U.S. Election Analysis 2024: Media, Voters and the Campaign

Early reflections from leading academics

Edited by:
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Acknowledgements

This is now the eighth Election Analysis report we have produced in nine years and the third U.S. Election Analysis Report. It has been a privilege to share this journey with the contributors to these reports: many of whom we know well, and many of whom we have met through this collaboration.

Publishing such reports within ten days of an election is always a huge challenge, which doesn't necessarily get any easier with practice. It would not be possible without the efforts of a number of people who we would like to acknowledge here.

First, we are immensely grateful for our contributors' enthusiasm, commitment and their expertise, which shine through the pages of this report. For many academics, writing short and accessible pieces does not come naturally, but we are always amazed by the quality of the contributions we receive, especially given the turnaround time.

On behalf of the editorial team, we would like to recognise the financial and moral support of the Centre Comparative Politics and Media Research at Bournemouth University, The Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications at Northwestern University, and our great colleagues and student community. We are also very grateful for the support of our partners in this project: the APSA Information Technology & Politics Section, the Political Studies Association Media and Politics Group and the IPSA Political Communication Research Committee.

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Introduction

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The 2024 U.S. presidential election was a fiercely contested, high drama affair, marked by multiple assassination attempts on former President Donald Trump, the resignation of the presumptive Democratic nominee, President Joe Biden, and the historic rise of Vice President Kamala Harris as the first woman of Black and South Asian heritage to be the nominee of a major U.S. party.

For academics, journalists, and everyday pundits there were many talking points from pressing issues like abortion, taxes, cost of living pressures, and immigration.

Beyond these policy debates, the campaign itself was a fundraising frenzy, with billions of dollars spent on advertising and grassroots efforts, alongside fierce competition to control the message across digital platforms, podcasts, and other communicative spaces. Hyperpartisan media, misinformation, disinformation and the use of artificial intelligence tools also played a role in campaign communications.
The result was a remarkable political comeback, with Donald Trump being the first President since Grover Cleveland in 1892 to win a non-consecutive presidential term. Trump, like his predecessor George W. Bush in 2004, also won the popular vote, electoral college, and control of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

Also remarkable in this election was the political ascendency of Ohio Senator J.D. Vance as Trump's running mate. During the campaign (and before) his populist appeals have targeted many including the LGBTQ+ community. Another attack, pertinent to this collective, is his hostility towards academia. In a 2021 speech to the National Conservatism Conference, Vance quoted President Richard Nixon's line that "professors are the enemy."

In that spirit, we bring together leading academics in the U.S. and beyond, to provide readers with in-depth analysis of the key issues, campaign dynamics, and consequences of the 2024 election. Divided into seven sections, we again turn to a diverse mix of world-leading experts and early career researchers to explore the campaign's major themes, the result, and what Trump's remarkable comeback might mean for the future of American politics and the world.

Section 1, titled "Democracy at Stake," explores the critical question of whether Trump poses a threat to democracy as we know it underpinned by trusted institutions, civil public discourse, and a rules-based order. The section explores Trump's propensity to lie, unsubstantiated claims of election fraud, and conspiracy theories. It also examines public policy implications in light of his unusually close ties with billionaire tech mogul Elon Musk.

In **Section 2** we turn to "Policy and the political context." It includes analysis on U.S. domestic and international issues. It examines issues that divide Americans such as abortion, guns, and environmental policies. This section delves into America's place in the world and what a Trump victory might look like for the war in Ukraine, Russia, and more broadly, international security.

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The focus is on "Voters" in **Section 3**. Here, we discuss polls and voting trends across key demographics including gender, youth, rural, Black, Hispanic, and independent voters.

Section 4 delves into "Candidates and the campaign." We turn our attention to celebrity endorsements like pop singer Charli XCX's appeal to Gen Z voters by calling Kamala Harris "brat." Contributors reflect on the Democratic nominee's strategy, the Harris vs. Trump televised debate, the role of disinformation, the ground wars, and the influence of political advertising.

"News and journalism" were particularly challenged in 2024. **Section 5** examines the controversial silence of some newspapers on presidential endorsements and the challenges of pro-democracy journalism. It discusses media ownership and power. The section probes questions about the moral leadership of the media, its partisanship, and if there is a case to be made for happy election news.

From mainstream media, we move to the "Digital campaign" in **Section 6**. The fragmented social media landscape is explored broadly with attention to prejudice and priming in the online political sphere, but also more specifically with articles on individual platforms including Meta's threads, TikTok, Facebook, and X. The use of AI in the campaign is considered, especially its role in voter suppression, along with other campaign activities including a discussion on how human-like is AI-generated social media content? A popular topic in the section is political memes.

Section 7 dedicated to "Popular culture" concludes the volume. It continues a discussion on memes and returns to the centrality of Elon Musk in the 2024 campaign. It looks at how gendered stereotypes are perpetuated in political comedy such as the appearance of Harris on *Saturday Night Live,* but also the "manosphere" with Trump's strategic use of podcasts that attract large audiences of men such as the Joe Rogan Experience.

Published within ten days of the result, this unique volume is designed to bring together informed contributions that are short and accessible. The authors draw on a range of methods to bring authoritative analysis – including early research findings and new theoretical insights – to offer readers new ways of understanding and thinking about the 2024 election and its implications for the future or democracy. Our contributors span disciplines from media and communication studies to political science, cultural studies, geography, and psychology. We hope this makes for an engaging and thought-provoking read to better understand the campaign dynamics and result of the 2024 U.S. presidential election and demonstrates the important role of universities in transmitting knowledge for all.

1

Democracy at Stake

Trump's imagined reality is America's new reality

In the 2024 U.S. election campaign, Donald Trump's communication strategy evolved from twisting facts to distorting reality itself. By divorcing a leader from any need for truth, the democratic system in which citizens hold leaders accountable is likely to fail.

Disinformation is not new to the Trump campaign, but it entered a new phase of falsehood in 2024, one in which there was not only deliberate lying but the knowledge on the part of both candidate and his supporters that the campaign was not even attempting to reflect reality. Rather, the campaign described an imagined America, by cherry-picking facts or simply inventing stories, such as immigrants eating pets. In this deliberate creation of a landscape often built on lies, Trump's communication strategy echoes that of authoritarian leaders, especially Russian President Vladimir Putin. It also allowed Trump and running mate J.D. Vance latitude to both frighten voters with depicting a nation in which the White majority was threatened by unrest and projecting an attractive imagined reality in which citizens would enjoy order and prosperity.

While Trump's disdain for facts and use of disinformation had increased significantly since his first campaign and administration, the new era of Trumpism that emerged in the 2024 campaign is qualitatively different. In his first administration and beyond, Trump often lied and pursued "interactive propaganda" with friendly media outlets such as *Fox* in an attempt to legitimize disinformation such as fake cures for COVID or – even more significantly – that the 2020 election results were rigged by Democrats. Trump's propaganda often featured a constellation of supporters, such as disgraced former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former lawyer Sidney Powell, who made extensive media appearances to support Trump's false claims. Both have since been found guilty of election interference.

By the end of the 2024 campaign, however, Trump and Vance were no longer attempting to legitimize statements that were untrue – and that they knew to be untrue. For example, Vance justified using what he knew was a fake story about Haitian immigrants stealing and eating pets in Ohio by saying he was willing to "create" stories to get media attention.

There is nothing novel about politicians using propaganda or lying intentionally, as Democratic President Bill Clinton did when he claimed he had not had sex with an intern in the White House (he had). Throughout American history, journalists have uncovered the many ways that leaders have lied to the American public. However, politicians have generally been held to account for those lies, with the expectation that the American public deserves the truth.

The 2024 Trump campaign's approach is significantly different, in that the creation of an imagined reality has become much more important than the traditional campaign approach of trying to persuade voters on issues and feasible solutions. It does not matter that statistics show that violent crime has fallen or that gun ownership does not keep people safe or that undocumented immigrants commit crimes at a lower rate than U.S. citizens. The Trump campaign relies not on facts or even logic, but on the emotional conviction that owning guns, ending immigration, and ousting Democrats are necessary to preserve American democracy. Trump, Vance, and his supporters are particularly motivated by conspiracy theories – such as immigrants eating pets or the U.S. government withholding support from hurricane victims in North Carolina – rather than by consuming reputable news and judging situations based on facts.

In his book *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible,* Peter Pomerantsev told the story of Russians who were embracing Putin's reality in the "surreal heart of the new Russia." As the title of the book suggests, when you separate yourself from a fact-based reality and embrace illusion, you no longer have limits. Thus, if you are struggling to make ends meet as union jobs disappear in the United States and the wealth gap grows wider, there could be logic in embracing a leader who makes promises that are rooted in fantasy rather than reality. The danger is that when this fantastical imagined future fails to materialize, leaders may have to employ more extreme measures – such as launching a foreign invasion – in order to remain in power.

It also begs the question of whether the classic electoral game, as American candidates, journalists, academics, and voters, have understood it has shifted from a model of *informed* citizen to that of *convicted* citizen. Trump's second election victory demonstrated the triumph of dreams and conspiracies over reality. We may never be able to return to a time when mere facts can compete with imagined desires.

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Trump's threat to American democracy

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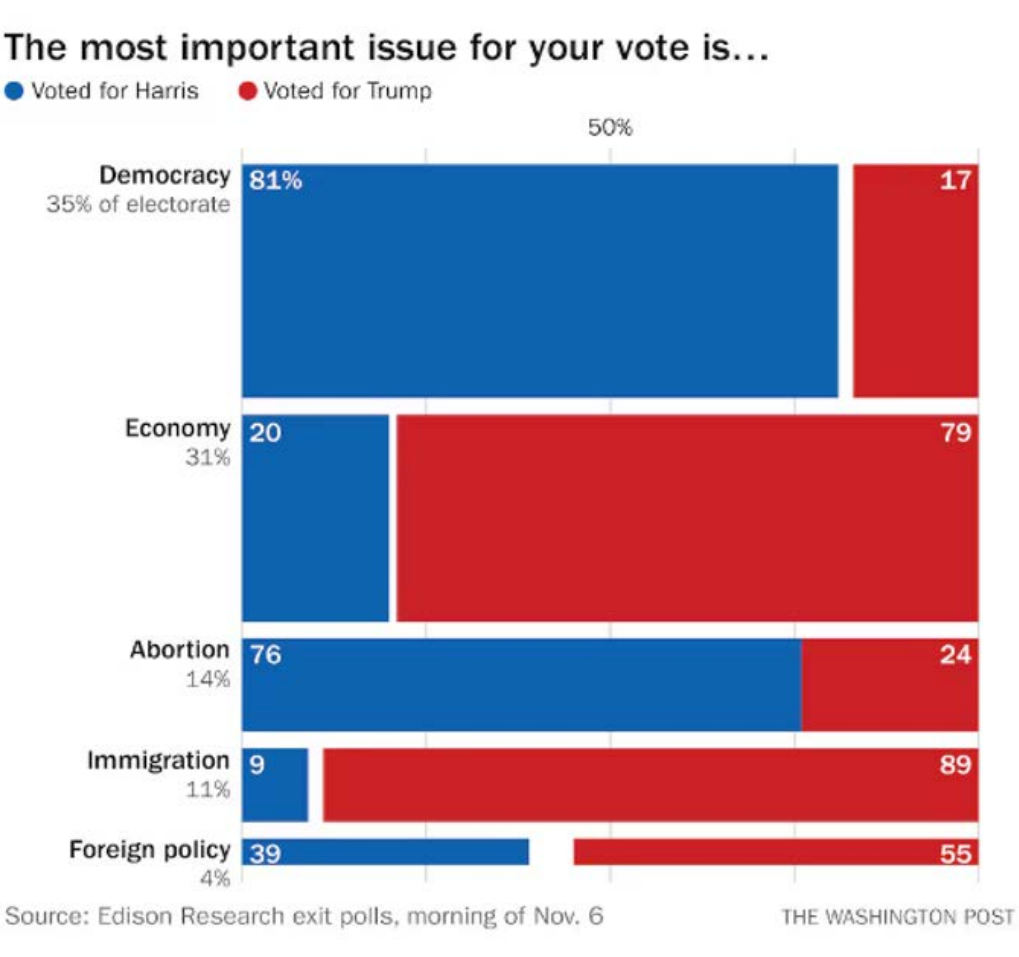
A perfect storm of contemporary events has triggered deep angst about American democracy. Long-standing concern was exacerbated in the run-up to the 2024 U.S. election by the Republican party's choice of President, Donald J. Trump, as their standard bearer despite his prior record of flouting democratic norms, culminating in the insurrection of January 6th. Vice President Kamala Harris' campaign warned about Donald Trump's illiberal rhetoric. MAGA rallies stoked racial resentment, partisan polarization, and grievance politics. Harris emphasized his authoritarian threats of violent retribution, his pledge to use the Justice Department against opponents, and his sweeping proposals to reshape foreign and domestic policies, like throwing out millions of illegal immigrants living in America. In the aftermath of polling day, Democrat anxieties rose as they realized the scope of Trump's victory – boosting his 2020 share of the vote as most counties swung rightwards coast-to-coast and expanding the Republican coalition, especially among the younger generation (+6%), first-time voters, and a majority of Hispanic/Latino men (+18%), the highest share won by the Republican presidential candidate for half a century. During the Fall, Harris enjoyed an initial surge in support. In the final week, however, late deciders broke for Trump, despite his increasingly erratic rally performances.

The outcome reinforced a long-standing legitimacy crisis in the United States; in Pew Research Center polls, in recent years, both Republicans and Democrats have expressed concern about electoral integrity, deep dissatisfaction with the state of American democracy, and fears about the future. Many American citizens in these surveys are deeply critical of their political system. They consider constant partisan warfare as dysfunctional and divisive, the political process dominated by lobbyists and cash, and all branches of the federal government as deeply untrustworthy. Anxieties have been heightened by contemporary events highlighting home-grown threats, ranging from the January 6th MAGA insurrection storming Capitol Hill to attempted assassinations against Trump and rising threats of violence against electoral officials, widespread allegations of rigged contests and voter suppression, hyper-partisan courts, and legislative gridlock. Certain serious threats diminished in the immediate aftermath of the sweeping Republican victory in the 2024 election, however, notably rightwing legal challenges to the integrity of elections and the genuine risks of post-election violence. Nevertheless, the longer-term risks of democratic backsliding have risen exponentially, given the lack of checks on the aggrandizement of Presidential power after Republicans gained control of the White House, the Senate, and (likely) the House of Representatives, and 27 State Houses to the Democrats 17. The 6-3 conservative balance in the Supreme Court favors Trump and the justices have also granted presidents substantial immunity from prosecution for official acts.

At the same time, the two most extensive election surveys currently available demonstrated widespread public awareness of the risks to American democracy. The pooled network exit poll (where Edison Research interviewed almost 23,000 electors) found that nearly three-quarters of all electors thought that U.S. democracy was "somewhat" or very" threatened. The exit poll reported that 35% said democracy was the most important issue influencing their vote, including 81% of Harris and 17% of Trump supporters. Democracy was more salient than other issues, including the economy (31%), abortion (14%), immigration (11%), or foreign policy (4%). Similarly, the Associated Press VoteCast poll (where NORC interviewed over 110,000 voters from 28 Oct-5 Nov 2024) also found that two-thirds of Harris and one-third of Trump voters said that the future of American democracy was the single most important factor influencing their vote. Liberal and moderate Democrats expressed most concern about the future of American democracy, but roughly four out of ten Independents and Republicans also shared this anxiety. Many Americans, therefore, seem aware of the dangers facing liberal democracy.

Yet Trump won. Why? One reason is that other issues like inflation were also clearly important. 'Democracy' is also an essentially contested abstract concept. Pew Research Center polls highlight that Republicans and Democrats sharply disagree about the nature and severity of the dangers facing U.S. democracy– and less consensus exists about proposed fixes. Debates over policy issues have metastasized into politicized tussles over legitimate procedural changes to resolve disputes. This is exemplified on the conservative right by the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 blueprint for politicizing the state and by numerous Republican attempts to adopt more restrictive state laws regulating electoral registration, balloting, and tabulation. By contrast, many on the liberal left advocate a range of reforms, including expanding deliberative assemblies and participatory budgeting to expand citizen decision-making, abolishing the Electoral College, adopting Ranked Choice Voting, and limiting judicial tenure for the Supreme Court.

During his first term in office, President Trump corroded important democratic norms and constitutional principles. Still, his bark usually proved far worse than his bite. Many checks and balances on the executive continued to function due to Democratic control of the Senate in the 117th Congress, push-back from the lower courts, many legacy news media outlets, and civil society resistance, as well as the lack of capacity of the Trump Administration to implement its policies. The V-Dem project estimates a modest decline in American liberal democracy during his first term- but then some signs of resilience during the Biden years. All the signs suggest, however, that the prospects for severe backsliding during a second term of the Trump Administration look far more likely.


The most important issue for your vote is...
Voted for Harris
Voted for Trump
50%
Democracy
35% of electorate
81%
17
Economy
31%
20
79
Abortion
14%
76
24
Immigration
11%
9
89
Foreign policy
4%
39
55
Source: Edison Research exit polls, morning of Nov. 6
THE WASHINGTON POST

Why does Donald Trump tell so many lies?

Prof Geoff Beattie

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Politicians who lie have an enormous advantage over truth-tellers. If you can successfully embellish the truth or construct a new reality, that can always be more interesting and engaging than the truth. The truth may be a bit dull and uninspiring; the lie can be whatever you want it to be. You know what your audience wants to hear. And besides what is there to lose? Politicians know that lying is part of our everyday lives. We all do it! Research in psychology using lie diaries tells us that people lie on average twice a day. Many are harmless "white" lies told for the benefit of others ("you don't look a day over thirty, honestly"), but some are not so harmless and told for the benefit of the liar themselves.

Some people get significant pleasure from telling such self-centred lies. Psychologists call this "duping delight". It confuses the recipient of the lie. They expect to detect signs of guilt or anxiety, instead all they see is a faint smile of satisfaction. The liar gets away with it. That smile could mean anything. Certain types of personality are drawn to these sorts of lies, including narcissists and those with little empathy like psychopaths. They don't care about the consequences for the recipient, it's all about them.

We start lying early in life - between two and three years of age. Charles Darwin in 1877 caught his son William Erasmus lying at that age. He had eaten some forbidden pickle juice and lied about it. Darwin was surprised by his son's evident pleasure in lying. The brightest children lie the most and most effectively; the ability to lie improves as our cognitive abilities develop. Like any skill, we get better at it with practice. But most of us still feel guilt even when we are well practiced.

Some politicians are so good, however, you wonder if they might actually believe the lies. You search in vain for tell-tale micro-expressions of guilt, shame or sadness, but you find none. You start to wonder about their underlying personality.

Politics was once thought of as a noble art, it was Machiavelli in 1532 who wrote "those princes who have done great things…have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft." A major part of that craft is the lie. Politicians lie by omission and by exaggeration, but sometimes they tell outright "big lies". This term was introduced by Hitler in Mein Kampf. A big lie "is a gross distortion or misrepresentation of the truth used as a propaganda technique." The big lie works, according to Hitler, because the ordinary person knows how bad it feels to tell a small lie so they cannot imagine someone having the "impudence" to distort the truth so gravely. To work, big lies, again according to Hitler, must be able "to awaken the imagination of the public through an appeal to their feelings." They are not aimed at our rational selves, but our unconscious and emotional selves. Trump telling us all that immigrants are eating the dogs and cats in Springfield Ohio is not appealing to our rational system (Where's the evidence? How do they cook them? Are all immigrants at it?); it's providing us with a vivid image, it's an appeal to our feelings, it's trying to impact on our emotional and unconscious system. But we ask ourselves, how could someone have the impudence to tell such a lie? That was Hitler's point.

These are some of the advantages that political liars have - no constraints on the story or the self-construction, a direct appeal to the emotions without the constraint of truth, an engaging emotional draw. What could be better? And some are very good at it - they suffer little from detection apprehension and feel confident in their ability to succeed. As the sociobiologist Robert Trivers has pointed out, lying can give you a clear evolutionary advantage - status, wealth and achievements are important in that great evolutionary battle in the survival of the genes - that's why people lie about them. But he says self-deceit can also be evolutionary advantageous because if you can convince yourself of something then it makes you more convincing to others, and therefore more effective.

Perhaps Trump managed to convince himself that they really were eating the dogs and cats in Springfield. Maybe he is that self-deluded as in so many areas (for example about climate change being a Chinese hoax). However, maybe he just thought to himself - plant the image, that is all you need to do for the faithful. MAGA.

Of course, politicians can always justify a lie to themselves. It was Plato who introduced the concept of the "noble lie"- a necessary lie to preserve the state. Perhaps politicians reason that we cannot bear the truth all the time. What will Putin do next? Can we bear to know? They are lying for our benefit, like a "kind" parent. Or it could be part of their own self-deceit and contribute to the fact that they then lie so often and so blatantly with little consideration of the long-term consequences for either our faith in democracy or our faith in ourselves.

Attractive fictions might well engage us and sweep us along, but fortunately or unfortunately the truth will out, as Shakespeare noted. And then it's not so pleasant for anybody but especially for the recipient of the lie. For us.

Strategic (in)civility in the campaign and beyond

The 2024 presidential contest was rife with incivility and intolerance. Even before he became the nominee, Tim Walz portrayed Republicans as "weird." In the single presidential debate in September, Donald Trump and Kamala Harris traded insults, calling each other "weak," "criminal," and "incompetent," among other insults. Late in the campaign, Trump escalated attacks against former Republican Congresswoman (and Harris supporter) Liz Cheney by calling her a "radical war hawk," and suggesting that rifles be aimed at her. In the final days of the campaign, he referred to former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as "a bad person…Evil. She's an evil, sick, crazy bi—," letting the crowd supply the word on his behalf.

Many have examined the ways in which Trump's rhetoric in particular feels like a direct departure from norms of campaign civility, often while also noting that campaign politics have been uncivil since our earliest presidential races. Incivility, as Susan Herbst argues, is a rhetorical strategy, just like attacking one's opponent or appealing to individuals' sense of nationalism or patriotic duty. In the context of a campaign, the decision to use civility and incivility is driven primarily by whether it will increase voter turnout and support for the candidate. More broadly, both civility and incivility can be used to advance democratic and antidemocratic objectives.

Research on the impact of (in)civility on election outcomes is mixed; while incivility has been shown to increase interest in voting (while civility does not), it tends to decrease support for both preferred and least-liked candidates. And our interpretation and acceptance of incivility is partisan. According to data from wave 4 of the Syracuse University-Ipsos American Identity poll, both Democrats and Republicans agree that the other party and their candidate use too much violent and divisive language. They are far less concerned about the rhetoric of their own candidate. In short, while Americans report a general desire for more civil politics, the 2024 election suggests that they are unwilling to punish their own candidate for incivility.

Despite these patterns, Harris still deployed civility strategically in her concession speech. "We will continue to wage this fight in the voting booth, in the courts and in the public square," she said "and we will also wage it in quieter ways, in how we live our lives, by treating one another with kindness and respect, by looking in the face of a stranger and seeing a neighbor, by always using our strength to lift people up to fight for the dignity that all people deserve." Harris' speech highlights the democratic possibilities of civility. Here, civility is a vehicle for articulating a politics of recognition premised not on any single identity but on everyone's basic humanity.

This is not always the case. Polite language can be used to sanitize injustice and discrimination, as was seen in much of the South during the civil rights era. It's this use of civility to strategically undermine citizens' democratic rights that has critics calling for an alternative approach—the strategic use of incivility to advance democratic values. As a starting point, consider the following 2015 tweet from writer Robert Jones, Jr.: "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist." The quote is now frequently misattributed to James Baldwin, but regardless, I have seen its sentiments echoed in TikToks and other social media posts throughout the 2024 campaign and its immediate aftermath.

It might feel as if cutting people out of our political conversations and our lives is the opposite of democracy, which is grounded in a sense of shared civic community. Even incivility deployed in an attempt to garner greater inclusion could lead to negative outcomes, including increased political cynicism, anger, and an inclination towards violent and combative politics. But those reactions might be a necessary part of the national conversation about what comes next.

