-election-2024-voter-turnout-marion-county/#:~:text=Just%20under%2050,amounting%20to%20about%20324%2C709%20residents>

