

Don't despair, Andy Beshear and Cory Booker tell Florida Democrats



U.S. Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey, left, Florida Democratic Party Chair Nikki Fried and U.S. Sen. Andy Beshear of Kentucky at the Florida Democratic Party's Leadership Blue conference and fundraiser at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood on Saturday, June 21, 2025. (Photo by Anthony Man)

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U.S. Sen. Cory Booker appealed to their hearts. Gov. Andy Beshear spoke to their minds.

The senator from New Jersey and the governor of Kentucky both urged Democrats from around Florida to restore their party's image, offered prescriptions for a resurgence, and inspired inspiration for party activists anguished about what's happening under President Donald Trump.

Simultaneously, they sought to burnish their political brands through unspoken — but very much present — signals about the 2028 presidential race.

Above all, though in vastly different styles and tones, Booker and Beshear urged Florida Democrats not to despair.

Beshear reassured Florida Democrats that they can once again win in a state that has turned solidly Republican.

“I know that people call Florida a red state these days. But I’m here as living proof. If a Democrat can win in Kentucky, Democrats can win in Florida,” Beshear said Saturday night at the Florida Democratic Party’s annual Leadership Blue fundraising dinner at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Hollywood.

Booker, too, said the future for Democrats is brighter than some see at the moment.

“We’re both here to support Florida, and make it very clear that Floridians are not being served by the leadership in our country,” he said. “This is the Sunshine State, and there may be darkness right now, but the sun is rising in Florida again. The sun is rising in America again.”

Remedies

Democrats are far behind the Republicans in registered voters and elected officials in Florida, and they’ve been falling farther and farther behind in recent years.

Those trends can be reversed in Florida and elsewhere, Beshear said. “Democrats can win again by winning back that middle. And it is there for the taking.”

The winning formula, he said, is for Democrats to “be the party of common sense, common ground, and getting things done. We’ve got to talk to people, not at them” and have “a relentless focus on the core concerns of hardworking Americans.”

People care about jobs, health care, better roads and bridges, education and communities that are safe — and also feel safe — he said. To most Americans, he said, “the latest cable news freakout just isn’t that important.”

And Beshear said, Democrats should talk the way most people talk and should not do things like call inmates the “justice-involved population,” addiction “substance-abuse disorder” or people who are hungry “food-insecure.”

He said that would work in Florida, where many feel the state has become unaffordable. “We have to stay focused on people’s daily lives. Especially when it seems as if your current governor isn’t doing a darn thing about it.”

Then came the Florida-oriented zinger. The state deserves a governor, he said, who is more interested in lifting up families, and less concerned about the lifts in his boots. (During Gov.

Ron DeSantis' unsuccessful presidential campaign, many on social media concluded he was boosting his stature via lifts in his cowboy boots, with [experts opining](#) at the time).

Booker was less oriented to specific prescriptions for Democrats and more on acknowledging what his party sees as the threat and lifting Democrats' spirits.

"These are scary times. These are really, really scary times. And if you say they're not, you're not telling the truth," Booker said. "These are frightening times."

Booker said Democrats shouldn't let Trump become the focus of all their attention.

"I haven't mentioned his name. Because I don't think he is the center of the story," Booker said. "And if you make him the main character of the story, he wins." Booker implored Democrats not to become prey for political traps set by Trump. "He wants us to fight him on his turf," he said. "You don't meet him on his battlefield. You shift the fight."



U.S. Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey at the Florida Democratic Party's Leadership Blue conference and fundraiser at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood on Saturday, June 21, 2025. (Photo by Anthony Man)

State efforts

Florida Democratic Party Chair Nikki Fried said it is now the fourth state in the country with a year-round organizing campaign that will base organizers in communities, especially where “voters have felt overlooked.”

The effort is called Pendulum “because the pendulum is starting to swing here in the state of Florida.” Its first priorities, she said, are signing up people whose vote-by-mail ballot requests have expired, registering new Democratic voters, and recruiting candidates.

“When we show up for every voter in every ZIP code in every year, we will win,” she said.

She said the party would spend \$1 million this year to start, and increase that amount.

Laurie Plotnick, president of both the state and the Broward Democratic senior caucuses, applauded the effort, which she said was “a tremendous, tremendous change” for the party.

“If you’re going to do the same thing, you’ll have the same outcomes, so we’re really hoping that by doing things in a different manner that we will have better outcomes,” she said.