On November 7th, *Atlantic* staff writer Jennifer Senior asked "How do we move forward without venom, without looking at strangers—and people within our own party—as potential enemies?" One step is to decouple incivility from enmity. Yes, much of the vitriol in the political world is intolerant, reinforcing inequalities and exclusion from the political sphere. It is likely that Trump will continue to use uncivil rhetoric in this way. But it can also be used towards other more productive goals; we should all be attentive to the difference and to our own strategic use of civility and incivility in our political conversations.

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Can America's democratic institutions hold?

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The integrity of American democracy faces an unprecedented stress test as election challenges and institutional distrust reach new heights. While legal battles over electoral processes have always existed, the scale and nature of current challenges signal a troubling shift in our democratic landscape.

Consider the extraordinary legal mobilization surrounding the recent U.S. elections. The Trump campaign enlisted the help of over 5,000 lawyers and initiated 130 lawsuits challenging voter rolls before Election Day. Not to be outdone, the Democratic National Committee allocated $22 million for legal resources, while the Harris campaign positioned some 400 lawyers across states to counter potential challenges. This unprecedented preparation for electoral disputes reflects more than routine legal oversight—it suggests a systematic approach to questioning electoral legitimacy.

The weaponization of legal processes represents just one facet of a deeper crisis in institutional trust. Traditional disagreements over policy have evolved into something more fundamental: Americans increasingly view political opponents not merely as wrong, but as existential threats to democracy itself. Social scientists term this phenomenon "affective polarization"—where political identity becomes so central that it colors our judgements of others' basic character and motives.

Political leadership plays a crucial role in this dynamic. When leaders consistently undermine institutional processes for tactical advantage, they erode the foundations that enable peaceful power transitions. This creates a dangerous feedback loop: diminished trust prompts more challenges to institutional legitimacy, which further depletes trust, perpetuating a cycle of democratic decay.

However, amidst these challenges, important institutional guardrails remain intact. The judiciary, regardless of judges' partisan affiliations, has consistently upheld electoral integrity when presented with unsubstantiated fraud claims. Courts continue to demand concrete evidence rather than conjecture, serving as a crucial bulwark against baseless challenges to democratic processes.

Moreover, local governance offers reasons for optimism. Citizens maintain relatively high trust in local leaders—the election workers and community officials who manage democratic processes at the grassroots level. Despite facing unprecedented pressures and sometimes threats, these individuals continue to demonstrate remarkable dedication to democratic principles.

The path toward rebuilding institutional trust must begin at the local level. Many cities already demonstrate how nonpartisan leadership can unite communities around shared challenges, transcending political divisions. These local governments actively engage citizens through participation in boards and decision-making bodies, while promoting civic education that helps residents understand the complexity of public issues and the nuances of finding workable solutions.

Trust in democratic institutions is inextricably linked to social trust—our faith in fellow citizens' commitment to democratic values. The current crisis stems not just from disagreement over issues, but from a fundamental breakdown in this social compact.

When citizens view political opponents as enemies rather than fellow Americans with different views, the very foundation of democratic discourse crumbles.

Recent challenges to election integrity highlight this interconnection. When political figures repeatedly make unfounded claims of electoral fraud, they don't just attack specific institutions, they undermine the basic trust necessary for democratic governance. Each baseless allegation chips away at citizens' confidence in the system's fundamental fairness.

The solution requires a two-pronged approach: strengthening institutional safeguards while rebuilding social trust. This means:

1. Supporting and protecting local election officials who serve as democracy's front-line workers
2. Maintaining robust judicial oversight while resisting attempts to politicize courts
3. Promoting civic education that emphasizes democratic processes and shared values
4. Creating more opportunities for meaningful cross-partisan interaction at the community level
5. Encouraging political leadership that prioritizes institutional stability over short-term tactical advantages

The current crisis presents both peril and possibility. The danger lies in allowing continued erosion of institutional legitimacy to trigger democratic collapse. The opportunity exists in using this moment to build stronger institutional frameworks and deeper civic bonds that strengthen democracy for future generations.

Our democratic institutions can hold, but only if we recognize that their strength ultimately depends on the trust we place in each other as citizens. The challenge ahead isn't just about protecting specific institutions; it's about recommitting to the fundamental premise that democracy requires good faith engagement across political differences.

The question isn't simply whether our institutions will survive, but whether we can summon the collective will to strengthen them. The answer lies not in Washington, but in thousands of communities across America where citizens choose daily whether to reinforce or undermine the trust that makes democracy possible.

How broad is presidential immunity in the United States?

Congress has investigated one third of the presidents of the United States based on misconduct in office. Most of these investigations have resulted in or been accompanied by litigation in U.S. courts.

For example, in 1922, President Warren G. Harding's administration secretly provided $3 billion (in today's dollars) of no-bid contracts to political allies. As a result of the scandal, Harding's Secretary of Interior became the first former Cabinet official in U.S. history to be sentenced to prison because of misconduct in office.

But few presidents themselves have been prosecuted criminally. Until President Donald J. Trump and his allies were indicted in federal and state courts on charges including misuse of classified documents and alleged interference in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections.

In 2024, President Trump became the first former president to be criminally convicted. This conviction resulted from Trump falsifying business records to conceal an illegal scheme to influence the 2016 presidential election.

Trump's election as the 47th president makes him the first convicted felon to serve as president. The charges still pending against him raise questions about the extent to which the president and his advisors are shielded from prosecution while in office.

Immunity under the U.S. Constitution

Immunity for public officials in the United States – including prosecutors, judges, and presidents – originates from British common law. For example, in 1234, King Henry III declared that the king has no superior in the kingdom and therefore cannot be legally summoned or commanded. This conception continued for the next several centuries and influenced how the Framers of the U.S. Constitution viewed executive power.

Today, the U.S. Supreme Court has extended immunity from prosecution beyond the head of state. The primary justification for such immunity is to enable government officials to serve the public without worrying about being punished criminally for doing what they think best serves the country. According to the Court, without immunity, there is a risk that officials will act in fear of political opponents' threats and refrain from making informed and independent decisions in office.

However, immunity is grounded in the office (not the person) and therefore only extends to official conduct.

But what happens when a president runs for re-election or pushes the boundaries of the office? When do his, or his advisors' actions constitute official conduct and when are they considered unofficial decisions made by politicians?

Trump v. United States

This was the issue the U.S. Supreme Court wrestled with this summer. In response to an indictment in federal court alleging that Trump conspired to overturn the 2020 presidential election, Trump moved to dismiss the charges on the idea that his conduct involved his official duties as president and were therefore immune from prosecution.

In its landmark ruling, the Supreme Court somewhat agreed with Trump but specified three types of presidential action.

First, the Court affirmed that the president has absolute immunity for official acts. Without such immunity, according to the Court, "the President would be chilled from taking the 'bold and unhesitating action'" required of the office. These responsibilities include serving as commander in chief, recognizing foreign governments, and signing or vetoing the bills Congress passes.

On the flip side, actions taken by presidents in their unofficial capacity are not immune from criminal or civil litigation. Unofficial actions include when a president files for reelection or sets up a campaign committee.

Yet sometimes the president acts in what the Court has called a "zone of twilight," where the president uses the outer perimeters of the presidential office. For example, even though the Constitution does not explicitly detail this responsibility, the president acts in his official capacity when he addresses the nation from the Oval Office to update the American people on important events. In these instances, the president has immunity unless a prosecutor can show that litigation will not upset the balance of power in the U.S. government.

Looking forward

In response to the Court's decision and prior to Trump's re-election as the 47th president, Jack Smith – the special counsel in charge of the 2020 federal election interference case – revised Trump's indictment to highlight conduct that fell outside of official conduct and would not upset the balance of governmental power.

Yet the election changed the legal landscape.

Specifically, the U.S. has a longstanding policy against prosecuting sitting presidents. The president oversees hundreds of agencies and millions of federal employees, who provide the president with nuanced information on policy and politics. Because the president's duties are "of unrivaled gravity and breadth," the person in office must make the most sensitive and far reaching decisions entrusted to any elected official in America.

As a result, three days after the election, Jack Smith filed a motion to suspend the case and the federal judge overseeing it granted that motion.

But questions remain about the extent to which immunity will cover future Trump actions.

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Election fraud myths require activation: Evidence from a natural experiment

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In an alternate reality, Vice President Kamala Harris is taking to TikTok and claiming that voter registration purges in key battle ground states—supported by Republican legislators and upheld by conservative court justices—resulted in election interference. Harris is claiming that her opponent's supporters threatening to monitor polling locations to "protect" the election had a chilling effect on Democratic voter turnout. She is claiming that leaving third party candidates on ballots after they suspended their campaign and endorsing her opponent was purposefully rigging the election against her. Harris' allies are floating the idea that by acquiring and changing Twitter, Elon Musk, a top donor and supporter of Donald Trump's campaign, was censoring liberal voices and changing the election's outcome. In addition, her allies in congress are claiming that the coordinated campaign against TikTok—a developing space for young voters to get news—was merely a prolonged scare tactic designed to limit the spread of liberal messaging.

To be clear, we are not living in an alternate reality. Vice President Kamala Harris conceded defeat to President-elect Donald Trump once the will of the American people was known. Harris did not even wait for all states to finish counting ballots. However, it is not as if she lost in a landslide. She will likely have received 226 electoral votes, only 7 fewer than when candidate Trump lost in 2020. The popular vote will be closer this year than in 2020, likely only a 2-3% point difference instead of the 4.5% difference that Trump lost. Even so, all signs indicate that she will preside over the election certification that will confirm her own loss.

From November 4th to 8th, 2024—in our reality—we are seeing the results a natural experiment testing the role of politicians in the propagation and seeking of disinformation. In the 2020 Election Analysis, I wrote four days after Election Day, "So far, the American public seems accepting of the results and political violence has been avoided. Whether or not a former president and his allies can still drive attention to misinformation remains to be seen."

In fact, the dominant story in the wake of the 2020 U.S. General Election was the perpetuation of myths of widespread election fraud and the subsequent instigation of a violent attempt to overturn the election results. These myths were seeded by lies told by President Trump and his allies in the weeks prior to the election, and immediately after Election Day. President Trump's attempt to remain in office were ultimately foiled by his own Vice President Mike Pence. Even so, Trump, his allies, and his 2024 campaign running mate J.D. Vance continued to lie and claim that the 2020 election was stolen for President Biden.

A substantial amount of scholarly work has been dedicated to the issues of misinformation, disinformation, political polarization, and the potential for violent extremism that these phenomenon fuel. Many causes and contributing factors have been identified in this literature including the role of the news media; aspects of large social media platforms; content moderation strategies and fact checking; the mechanics of biased information selection and processing; and the public's lack of political knowledge, media literacy, and critical thinking skills. Much of this discussion has reinforced the civic, democratic responsibilities of journalists, educators, online platform developers, and members of the public.

Comparing the aftermath of the 2020 election against the 2024 election reveals a strikingly simple conclusion. Using similar sets of terms tailored to the specifics of each election cycle, I collected Google Search trends data, normed across the relative search frequency in the different years, and matched the search frequency data along a timeline where the end of Election Day was set to 0 (the x-axis of Figure 1). By looking at the information seeking behaviors of the American public through their use of this data, we can see the effect of elite political communication and the importance of what candidates say to their supporters.

In both elections there was some searching about election fraud topics prior to Election Day. However, as ballots were tallied and the likely results took shape, realities diverged resulting in one instance—the 2020 election—where the public began searching for and consuming online information about conspiracies and terms connected to eroding trust in the electoral process. Meanwhile, Kamala Harris has chosen not to engage in fabricating and promoting electoral conspiracies. This has resulted in public information seeking behaviors uninterested in topics of electoral fraud.

This data suggests the events of January 6th, 2021 were not inevitable. It took Trump for the myth of voter fraud to be activated for the public. Had Trump lost in 2024, many indications suggest he was ready and willing to make the same unfounded arguments that he did in 2020. For 2024, this data suggests that Harris' supporters will not storm the capital, they will not spread lies motivating political violence, they will not seek out and reinforce the fabricated reality of widespread voter fraud. This is not because Harris' supports are better or different than Trump's supporters. Instead, a peaceful transfer of power will occur as long as Harris and her allies choose not to activate these myths.

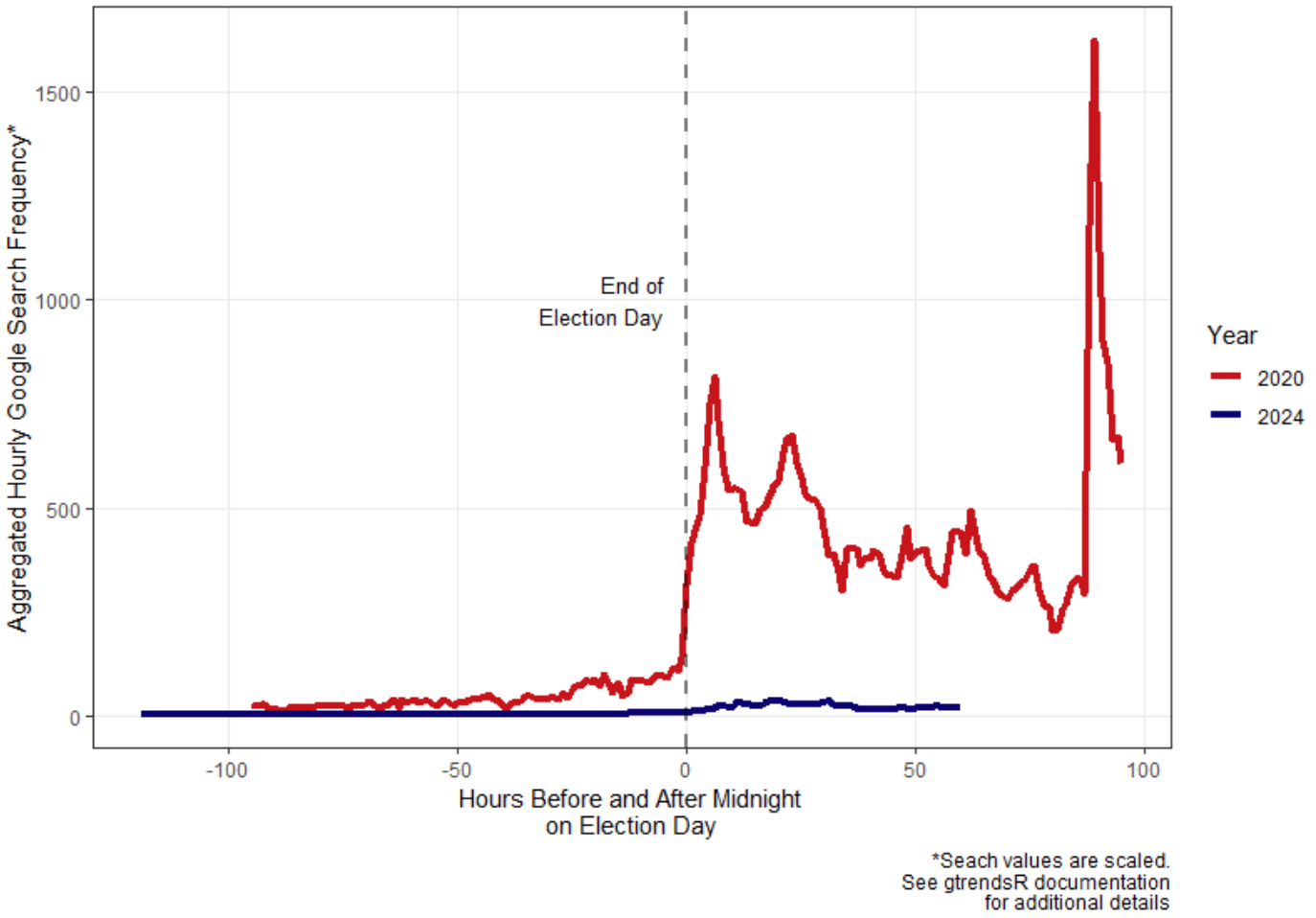

Figure 1: Comparison across presidential elections of google search frequency for election fraud topics

What ever happened to baby Q?

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During the 2020 election media cycle, QAnon, an online driven conspiracy theory rooted in the belief that President Donald Trump would usher in a day of reckoning, dominated the liberal news cycle. Alternatively, mainstream Republicans were forced to distance themselves from the QAnon elements of their party, particularly following January 6th and the Stop the Steal campaign. In response to the last election, I predicted that despite President Trump's election loss in 2020, QAnon would persist through the next wave of media savvy far-right political figures.

Q out of favor

Following January 6th 2021, the QAnon brand had expired in popularity and became something of an embarrassment and liability for the GOP. The mobilizing force that, while useful for galvanizing a previously untapped voter base, had spiraled out of control, and was thus publicly derided. It became politically prudent for the right to retire the Q brand. Consequently, QAnon has been markedly absent from this election cycle. The Q flags and #TheStorm tweets have all but vanished form the spotlight. The question for the GOP therefore became how to continue to harness the electoral potential of the populist right with President Trump as a figurehead while maintaining distance from the signs now associated in the public mind with the violence of January 6th.

Contradictions

The solution has been to embrace the ideologies, conspiracies, and actors of the Q movement into the very core of conservative identity. The 19th century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel's dialectic provides a way of thinking about historical processes through the lens of how contradictory phenomena push and pull each other to produce new levels of organization.

The 2024 election made clear that mainstream Republican Party and QAnon are not phenomena in isolation but are placed in relation to one another. While both support Trump as candidate, they also share notable differences in their iconography and performance of conservative identity. As such, tensions between the two, particularly after January 6th, lead to what Hegel calls "movement," or change. Through contradiction and movement, the two phenomena undergo *Aufhbung*, or sublation.

Sublation holds three meanings. Firstly, contradictions are negated, such as the retirement of the Q sign and its associated slogans and alternatively, the departure of the "reasonable" conservative, with neoconservative stalwart Dick Cheney moving to endorse Kamala Harris. Secondly, some aspects of the two phenomena are preserved. Here, the GOP is able to retain a neoconservative economic vision for America, with Trump passing the largest corporate tax cuts in history during his previous tenure and promising to provide further tax cuts as well as trade war with China. Alternatively, the Q right is provided free reign to inject conspiracy rhetoric into the normal discourse of the Republican Party. Fantastic lies dominated much of the election cycle, with both Trump and his vice presidential pick, J.D. Vance, repeating the conspiracy theory that Haitian migrants in Springfield, Ohio were abducting and eating dogs and cats. Mike Pence, who served as a foil to the online right in 2016, was replaced by the internet savvy Vance. Likewise, as Hurricane Milton approached Florida in October, Representative Marjorie Taylor Green, who rose to prominence on the back of Q populism, drew on antisemitic conspiracies to claim that the government was manipulating the weather in an attempt to slam the Biden administration's disaster response and climate agenda.

A new conspiratorial conservativism

The final meaning of sublation is that through negation and preservation, the phenomena arrive at a new level of more sophisticated, united organization with new characteristics. The party set to take power in 2025 is one that no longer views dealing with conspiracy theories as a distasteful byproduct of mobilizing low information voters, but as a signifier by which to articulate racist, patriarchal, transphobic, and white supremacist ideology to their base.

In 1981, conservative kingmaker Lee Atwater defined his rhetorical strategy; "You start out in 1954 by saying, "N—, n—, n—." By 1968 you can't say "n—" that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff, and you're getting so abstract…" During the 2024 election, the rhetorical abstractions of Atwater have (d)evolved to lies repeated by the conspiratorial right. The dogwhistle has become a regular whistle. Repetitions of Haitians eating dogs, trans people grooming and mutilating children, and the government controlling the weather send a clear policy platform to the public; *We don't want you to exist in OUR space.*

Vance stated that he had "to create stories so that the… media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people." It may not just be the senders who are nonbelievers. Conspiracy theories are not crafted to communicate a fact about the world, but a deeper truth to the audience – that the Republican Party is in ideological alignment with the most reactionary members of the right. For their audience, the truth of the conspiracy is inconsequential; it enough that their anger and grievances are understood and that the GOP is firmly on their side.

We're all playing Elon Musk's game now

This election cycle has finally put to bed a long-standing and frustrating myth: that Silicon Valley is both nerdy and liberal. While it's easy for the media and public to view the ubiquitous hoodies and casual demeanor of tech industry bros as a sign that these companies are less staid and conservative than their predecessors, the reality is that the White men who run Big Tech are not progressives. Really, how could they be? They're billionaires. And the culture of "geek masculinity" that permeates much of tech bristles at attempts to diversify these spaces, citing the inherent meritocracy of Silicon Valley. But it's funny that clinging to this problematic principle also works to create hidden structural barriers that prevent BIPOC, women, and other marginalized groups from success in tech fields. This, in turn reinforces an often unspoken narrative: that marginalized communities and women are just not suited for success in tech.

In 2017, the quiet part of this logic was spoken out loud by a Google engineer who published a deeply troubling memo about why Google had become an "ideological echo chamber." Grounded in bad, discredited "race science" and biological essentialist arguments, the screed also bristled at Google's DEI initiatives, suggesting that the real diversity issue in tech was that conservatives were not welcomed. This despite evidence that Silicon Valley from the beginning has been dominated by a deeply libertarian ethos – one that is only superficially liberal.

Following George Floyd's murder and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, Big Tech seemed to finally take diversity issues seriously. At the very least, new initiatives were launched across the industry (Google, for example, promised that by 2025 it would increase under-represented groups in top leadership positions by 30%). This mirrored the changes that many social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) had made to combat mis/disinformation in the wake of the 2016 election and the COVID pandemic. Trust and Safety teams in Silicon Valley grew to address these concerns.

Cut to 2023. These same programs were gutted. Not because they'd been particularly effective, but because the tech industry contracted and was hemorrhaging jobs. But as I argue in my new book, Silicon Valley (and other geek-friendly spaces like gaming) have increasingly taken a rightward turn.

Mark Zuckerberg (CEO of Meta) recently suggested that he'd gone too far in taking the blame for how social media might be damaging to democracy and young people's health (not to mention it being a key factor in genocide in Myanmar and elsewhere), and declared he was moving away from liberal fundraising. Just two weeks ago, former Amazon CEO and owner of the *Washington Post* Jeff Bezos quashed an effort by the paper to make an endorsement in the U.S. presidential race. And, Elon Musk has used his billions to fund a massive PAC for Trump, has appeared with the president-elect regularly (which from the photographs of these events seems to be mostly Musk jumping around on stage trying and failing to make his body into the shape of an X), and has flouted election laws by creating a lottery to give money to voters who sign a pledge supporting the First and Second Amendments (oh, and voting for his candidate).

It's Musk, in particular, who troubles me. His rise as Trump champion in recent years has probably shocked many who aren't as plugged in to the culture of tech. But for those of us who have been tracking Musk's career long before his disastrous tenure at Twitter/X, it's hardly surprising. He is deeply steeped in a particular corner of toxic geek masculinity, continuing to embrace the idea that sowing chaos at whatever company he's running is a good thing for anyone but him (spoiler alert: it's not) and that the rest of us should be forever impressed with his ability to fund multiple companies crafting our collective future, even if it's one that seems to be lacking any moral or ethical clarity. The early ethos of most internet companies ("Move fast and break things") may have been abandoned by others, but not Musk. Instead, he's fixated on proving that his vision of the future is "cool" regardless of whether or not it works for anyone else who is not a privileged billionaire. See, for example, how quickly he destroyed Twitter/X just because he wanted to make a playground for himself, and how terribly the launch of Tesla's Cybertruck has gone, just because he sacrificed critical functionality and safety features so it could fit with his retro-futuristic aesthetic.

The worst part: the bet worked. Trump won, and Musk (and the rest of tech) will reap the rewards. And they will celebrate by continuing to move fast and break things, including democracy. For Elon Musk (and Trump), the world is a videogame, and empathy is not an asset. The rest of us are just NPCs.

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Peak woke? The end of identity politics?

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Did the depth of Democratic defeat suggest the end of progressive identity politics? Or did Trump's victory confirm the ascendancy of a new conservative form? So soon after Election Day, it is difficult to be sure. But let me suggest some arguments that will be tested as both sides reflect on their performance.

Was identity politics a drag on Democratic performance?

A different way of asking this question might be: did the Harris campaign bet too much on the ascendancy of their cultural assumptions? There is some evidence that they did. Walter Russell Mead (2024) captured the poor terrain on which so many Democratic candidates stood or were unable to move away from:

"Spending political capital on affirming trans students by making tampons available in boys' bathrooms in public schools while the opioid epidemic kills more Americans every year than the Vietnam War killed in nearly a decade strikes many sensible people as a sign of derangement. Are they wrong?"

This caricature of progressive priorities may have made selling their economic record harder than the economic record itself. Democrats were unable to do with culture what they could not achieve on questions of economic competence. Several GOP ads featured Kamala Harris in supportive dialogue with left-wing LGBTQI+ people. This issue was ranked low on the list of voter priorities. If it did not cost Harris votes, it is not clear it won her many either.

While Harris herself did not campaign on her race and gender, she led a movement that has made these identities central to its ideology. That seems not to have paid off in electoral terms. The Democrats lost votes among people of color and women did not desert the Roe v Wade repealing Trump in the droves progressives expected.

Native Americans, one of the groups progressives have attempted to sacralize, moved back towards the GOP (by 10pts). Trump increased his support in Hispanic-majority counties by 13.3pts (compared to 2020). More Hispanic women voted for Biden in 2020 than for Harris this year. The coattails of her race and gender were short – if not actually non-existent.

As the *New York Times* (2024) acknowledged, "Donald J. Trump's swift victory was driven by red shifts across the country, with gains among seemingly every possible grouping of Americans." These included the identity groups Democrats have long assumed belonged to them. Turns out, they did not.

Did Trump win using conservative identity politics?

If Democratic identity politics failed, did a new Republican form succeed? This is a fascinating question which should seize the imagination of social scientists in the coming years. A good start has been made by Drolet and Williams (2022) and Abrahamsen et al (2024).

Perhaps left-wing efforts to prosper using identity politics have inevitably encouraged the right to do the same thing? Progressive attempts to restructure the family, to make masculinity suspect, to chide church and faith, to make abortion great again, have been met by a doubling down by conservatives who value what progressives wish to sweep away.

More intriguingly, Trump has initiated a New Right intellectual movement that owes much of its critique to critical theorists of the New Left. Abrahamsen et al (2024) show:

"how radical conservative thinkers have developed long-term counter-hegemonic strategies that challenge prevailing social and political orders both nationally and internationally. At the heart of this ideological project is a critique of liberal globalisation that seeks to mobilise transversal alliances against a common enemy: the 'New Class' of global managerial elites who are accused of undermining national sovereignty, traditional values, and cultures."

The success of this New Right was reflected in Trump's victory in the 2024 election. J.D. Vance represents, possibly, a turn toward a more technocratic conservatism, prepared and trained to march back through the institutions.

Was this election evidence of 'peak woke'?

Those hoping for a change in the cultural focus of progressive activists will find some reassurance in Harris' defeat. The cultural hegemony Democrats have enjoyed in government departments and especially on university campuses (where conservative academics essentially do not exist) has not translated into electoral gains.

If politics is about winning, we can predict how Democrats will (and should) turn from a vocabulary of race and gender back to one of class (and of working-class) interests. Trump has stolen a march on this. His party spoke to an alienated and disaffected blue-collar America with greater efficiency, even authenticity, than Kamala Harris was able to match. A Democratic party meant to be the champion of American workers needs to relearn how to speak to and for them.

If Election Day 2024 was 'peak woke', and progressives acknowledge this, their path back to national power is more certain – though that path could well be a long one.

Teaching the 2024 election

Since 2020, I have taught courses on presidential and midterm elections as they unfold in real time. In these classes I focus on politics, of course, but also on the relationship between stress, overwhelm, and communication. This approach draws from published research and many years teaching courses on public debate and controversy (training wheels for my election courses) that have highlighted the relationship between how we're feeling and what we're sharing, online and off. The pedagogical nutshell is, the more overwhelmed and stressed out people are, the more problematic their communication tends to be, either because they're triggered into sharing information that is itself problematic or because they're sharing too much information or sharing in ways that are stressful to others.

This tendency is a function of brain science. When people shift into a limbic "fight flee freeze" mode, their sympathetic nervous system essentially hijacks their prefrontal cortex, which is what manages critical faculties like the ability to take perspective, control impulses, distinguish real from imagined threats, and effectively attune to others (psychiatrist Dr Dan Siegel elaborates on the cognitive skills that go offline following limbic hijacking here). Given this relationship, talking about politics also requires talking about mental health and wellness, and further, talking about how mental health and wellness impacts the overall information environment, not just at the individual and interpersonal level but also societally.

And so, on the Monday before the election, I put mental health issues front and center in my 2024 Election undergraduate class here at the University of Oregon. That day's lecture explored strategies for navigating difficult political conversations, which included tips for noticing limbic reactivity in the body (a raised heartbeat, changes in breathing, sweating) and for adopting effective calm-down strategies (breathing exercises, body scans, placing one's hand over one's heart) so that students could activate their parasympathetic "rest and digest" nervous system–essentially the system that puts the breaks on limbic reactivity–to more effectively talk about contentious political issues, including what I assumed would be a very close and contested election result.

And then Donald Trump won the election, not by a razor-thin margin, not with a split between the popular vote and the electoral vote, but decisively. Hit-you-upside-the-head-ly. As that specter began to appear on Tuesday night, I started receiving texts from friends and family who had been prepared for anything and everything, except for this. I was struck by the tone of these reactions, and what I was feeling in my own body as well: anger, summarized by the texted lament, how could Donald Trump lose an election pre-January 6th and be winning an election post-January 6th? Waking up to President-elect Trump and to even more angry messages from friends, I knew that I would need to bring anger–that is to say, a discussion of anger–into my Wednesday election class.

I started with a defense of the emotion itself, one I initially forwarded in a book on digital ethics and have also written about regarding online discourse. While anger is often regarded as a "bad" emotion, one that is especially pathologized in women, Black people, and other minoritized groups, anger is actually very important and indeed very helpful. It signals that something is wrong and requires action. It compels people to protect and care for others and themselves. Conversely, refusing to express anger can cause various kinds of harm.

Anger becomes unwieldy when it emerges from limbic reactivity. When we have been hijacked by the flight-flee-freeze mode, we lose all the cognitive functions described above, most critically, the ability to assess threats accurately. This means that we are often wrong about the specific causes of our anger and end up lashing out at the wrong people or things. But even when we identify the correct causes, solutions born of limbic thinking are not likely to be very effective. Limbic thinking is fundamentally short-sighted. It often creates bigger messes, even if the anger itself is justified and directed at the right target. This is where discussions of anger loop back to discussions of parasympathetic "rest and digest" strategies. When we pay attention to what's happening in our bodies and can calm ourselves down in limbic moments, we are better positioned to harness our anger in ways that are useful–rather than have our anger harness us in ways that are contagious.

Given the strong limbic energies many of my students brought into class on Wednesday, it was good that we talked about anger. Given the equally strong energies animating post-election finger pointing and other anti-MAGA sentiment, it will be good to talk about anger more broadly as the world prepares for Trump's second term. Specifically: how can this anger be used to protect rights and freedoms while retaining the ability to maintain perspective, control impulses, distinguish real from imagined threats, and effectively attune to others (including Trump supporters)? Over the next four years, anger will either be a roadblock or an asset in the fight to maintain a pro-democracy coalition. Let's take a breath and make sure it is an asset.

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Policy and political context

The campaigns' pandemic memory hole

Imagine this: It's 2004 and President George W. Bush takes the stage at the Republican National Convention in New York City. Not once does he invoke the September 11th attacks.

Or, alternately, picture this: It's 2012 and President Barack Obama is accepting his re-nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte. He touches upon many topics, but never mentions the financial crisis that beget the Great Recession.

Unthinkable, no? And, yet, such was the equivalent omission from this year's presidential aspirants. The history-altering coronavirus pandemic – a rupture as consequential to American society and politics as those two preceding catastrophes – went almost entirely unremarked.

In August at the DNC, Vice President Kamala Harris delivered an efficient 35 minutes of wide-ranging oratory – biography, stakes, the usual platitudes – yet spared not a single word for Covid-19.

A month prior to that at the RNC, Donald Trump indulged the director's cut version of a speech – meandering through more than 90 minutes of digressive curlicues on Dana White's vacations, the Packers' playoff odds, and Hannibal Lecter's diet. The former-now-future president did glance, in passing, at what he again termed the "China virus": "We got hit with Covid. We did a great job."

But that was it – then, in his telling, back to the stock market heights that predated the virus. This was a variation on the sleight-of-hand he'd been trying out last winter, beseeching crowds: "Were you better off five years ago or are you better off today?"

Most elisions from the stump are understandably, if cynically, convenient; few are quite so elephant-sized. Four years ago, he was still in charge.

This pandemic memory hole runs deep, subliminally so: We might want to be done with the virus, but it is not done with us.

It reshaped how and where works takes place, decimating downtowns; it stunted a generation of students sequestered from their shuttered schools, impairing monumental learning loss; and, most irreparably, it snuffed out more than a million loved ones across the United States. Many of those goodbyes could not be offered in person.

Your life is almost surely different from before 2020, because of 2020. Such aftershocks were not left behind then, yet listening to these marquee speeches this summer, one could be forgiven for thinking they were.

And all this is to say nothing – literally – of the lingering psychic energy from our plague year: the cost of social distancing that frayed community, culture, and nerves alike. That, arguably, was the most consequential story untold – the most important experience un-empathized – by both Harris and Trump.

Leaders, self-evidently, set a policy agenda with their words – this is one of the more enduring truisms of political communication theory. Yet they also set an emotional agenda for the nation.

More than any other single figure, the U.S. president can narrate collective memory, definitively so – and it is from that well of collective memory that political capital accrues and is drawn. If you want to tell people what to do, you have to speak, first, from where they came.

Why, then, did neither candidate speak, in any meaningful way, to that collective memory of the pandemic – was there no political advantage to be leveraged?

For Harris, would a dirge interlude have sacrificed the joyful "brat summer" vibes she rolled up since replacing Joe Biden on the ticket? For Trump, would reminding the audience of his "warp speed" vaccine accomplishment have, again, risked a shower of boos from many who didn't want to take it – and certainly didn't want to be forced to?

All these explanations seem plausible. Neither party covered itself in glory with its pandemic management and few leaders – here or abroad (think Sweden, think China) – emerged politically unscathed. Only hindsight grants the wisdom of discerning let-it-rip underreaction from lock-it-down overreaction amidst a once-in-a-century public health crisis.

Yet as politicians from Winston Churchill to Rahm Emanuel are said to have said: Never let a crisis go to waste. Humanity is (hopefully) past the acute phase of Covid-19's wrath. The spiritual aftermath of that rupture, however, lingers.

As with any problem, not talking about that doesn't make it go away. The leader who finds the right words to speak to our memory will find a nation in need of them.

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America's kingdom of contempt

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In 2018, the American academic and writer Mark Lilla's book *The Once and Future Liberal* eloquently analyzed why Hillary Clinton had lost to Donald Trump in 2016. Lilla argued that for some time the influence of identity politics on the Democratic Party had driven it, as it had done with liberal opinion as a whole, further and further away from large sections of the American public. His was surely not the only such observation. Yet the scale of Harris' failure in 2024 suggests that it has been little heeded.

Writing in the *Sunday Times* on October 3rd, 2024 the British-American commentator Andrew Sullivan said that he would reluctantly vote Harris, though he is a conservative who would not normally be a Democratic voter. The reason was his hatred of Trump: "this absurd man…utterly reckless," he wrote. The main target of his angry article was, however, the Democratic Party, for its failure to build a clear winning majority. Sullivan listed three areas of policy in which the Biden administration lost voters. Other commentators, and Trump himself, have made much of the Democrats' record in these areas, which we can refer to as WWW – wall, woke, and war. Unsustainable rates of illegal immigration, authoritarian "progressivism," and U.S. military involvements lacking in clear purpose are all objected to by majorities of the American people, and seen as problems that the government has failed to address, let alone to fix. Against that backdrop, Trump's second victory should have been no surprise.

Moreover, this is not simply a matter of the wrong policies. Elections are never straightforward contests about real-world issues and the rational comparison of policies. Feelings and fantasies are also deeply involved, even more than usual in this case since it involves a political party widely seen as having been taken over by a cult. Yet the majority of those who voted for Trump are not cap-wearing members of MAGA. The politics of WWW generate for many the sense of not only having their concerns ignored while "identity"-related agendas are foisted on them, but also of being related to condescendingly and even with contempt.

That may partly be a fantasy; people with low unconscious self-esteem may project that outwards, so that it is others who are seen as denigrating them. But even if that is part of the picture, perceptions of insensitive elites pursuing their own interests and scorning opposition could be well-founded. Biden had already enhanced Trump's chances by choosing to run, and then to hang on for so long, but his "garbage" comment on October 30th was a disturbing moment. He responded to a comedian at a Trump rally describing the inhabitants of Puerto Rico as garbage, by seeming to say that the only garbage were Trump supporters. This may not only have lost consequential votes, but as an obvious echo of Hillary Clinton's "basket of deplorables" moment from 2016 it pointed to the destructive emotional dynamic of contempt that is a key part of the deepest fracture in American democracy. The White House had to suggest he had not spoken that way, but its re-interpretation of his remark was implausible. And perhaps Biden failed to censor himself and allowed that remark to slip out because contempt for Trumpism is out there, intense and common, amongst Democratic elites and their liberal constituencies.

Politicised contempt is not new nor unique to the U.S. It flows in both directions through the often nebulous but powerful sense of a socio-cultural status hierarchy, which is to be found helping to drive so-called "populism" in Europe. But something about American culture, perhaps the harshness of its competitive individualism (expressed in Trump's life), may be especially hospitable to contempt.

Of course, Trump himself is the king of contempt; it is his default attitude towards most others who are not, at any given time, in his shining circle of supporters. But that seems to be precisely his appeal for many of his followers, those who feel themselves to be the object of contempt in society at large: he invites them to join him in his contempt for others. He inverts their world; he elevates them from contemptible to contemptuous. His complementary claims of love for them, those who feel unloved, are compelling, as much if not more than failures of policy or delivery.

Ideally, Democrats would avoid reacting to this tragic bond between Trump and his public, and to the pain of their own defeat, with more contempt. A lot of emotional effort will be required to sustain hope for American democracy, as that will involve finding respect for others, even for those in red caps so excited by Trump's promises to them, as well as for those who, while less caught up in the exchange of contempt, may still prefer his professed respect for them to disparagement from the elites. It may be hoped that rational governance can and will proceed beneath Trump's bombast. Perhaps it will, in parts, though to focus on that is somehow to have completely lost sight of the moral and cognitive collapse that Trumpism entails. Yet, to be fixated on that collapse, and on the bizarre pathologies of the man himself, will continue to feed the spiral of contempt. To break out of that seems to need a clear acknowledgement of the Democrats' failures under Biden, and a radical reset of ethos and policy around WWW.

Americanism, not globalism 2.0: Donald Trump and America's role in the world

In his first presidential run, Donald Trump famously declared his foreign policy would be governed by "Americanism, not globalism." Trump fundamentally disagreed with the foreign policy consensus that had been built by Democratic and Republican presidents since the end of World War II. During his first presidency, Trump attempted to continue this theme. He was critical of international institutions such as the United Nations and NATO. He pulled the United States out of the Paris Climate Accords, Trans-Pacific Partnership, Iran nuclear agreement and other treaty obligations. He renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), favored bilateral trade deals, and increased tariffs on Chinese imports. Trump attempted to undermine the liberal order consensus created by his predecessors. Given that backdrop, how will Trump position America's role in the world for his second term? Based upon Trump's campaign discourse and his previous term in office, I think it is safe to say that Trump will further ramp his "America First" foreign policy, particularly in several areas.

First, Trump's campaign rhetoric continually emphasized his desire to increase tariffs on foreign imports. Trump's aversion to free trade has been a foreign policy staple he has held for over 35 years. In his second presidential term, expect Trump to increase tariffs on significant amounts of imports. According to Trump, increasing tariffs is a key component of leveling the playing field of global trade for Americans. Under his logic, increasing tariffs will create more revenue for the American government, force some industries to reshore to the United States and start businesses domestically, and further de-link the United States from a global trade system that he asserts has been hard on Americans and American industries. Trump has even channeled himself to be akin to former President William McKinley who was a fervent advocate for large tariffs to fund government expenditures. Trump's tariff increases are central to his foreign policy agenda.

Second, Trump will continue to be cautious toward American interventionism. The former president constantly points out that he was the only president since Jimmy Carter who didn't start any American wars or put large elements of the United States military in dangerous situations. He called Kamala Harris and her supporters (e.g. former Republican Representative Liz Cheney) "war hawks" who sink American resources into follies abroad (e.g. Ukraine). Moreover, Trump has railed against the amounts of military aid that Ukraine has received from the U.S.; offered no definitive commitment to defend NATO nations if they came under attack; given a green light to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to do "what he must" in Gaza and Lebanon; and has wavered on America's commitment to Taiwan, if they were attacked by China. In short, Trump views interventionism abroad as a losing game for the U.S. and he has no appetite for committing any major resources to any potential conflict areas unless it directly benefitted American interests.

Finally, a second Trump administration will continue his campaign to undermine the liberal international order. During his first term, Donald Trump criticized American foreign policy makers for giving too much power to international organizations like the United Nations, NATO, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). According to the president-elect, these organizations allowed unelected foreign bureaucrats to make decisions concerning U.S. policy, which undermined our sovereignty. For example, during each of his United Nations addresses, Trump consistently argued that the primary value in the international system was sovereignty. In my own research, I have argued that all previous presidents speaking at United Nations emphasized peace and freedom as the primary values of the global order. So what does Trump's UN rhetoric tell us? It suggests that Trump places no value on the liberal international order. That he believes that order actually harms American interests more than it helps them. Trump's actions during his presidency bear that out. As noted earlier, he withdrew from the Paris Climate Accords, the Iran Nuclear Agreement, the Trans Pacific Partnership, denigrated our NATO partners, and pledged to rip up and renegotiate all trade agreements. In word and deed, Trump curtailed U.S. multilateralism abroad. Expect his second administration to continue this admonishment of the global order with the ultimate goal of returning to a Westphalian global order that focuses on nation-states as the primary actors and international institutions and norms are minimal.

Ultimately, Trump's second term will continue his policy of Americanism and curtailing global involvement. Trump's foreign policy predilections may have grave consequences for the global order and U.S. foreign policy.

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The politics of uncertainty: Mediated campaign narratives about Russia's war on Ukraine

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Since the start of the 2024 U.S. election campaign, Ukrainians at home and abroad have been anxiously watching for any mention of the candidates' stances on supporting Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. The anxiety of the election cycle was also felt strongly in Ukrainian official circles as the war has become a partisan issue in U.S. domestic politics.

The two candidates' pre-election positions on continuing military support for Ukraine stood in rather stark contrast, but were firmly within the overarching narratives pushed by both camps. The Democratic nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris, promised to stand by Kyiv "every step of the way" until "Ukraine prevails in this war." In line with her prior critiques of Trump's political inefficacy and his inclination to court favor with authoritarians, she speculated that if her opponent was in White House, Russian President Putin would already be "sitting in the Ukrainian capital."

Republican nominee (and now President-Elect) Donald Trump recently blamed President Zelenskyy for the war starting, but has also played up his diplomatic savvy, saying he could end the war by making "a deal" between Putin and Zelenskyy "in one day." He also boasted in a September TV debate with Harris that he would "get it done before even becoming president," though did not detail how he would do that.

Trump and his vice presidential pick J.D. Vance have also manipulated U.S. voters' economic fears: throughout the campaign, they falsely insisted that European powers had "underfunded this war" while "American taxpayers have been very generous" with their financial support for Ukraine. This has been refuted by factcheckers, as much smaller European economies had collectively spent considerably more than the U.S. Speaking at a Pennsylvania rally, Trump insisted he wouldn't spend taxpayers' money on wars "in countries you have never heard of".

Earlier in September, Vance floated a potential plan to end the war by negotiating a "heavily fortified demilitarized zone" in Ukrainian territory currently occupied by Russian forces, in essence freezing the conflict. In a podcast interview, Vance also suggested the peace plan would see Ukraine maintain its independence in exchange for a guarantee that it would not join NATO.

Speaking with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his visit to Washington, DC in late September 2024, Harris slammed such proposals to "give up large parts of [Ukraine's] sovereign territory" as "dangerous and unacceptable," and stressed that these were not "proposals for peace" but rather "for surrender."

For Ukraine, the only certain outcome of Trump's now evident election victory is the promise of further uncertainty. The change in leadership for the largest backer of Ukrainian resistance is guaranteed, but it remains unclear what new challenges Kyiv might face as the Trump cabinet and foreign policy priorities take shape. It is no surprise, then, that Ukrainian official rhetoric in response to Trump's leading the polls has been cautious and pragmatic, yet calculated.

The President-Elect has repeatedly claimed to have a good relationship with Putin and has criticized Zelenskyy as "the greatest salesman in history." But Trump did end up meeting with Zelenskyy during his September visit to DC and has said that he'd told Putin the U.S. would bomb Moscow if he dared to attack Ukraine. Much of Ukraine's reaction seems to be taking account of the former businessman's tendencies for self-aggrandizement.

In his November 6th victory speech, Trump vowed to "stop the wars," but made no explicit mention of Ukraine. Despite this, Zelenskyy was one of the first world leaders to congratulate Trump in a post on X, writing that he valued the U.S. politician's "commitment to the 'peace through strength' approach in global affairs" and forecasting "an era of a strong United States of America under President Trump's decisive leadership." He later held a phone call with Trump and explicitly outlined Ukraine's expectations, saying he relied "on continued strong bipartisan support for Ukraine" in the U.S.

Though the prospect of an unpredictable Trump administration and his penchant for deal-making worries many in Ukraine, the mood in Kyiv is one of grim resolve rather than panic. Ukrainians are well used to pushing back against the reticence of their Western allies, as their continued campaign to pressure the Biden administration into letting Ukraine hit military targets deep inside Russia shows. They also knew contingency planning would be needed whatever the outcome of the U.S. election, due to tensions among EU states with regard to continued support, with Hungary's Viktor Orbán continually impeding approval of key funding mechanisms.

The other reason Zelenskyy and Ukrainian officials have refused to consider any sort of ceasefire freezing Russia's battlefield gains or any compromise that would violate Ukraine's territorial integrity is because they know too well how Putin operates – and want Trump to know this too. As one Ukrainian lawmaker told the *Kyiv Independent*, Trump might be quickly disappointed once he realizes Putin "is not interested in negotiations and agreements" and still believes he can win. Trump, the lawmaker said, "doesn't want to be a failure; he wants to be a success, and if he wants success, he has to get Ukraine to agree, and Ukraine will never agree to territory concessions."

The U.S. elections and the future of European security: Continuity or disruption?

The presidential election looked for several months like it could be an outlier. Typically, U.S. voters tend to be motivated by domestic matters, but it seemed that it could be different this time. In a September 2024 poll, foreign policy actually ranked quite high in voters' concerns. More Democrats and Republicans combined suggested international affairs were "very important" to their vote than, say, immigration and abortion. Yet, that poll proved to be a mirage. Exit polls confirmed voters were disproportionately driven by the economy and the state of democracy, with foreign policy far behind.

That said, even if not the forefront concern, the election will still likely prove very consequential for U.S. foreign policy, and especially for some specific issues and regions. Voters were not offered an obvious choice toward China, since both candidates promised to maintain a policy of competition. On Europe and the Atlantic Alliance, however, Donald Trump and Kamala Harris promised very sharp and clear distinctions. As Jim Goldgeier and Elizabeth Saunders pointed out, NATO was on the ballot in November.