U.S. Rep. Darren Soto, left, U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz and Gov. Andy Beshear of Kentucky at the Florida Democratic Party's Leadership Blue conference and fundraiser at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood on Saturday, June 21, 2025. (Photo by Anthony Man)

The dinner also provided a bit of news, delivered subtly in the governor's race.

David Jolly, who announced his candidacy for the 2026 nomination for governor earlier this month, was a guest of Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava and sat at her table.

After she easily won reelection last year, some supporters had floated her as a possible Democratic gubernatorial candidate. Having Jolly at her table was a clear signal that she won't be running.

Presidential race

Besides their dinner speeches, the Beshear and Booker visits included other fundraising activities, receptions, small group meetings and talks to a handful of Florida news reporters

— all hallmarks of the unofficial, pre-candidacy, testing-the-waters phase of a presidential campaign.

Beshear has won statewide three times in Republican Kentucky, and was considered last year by Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris as a vice presidential running mate. In 2026 he will become chair of the Democratic Governors Association.

Booker ran for president in 2020 and dropped out early. He received enormous attention earlier this year for delivering a record-breaking 25-hour and 5-minute speech on the Senate floor, which he's now turning into a book.

They demurred when asked about 2028.

Booker insisted he was focusing only on his 2026 Senate reelection campaign and Beshear said he was “very, very focused on my current job.”

When would a hypothetical presidential candidate hypothetically need to make an announcement? “I can’t deal with hypotheticals,” Booker said. “We’ll see,” Beshear said.



U.S. Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey, leaves the stage and walks through the audience as

he delivers a speech at the Florida Democratic Party's Leadership Blue conference and fundraiser at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood on Saturday, June 21, 2025.
(Photo by Anthony Man)

At just over 30 minutes, the senator's speech was about twice as long as the governor's. After a rousing verbal crescendo about 16 minutes into his speech, the crowd rose to its feet and delivered a standing ovation. Booker had them sit back down, declaring he had more to say.

Both sounded like candidates, with personal biographical tales and recounting of political decisions to illustrate their philosophies and approaches.

Booker, 56, wore a tie; Beshear, 47, sported an open collar.

Beshear, like the evening's other speakers, was behind the lectern.

Booker used a hand-held microphone and stayed in front of the lectern. Midway through his speech, Booker left the stage and walked among tables as he spoke, sometimes stepping up on chairs to finish a point.

He began with a flourish. U.S. Rep. Jared Moskowitz, who represents Broward and Palm Beach counties, delivered a praise-filled introduction of Booker. Booker, who at 6 feet 3 is significantly taller than Moskowitz, came on stage, picked up Moskowitz and spun him around.

Gregory Gayle, president of the Coconut Creek-Margate Democratic Club, said he has no doubt Booker will run for president.

"I am so pumped. He is energetic. He speaks the truth," Gayle said. "He is all that Democrats want." As Booker spoke, Gayle said he kept thinking "he can win Georgia," a key state in amassing the electoral votes needed to win the presidency.

"Booker was terrific," Plotnick said. "I would like him to run."

She had a positive, though less effusive, assessment of Beshear, who "showed us what the possibilities are when we work together." Gayle termed Beshear "quite good."



U.S. Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey picks up U.S. Rep. Jared Moskowitz of Florida and spins him around immediately after Moskowitz introduces him at the Florida Democratic Party's Leadership Blue conference and fundraiser at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood on Saturday, June 21, 2025. (Andrew Dolberg/courtesy)

Leadership Blue

About 800 people attended the dinner, which is the state Democratic Party's biggest fundraising event of the year. Fried declined to estimate how much the party would raise.

The Democrats attempted to impose more message control than in the past. Unlike most past Leadership Blue events, the party imposed more restrictions on the handful of news reporters covering the activities.

The event attracted multiple federal, state and local elected officials, and was marked with noticeably heavier security than in the past.

Fried said in an interview that security had been increased in the week leading up to the dinner in the aftermath of the June 14 assassination of a Minnesota state representative and killing of her husband and the shooting of a Minnesota state senator and his wife.

“It’s heartbreaking what’s happening in our country right now, the increase of political violence,” she said. “We have seen an increase overall of just violence in political areas and wanted to make sure that everybody who was coming this weekend felt safe and that there were never any questions about people being able to have a good time and go home.”

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