President-elect Donald Trump has a long history of deriding NATO, dating back decades. During the 2016 campaign, he routinely called the Alliance 'obsolete,' complaining about burden sharing among allies. He even threatened to withhold Article V protection – the core collective security provision – for allies not meeting spending levels. During his first term in office, Trump stuck to the same tune, routinely insulting allies at high-level summits, and he allegedly came close to withdrawing from the Alliance altogether in 2018. While NATO made inroads in bolstering its Eastern flank in that period, Trump's time in office was primarily defined by internal turmoil and limited cohesion within the Alliance.

After leaving office in early 2021, Trump's attitude toward NATO hardly mellowed. On the campaign trail in 2024, he continued to attack allies, and caused a stir when adding that Russia could "do whatever the hell they want" to member states not spending enough on defense. Furthermore, he also hinted that he would not support Ukraine and that he could achieve peace between Kyiv and Moscow in 24 hours, without explaining how he might achieve that feat.

Unlike her political rival, Vice President Kamala Harris promised predictability and continuity as far as U.S. policy toward NATO and European security. She did not signal any intent to deviate from the approach taken by the Biden administration for the past four years.

Joe Biden, in his 2021 inaugural address, had committed to repair alliances, after the turbulent Trump years, and sought to avoid the public attacks against rivals. The transatlantic partnership was certainly not free from hiccups and disputes in recent years, such as over the AUKUS deal or the 2021 chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan; but Biden did invest heavily to keep NATO united in its response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Harris' rhetoric in the past year only reaffirmed this strong attachment to the Atlantic Alliance. During the 2024 Munich Security Conference, in February, she stated that "our sacred commitment to NATO remains ironclad" and that "NATO is the greatest military alliance the world has ever known." Harris also firmly emphasized her continued support for Ukraine, attending its peace summit in June 2024, and meeting President Zelensky multiple times.

In other words, voters would not have expected a great shift toward NATO during a Kamala Harris administration, which would continue to view the alliance as fundamental to U.S. foreign policy. There would have been broad continuity, with the possibility of small shifts on specific issues. For instance, a Harris presidency might have paved the way for Ukraine to join NATO or allowed authorities in Kyiv to strike at deep targets in Russia.

So, what should we expect from the 47th President? Donald Trump is notoriously difficult to predict and tends to blow hot and cold. We can safely assume that transatlantic relations will generally experience another very turbulent period. He has never been shy in his criticism of Europe, calling the European Union a "foe" in 2018, and more recently lambasting it as a "mini-China." And his plan to impose tariffs on European partners will ensure friction between allies on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Trump's victory brings us closer to the new world disorder

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Donald Trump's victory will have profound implications for sites of regional re-alignment (Ukraine, Middle East), for liberal democracies, and for the international system more broadly. His re-election creates a shockwave that will be felt around the world.

The initial shockwave

The shockwave will reach Brussels, Paris and Berlin. European countries will have to decide whether they shore up their defence and deterrence capabilities, and whether they do that within or outside NATO.

The shockwave will hit Kyiv, Chisinau and Tbilisi. Trump's comeback opens the way for Putin to continue his campaign of expansion across former USSR republics. Ukraine will be pressured to give up sovereign territory that it has sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lives to defend.

The shockwave will be felt across Beirut and Gaza, as Trump is a staunch ally of Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu. Trump has pledged to "end the war", but it is unclear what that means and how it can be achieved.

Finally, the shockwave will reach the Pacific and hit Beijing, Taipei and Seoul. The issue is not Trump's combative approach to China – there is bipartisan support for a strategy of containment – but his unpredictability, which may hasten Xi Jinping's plans to move against Taiwan.

What happens next?

A pessimistic but linear and plausible scenario sees the continuing unraveling of liberal democracy, global security and the norms-based order: Ukraine capitulates; NATO and EU deterrence fails; Putin feels emboldened and moves against Moldova or the Baltics, while his campaign of civil strife and fake news further erodes Europe, leading to electoral successes by the far right and the far left in France and Germany, and by puppet regimes in Central and Eastern Europe; Netanyahu feels emboldened and takes further action against Lebanon and Iran, further damaging the chances of a viable ceasefire and a two-state solution; Xi Jinping attacks Taiwan edging towards Graham T. Allison's Thucydides Trap. The United States either honors its pledge to defend it leading to a global conflict between two nuclear superpowers, or fails to do so, leading to the destruction of Taiwan, and further empowering China. Without the moral, symbolic, diplomatic and military support of the U.S., liberal democracies around the world cave under the pressure of globalization, digitization and rising populism. The axis of authoritarian powers – China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, Turkey – consolidate their alliance and expand their influence across the Global South. The international system moves to a new world (dis) order in which global cooperation on the climate crisis, artificial intelligence, nuclear weapons and pandemics fails.

There is a less linear, less plausible, more optimistic scenario: following the shock of Trump's withdrawal, Europe develops security "antibodies" and shores up its defense resources and posture; the EU moves towards flexible decision-making and draws red lines that weaken Putin's and Xi's supporters in Europe; Trump's détente with Putin leads to a strategic realignment realizing Henry Kissinger's dream of an alliance that will isolate China and fracture BRICS; with U.S. support, the Abraham Accords are revived, creating a stronger regional counterbalance to Iran; the Trump administration follows a credible strategy of containment and deterrence against China, protecting Taiwan and limiting China's erosion of Western institutions and businesses. All that leads to a fragile but balanced multipolar world order in which no single power has enough global influence to destabilize the system. New forums of diplomatic exchange and mechanisms of international cooperation and decision-making emerge.

The new world (dis)order

Both scenarios are neat, tidy, coherent. Reality is rarely so. Reality may combine elements from both, and many other scenarios that we cannot even imagine at this point.

Despite all the rhetoric and drama, Trump's first term was less apocalyptic than originally thought. While U.S. soft power and global influence sustained damage, in foreign policy terms the administration's track record was mixed: his criticism of NATO partners was valid; the (haphazard and failed) attempt at rapprochement with North Korea was useful; the Abraham Accords were a success (perhaps the reason for the October 7 attacks by Hamas).

There is no guarantee that the second Trump term will look like the first. Many senior advisors – from national security advisors and White House staff to Pentagon, State and CIA officials – who worked hard from the inside to counterbalance Trump's destructive urges, have now left and turned against him. His vice president, J.D. Vance, seems more ideologically driven, politically ruthless and energetic than Mike Pence ever was. Trump will be the oldest president. It is not unreasonable to imagine that he might leave the presidency before he completes his second term. A Vance Administration would look and sound different in tone, structure and efficacy, but the substance would not change. America is trying to become great again. But isolationism has never worked.

Abortion: Less important to voters than anticipated

In the context of "Wade vs. Roe" being overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2022, abortion was centered by political campaigns and the media in the 2024 election. Ultimately though, the issue of concern for the majority of voters was not abortion but the economy.

The presidential race took place against a background of abortion bans in 13 states. Ten of these states have a total ban with no rape or incest exception, and six states have no exception to save the life of the mother/parent. Stories in the news have highlighted cases such as, in 2022, a 10 year old victim of child abuse in Ohio who was forced to seek an abortion in Indiana. An Associated Press investigation found over 100 pregnant women denied medical treatment or treated negligently in the past two years.

The Democratic campaign banked on Roe versus Wade galvanizing a blue wave of voters, especially women. Video ads encouraged women to vote for Vice President Kamala Harris against their husbands' wishes, and many Democrats assumed that abortion would cinch these votes. While there were concerns about the loss of Black men voters or voters protesting the current administration's handling of Gaza, it was white women voters who proved problematic. In *NBC*'s 2024 election exit poll, only 45% of white women voted for Vice President Harris, and those numbers dropped to 35% of white women who had not graduated from university.

The Democratic campaign failed because, overall, abortion was a top priority for only 14% of voters, with the economy dominating at 32% (*CNN* 2024 exit poll). President Donald Trump unashamedly took credit for the repeal of Roe vs. Wade and employed strategic ambiguity to present a moderate stance, emphasizing that individual states should be able to decide legislation on abortion. Vice presidential candidate J.D. Vance, as a strong abortion opponent, reassured anti-abortion elements of the Republican base. Former President Trump focused less on abortion but on sending a message of strength to white men, 60% of whom voted for him (*NBC*), as well as to white women via supporters such as commentator and media personality Megyn Kelly who called for the "old" masculinity to return.

Intriguingly, Republicans voters feel more secure about abortion than in 2020, when a Pew Center poll found that of people concerned about abortion, the majority (46%) were Trump supporters. In the 2024 *CNN* exit poll, the majority of voters concerned about abortion were Vice President Harris supporters, suggesting that the repeal of Roe vs. Wade and consequent abortion bans have activated Democratic leaning voters.

Opinion polls consistently find that most Americans believe abortion should be legal, but there is some important nuance. In the 2024 *CNN* exit poll, 65% of people thought that abortion should be legal in either "all" or "most" cases. Those in favor of no limits on abortion were generally Vice President Harris' voters, while people who thought abortion should be legal "in most cases" were a fairly even split between former President Trump and Vice President Harris' voters. Those who thought abortion should be illegal (in "most" or "all" cases) were dominated by Trump voters, and it is easy to assume that he may want to cater to this base. With control of the Senate and a strong Republican showing in the House at the time of writing, Donald Trump has many tools at his disposal to support abortion bans around the country.

The American policy on abortion also has global implications. In 2021, President Joe Biden rescinded the "global gag rule," limiting funds to foreign groups and those in the U.S. who provide or inform about abortions. The "global gag" rule had been reintroduced during President Trump's first term. Will we now see it return? In 2021, President Biden withdrew from the "Geneva Consensus Declaration" (which asserts that there is no international right to an abortion), though he was urged to rejoin it in 2023. The Hyde Amendment remains in effect, meaning that taxpayer money cannot be used to fund abortions except where there is rape, incest, or danger to the mother, a policy that impacts low-income women in particular. It seems unlikely that President Trump will repeal it.

A strong Republican showing in the House and Senate and the re-election of President Trump may make it easier for anti-abortion laws to be passed, but on ballots across the country, voters also chose to support measures to enshrine the right to an abortion in state law. Ten states put forward these measures, and of these, seven passed. The three that failed were in Nebraska, South Dakota and, controversially, in Florida. Most of these states already have access to abortion, but the success is especially significant in Arizona, where the limit for an abortion is currently 15 weeks, and in Missouri, which has a total abortion ban with no exceptions. In Arizona, there is uncertainty about which laws will still stand after the constitutional measure, and Republican politicians in Missouri are mobilizing to find ways to evade the new provision.

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Roe your vote?

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Reproductive health issues hold a persistent place in modern American politics, but their presence was palpable in the 2024 elections. The 2024 election was the first presidential election after the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization (2022)* ruling overturned Roe v. Wade (1973). A year after the ruling, anti-abortion activists said, "the battle is really engaged" because Hobbs "fragmented the cause across 50 states." Democrats were banking on abortion being a big motivator for voters for 2024. Polling confirmed that voters were engaged, with 1 in 8 voters saying abortion was the most important issue in their vote. Given the stakes, presidential tickets' messaging on the issue was crucial.

When President Joe Biden was the nominee, some fellow Democrats said his messaging was too weak. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer said, "I think people want to know that this is a president that is fighting," urging Biden to use more "blunt language." The Biden ticket delegated such language to Vice President Kamala Harris: "For more aggressive talk about abortion and how the ripple effects of the decision are affecting maternal health, there's Harris." My analysis of Harris' tweets leading up to the 2022 midterms and the 2023 State of the Union address supported this claim. Reproductive issues were Harris' third-most tweeted about issue overall—coming in behind healthcare and economy—and she was especially focused on the issue before the midterms. When Harris tweeted about reproductive issues, it was often as an attack against Republicans, labeling them as "extremists," such as this tweet from October 2022: "Extremist Republicans are calling for an abortion ban nationwide. They believe the government—not women—should make decisions about their own bodies. We do not. We trust the women of America." Such rhetoric was coupled with other bold moves, such as Harris being the first president or VP to tour a Planned Parenthood health center as part of her Fight for Reproductive Freedoms Tour.

As VP, Harris' position was clear, and when she became the nominee, she did not falter. In her DNC speech, Harris laid the blame squarely on Donald Trump: "Trump handpicked members of the United States Supreme Court to take away reproductive freedom...And understand, he is not done. As a part of his agenda, he and his allies would limit access to birth control, ban medication abortion, and enact a nationwide abortion ban, with or without Congress." She then goes back to her framing as VP when she says, "Why exactly is it that they don't trust women? Well, we trust women," and concluded with, "when Congress passes a bill to restore reproductive freedom, as president of the United States, I will proudly sign it into law." Throughout, she frames the issue as a fundamental freedom, aligning with reproductive activists and organizations, and echoes her campaign theme of "vote for freedom." Harris reiterated much of this framing in the September presidential debate, advocating for "the freedom to make decisions about one's own body."

Trump's messaging on reproductive issues was decidedly less clear. Trump and VP nominee J.D. Vance did not mention abortion once in their RNC speeches. At the September debate, moderator Linsey Davis recounted Trump's oscillating stance on abortion. Trump claimed he "did something that nobody thought was possible" with the Hobbs ruling, bringing the focus back to him as the hero. He also stated he is not in favor of an abortion ban "because we've gotten what everybody wanted… [for] it to be brought back into the states." When asked if he would sign a ban because "Vance has said that you would veto if it did come to your desk," Trump responded that he "didn't discuss it with JD." Combined, these instances signal dismissiveness: For Trump, the issue is settled, so he does not need to discuss it at the RNC or even with Vance.

This dismissive tone took a different track weeks after the debate when Trump said at a rally: "You will no longer be abandoned, lonely or scared…You will be protected, and I will be your protector…You will no longer be thinking about abortion." Trump doubled down weeks later, saying he'd protect women, "whether the women like it or not." According to Josh Marshall, it was an "assertion of power…an expression of dominance," which stems from how U.S. culture, according to Julia Wood, "instructs men to gain and exercise power over others and, consequently, to feel proud when they do so."

Harris framed the issue as a fundamental, personal freedom. She wanted to protect individual freedoms. Trump took that personal agency away and located power within himself. He dismissed women's ability to even think about abortion because he would protect them, but not their rights or freedoms.

According to 2024 exit polls of key states, when asked which of five issues mattered most in their vote for president, 76% of those who said abortion voted for Harris and 24% for Trump. However, only 14% of voters said abortion mattered most. While its seems some Americans did "Roe their vote" toward Harris, it was not enough to elect her.

Gender panics, far-right radicalization, and the effectiveness of anti-trans political ads

Transgender people have become increasingly visible in American electoral politics as the Republican Party has made opposition to trans people and their rights a central plank of their social platform. In 2024, their anti-trans politics reached fever pitch. Between August 1st and Election Day, Republicans spent over $65 million dollars on television advertisements about transgender topics in over a dozen states. The Trump campaign alone spent more than $19 million on two anti-trans ads that aired almost 55,000 times in the month of October, mainly during football games in battleground states. This onslaught of anti-trans ads not only attacked Vice President Harris for her trans-inclusive policy positions, but also targeted Democratic candidates in at least eight different competitive races for the House of Representatives.

Democratic operatives and progressive pollsters argued these ads were ineffective and damaging to Republicans' image. For example, polling from progressive think tank Data For Progress found that a majority of voters across political affiliations considered anti-trans ads "sad and shameful" and 85% of Republicans reported believing that candidates should move away from anti-trans messaging. Others pointed to anecdotal evidence of Republican candidates whose campaigns relied heavily on anti-trans messaging in the 2022 midterm elections losing their races as proof anti-transness was a losing position. But this data only tells part of the story. It overlooks the ongoing radicalization of the Republican base through strategic anti-trans rhetoric that capitalizes on public uncertainty and cultural divides over shifting gender norms.

It's true most Americans claim to support pro-trans legislation. Pew Research Center data from 2022 show 64% of Americans favor anti-discrimination laws and policies for trans people and only 10% oppose. However, a closer inspection of the data reveals increasing radicalization of right-wing Americans on transgender topics. 66% of Republicans say society has gone too far in accepting transgender people, versus 15% of Democrats. A stunning 72% of Republicans support making it illegal for health care professionals to provide trans youth gender-affirming care; 69% support making it illegal for public schools to include references to gender identity in course materials; and 59% support investigating parents for child abuse if they allow their child to seek gender-affirming care. None of these positions enjoy even modest support from Democrats. This split extends to perceptions of the pace of societal change, with 70% Republicans feeling that views on transgender people are shifting too quickly (versus 21% of Democrats)—a feeling that is more pronounced among men and white Americans.

The radicalization around transgender issues stems from the rapid and, for some, disorienting changes in how transgender identity is viewed and understood in society. For many, the increasing acceptance of trans and nonbinary people has created uncertainty and confusion, leaving them feeling disoriented and struggling to make sense of what gender means during this period of rapid social change. As one research participant told Pew Research Center in their study of public attitudes toward trans people, "The issue is so new to me I can't keep up. I don't know what to think about all of this new information. I'm baffled by so many changes." This disorientation, which is disproportionately experienced by white conservatives, is then capitalized upon by far-right actors in media and politics. So-called "trad wife" influencers on platforms like TikTok have formed a movement around regressive and biologically-essentialized social roles for women and girls that intentionally retreats from advances in gender equality into a nostalgic fantasy of simpler times. The country's most popular podcast, hosted by serial disinformer Joe Rogan, routinely features guests like Jordan Peterson (who built his name off teaching young men to "improve" their lives through "re-masculinizing" them) that compare the increasing acceptance of trans people to "satanic ritual abuse." And, under the direction of owner Elon Musk, the social media platform previously known as Twitter has pushed far-right content, such as that of Matt Walsh, who has built a career off of stoking prejudice against trans women.

Anti-transgender political ads similarly capitalized on this disorientation over changing meanings of gender in society, inciting moral panic around trans women and girls in sports and the increasing acceptance nonbinary people. These ads were incredibly effective with the Republican base of suburban white people, according to both focus group research by Republican pollsters and Democratic testing. And given American football's status as a cultural bastion for white hegemonic masculinity and "traditional family" morality, the choice to air these ads during NFL and college football games was strategic. It is unsurprising, then, that the largest increases in vote share for Republicans were among non-college-educated white men and women, who were a major segment of the audience for those ads.

In the end, Republican anti-trans political ads weren't effective due to overwhelming public transphobia, but rather fueled voter response driven by panic over shifting gender norms amplified by far-right media. While few, if any, voted solely on trans issues, many responded to the widespread panic over changing gender norms that trans people are a salient example of. The ongoing radicalization, particularly of straight white men and women, into regressive gender roles seeks to maintain a cultural and political status quo that is certain and in which they currently hold power. The hateful rhetoric of Republican anti-trans ads offers a salve for their anxieties and a target for their outrage.

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U.S. politics and planetary crisis in 2024

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That planetary ecological and political conditions abound with contradictions may have been an understatement before the 2024 U.S. election, yet MAGA's sweeping electoral victory makes this an empirical fact of extreme lethality. I proceed with a conjunctural analysis of what this means for climate justice at the turn of the first quarter of the 21st Century.

2024 will be the hottest year recorded, set to eclipse last year's records. In August, new temperature records were set for 13 consecutive months, culminating in the hottest month and day on record. 2024 will likely be "at least 1.55C hotter than pre-industrial times," the first calendar year to breach the 1.5 degrees Celsius target set under a decade ago. This forecloses certain just climate futures, magnifying the urgency of climate mitigation and adaptation while further constraining our options for a livable future for billions of people. Following James Hansen, "under the present geopolitical approach to greenhouse gas emissions, global warming will exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius in the 2020s and 2 degrees Celsius before 2050."

Geopolitically, the planet is significantly more fractured and dangerous than in 2016. If 2024 marks the end of the 1.5 degrees world from the physical science standpoint, then future historians may write 2022 as its signal date, marked by two devastating indicators: Russia's invasion of Ukraine, marking this latest renewal of inter-imperialist rivalry; and the resurgence of emissions past pre-COVID levels, spurred by record coal consumption. Wars don't run on renewables (yet), although Israel has demonstrated lethal capabilities of artificial intelligence – with its colossal emissions footprint – with its devastating attacks on North Gaza.

Regardless how much discontent over foreign policy may have figured in the electoral results, from a historical standpoint it might be apt for Palestine to figure in the terminal crisis of the (neo-)liberal "rules-based order": if coal-fired British bombardments of Beirut and Akka marked the onset of the age of fossil empire, might this latest destruction portend its decline?

For the upcoming COP29 climate summit, despite record heights – like temperatures and the S&P 500 – of the stakes, expectations are low as ever. Azerbaijan marks the third consecutive autocracy presiding over negotiations, and like last year, leadership is using the opportunity to sell fossil fuels and jail dissidents. Unsurprising this "Finance COP" is awash in petrodollars, but it enables Azerbaijan to launder their reputation shortly after conducting an ethnic cleansing of their own.

That the dollar remains the world reserve currency ensures U.S. supremacy within the geo-political-economic order, for now. This unstable equilibrium persists largely because there is not yet a suitable alternative available, despite efforts to the contrary. And with the U.S. striving to maintain "as large a lead as possible" in developing technology to maintain asymmetry against their rivals, the continued flow of dollars for oil was assured even before this most recent triumph of "America First" and "Energy Dominance."

MAGA's capture of working-class support beyond the white Christian nationalist core may have less to do with their understanding or approval of Trump's proposals, than Harris and Biden's inability to alleviate economic concerns regarding cost of living and quality of life. Besides not promoting a U.S.-led green transition, one to revitalize rural America and guarantee livable working conditions, Democrats failed to sell their biggest economic and climate *win*: the Inflation Reduction Act. Hailed as the U.S.'s largest climate investment, neither Biden nor Harris could sell the "soft landing" to working class voters let alone make the case for fighting inflation by fighting climate change.

Americans will get neither if MAGA get their way, as tariffs will skyrocket prices while regulatory dismantling will expose workers and consumers to greater harms. Efforts to deport, even denaturalize, potentially tens of millions – including food producers, construction workers, and caregivers – will severely constrain basic goods and service provisions, compounding the human suffering and rights violations.

It is imperative to develop and implement strategy and tactics to respond immediately. Organizing communities and workplaces, while continuing to build and maintain nationwide and transnational networks, to inform and educate, provide mutual aid, and not just resist but create viable alternatives to the rising tide of fascism worldwide, is essential. There are also important steps the Biden Administration can take.

Beyond organizing across scale and at all sites of social reproduction, climate activists must be creative and resourceful, retaining what works, adapting to a new reality and pushing the limits of what is realizable. Internationally this may mean escalating demands for climate reparations, strengthening indigenous land rights, restricting fossil fuel lobbying and subsidies, supporting fossil fuel nonproliferation and geoengineering non-use, while picking up where the wave of climate strikes and emergency declarations left off before the pandemic.

Within movements against MAGA and fossil fascism, climate advocates must be strategic and selective as they confrontincreasingly hostile and violent opposition. Solidarity, mutual aid, and obstruction of mass deportation should provide one pathway, but there will be multiple. Movements must be assembled before widespread civil disobedience and direct action, up to and including a general strike, can take place, though recent history shows how quickly these can develop. Meanwhile, activists must become more capable of striking directly at the forces of fossil capital. The movement's vision, ambition, and determination must match the scope, scale, and urgency of the crisis to chart a sustainable and just alternative beyond Climate Leviathan or Behemoth. "Ecosocialism or barbarism, there is no other way."

Trump and Musk for all mankind

In his victory speech Donald Trump devoted a significant amount of time eulogizing Space X's successful landing and recapture of Starship's first stage booster, known as SuperHeavy, using a chopstick pincer movement. It was a "big step towards making life multiplanetary", Musk declared at the time. Trump meanwhile was preoccupied with the paintjob of the rocket: "It was beautiful, shiny white. When it came down, it didn't look so pretty.", he recalled in his speech, noting how Musk had explained to him that there was no paint that could withstand that type of heat.

Rocket vanity aside, Trump's victory is sure to accelerate another space race and aspirations of a human crewed mission to Mars.

Another space race might seem like a strange conclusion from an election where the very fabric of democracy was claimed by both candidates as being at stake. Space exploration was not one of Trump's 20 core promises to Make America Great Again, nor did it feature as any of the top issues important for voters in determining who to vote for. Musk's turn to the right meanwhile owes as much to his relentless pursuit of deregulation and efficiencies as it does to his daughter's gender transition which he attributed to "woke mind virus".

Musk first endorsed Trump in July, following the assassination attempt at a rally on a rural farm show ground in Butler, Pennsylvania – a scene which Trump would return to some three months later, when he was joined on stage by Musk. He eventually donated more than $119m to fund America PAC aimed at re-electing Trump, and also caused ruptures with his infamous $1m a day giveaway to incentivize registered voters in Pennsylvania and other swing states to sign a petition on supporting the First and Second Amendments of the U.S. Constitution.

Trump also joined Musk in a two-hour long livestream debate on X in August, with purportedly 2.1 million tuning in to watch and the post itself garnering 54.3 million views. At one point in their discussion, Musk mused that "People in America want to feel excited and inspired about the future … and that America's going to do things that are greater than we've done in the past". So far on message with MAGA. "They want the American Dream back.", Trump replied, to which Musk then suggested "I think there are some grand projects that we could do. I think we could build a base on the moon. We could send American astronauts to Mars."

Whilst the pair then drifted off to discuss high-speed rail and pharmaceutical drugs, the connective thread was their celebration of deregulation to accelerate development of new technologies. This is a familiar argument from Musk, who has often claimed that allowing rockets to explode during early development stages makes for more a rapid development cycle than ground testing. He has via SpaceX repeatedly challenged the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on issues ranging from environmental impact of launches to fines issued for violations of launch licenses. The FAA on its side is struggling to keep up with SpaceX's launch pace, attributing 80% of its space workers' overtime to SpaceX.

Pragmatically speaking, from a space exploration perspective, there are two launch windows during the next presidency: uncrewed test missions to Mars in late 2026, and crewed missions in 2028, with potential for the first humans setting foot on Mars in 2029 (which of course will be after the next presidential election, so unless Trump changes the constitution to allow a third term he won't be overseeing those historic footsteps on the red planet). The race to Mars is heavily influenced by optimum launch windows, which only occur approximately every 26 months due to the relative positions of Earth and Mars. Musk's fear, therefore, is that any regulatory issues with rocket launches or environmental concerns will ultimately cause delays that miss these launch windows, pushing back the ambition of placing humans on Mars by several years. The concern is not for the delay per se, but the potential success of other nations in getting there first.

The costs of space exploration are also astronomical. While costs for crewed missions to Mars are inherently complex and at best speculative, estimates typically range from a very conservative $230 billion for the first mission to potentially over $1.5 trillion for a series of missions.

Trump meanwhile covets the ultimate spectacle – not just of shiny white rockets – but of being first and claiming achievements no-one else can. He has form on championing space exploration too. During his first term in office, he signed the Space Policy Directive 1, which laid the policy and funding foundations "for a human return to the Moon, followed by missions to Mars and beyond".

For him, this is also about cold war power dynamics. And there is no bigger stage than space! The stakes are high, and for Trump too the risk of being beaten by another nation is unfathomable. Even in Trump's victory speech we see those same hallmarks – back to the Starship SuperHeavy rocket capture:

"And it was a beautiful thing to see, and I called Elon, I said, 'Elon, was that you?' He said, 'Yes, it was.' I said, 'Who else can do that? Can Russia do it?' 'No.' 'Can China do it?' 'No.' 'Can the United States do it? Other than you?' 'No, nobody can do that.' I said, 'That's why I love you, Elon, that.'"

Indeed.

Billionaires.

For all mankind.

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Guns and the 2024 election

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The presidential candidates found much to debate in the 2024 election cycle, but gun policy was not initially among the panoply of top tier issues dominating their agendas. Yet the reality of gun violence in America intruded.

On July 14th, 2024, a gunman carrying an AR-15 assault-style rifle clambered onto a nearby rooftop at an outdoor Trump rally in Butler, Pennsylvania where he fired multiple shots at the candidate, one of which grazed his ear (another shot killed a bystander). A law enforcement sniper shot and killed the man. Trump returned to the location later, having utilized the attempt against him as campaign fodder, and held another rally.

On September 4th a 14-year-old student brought an AR-15 rifle into his Georgia school where he shot and killed four people and wounded nine others. On September 15th a shooter armed with an SKS assault rifle positioned himself on the Trump golf course adjacent to Trump's Mar-a-Lago property in Florida. While preparing to fire on the course's namesake, who was playing a few holes away, a secret service agent spied the rifle muzzle in the undergrowth and fired at him, driving the assailant away. He was captured as he fled on the nearby interstate highway.

Two decades earlier, Donald Trump had endorsed restrictions on assault weapons, but since his 2016 presidential campaign Trump aligned himself with the National Rifle Association in opposing nearly all new gun measures, and they backed his campaigns enthusiastically. In the 2024 campaign the Republican nominee said nothing about assault weapons or gun violence, although he did vow to roll back what he called the Biden administration's "attack on the Second Amendment." In a departure from every Republican party platform dating back to the 1970s, the 2024 platform made no mention of the gun issue, except for the expression of support for Second Amendment rights. (This absence did not represent a retreat on the party's or Trump's support for gun rights, but rather reflected Trump's wish that the platform omit mention of controversial subjects like gun control and abortion.) Still, Trump made clear that he opposed all of Biden's gun safety initiatives, and would roll them back, and work to loosen concealed carry gun laws.

Departing briefly from his running mate's relative silence on gun violence, Trump's vice presidential pick, Ohio Republican Senator J.D. Vance, commented darkly on the Georgia school shooting by saying it was an unhappy "fact of life."

President Joe Biden's record on gun policy represented his continued commitment to stronger laws. In 2022, an unusual display of bipartisanship produced the first notable gun measure to pass Congress in nearly 30 years, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. The new law provided funding to encourage states to adopt so-called "red flag laws," strengthened background checks for gun buyers under 21, prohibited interstate gun trafficking and straw purchases (legal gun purchasers who buy guns for those could not do so legally), and funding for anti-violence programs. Ironically, the Senate passed the measure on the same day that the Supreme Court handed down its decision in NYSRPA v. Bruen, which struck down New York State's century-old pistol permit law and expanded Second Amendment gun carrying rights to citizens in public places.

When Biden bowed out of the race on July 21st, handing the nomination mantle to Vice President Kamala Harris, she readily embraced his commitment to stronger gun laws. When Biden created a new White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention in 2023, he appointed Harris to head it.

During the campaign Harris embraced a party platform that endorsed a variety of gun safety measures, including universal background checks for all gun purchases, reinstitution of a federal assault weapons ban, a mandatory safe gun storage law, a federal "red flag" law (allowing guns to be taken from those considered homicidal or suicidal), repeal of legal immunity for the gun industry, and increased funding for gun violence research and gun law enforcement. Harris is also a handgun owner. During the campaign she emphasized her support for stronger gun laws, but also touted her support for gun rights as an expression of "freedom." In a September interview, she commented, "I'm in favor of the Second Amendment, an assault weapons ban, universal background checks, red flag laws" but added that "If somebody breaks in my house, they're getting shot." Running mate and Democratic Minesota Governor Tim Walz buttressed the gun laws and gun ownership message as a lifelong hunter and gun owner.

Trump's decisive victory will mean that his second administration will follow through to dismantle Biden-era gun safety measures. For example, Trump will either abolish the White House Gun Violence office or appoint a gun rights person to head it and rebrand its mission to extol gun ownership. Biden's appointed head of the ATF, Steven M. Dettelbach, will be fired, and the agency's more aggressive effort to stem illicit gun sales and trafficking will be rolled back. And Congress will move to reduce the ATF budget, and advance a bill to make the least restrictive concealed gun carry state laws applicable to all of the states (called concealed gun carry reciprocity).

Echoes of Trump: Potential shifts in Congress's communication culture

The 2024 presidential election will shape more than just foreign or fiscal policy. It will also significantly impact Congress's approach to communication in the coming year. The return of Donald Trump as president sparks familiar discussions about what this will mean for how Congress operates, including how it communicates both internally and externally. Trump made an indelible mark on the presidency with his Twitter-first agendas and political rhetoric — shaping both how members interacted with their constituents and the broader strategies they employed with media. The digital landscape in Congress has changed over the last four years — including Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter — and congressional members are likely to recalibrate communication priorities based on the political shifts and pressing issues that the election has revealed.

The Trump effect: The Trump era brought a transformative impact to Congressional communication, intensifying a shift already underway in how lawmakers interact with constituents, journalists, and political adversaries. Congress's digital adaption continues to this day — albeit slowly — but Donald Trump's first term fueled this adaptation to an unprecedented level of urgency. Press teams, journalists, and lawmakers alike experienced drastic change in the immediacy of information and the deference to online news, navigating a new information environment driven by real-time updates and minute-by-minute news cycles. Digital platforms have long been in use, but Trump's unfiltered use of Twitter rewrote the playbook for congressional communication, accelerating the demand for instant responses, on-the-fly reputation management, and a strategic crisis communication approach.

Looking ahead to next year, one of the trends in congressional communication will be staff and lawmakers adapting to Trump's rapid-response communication. Lawmakers and staff were caught off guard during the first few months of the first Trump presidency — needing to react quickly and assertively to Trump's tweets given that many came at all hours. Congressional offices, particularly Democrats in the opposition, will be tasked with adapting digital practices that present an alternative voice to the administration's messaging. This new yet familiar digital pace will likely force some congressional offices to rethink their communication strategies — investing more in digital advertising, coordinating rapid-response, and connecting their political brand with a diverse set of audiences.

Increased use of digital platforms: The 2024 election reaffirmed the importance of digital outreach, especially among younger, tech-savvy voters. The recently dubbed "podcast election" highlights the ways digital caters to a fragmented media and diverse audience that has increasingly moved away from traditional news and even cable news. In response, Congress is likely to further embrace digital platforms as a tool for direct communication with preferred audiences. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and emerging networks continue to be invaluable for rapid response, personal branding, and controlling narratives without the filter of traditional media. Congressional offices may expand their digital teams to craft platform-specific content and employ tools that enhance digital engagement. Live videos, stories, and interactive posts allow members to foster a sense of immediacy, while longer-form posts on platforms like Substack or Medium can provide deeper insights into their policies. Senators, like Republican Ted Cruz, have already begun relying on podcasts as a necessary tool, and that trend may grow going forward. Additionally, with social media algorithms favoring visual content, many members will likely invest more in video production to connect on an emotional level with constituents.

Heightened focus on leadership: Republican likely control, at the time of writing, of both congressional chambers and the White House creates a powerful communication operation for the GOP, meaning that Democrats will have an even greater need for coordinated messaging, digital support, and strong leadership to navigate their vocal opposition. In the House of Representatives, this team of Democratic leadership will enter its first session without the support of the White House, meaning that leadership across the House and Senate will be tested in their ability to coordinate communication. Democratic leaders will need to respond quickly to both potential controversies and opportunities, not only to safeguard their own reputations but also to build out the strength of the caucus.

Leaders' communication teams may lean into pre-emptive messaging and quick-response tactics, as well as working closely with committee staff to coordinate messaging on policy priorities. For example, by preparing content that addresses anticipated criticisms or clarifies complex policy issues, leaders can be proactive in navigating potential challenges.

Unanswered questions ahead: The election and new Republican majority will set the tone for Congress's communication strategies in the coming year. With a clear mandate on key issues, a commitment to both digital and traditional channels, and an emphasis on targeted digital platforms, congressional communications will evolve to meet the demand. A number of questions, however, remain unanswered at this point, but will be vital to the information climate moving forward: What is the relationship between Congress and the press? Will the culture of "scooplets" on Twitter/X continue? Will offices bypass reporters and opt for paid digital communication options? Will digital advertising and micro-targeting be used to further target constituents with specific messaging, especially as legislators look to build and maintain new coalitions? Will younger audiences, in particular, see more targeted outreach? While some issues demand vocal leadership, others require tactful silence. What issues will fall off the agenda?

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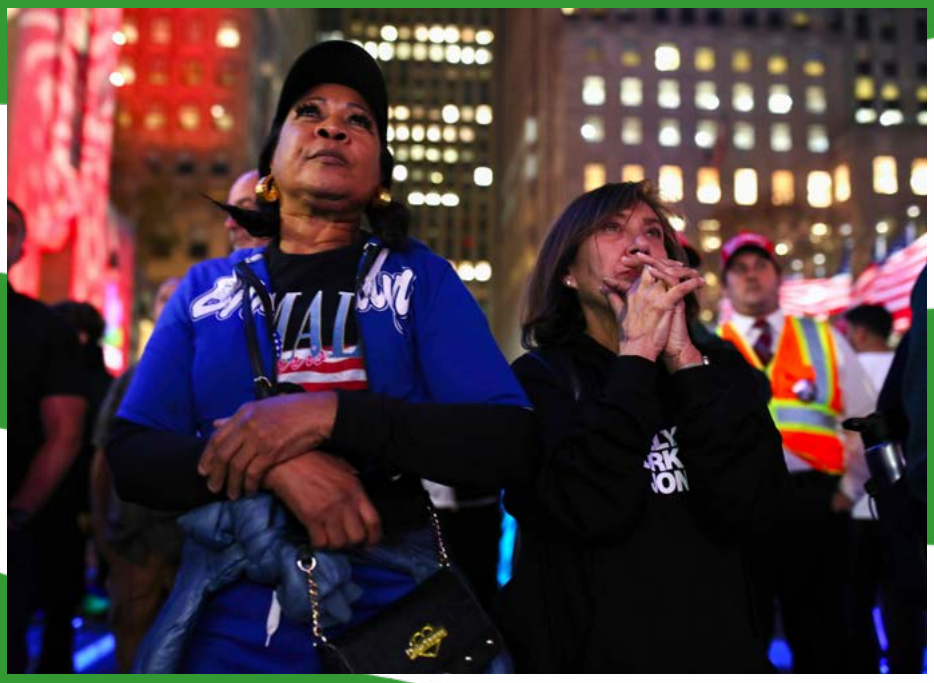

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Voters

Seeing past the herd: Polls and the 2024 election

In the three days following Joe Biden's disastrous debate performance with Donald Trump in late June 2024, *CNN* and SSRS had a survey in the field testing how well his Vice President Kamala Harris would fare were she to serve as Democratic Party standard-bearer in his place. While the poll found Trump continuing to lead Biden by six points, Harris performed better, coming tantalizingly close "within striking distance," the network wrote. She trailed in that survey 47 to 45 among registered voters—a nearly identical margin to the one she lost by some four and a half months later.

Unlike 2016 and 2020, the 2024 election will not be remembered as a year in which the polls failed. Some spectacular exceptions notwithstanding, including a late outlier result from respected Iowa pollster Ann Selzer whose 2020 statewide survey had foreshadowed the undercounting of Trump's support that year, returns largely reflected what the numbers had been showing all along: a close election with Democrats facing strong nationwide headwinds. Polling averages showed exceptionally close races in all seven battleground states, and the final tally reflected that, tilting a bit more in Trump's favor rather than less, but by normal predictable standards.

However dismayed Democrats may be about the outcome, however shocking it is that a majority of American voters could view his past actions as anything but disqualifying, one can't really blame the pollsters for failing to forecast the final result this time around.

That didn't stop analysts and academics from devoting an inordinate amount of time to second guessing and questioning the decision-making of pollsters in the run-up to the vote itself. And for good reason. The industry has been undergoing rapid changes over the last two decades. Survey research methods have been in a state of flux with many pollsters employing new weighting and modeling strategies. While some are defensible albeit debatable, such as relying heavily on respondent's recall of past vote choice, others are more questionable or simply unknowable. With the proliferation of new firms in recent cycles—many partisan, others opportunistic—employing methods lacking in transparency if disclosed at all, many observers couldn't help but wonder how many pollsters were putting a thumb on the scale in the way they tabulated their results to shape media narratives about their favored candidates or, self-servingly, in an effort to avoid embarrassment for getting it wrong on election day. As Nate Silver insisted on the eve of the election, "There's more herding in swing state polls than at a sheep farm in the Scottish Highlands."

But for all the fretting over implausible crosstabs, insidious nonresponse bias, and statistically improbable lack of variance in battleground predictions, what, yet again, did we gain from our collective obsession with the horse race?

Two decades have passed since the first polling aggregators began tracking the ups and downs of U.S. presidential elections in state level surveys in order to game out how the Electoral College would be decided. Such efforts have become increasingly complex and arcane, feeding a certain kind of hobbyist demand just as sports analytics has done for baseball and football fans. But to what end? Whereas polling aggregators once served as a useful corrective to political journalists' tendencies to cherry-pick unrepresentative point estimates in their coverage, that battle is long since won. The worry today is less about unsophisticated reporters making too much of a single result and more about their being unduly influenced by fly-by-night pollsters laundering suspect data through aggregator websites that employ virtually no gatekeeping standards. With an insatiable demand for ever more data to train increasingly anthropomorphic models, the aggregators are now an easier mark than the journalists.

But what we and so much of the rest of the world are left wondering the morning after is how to explain what it all means? What was this election about? Cutting through the thick haze of campaign messaging, it increasingly seems this election hinged not on concerns about freedom, authoritarianism, racism, xenophobia, or sexism—though all clearly mattered in some way to some—but instead on basic nickel-and-dime perceptions about the health of the economy, whose post-Covid improvements have not been universally felt nor recognized. Exit polls helped put those cold facts in sharp relief: 68% of voters felt the condition of the economy was "not so good" or "poor" and 7-in-10 of those voters opted to put Trump back in charge. What was true in June was still true in November.

For all the millions spent tracking the score in between, the marathon of rallies, the rambling speeches, the TikTok memes, celebrity endorsements, and even the failed assassination attempts, it is hard not to walk away from the 2024 election feeling anything but numb and nihilistic about democracy itself.

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On polls and social media

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Just before Election Day, U.S. Today posted on X (Twitter) about the results of a Selzer poll showing Kamala Harris leapfrogging Donald Trump to a 3-point "lead" in Iowa. If true, that would have been a remarkable change from 2020, when Trump won the state with 53% of the vote. That result fueled speculation that other pollsters showing tied results in the swing states were "herding," or weighting their results to match everybody else's, inspired fawning memes about pollster herself, and gave Harris supporters a last-minute confidence boost. But that post, and other posts about the same poll by the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and *Politico* among others, left out at least once important detail – that Selzer's results showing Harris ahead were inside the margin of error. As we know today, Trump went on to win Iowa and the presidency.

This speaks to one of the challenges of reporting polls on social media. In traditional news stories, the Associated Press recommends that journalists include enough information about polls for "readers and viewers to evaluate the results for themselves." In one example from The AP Stylebook, that amounts to five methodological details – the sponsor of the poll, population, sample size, selection procedure, and dates the poll was conducted. The AP also mentions several other details like margin of error that could be useful as well.

But there are no such guidelines for poll disclosure on social media. And, as a result, there's less of it. As a quick example, I analyzed over a hundred posts about presidential match-up polls from 15 major news outlets (print, digital, and television) on X during the month before Election Day. Only 10% included four or more methodological details. And, while mentions of a poll's sponsor, population, and some indication of when it was either conducted or released were relatively common, just 10% referenced margin of error.

Admittedly, there are good reasons for leaving some details out. For one thing, there's less space on social media. For example, on X, where a lot of political news breaks, accounts that use the site for free have a maximum post length of 240 characters. And even apps that allow more text or video tend to reward brevity. Journalists and news media also tend to use their social media accounts more as promotional tools, driving traffic to their websites. And, in that context, it makes sense to treat their posts about polls more like teasers than comprehensive stories with all the relevant methodological details. And making their social media posts appealing and accessible to consumers is an important consideration as well. Many people are more interested in the results of a poll than the methodological details and may not know how to assess some of those details, like weighting procedures, anyway.

On the other hand, there are compelling reasons for journalists to publish more context for polls on social media. For one thing, those details can make it easier for consumers to interpret the results for themselves. Even reputable news sources can misinterpret or misrepresent a poll. In fact, research has shown that journalists often frame stories about election polls in terms of change even when the polls themselves show no change outside the margin of error. We saw a version of that phenomenon this year on social media. For example, this *Fox News* post about Harris taking a "slim lead" over Trump in a *NYTimes/Siena* poll referred to results that were inside the margin of error. You had to read the article on *Fox News*'s website to find that out though. This kind of framing can drive media narratives about potential outcomes and even affect voter behavior.

As a compromise, I would encourage journalists and news media to apply AP standards for covering polls to their social media. And that can be done without sacrificing brevity and readability. For example, The *New York Times* attached an image including six details – the poll sponsor, population, sample size, phrasing of the question, dates conducted, and margin of error – in this post about a head-to-head matchup. Admittedly, applying AP standards wouldn't eliminate confusion about polls on social media altogether, but it would be a step toward more transparency.

I'm not dismissing the challenges that news media face in determining how to package their stories for social media. There are different and competing interests at stake, and legitimate reasons that some outlets would hesitate to share the minutia of polling data on their social media. But social media are news access points for millions of people now, and journalism should adjust to that reality.

How did gender matter in 2024?

Gender is a perennial feature of presidential politics. As Melody Rose and I argued in our study of Hillary Clinton's race for the White House in 2008, it just tends not to be noticed until a woman shows up on the presidential stage.

When Kamala Harris became the Democratic candidate in August of 2024, many were watching for how she would navigate the delicate and treacherous "double bind": The no-win situation created by contradictory expectations for women leaders who must somehow be "tough enough" for the job while still appearing "womanly enough." Many (myself included) also thought that Harris might struggle with how to frame her candidacy as an historical first—especially since she would have been the nation's first non-White female president. But Harris barely mentioned her gender (or her racial identity) on the campaign trail. (Nor did she talk much about the LGBTQ+ community and the ways transgender people were being explicitly targeted by the Trump campaign and its allies.) Ultimately, any double-bind difficulties Harris faced paled in comparison to other factors that hobbled her campaign.

The biggest of these was simply the context in which she became the Democratic nominee: Entering the race late, with just over three months to campaign, and hamstrung by her association with the deeply unpopular Biden presidency, Vice President Harris faced a serious uphill battle that could have stymied any candidate. The question hanging over it all the morning after the election was: Would a (White) male Democratic candidate have done better?

Research shows that being female is not an automatic political disadvantage. Rather, gender is one factor among many that can affect electoral outcomes, including the candidate's political party and the top-of-mind issues for voters. Moreover, as research by political scientist Angela Bos and her colleagues found, U.S. voters hold increasingly positive stereotypes about women in politics (and increasingly negative views of male politicians). Yet in 2024, the U.S. presidency still represented, as Hillary Clinton famously put it after her loss in 2016, the "highest, hardest glass ceiling."

So how did gender matter in 2024?

While Kamala Harris rarely talked about gender (or race) explicitly, Donald Trump worked overtime to attract male voters, and, especially in the waning weeks of his campaign, to trigger negative gender (and racial) stereotypes. He repeatedly referred to Vice President Harris as lazy, unintelligent, and unqualified. He eschewed mainstream media appearances in favor of niche media, especially podcasters with predominantly male audiences such as Joe Rogan and Logan Paul. And he went much further than any candidate in modern history to evoke toxic masculinity in voters by performing it himself, in increasingly flagrant ways—perhaps most notably by boasting that he would "protect" women "whether the women like it or not." Trump's surrogates made his gendered messaging explicit. As the clock ticked down toward Election Day, conservative activist Charlie Kirk posted on the social media platform X, "If you want a vision of the future if you don't vote, imagine Kamala's voice cackling, forever," Kirk added. "Men need to GO VOTE NOW." This messaging ricocheted through an online environment marked by "faster, uglier" online attacks on Harris. Ultimately, young men aged 18-29 voted for Trump by an 11-point margin—a bigger gender gap than among the general electorate overall—and Trump made gains with Black and Latino men as well. The liberal-leaning news outlet Vox declared the day after the election, "When the final votes are counted…we might have a new way of referring to the 2024 election: The Year of the Man."

At the same time, 53% of the 2024 electorate was female, and reproductive rights were top of mind for young women. Harris relentlessly reminded voters of former President Trump's role in the Supreme Court's 2022 decision in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization that overturned Roe v Wade, and of Republican intentions to roll back reproductive rights further. The gender gap among younger voters was striking, with 58% of women aged 18-29 voting for Harris. But while women overall voted predominantly for Harris, white women once again buttressed the presidential glass ceiling. As they did in 2016 and 2020—and, in fact, in nearly all presidential elections since 1952—a majority of white women voted for the (male) Republican candidate.

So, gender clearly mattered in 2024: In Trump's messaging and the misogynistic attitudes it likely evoked among a certain swath of voters, and, on the other side, in high support for Harris among younger women concerned about reproductive rights and among the LGBTQ community. Ultimately, it was almost impossible to review the results—in which Kamala Harris consistently underperformed with almost every group and in nearly every geographic area compared with Joe Biden's 2020 campaign—without seeing the imprint of race and sex on the results. Yet while it is tempting to treat the results of the 2024 presidential election as a referendum on Americans' readiness for a female president, we should be careful to remember the highly unusual circumstances in which Harris' campaign was fought. Whether any Democrat associated with the Biden presidency could have won in 2024 isn't clear. What is clear is that gender, as always, was a significant feature of the presidential stage.

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The keys to the White House: Why Allan Lichtman is wrong this time

Tom Fisher

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Although I am primarily concerned with predicting British general elections, having published my *Keys to Downing Street,* earlier this year, the methodology I used was adapted from that of American historian Allan Lichtman. Professor Lichtman gave me his kind permission to adapt the system which has predicted every U.S. presidential election ahead of time since 1984 using *the keys*. This system views general elections as a kind of referendum on the success and competence of the sitting government, with the quality of the opposition only of small importance.

The method involves the calling of thirteen keys. Each key is a true or false statement, to be answered from the viewpoint of the sitting government. If six or more keys are false, the incumbent lose the popular vote, and if five or fewer are false, they win it.

I am writing this on October 10th, so by the time you read this, the results will be in. So, here is my prediction for November's presidential elections. Allan Lichtman himself has publicly predicted a Harris win, yet I am not alone in thinking that this time, he may be wrong. Let's take a look at the keys, and see what they foretell. The first key is clearly false, as the Democrats lost the house in 2022. The next key is true, because when Biden dropped out, Kamala Harris was not seriously opposed. The third key is false, since Kamala Harris is only Vice President, not the sitting President. The fourth key is true, since before Robert Kennedy Junior dropped out of the race and endorsed Donald Trump, he was only polling at around five percent.

Key five is the bone of contention. Certainly, by any objective measure of GDP, the U.S. economy is not in recession now. However, in his book, Professor Lichtman argued that the ultimate arbiter of the keys is public perception, and not raw data. Two polls since May have shown that 56-59% of Americans believe the economy to be in recession. They also apparently believe that inflation is rising and unemployment is at a fifty-year high despite the exact opposite being the case. Therefore, we have the situation of a false consciousness of recession – dubbed in the media as a 'vibecession.' Therefore, I disagree with Allan Lichtman, and declare the key false. Key six is objectively true, because the COVID lockdowns during Trump's term severely reduced economic growth.

Key seven is also true, since the Biden administration has implemented the Inflation Reduction Act and Infrastructure Bill, which are both innovations promoting green technology and a clear change of policy from the Trump administration. One can also point to the change of policy on immigration and border controls.

Key eight, is true, since although there were protests against American policy on the Israel-Gaza war in the spring, these have largely petered out.

Key nine is true. Although there have been investigations into the President's son, Hunter Biden, no link has been established to the President himself. Although Biden was accused of unlawfully removing documents when he was VP, there will be no trial, and therefore these issues fall short of toppling this key.

Key ten is undoubtedly false. The disastrous scuttle from Afghanistan three years ago, the failure of the Americans to restrain Israel in the Middle East, and the failure to secure the southern border, are all major failures. Key eleven is also a failure, barring a breakthrough in the Middle East or Ukraine in the next thirty days. Although American aid to Ukraine has not been a failure, the bloody stalemate in the Ukraine is far from being a success.

The twelfth key is definitely false, as Kamala Harris falls well below the threshold of a once-in-a-generation inspirational figure, such as JFK or Obama. The thirteenth and final key is true, since although Donald Trump is undoubtedly a charismatic figure to his base, his charisma does not extend much beyond it.

Therefore, we have six false keys, predicting a Trump victory in the popular vote and electoral college. Even if we were to accept that Short Term Economy key five is technically true, it would still be a very precarious predicament for Kamala Harris. With five false keys, a narrow win in the popular vote would be assured, but a win in the electoral college would be contingent on Harris fighting a highly competent campaign. With two weak keys – Short-Term Economy and Third Party (RFK drew more support than normal for a third party, signalling a degree of popular discontent) she would need to fight a stellar, if not exceptional campaign. She has not done so.

	Name of Key	Conditions of being true	True or False
Key 1	Incumbent-Party Mandate	Democrat gains in the House of Representatives, between 2018 and 2022.	False
Key 2	Nomination Contest	Democrat candidate is not seriously contested	True
Key 3	Incumbency	Incumbent party candidate is sitting President	False
Key 4	Third Party	No Third party likely to poll 5% or more	True
Key 5	Short-Term Economy	Not viewed by the public as being in recession	False
Key 6	Long-Term Economy	Mean GDP over current term at least equal to previous two terms	True
Key 7	Policy Change	Administration has effected major policy change	True
Key 8	Social Unrest	No widespread major unrest during campaign	True
Key 9	Scandal	Administration not tainted by major scandal	True
Key 10	Foreign/Military Failure	No major foreign policy or military failure.	False
Key 11	Foreign/Military Success	Major foreign policy /military success.	False
Key 12	Incumbent Charisma	Is charismatic or a national hero.	False
Key 13	Challenger Charisma	Is not charismatic or a national hero.	True

Figure 1: Data table

Beyond the rural vote: Economic anxiety and the 2024 presidential election

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Rural voters were considered pivotal to Trump's first presidential victory in 2016 - when he won the electoral college but not the popular vote. Yet, the influence of rural counties on the electoral college is often overstated and oversimplified (for example, one of the most rural states in the nation, Vermont, is a democratic stronghold). In 2020, Trump lost the electoral vote despite increasing the share of rural voters voting Republican. In 2024, Trump continued to increase the share of rural voters supporting Republicans, consistent with previous trends, but less rural (more populous) states saw an even larger increase in the share of support for Trump (Figure 1). Ultimately, smaller shifts in the urban and suburban areas of key swing states (Pennsylvania, Michigan, Georgia, and Wisconsin) secured both the electoral and popular vote for Trump.

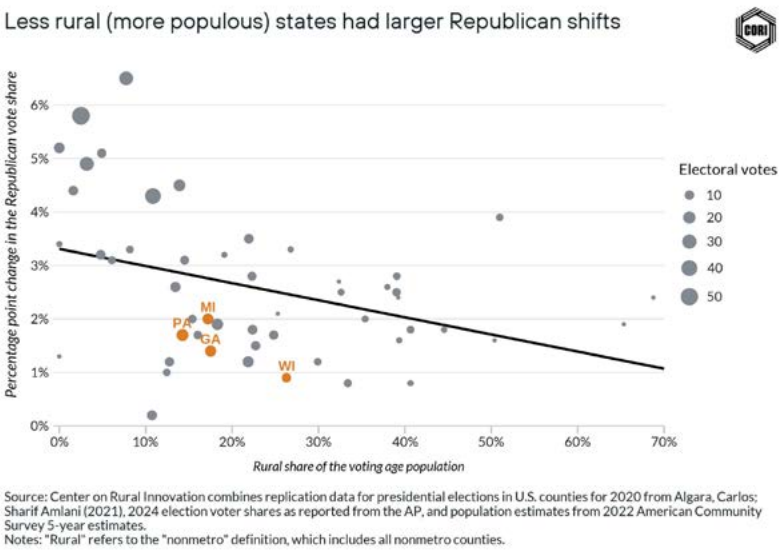
Historically, the divide between rural and urban voting preferences was not stark. Trends in the share of Republican votes in rural and nonrural counties were nearly identical between 1970 and 1992. However, starting in the 1990s and accelerating into the early 2000s, rural voters began shifting their support to the Republican Party. From 2000 to 2020, the gap has widened with Republicans gaining a larger share of the rural vote over time (Figure 2).

In *The Rural Voter,* authors Nicholas Jacobs and Daniel Shea (using the largest national survey of rural voters to date) present a more complex portrayal of rural America. Their analysis underscores how a strong sense of place intersects with economic anxiety to influence political perspectives and voting behavior. This economic anxiety is backed by data. The widening of the rural-nonrural gap in job growth preceded the rural-nonrural voting gap by about a decade with rural areas experiencing stagnant job growth since 2000. What happened? While larger economic trends including automation and globalization have led to higher total employment and GDP for the nation, they have disproportionately negatively affected rural areas (Figure 3) that are now more likely to be reliant on manufacturing than agriculture (with manufacturing at about 11% of rural employment compared to 6% for agriculture). Home to many swing states (and former swing states), the Midwest has also been hit hard by declines in manufacturing employment. Recent gains in manufacturing employment have largely benefitted the Sun Belt and Mountain West (not the Midwest). Yet, far less attention has been paid to how the shift toward the service economy and the rise of the knowledge economy has disproportionately benefited large incumbent metropolitan areas (see for example the work of Eckert et al. and the Center on Rural Innovation on these issues).

There is no lack of economists and political pundits who seem puzzled by the disconnect between indicators that suggest a strong national economy—such as low unemployment, high GDP, and real wage growth - and historically low levels of economic confidence. Despite positive signs, like lower inflation rates, people have not seen concomitant decreases in the prices they pay for consumer goods and services, a major concern for many. It is difficult, if not impossible, for Americans to recognize our economy's upward trend when they struggle to afford necessities like food, shelter, and health care. Many concerns for rural residents (such as access to affordable health care) are downstream effects of not having access to economic opportunity - high-paying jobs in growing sectors. Geographic inequality in income has increased by more than 40% since 1980 with richer areas getting richer and poorer places falling further behind. As inequality has grown in the U.S., national economic metrics have become less reflective of conditions for a growing portion of the population.

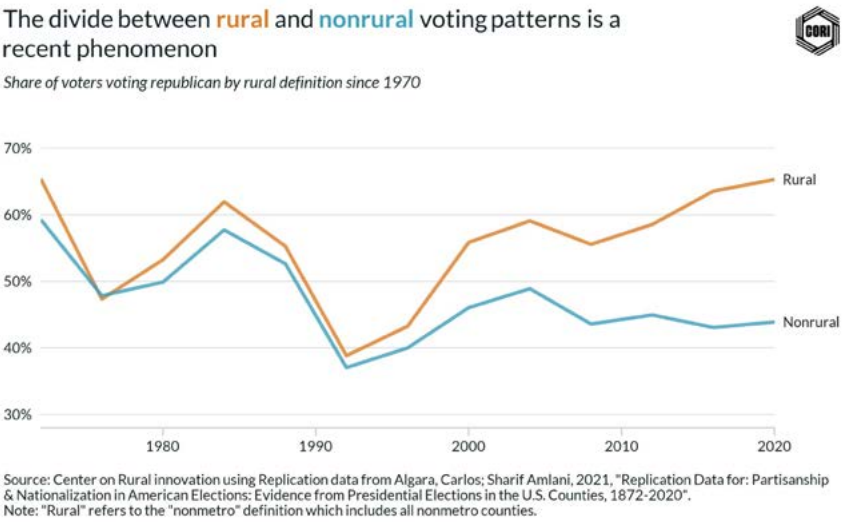
We have yet to meaningfully address the growing geographic inequality - or inequality in general - in this country. This lack of action doubtless contributes to the growing economic anxiety felt by many Americans - rural, suburban, and urban. Indeed, exit polls show that 80% of voters who identified the economy as the most important issue voted Republican. Economic anxiety may have influenced voters who usually vote Democrat to consider other choices.

Prices tend to be "sticky," so consumers need time to adjust. But ignoring Americans' economic anxiety risks deeper discontent unless we address local economic conditions and the root causes of disparities. We need a community-centered approach that fosters resilient local economies by tailoring solutions to each community's unique assets and needs and ensuring access to essential resources—from broadband and education to venture capital. Venture capital is a critical resource to help new and innovative companies scale and grow, yet it still predominantly goes to just five large metropolitan areas on the coasts. Like rural electrification, these investments are overdue in many rural areas. A long-term, locally-focused strategy is crucial to reducing inequalities and rebuilding trust, but whether the new Trump administration will rise to this challenge remains to be seen.



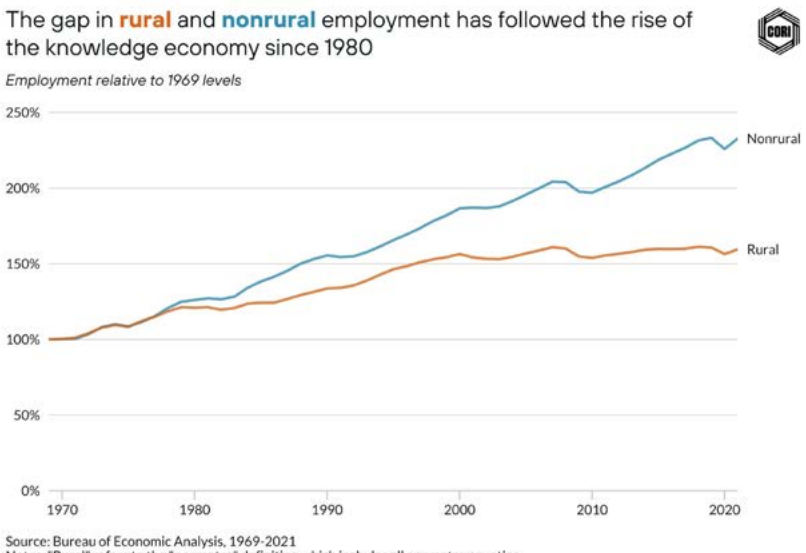
Source: Center on Rural Innovation combines replication data for presidential elections in U.S. counties for 2020 from Algara, Carlos; Sharif Amlani (2021), 2024 election voter shares as reported from the AP, and population estimates from 2022 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.
Notes: "Rural" refers to the "nonmetro" definition, which includes all nonmetro counties.

Figure 1



Source: Center on Rural innovation using Replication data from Algara, Carlos; Sharif Amlani, 2021, "Replication Data for: Partisanship & Nationalization in American Elections: Evidence from Presidential Elections in the U.S. Counties, 1872-2020".
Note: "Rural" refers to the "nonmetro" definition which includes all nonmetro counties.

Figure 2



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, 1969-2021
Notes: "Rural" refers to the "nonmetro" definition which includes all nonmetro counties

Figure 3

Black and independent voters: Which way forward?

Prof Omar Ali

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A plurality of American voters identify themselves as politically independent—neither strictly Democrat nor Republican. They do so despite having to practically vote for one or the other major U.S. political party if they want their candidate to win office, given the restrictions faced by third-party and independent candidates—from getting their names on the ballot to participating in public debates. In some states, such as North Carolina, the largest group of voters not only state that they are independent but are registered as such (technically, as 'unaffiliated' in North Carolina).

The pattern towards greater political independence is consistent and national: in Gallup polling from 1988 to 2023, the share of Americans who self-identified as politically independent (neither Democrat nor Republican) rose to 43%. Meanwhile, the share who said they were Democrats fell to an all-time low of 27%, the same percentage as those who identified themselves as Republican.

Also, for the first time since Edison Research began exit polling in 2004, independents' share of overall turnout has exceeded that of one of the two major U.S. political parties: the independent share was 34%, compared with 34% for Republicans and 32% for Democrats.

So how did independents vote in 2024?

Upwards of 50% of independents said they voted for Democratic candidate Kamala Harris and 45% for Republican candidate Donald Trump, amounting to a 4-percentage point increase for the Republican from 2020. But while more independent voters supported Harris over Trump, more 'traditional' Democratic voters turned away from their party by either not showing up to vote, voting for third party candidates, or voting Republican.

In total, *ten million fewer voters* supported Harris than Joe Biden in 2020. Trump won. Game over, at least this *second* time around.

Since 2016, Trump has served as a blunt tool for U.S. voters who have tired of, or actively oppose, the Democratic Party. To some, what appears to be emerging is a class division that increasingly favours Republicans, as seen in the disaffection from the Democratic Party among segments of its longstanding base giving their support to Trump in 2024.

Independent U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders stated on November 6th "It should come as no great surprise that a Democratic Party which has abandoned working class people would find that the working class has abandoned them" (see *Politico*). That same day, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks opined that there was "a loss of faith, a loss of trust, a sense of betrayal" among the working class regarding the Democratic Party. The next day, Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren added to the mix in her *Time100 Voices* commentary: "On paper, the U.S. economy is the strongest in the world. But working families are struggling with big expenses like the cost of housing, health care, and childcare. Giant corporations get tax breaks and favorable rules while workers are gouged by higher prices."

Exit polling supports these assertions: Biden carried 55% of voters who earned less than $50,000; Harris carried 48% of those working-class voters. According to Edison Research, Harris won 85% of Black voters nationwide; Trump won 13%, up 1 percentage point from a 2020 exit poll. Even more dramatic is Trump winning 46% of Latinx/Hispanic voters nationwide, up 14 percentage points from a 2020 exit poll.

But long before Trump took over the Republican Party and long before Barack Obama became the first Black person to become U.S. President, Dr Lenora Fulani, a champion of independent voters, became the first woman and first African American to get on the ballot in all fifty states running for U.S. President. That was 1988. And when she was later asked what was more difficult in running for president, being Black or being a woman, she responded "neither, it was being independent."

Perhaps what we are seeing is the dissolution of the Democratic Party. Probably not. It's the longest lasting of political parties in the nation—a two-hundred-year history. But maybe, just maybe, there's an opening to create something new among the disaffected, disrespected, and disconcerted.

So, now, what? Really? Which way forward?

Fulani might say "keep building." But here, like so many others writing or talking about the election and what happens next, I speculate. Ultimately, it's up to the American people to decide.

Latino voters in the 2024 election

As they started to do in 2020, Latino voters continued to move toward Donald Trump in the 2024 election. Exit polls suggest that around 42% of Latinos supported Trump. First observed four years ago when counties in South Texas and Florida moved toward Trump, there was a larger nationwide shift towards Trump in the 2024 election across several heavily Latino areas. This troubles the conventional wisdom that an emerging multiracial electorate would benefit Democrats in U.S. elections.

Per the *New York Times*, counties where the Latino population is over 25% shifted +.9 points towards Trump in 2020. In 2024? The movement was +9.5. This was the largest movement among any county category analyzed by the *New York Times*. For example, Orange County, FL, which has the second-highest population of Puerto Ricans outside the territory moved 9.5 points toward Trump. This followed remarks by a comedian at a Trump rally that compared the island of Puerto Rico to garbage which seemed to have no effect. In the four South Texas counties on the U.S./Mexico border, each moved toward Trump, and three flipped to Trump. All of the counties are over 90% Mexican and Mexican-American.

So, what might be learned from the trend? The initial reaction from some Democrats and liberals has been to blame Latino voters for voting against their "interests," wishing them the best when mass deportations come, or identifying a range of explanations such as machismo and proximity to whiteness. However satisfying those reactions may feel, they mystify some of the reasons Latino voters are moving toward Trump

First some caution and nuance drawing from years of research on Latino voters. It is almost a cliche at this point, but Latinos and Latino voters are not monolithic. There were historically solid Democratic partisan Latino voters and a small minority of solid (but consistent!) Republican Latino voters. Different national groups have different histories and geographical distributions. There is also evidence that some of the gains Trump achieved in 2020 among Latino voters came from previously unengaged, non-voters. While we do not have evidence yet, my strong hunch is that the gains seen this election also come from this group of previously unengaged Latinos, not former Democratic voters.

Second, it is becoming clearer that the markers of gender, education, social class, and religion play just as important a predictive role among Latino voters as they do among white voters. Latino men without college degrees and evangelicals, sub-groups where the Trump campaign had mobilization *and persuasion* efforts, moved towards him. Returning to AP VoteCast data, 47% of Latino men seem to have supported Trump.

Since many Latinos are working class, they are especially sensitive to prices and inflation. Equis Research noted the word *huevos* (eggs) would appear over and over again in focus groups and became shorthand for the pain inflation was causing among Latinos. Polls routinely bore inflation as an important issue and it should not be too surprising.

Immigration as an issue among Latino voters has been studied more extensively and the assumption has always been that anti-immigrant rhetoric and politics would motivate Latinos negatively. That was not the case in 2024. Some polls suggested Latinos did not believe Trump was referring to them when he spoke ill of immigrants. Others who did support Trump said they also supported his policy, even if they were immigrants themselves. In our own qualitative study of Latina Republican candidates for Congress, we found they strategically deploy conservative ethnic (but not racial) identity through anti-immigrant rhetoric. Instead of moderating anti-immigration rhetoric, these Mexican American candidates instead redirect the immigrant threat narrative towards other subgroups of Latines while using traditional Latine values like *familismo* and *marianismo* in their ads.

So, what might be the path forward? Democrats are in the political wilderness now. They lost the popular vote for the first time since 2004. That was an election with a lot of parallels to 2024 as George W. Bush also captured over 40% of the Latino vote in that election. Trump may have a chance to solidify his hold over a solid segment of Latino voters, since as one of the top Latino political scientist studying this trend says, "once voters learn to connect their ideology to their vote choice, it's hard to reverse."

Nevertheless, there were mixed results in this election. Those South Texas counties on the Border? Three of the largest ones also supported the Democratic candidate for Senate, Colin Allred over Republican Senator and Cuban American Ted Cruz. In Arizona, a Democrat Ruben Gallego will likely win the Senate alongside Trump winning the state. As the Equis Research shows, it may be the figure of Trump himself that motivates and energizes low-propensity Latino voters who otherwise would not vote. Trending toward Trump does not mean a majority voted for Trump by any means nor will be permanently Republicans. And if Latino voters as a majority keep saying the economy is more important than immigration, Democrats should listen.

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Kamala's key to the polls: The Asian American connection

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The 2024 election cycle has highlighted a striking contrast in how the major campaigns engage with Asian American voters, with Vice President Kamala Harris' historic candidacy and targeted outreach efforts resonating strongly within these communities. As the first Asian American vice president, Harris' background as the daughter of an Indian immigrant has created a unique connection with Asian American voters, contributing to her significant lead in polling among this demographic. A September 2024 poll by AAPI Data reveals the extent of this advantage, showing Harris leading former president Donald Trump by an overwhelming 38 percentage points among Asian American voters.

The demographic landscape of the United States has undergone profound changes, with the U.S. Census Bureau reporting that the number of people speaking a language other than English at home nearly tripled from 23.1 million in 1980 to 67.8 million in 2019. Within this broader trend, Asian American communities represent a crucial voting bloc, particularly given that more than half of Chinese and Vietnamese speakers reported limited English proficiency.

Understanding these linguistic barriers, the Harris campaign and the Democratic National Committee launched an ambitious $35 million outreach program in August 2024, which featured comprehensive multilingual advertising across multiple platforms. This initiative includes carefully crafted digital, direct mail, print, and radio advertisements in Vietnamese, Korean, and both simplified and traditional Chinese that were released in three Congressional districts in California and Nevada . Harris has also released a slew of ads in Tagalog aimed at Filipino American voters in Nevada, the largest ethnic group within the Asian American demographic in the state.

The Harris campaign's approach stands in marked contrast to that of the Trump campaign. While Trump campaign senior advisor Steven Cheung has claimed that the former president has "created an environment where diversity, equal opportunity, and prosperity were afforded to everyone," the campaign's outreach efforts have been overshadowed by Trump's continued use of the term "China virus" to describe COVID-19. This kind of rhetoric has contributed to a significant rise in anti-Asian hate and violence during the pandemic and subsequent years. His comments comparing the treatment of January 6 rioters to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II has also been condemned by many Japanese American leaders, who called his statement "egregiously inaccurate" and immensely culturally insensitive.

Harris' campaign has demonstrated a sophisticated understanding that Asian Americans are not a monolithic group, tailoring outreach efforts to specific communities' needs and concerns. Harris wrote a series of essays in five different Asian American newspapers days before Election Day, each of them tailored to speak to different ethnic communities. These essays highlighted key issues relevant to each group, showcasing her commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by different segments within the Asian American population.

The effectiveness of Harris' outreach is evident in the attention paid to cultural authenticity and linguistic accuracy. With about a third of Chinese and Vietnamese households classified as limited English-speaking households, the campaign has invested heavily in hiring dedicated AAPI staffers in each of the seven battleground states, helping to build trust and credibility within these communities. This has facilitated more personalized engagement and more effective messaging, amplifying the campaign's appeal across a diverse voter base.

Statistics from Data for Progress indicate that Asian Americans make up 7% of swing voters in 2024, a significant bloc that could determine election outcomes in closely contested states. The substantial lead Harris holds over Trump suggests that her personal story and comprehensive outreach strategy have successfully connected with these voters, particularly when contrasted with the Trump campaign's approach.

Despite Harris' failure to secure the presidency, her campaign achieved a significant milestone among Asian American voters, with *CNN* exit polls showing 54% supporting her compared to 39% for Trump. This outcome signals both the resonance of her outreach efforts and the growing political engagement of Asian American communities. Looking beyond 2024, the Harris campaign's approach to Asian American outreach marks an important step forward in setting a new standard for political engagement with the fastest growing racial or ethnic group in the United States. By combining authentic representation at the highest levels of government with sophisticated multilingual outreach and cultural competency, the campaign has laid the groundwork for effective engagement with Asian American voters while avoiding inflammatory rhetoric.

The success of Harris' outreach to Asian American voters goes beyond an effective campaign strategy and signals progress toward a more inclusive democracy that acknowledges and values every voter's voice. Yet, as Asian American communities continue to grow in size and political influence, ongoing efforts will be needed to build on this foundation. The Harris campaign's emphasis on respectful discourse, cultural understanding, and multilingual engagement sets a valuable precedent, but maintaining and advancing these initiatives will be essential for future political outreach to fully reflect the diversity of American democracy.

The vulnerability of naturalized immigrants and the hero who "will fix" America

The 2024 U.S. Election campaign was dominated by anti-immigration, misogynistic and racist rhetoric: Donald Trump has used fear and dehumanizing language to depict immigrants, claiming they are eating pets, attacking villages, poisoning the blood of the country. He especially targeted illegal immigrants, labelling them murderers, rapists and ultimately animals, thus striping them of their humanity. Trump's America has been described as an occupied country, a country under siege and threatened because there are a lot of bad genes among migrants in the U.S. He promised to stop what he called a criminal invasion with the largest deportation program in the American history.

Yet, there were first- and second-generation Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, even Black Americans and several other ethnic groups of naturalized Americans who voted for Donald Trump. Why did (some) naturalized immigrants vote for Trump?

I argue it was the combination of several inter-related factors including: the heterogeneity of these often-marginalized communities, the inflation and the cost-of-living crisis and the trauma of their immigration and their emotional costs of immigration. They all played into the psychology of these communities at individual and group level, making them vulnerable and susceptible to the firm claims of a self-constructed hero coming to their rescue.

Ethnic minority and diaspora groups are not monolithic and fragmented. Yet, they are often being essentialized and homogenized along their race, ethnicity and/ or home nation-states in media and public discourse. For example, the references to the Asian Americans, the Latino Americans, the Black Americans or to the Indian Americans and the Venezuelan Americans obscure the heterogenous, diverse, and intersectional make-up of these groups. As I showed in my recent study, avoiding methodological nationalism reveals the multiple belongings and identities that are always in the making and constantly negotiated: within any one ethnic minority and diaspora group there are a variety of socio-demographic, ethnic, class, gender, religious, and ideological subgroups; traditional and conservative views, progressive and liberal views, moderate, as well as radical and extremist views coexist and clash regularly. The cultural divides and debates in the homeland as well as the global culture wars are often reproduced within these transnational communities living in America. Donald Trump appealed to voters across all these subgroups: Latino, Asian and Black voters are more conservative, often religious, and their views aligned better with his radical take on abortion and sexual minority rights; the men (Latino, Black, other minority) were swayed by his rhetoric on masculinity and manhood as they were seen and heard; some others were nostalgic considering America's best days are in the past.

"Old" vs "new" immigrants and the competition over less resources. The "old immigrants" – meanwhile naturalized Americans – might not like or endorse Donald Trump's labelling and racist depictions of "new immigrants", but they agree with his approach to limit immigration: the condition of the nation's economy is already not so good and poor and the new comers will only add pressure to the government welfare. Furthermore, the naturalized immigrants identify themselves as belonging to an established American group, thus Othering the newcomers, even if they share the same Latino, Asian, Black, other ethnic roots: the sameness and difference between "us" already naturalized in America and "them" the newcomers are amplified by the longing to belong. While the post-pandemic inflation has worsened the standard of living across the U.S., the working-class ethnic minority groups were particularly hit. They remember they simply lived better during Trump's first term and his pledge to tax relief, cutting prices, hiking tariffs and strengthening the economy was addressing their immediate concerns.

Anger, fear and the saviour who can fix America. The "old" immigrants carry with them the invisible luggage of loss and trauma of migration: immigrants often feel they somehow had no choice but to immigrate in their search for a better life and more opportunities; thus, they left behind the family and friends, the ancestors' burial grounds, the familiar language and smells and have followed a lengthy and legal process to naturalize, often with great personal sacrifices. The assimilation and adaptation is often doubled by rage and guilt towards homeland and those left behind. The illegal immigrants and the undocumented are seen as a problem and are delegitimized because they don't follow the legal process, but also as dangerous as they keep coming into America and threaten a certain sense of security: the physical border becomes a psychological border, and the newcomers are the Others who damage their acquired psychological border and identity. That is why there is no empathy for the newcomers. Ultimately, someone needs to stop this deluge and protect them; Donald Trump has promised he will fix it.

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Did Gen Z shape the election? No, because Gen Z doesn't exist

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Age played a prominent role in this election. The original match-up between Trump and Biden, both the oldest candidates to run for office, ignited incessant discussions of the candidates' age, physical health, and mental acuity. When Biden passed the torch to Harris, who was not a particularly young candidate at 59, the historically unpopular Vice President suddenly radiated "vibes" and was hailed as "brat": a pop culture reference to a woman who is a bit messy, likes to party, and "says dumb things sometimes."

These aren't traditionally the traits that Americans look for in a president, but the frenzy around Harris—fueled by social media—drove an incredible turnaround in her favorability that can largely be explained by the fact that she wasn't as old as Biden. It certainly wasn't a strong policy plan or clearly articulated vision for America that made Harris viable. It was vibes, and these vibes emerged from the alternative scenario of an election where voters had to consider which candidate would actually live through their mandate.

The ever-present role of age in this election sent discussions of generations into overdrive. While some outlets focused on Boomers' political dominance, the media reporting on Gen Z was particularly obsessive. As with the European Elections a few months prior, the same question was asked over and over: How will Gen Z shape the election?

Gen Z did not—and possibly could not—shape this election. The reason is that generations like Gen Z, Millennials, and Boomers don't really exist in the way they are portrayed in the media. There is little scientific evidence that generations are real identities, and major academic societies and think tanks are advocating to stop using these labels.

A simple example is enough to show how silly generational labels really are: where do we draw the line between one generation and the next? Picking the year where one generation stops and the next one starts is almost entirely arbitrary, as the boundaries between generations can't be measured, tested, or proven by science. For McKinsey & Company, Gen Z is born between 1996-2010, but for Pew Research Center, the years are 1997-2012.

But does it really matter if we use the term "Gen Z" instead of "young voters"? I argue that it does, because using generational labels assumes differences between falsely constructed social groups. This means that when we use generational labels, we overlook key similarities in the electorate.

Let's look at some examples. Gen Z is widely presumed to be distinctive group that is: 1) progressive, 2) deeply concerned about the environment, and 3) special in their use of social media. Each of these is partly true, but not enough to warrant Gen Z's distinctiveness as a social category.

First, the progressive leaning of Gen Z should clearly show a strong break for Harris among younger voters. According to CIRCLE's analysis of AP VoteCast data, 52% of Gen Z-aged voters went for Harris, which is 1% higher than Millennials and between 4-6% higher than Gen X and Boomers.

This is hardly a blue wave and importantly, painting Gen Z as broadly progressive overlooks gender differences between younger voters. 56% of young men broke for Trump, which hardly aligns with the Gen Z narrative as progressive.

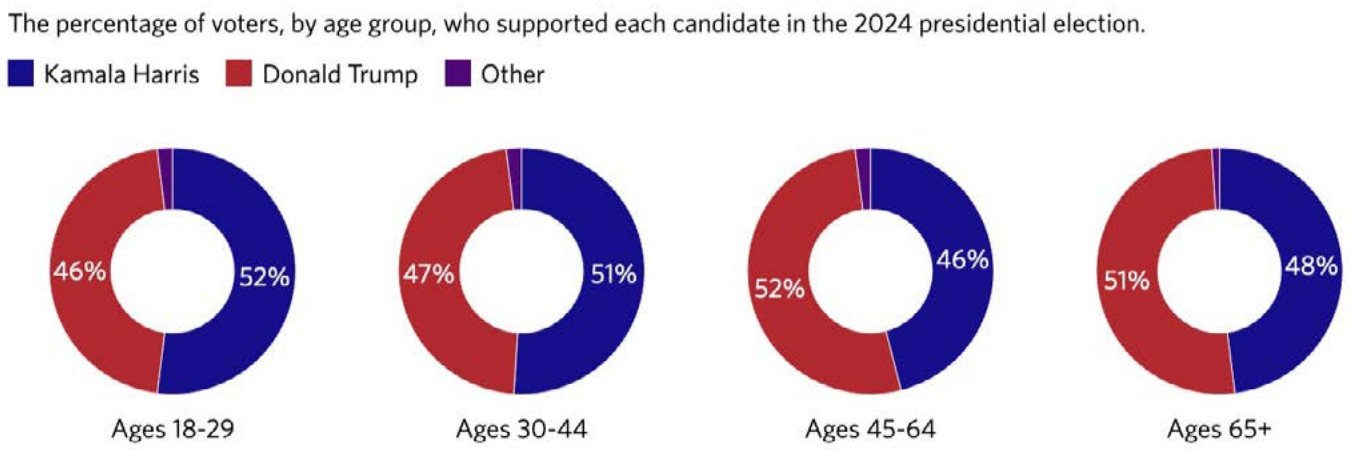
Second, the Gen Z narrative presumes that climate change is a particularly important issue that is distinct for this generation. This is partly true, but it overshadows the similarity that young voters share with every other "generation." The economy, not climate, was the most important issue for most voters, irrespective of age. The same CIRCLE analysis shows virtually no distinction between Gen Z and the wider population for top issues, with the exception that younger voters seem to prioritize immigration less.

The third and most convincing part of the Gen Z narrative is that they are distinct in their media habits, particularly their use of social media. Again, partially true—while there are certainly more younger users of platforms like TikTok and Instagram, there are still about one-in-four older Americans using these platforms, and the gap in platform use between the young and old is closing. Thus, Gen Z is not unique in their use of platforms, and "Gen Z-ness" does not explain when, why, or how young Americans use social media or engage in politics more broadly.

Certainly, there are important differences between younger and older voters, and we need to research them in order to better understand how America is changing. However, the core problem with generations is that they imbue a massively diverse block of voters with some distinct attributes that, upon closer inspection, aren't really that distinct.

My point in highlighting similarities between generations is to show how they can lead to false perceptions of voter differences. Generations are catchy and cool, but they do little to improve our understanding of the electorate and overshadow more important factors like race, partisanship, and gender.

So, did Gen Z shape the election? No, because Gen Z doesn't exist.

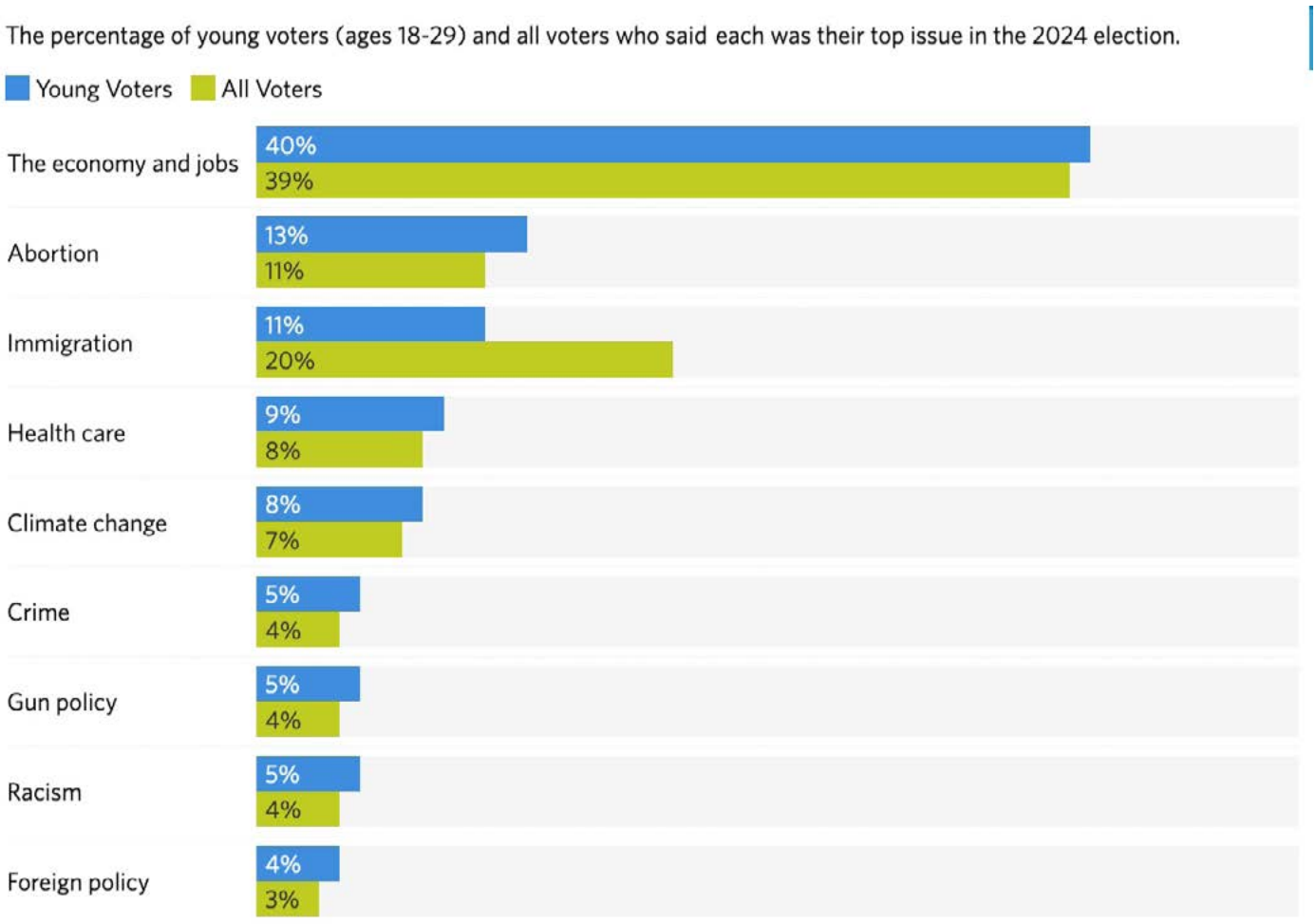


Note: Updated with data as of November 6, 11am ET

CIRCLE Tufts University Tisch College · CIRCLE

Source: CIRCLE analysis of AP VoteCast Survey conducted by the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research for Fox News and The Associated Press

Figure 1: Vote choice by age



Notes: Updated with data as of November 6, 11am ET.

CIRCLE Tufts University Tisch College · CIRCLE

Source: AP VoteCast Survey conducted by the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research for Fox News and The Associated Press

Figure 2: Top issues for young voters

Cartographic perspectives of the 2024 U.S. election

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In 2017, during his first year in office, Donald Trump reportedly mentioned his election victory nearly every fifth day. His triumph in the 2016 election was marked by narrow margins, with around 78,000 votes in key battleground states securing his win in the Electoral College, despite losing the popular vote to Hillary Clinton. Trump highlighted his success with maps illustrating the electoral outcomes, enthusiastically pointing to a map with swathes of red representing Republican victories, particularly in rural areas: "Here, you can take that, that's the final map of the numbers. It's pretty good, right? The red is obviously us."

These maps, however, exaggerated the rural vote by inflating the visual representation of sparsely populated areas. Population-weighted cartograms, which resize areas based on population rather than land area, offered a different perspective by giving more space to densely populated urban regions, traditionally leaning Democratic. This style of mapping exposed the political divide between rural Republican-leaning areas and urban Democratic strongholds - a pattern that persisted through the 2016 and 2020 elections.

Trump's polarizing influence has deeply impacted every election since he entered the political arena. Yet, the clarity of his victory in the 2024 election was unexpected. Major polling organizations had not anticipated the decisive margin of his win, which transformed the election maps. For this election, even conventional maps or population-weighted cartograms reveal a straightforward victory, diminishing the need to account for regional nuances as in previous elections.

Election maps play a vital role in election coverage, shaping public understanding of voting patterns and results across media platforms. Traditional geographic maps remain popular in print and television due to their familiarity and simplicity in showing state-level victories. Online media, however, have increasingly employed more sophisticated tools, including interactive and scalable maps as well as alternative map forms like cartograms. These advanced visuals enable viewers to explore election results in greater depth.

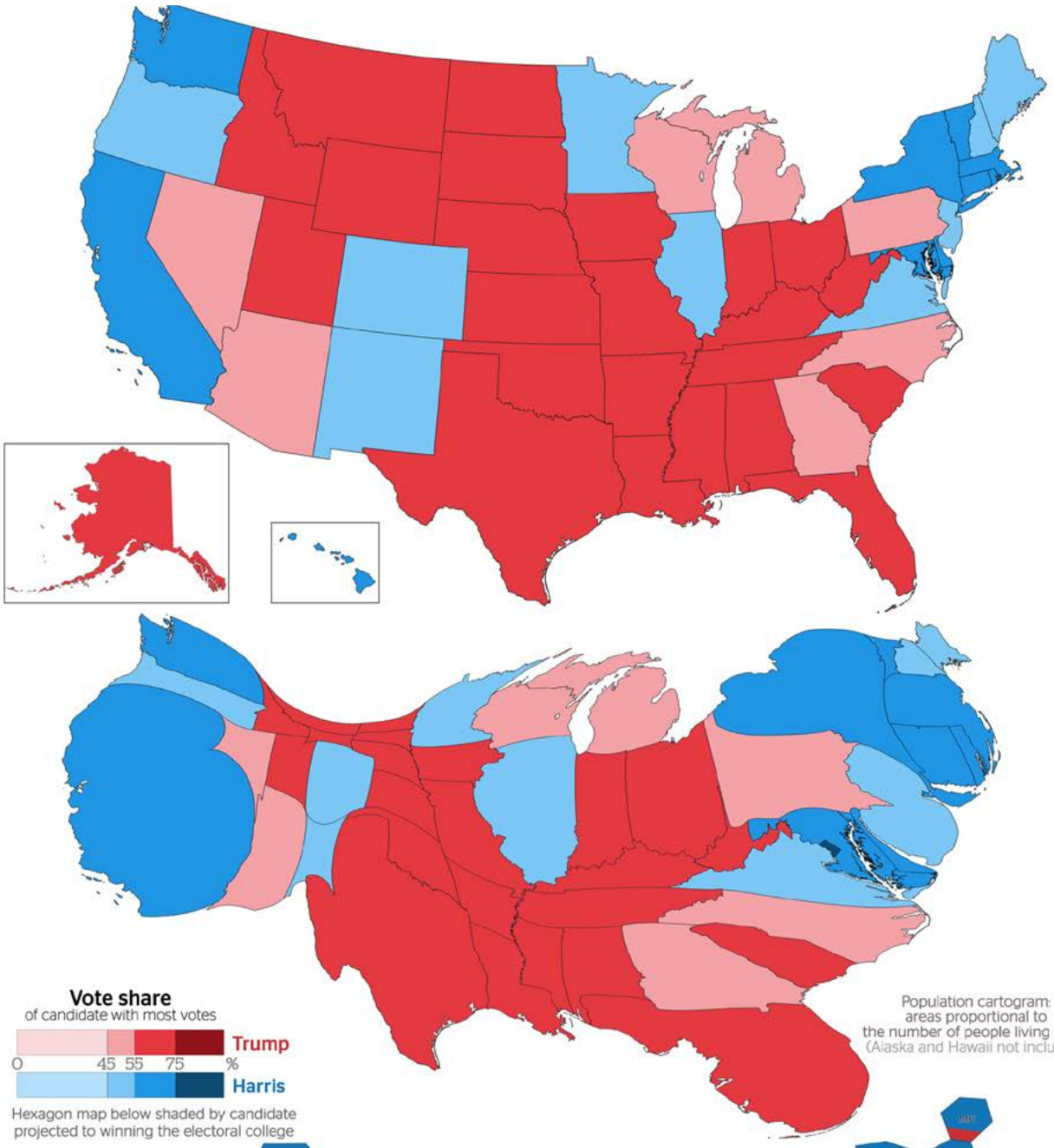
This map series shows the preliminary outcome of the 2024 election from a state-level perspective. At the time of writing (Nov 8, 2024) most states had completed counting between 95 and 100 per cent of the votes. Therefore, only minor, if any, changes in this overall state-level picture provided here are to be expected.

Each map in this series highlights distinct aspects of the 2024 election results: The conventional map (top) shows state wins by colour but can mislead by visually emphasizing large, sparsely populated areas. The population-weighted cartogram (middle) adjusts state sizes based on population, highlighting more populous, often Democratic-leaning regions. The hexagon cartogram (bottom) simplifies state shapes into hexagons sized by Electoral College votes, offering the clearest view of the electoral outcome. Only the winning candidate is depicted, with indications of states that changed party preference since 2020. This layered approach provides a nuanced understanding of voting influence and population distribution, especially valuable in an election with such decisive results. This map thus offers a clear image of the Electoral College majority that will elect Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States.

The population-weighted cartogram additionally uses a color gradient to represent the candidates' vote shares. States with the highest vote share for either candidate are marked accordingly, except for Maine and Nebraska, where the Electoral College vote is split. This method illustrates the growing political polarization in the United States: in the previous two elections involving Trump, many states showed relatively narrow winning margins, with winning vote shares between 45 and 55 per cent. In 2024, however, more states exhibited a stronger majority, with Trump securing over 55 per cent of the vote in 23 states and Kamala Harris achieving similar dominance in 13 states. Only 14 states had close contests, primarily in battleground states Trump ultimately carried home.

When the final results are available at the county level, this pattern of polarization will become even clearer, highlighting some underlying social and political divides. Joe Biden arguably struggled to bridge these divides during his presidency. The impact of Trump's return to the presidency on this deeply polarized landscape remains uncertain.

This short introduction demonstrates how powerful maps are in shaping our understanding of electoral outcomes. By presenting the election results through different visual lenses, each map unveils unique insights into voting patterns, voter density, and political influence. Together, these maps underscore the complexities of the American electoral landscape, capturing both the geographic vastness and the population density that define the nation's political divides. As Donald Trump prepares to return to the White House, the maps of 2024 remind us that visualizing and effectively understanding American democracy goes beyond a simple choice of red or blue; it reveals the underlying contours of a deeply polarized society, offering both clarity and complexity to the story of American democracy that will remain subject of discussions in the years to come.


Vote share
of candidate with most votes
Trump
0 45 55 75 %
Harris
Hexagon map below shaded by candidate projected to winning the electoral college
Population cartogram:
areas proportional to
the number of people living there
(Alaska and Hawaii not included)
Hexagon cartogram:
each hexagon representing a state,
resized proportional to the
number of electoral college votes
States that flipped from 2020
Data not showing final results,
last updated Nov 8, 2020

4

Candidates and the campaign

The tilted playing field, and a bygone conclusion

What is there, really, left to say? Back in 2016, I contributed an essay to this collection titled "The #Lolnothingmatters Election." My core thesis was that Donald Trump had managed to win despite running a ludicrously poor campaign.

Here I sit, eight years later. Donald Trump has won an even more resounding victory. And I cannot say that his campaign was more professional or sophisticated than the first time. If anything, he has gotten sloppier with age. His rallies drew smaller crowds, the attendees drifting away before the speech ended. Signs of cognitive decline were obvious to anyone who bothered to look. His small-donor fundraising was around a quarter of what he raised in 2020 , though a handful of billionaire benefactors stepped in to make up the difference. His field operation was outsourced to Charlie Kirk and Elon Musk – political neophytes who reportedly made a litany of rookie mistakes. He was convicted of 34 felony counts. He had three other major trials pending. He promised to pardon the January 6th insurrectionists. He insisted that everyone was thrilled with the overturning of *Roe v Wade*. He was incapable of acknowledging that he lost in 2020.

The final weeks of the campaign were awash with negative Trump headlines. Where Donald Trump in 2016 benefited from general public underestimation – few people took seriously that he might actually win – absolutely everyone in 2024 knew that it was possible for Trump to win, and what that would represent.

Kamala Harris, meanwhile, ran about as effective of a campaign as one could. She replaced Joe Biden three months before the election, but three months is, in fact, plenty of time to run a competent electoral campaign. She assembled a cross-ideological coalition, offered policies that spoke to the needs of the electorate, and ran a scandal-free, disciplined campaign.

And yet, here we are. Ultimately, 2024 was not another "#Lolnothingmatters Election." Rather, it was an election where the things that *mattered* lay outside the boundaries of what a good campaign can influence.

The United States had a stronger post-pandemic economic recovery than any other developed nation. But U.S. voters do not grade on a curve. Donald Trump promised that he would make inflation go away. It was nonsense, but it was appealing nonsense.

Across the globe, every governing coalition during the post-pandemic recovery has faced crushing defeats. The COVID pandemic was a civilization-wide traumatic event, and we have not collectively processed that trauma. Instead, we have assigned blame and demanded change. Joe Biden was an unpopular president, just as every other nation's president or prime minister was unpopular. Kamala Harris, as Biden's successor, inherited the blame. And Donald Trump, despite his disastrous mismanagement of the 2020 pandemic, represented a return to the before-times.

I have written before, in other settings, that the central conflict in American politics is not liberal-versus-conservative, but simple-versus-complicated. We have two conflicting metanarratives.

One story goes something like this: "government and governance are fundamentally simple. The reason things have gone wrong is crooks and idiots in charge. If we get rid of the crooks and idiots and replace them with the right people, everything will be fixed."

This is the siren song of the authoritarian demagogue. Trump has performed it for years. He insists that the government is a mess because of the crooks and idiots screwing things up. Put him in charge, he'll fire them, and conditions will improve. (One would hope that this story would have lost some appeal due to lived experience. Many of his cabinet secretaries spoke out against reelecting him. Many of his senior officials are now in prison for their own corruption scandals. Alas, nevertheless…)

The other story is, in essence, a liberal technocratic narrative: "government and governance are fundamentally complicated. The reason things are going wrong is that governing a large, pluralist society is really hard and includes a thousand hard-to-navigate tradeoffs. Well-meaning people can make government work better at the margins. But change is frustratingly slow and always incomplete. None of the hard problems can be easily fixed, or else they would have been fixed already."

The latter story has the benefit of being, well, *true*. Yet, as a scholar of strategic political communication, it has long struck me that the "it's simple" story is much more compelling. It contains all the elements of an effective story. There is a hero, a villain, a victim, and a plot resolution. And there *are* crooks and idiots in positions of power. It isn't as though every government bureaucrat and politician is brilliant or a saint.

The playing field is slanted in favor of authoritarian demagogues. And *the worse that objective conditions become, the more appealing their rhetoric becomes.*

Inflation hurt. The aftermath of the pandemic stings. Donald Trump promised to return us to a bygone, better time. Kamala Harris was stuck with the unenviable task of keeping people committed to making complicated social systems work better at the margins.

The malaise – the objective conditions on the ground – mattered to the ultimate outcome, far more so than the architecture of either candidates' campaign.

So now we will hand the government over to a vindictive authoritarian, unchecked by laws or norms or the judgment of future electorates.This will not go well for the United States. And, what's worse, I am not convinced that there were any choices the Harris campaign could have made that would have prevented it.

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Looking forwards and looking back: Competing visions of America in the 2024 presidential campaign

Prof John Rennie Short

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On the Republican side: It started with a presidential candidate, Donald Trump, marching towards the Republican Party's nomination while also facing a series of legal challenges. His days were spent shuffling between campaign and court appearances. He was mired in ongoing legal woes. He faced 91 felony counts in state courts and federal districts. As he won state primaries, he lost court cases. In May 2023, a jury found him guilty of sexual assault and defamation against E. Jean Carroll. In a second defamation trial that began on January 16th 2024, the day after he won Iowa, the jury ordered him to pay damages to Carroll of $83.3 million. In February in a civil suit brought by New York State alleging fraud in property assessments, a judge ruled against Trump and ordered him to pay $544 million and barred him from running a business in New York State. In March 2023 he was charged by the Manhattan District Attorney with felony charges of falsifying business records to pay hush money to women claiming that they had sexual relationships with Trump. A jury found him guilty on 34 charges. He became the first President to be convicted of felony crimes.

A presidential candidate marching to an easy victory for his party's nomination at the same time as he faced a barrage of legal challenges. All of this was unimaginable just ten years ago. But Trump has generated more norm busting, rule breaking and the upending of established practices than any previous president.

On the Democratic side: there was the dramatic change in leadership. The ageing process was cruelly revealed in Biden's June 28th presidential debate with Trump. He mumbled and stumbled. He looked old and more ready for assisted living in a retirement home than four more years in the White House. After prompting from Democratic power broker Nancy Pelosi, as well as pressure from big donors, Biden withdrew from the race and vice president Kamala Harris quickly emerged as the unchallenged Democratic candidate. There was some disquiet at the lack of a nomination race, but the lingering fears soon disappeared as Kamala energized the base, attracted crowds and generated a huge amount of money from donors. But it was not enough to secure victory. There was a shift to Trump across the country, in urban as well as rural areas, by Hispanic voters, in minority districts and by young (18-34) and older voters (65+).

The election year of 2024 had a Janus-faced quality. Trump looked backwards. Sometimes way back. In one speech in Greenville NC, he invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798. For those of the for those of you not familiar, it was a law written at the time of fear of a French invasion and fears of disloyalty and allowed the government to deport non-citizens en masse. It was used by Roosevelt in World War 2 to detain thousands of Japanese Americans. Trump lived in an America of the rear-view mirror: The family structure and race relations of the 1950s, the urban America of riots and crime of the 1980s, the gender relations of before MeToo movement. He had litany of complaints about the past. He repeatedly claimed that the 2020 election was stolen from him. The future involved revenge and retribution. His message especially resonated with those groups who had seen a relative decline in their standards of living, most notably noncollege educated white males. Others were dissatisfied with illegal immigration across the southern border and rising prices. In contrast, the Harris campaign was built on the idea of a better future. What it lacked in granular detail and policy specifics it filled with the grand gestures of forward progress. The campaign slogan was We are not going back.

In the 2024 elections, one looked backwards to an unfolding story of deterioration and decline, the other look forward with optimism and hope. Underlying the differences were different visions of the U.S., competing narratives of decline and renewal. These clashing contrasting visions remained solid realities despite all the power of the campaigns, the television commercials, celebrity endorsements, rallies and events. There was some movement at the very edges of each voting bloc, all as it turned in favor of the Republicans but at their core was a granitelike resistance immune to persuasion.

In 2024, the U.S. elected a felon. He tapped fears of 'illegal immigrants', anger at the 'establishment' and outright rage against the 'elites.' His supporters hope for a strong man to lead the country out of darkness. His detractors see a danger to democracy. The election provided a winner but did not heal the country's divide; it reinforced the polarization in a U.S. that now has competing 'truth' communities, with their different 'facts' and their separate visions of the past and the future.

Brat went splat: Or the emotional sticky brand won again

By election day, it was no shock that Donald Trump could win or that the Republicans could win the Senate, the surprise was in the scale of these victories and the Republican's competitiveness in the House races. The 2024 election represents a class and ethnic realignment of the electorate that, as Patrick Ruffini suggested, had been underway for several years. The Democrats failed because of the results of the Biden Administration's governance that differed from their 2020 brand promises. Donald Trump ran largely the same emotive campaign that he had run twice before only this time he asked if voters were better off now than they were under his administration. This election showed the superiority of branding as a political marketing tool to an untethered set of emotions or vibes that Harris attempted to use to win the election.

Democrats

Democrats were elected in 2020 to deal with the pandemic and restore a sense of normality to the country. Instead, they implemented policies that appealed to progressive audiences and interest groups. As Teixiera and Judis note, college educated and progressive voters don't constitute a majority of the electorate meaning that the Biden Administration opted to target the smaller, not the bigger, available audience.

Biden personally did not keep his promise of being a transitional figure because he sought a second term, and his team deprived the Democrats of several months of earned media for their brand by making sure Biden had no serious primary challengers. By the middle of 2024, the Administration had been caught lying about the health of its principal as Biden imploded during a live televised debate with Trump. By the time Kamala Harris replaced Biden she was saddled with a string of promises not kept by the administration and little time to build her own brand. Harris cemented her public image as a leftist by picking a leftist for Vice-President. Harris only had around one hundred days to change public perceptions about her, differentiate herself from Biden and negatively brand Trump. She didn't have the extant brand to do it and instead relied on celebrity endorsements and free-floating emotions or attitudes: the so-called vibes.

She failed to differentiate from Biden, most notably during her appearance on "The View" and tried to build a positive vibe by using language like "freedom" and "joy" as George Lakoff suggested politicians should do, but Harris never defined these terms. Her campaign was light on specifics but heavy on attacks on Trump. negative messaging about her opponent. Her campaign theme of "we're not going back" went undefined and this was problematic given that she was the sitting Vice-President. Her campaign had vibes, but vibes don't make brand. She lacked a unique story, emotions and policy offerings able to convince people she could solve their problems or wasn't just a continuation of an unpopular status quo. When she spoke about policy, she always did so in terms of Donald Trump being unacceptable and not so much about herself or what she would do in office.

Trump

Donald Trump used a similar sticky brand to what he had used previously and focused on that not vibes. His brand story was a tale in which he'd done well as President, taken on the Washington Establishment and been repaid with impeachment, a rigged election, indictment and assassination attempts. Trump, as he always had, told his supporters that they prove that the establishment feared him and was only after him because they wanted to make sure he couldn't protect the voters from them anymore. Trump deftly turned the Democrats' name calling against him into attacks on his supporters. He ran on mainstream issues using working-class sensibilities. He turned the election into a referendum on his and Biden's Administrations by asking people if they were better off than they had been four years earlier and used the Biden Administration's controversial record to build a contrast with his. He recruited new customers, appeared with celebrities and influencers these audiences respected and in media that they consumed. At the same time, he successfully did to Biden in 2024 what Biden had done to him in 2020 by making the election into a referendum on the current Administration.

Conclusion

The lesson of the 2024 campaign is that branding remains the key tool for winning elections. Vibes alone aren't enough and woe unto the politicians who don't keep their brand promises as the Democrats did not from 2020 forward. The second lesson is that it takes time to build an effective brand. Trump had been building his for decades, Kamala Harris only had a few months to do so. Trump used sticky branding well. Harris had to rely on vibes because of the difficult situation into which she'd been thrown. Once again, the better built, more effectively distributed brand won.

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Election 2024: Does money matter anymore?

Prof Cayce Myers

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U.S. elections are unique in many ways, perhaps most unique in their cost. Unlike many other Western democracies, U.S. politicians are not only expected to have resonance with voters, but they are also expected to have the ability to raise vast sums of money to support their candidacy. Good candidates are good fundraisers, and winners are thought be exceptional. It should be no surprise that the cost of campaigning for the presidency now costs over a billion dollars, with the aggregate cost of all 2024 over $16 billion. Among presidential candidates, the Democratic nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris, clearly had the money advantage. Harris' campaign receipts through October 16th showed just shy of $1 billion with the campaign spending just over $868 million (the next filing is due December 5th). In the first 16 days of October, her campaign raised over $97 million. Her operating expenditures during that time was just over $163 million. These numbers don't include what she raised or spent in the final weeks of the election, which was substantial.

Yet Harris lost. She lost the Electoral College with Trump receiving 292 Electoral votes. That count may rise to 312 if he also wins Arizona and Nevada, which lean Republican. Trump also became the first Republican to win the popular vote in 20 years receiving over 73 million votes. Trump performed well with many segments of the voting population improving his margins from his 2020 race. That begs the question: Does money matter in politics anymore?

The answer to that question is complex. Yes, money matters as it always has. There's an entry price to participate in the political arena, and the price goes up proportional to the office. The presidency is now a billion plus dollar endeavor. However, once a candidate is there, they must be able to have the right messaging, campaign organization, and resonance with voters to win. If money were the sole predictor of electoral victory Hillary Clinton would have won the presidential election in 2016, and Mike Bloomberg would have been the Democratic nominee in 2020.

What the presidential election in 2024 illustrates is that sometimes a candidate can do more with less, particularly if they are willing to continually engage with the media and have a message that resonates with voters. Trump's campaign benefitted from the MAGA movement's utilization of rallies and social media, notably Twitter, in 2016. In 2024 they made use of the podcast, which now has an outsized popularity in American media, as well as less expensive campaign methods of rallies, legacy media interviews, and a barrage of text messages.

It is important to note, however, we are not in an era where money no longer is a factor. Money does matter--a lot. After all, it was donor concern that led to President Joe Biden stepping out of the race. The resonance of actor George Clooney's open letter to Biden in the *New York Times* was, in part, due to Clooney's status as a Democratic fundraiser connected to other influential Democratic fundraisers. In fact, his concerns over Biden's ability to run were rooted in his interaction with the President at a fundraising event. The larger concern of Biden continuing in the race was that his candidacy was causing him and other Democrats to underperform in fundraising. Once Harris assumed the mantle as the presumptive nominee, the campaign coffers began to refill with much needed cash. Biden's departure and Harris' candidacy likely contributed to the Democrats winning more races than they might have otherwise, partly because these changes enabled them to fund and run more competitive campaigns.

Trump was also not running a shoestring campaign. According to the FEC, his total receipts as of October 16th exceeded $381 million, $192 million of which were from donors giving less than $200. From October 1st through 16th his total receipts exceeded $162 million, and his operating expenditures were just under $100 million. Trump also benefitted from the largesse of multi-billionaire Elon Musk's America PAC, which helped both Trump and Republicans during the election through canvassing efforts propelling voters to the polls (not to mention his work as a Trump surrogate in the media and on his social media platform, X).

The post-mortem of the 2024 election and Harris' defeat will not be a discussion of finances but of other political issues such as the choice of Tim Walz as Vice President, the lack of an open Democratic primary, Harris' inability to distance herself from an unpopular President, and her overall campaign message strategy against Trump. The 2024 election underscores the truth of the late California politician Jesse Unruh's famous observation that "money is the mother's milk of politics," though with important caveats. The issues can eclipse even the deepest war chests, and the resonance of a campaign message has more to do with voter perception than a candidate's donors. The 2024 election proves that U.S. elections are still uniquely costly, setting a new record as the most expensive—until 2028.

Advertising trends in the 2024 presidential race

It will take time to assess the role of the campaign generally and political advertising specifically in Trump's 2024 presidential election victory—and we may never have a definitive answer to the question of exactly how much advertising mattered. But we offer here some initial observations about trends in political advertising this year.

Since 2010, we have led a project that has tracked political advertising in the United States and analyzed its content. Over the past eight election cycles, we have watched thousands of political ads and have tracked spending in thousands of races. When considering advertising in the 2024 presidential race, four things stand out to us:

1. It was an extremely even television ad campaign after Harris became the de facto Democratic nominee on July 22, according to our analysis of data from Vivvix CMAG, a media tracking firm. Between July 22 and October 27, there were 423,000 pro-Harris ad airings (which include ads from outside groups supportive of her campaign) on broadcast, national network and cable television, amounting to $495 million in spending. During that same time period, there were 414,000 pro-Trump ad airings, at an estimated cost of $438 million. The number of ad airings may be slightly understating the reach of Harris' advertising because her campaign spent more on national advertising than did Trump's campaign, meaning those national ads were seen across the country, not just in a single media market.

2. Looking solely at the candidate-sponsored advertising (including joint fundraising committees), there was a huge Harris advantage in digital advertising. We examined ads placed on Meta (including Facebook and Instagram) and ads placed on Google (including search ads, YouTube and some third-party ads) since Harris became the Democratic nominee. We found $215 million in ad spending on the two platforms by the Harris campaign (and joint fundraising committees) versus $49 million placed on the two platforms by the Trump campaign (and joint fundraising committees). Snapchat's ad library reports about $8 million in spending by the Harris campaign and only about $60,000 in spending by the Trump campaign. Of course, these platforms do not represent the universe of digital advertising, and it is possible that Trump was spending more heavily on other platforms or on ads that appeared on third-party websites. It is also possible that outside groups made up for the spending gap between the candidates and their joint fundraising committees.

3. On television, pro-Trump advertisers prioritized smaller media markets while pro-Harris advertisers prioritized larger media markets. The bulk of political ads in the presidential campaign were aired on broadcast television in specific media markets, which are geographic areas that receive television from a particular city. In six of the seven battleground states, Harris and allies aired more ads (between July 22 and October 27) in the largest media market in each state (Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Detroit, Michigan; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Raleigh, North Carolina; Phoenix, Arizona; and Las Vegas, Nevada). The only exceptions to this rule are Atlanta, Georgia, where Trump and allies had a 400 ad-airing advantage out of more than 50,000 ads aired, and Charlotte, North Carolina, which is essentially the same size as the Raleigh media market. Pro-Trump ads were generally more common in smaller media markets. This pattern is an efficient one if the campaigns are appealing to their bases—generally in more urban areas for Harris and more rural areas for Trump—or trying to hunt for persuadable voters who may be open to voting for them.

4. It was an extremely negative ad campaign. We classified political ads into three types: positive ads (those that solely mention the favored candidate), attack ads (those that solely mention the opponent), and contrast ads (those that mention both the favored candidate and an opponent). Among pro-Harris ads, there were about the same proportion of attack airings (26%) and positive airings (28%), with the bulk of ads falling into the contrast category (46%). But among pro-Trump ads, fully two-thirds were attacks, and only 0.2% of airings were positive. In other words, almost every single ad aired by the Trump campaign and its allies mentioned Kamala Harris. Clearly, Trump ad sponsors were spending much more time trying to define Harris than to define Trump—whose image was already set in the minds of most Americans. In fact, the Trump campaign (including group and party ads) aired the lowest proportion of positive ads of any presidential campaign that we have tracked.

It is clear that Harris' big advantage in digital advertising did not secure her victory, but we would not expect that it would. Ad effects tend to be quite small, especially in presidential elections, and much of the digital spending is to raise money rather than persuade or mobilize. Yet questions remain: did the campaigns' relative emphasis on different types of media markets (Harris' focus on the most urban markets and Trump's focus on more rural markets) or their distinct issue focus make any difference? To what extent did Trump's constant attacks on Harris land? Much research remains to be done in figuring out the impact of the well over $1 billion spent on advertising in the campaign.

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Who won the ground wars? Trump and Harris field office strategies in 2024

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Just four years ago, while the world was grappling with a devastating pandemic, the two U.S. presidential campaigns could not have looked more different in the field. Donald Trump, who invested minimally in field operations in 2016, opened over 300 field offices while Joe Biden had none. While ceding the field to Trump, because of public health concerns, the Biden campaign pivoted to innovative digital organizing strategies, utilizing platforms like Slack to organize and mobilize voters. Trump and the Republican National Committee (RNC) meanwhile, utilized their field office dominance to hold in-person volunteer trainings and canvass neighborhoods. Questions emerged following Biden's victory in 2020 about whether in-person field organizing would be cut back in favor of digital organizing that is far less costly. Fast forward four years later and we can confidently state that answer was an emphatic "no."

While there is uncertainty on the exact number of field offices for Harris and the Democratic Coordinated Campaign this cycle due to a lack of centralized data and conflicting media reports, reports suggest upwards of 350 offices directly managed by the campaign (*The New York Times*, 2024). The Trump campaign, meanwhile, invested far less in field offices this cycle than they did in 2020, with an estimate of only 120 offices opened nationwide. Instead, Trump and the RNC outsourced much of the field operations that are typically kept in-house to outside vendors, such as Elon Musk's 'America PAC' and 'Turning Point Action PAC.' Clearly, the two camps took wildly different approaches to the ground game this cycle. No longer did Trump have the field to himself. Harris' campaign dominated the ground game, establishing hundreds of more offices than Trump. So, where exactly did the campaigns invest in field offices this time?

Not surprisingly, both Harris and Trump focused their ground-game efforts in the seven pivotal battleground states: Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Georgia, North Carolina, Arizona, and Nevada. We focus here on two Midwestern states, Michigan and Pennsylvania, as well as the southern swing state of Georgia. The map below illustrates where the candidates opened offices in these states, using an original dataset of field office locations collected from the campaign websites.

According to our data, Harris opened ninety offices in the pivotal rust-belt states of Pennsylvania and Michigan combined, while Trump only opened thirty-eight offices. In Pennsylvania, the prize of the seven battleground states, Harris invested heavily in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, the most populous cities in the state, while also opening offices in ruby-red counties that Trump carried comfortably in 2020. There was far less office investment from Trump in the state, but his strategy mirrored Harris' in most respects, particularly in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh suburbs. In Michigan, Harris flooded the Detroit metro area with twenty-one offices compared to just Trump's five. Similarly to Harris' strategy in Pennsylvania of trying to chip away at Trump's rural advantage, she opened offices in several Michigan counties that Trump won by 60%+ in 2020. Trump countered with offices in urban areas throughout the state such as Kalmazoo, Ingham (Lansing), and Wayne County (Detroit).

After President Biden's successful flip of Georgia in 2020, Harris and the Democrats poured extensive resources into trying to hold the state in 2024. Harris opened thirty-one offices statewide compared to Trump's sixteen. With Atlanta and its neighboring suburbs being the most populous region in the state, both campaigns placed a majority of their offices here. Harris needed to maintain her margins in the greater Atlanta region, while Trump sought to cut into them, attempting to make inroads with Black voters. As in the other Midwest swing states, the Harris campaign deliberately invested offices in rural Trump stronghold counties in an attempt to cut into his margins.

Overall, the office placement strategy in these three battleground states did not appear to be exclusive to either 'base' or 'swing' counties. Rather, both campaigns placed offices in counties their party won comfortably in 2020 and in counties they performed poorly in as a way to "lose by less." Of particular significance was the Harris campaign's strategy to establish offices in Trump's stronghold of rural, white-majority counties.

Since Harris lost, some might view this as an indictment on either her office placement strategy or the broader notion that opening offices is not a recipe for electoral success. We believe a word of caution is warranted before assigning that sort of blame.

Offices do not vote: they provide a space for activists and volunteers to coordinate efforts, engage with voters, and organize activities to build support. They are not a substitute for remedying a candidate's approval ratings, poor economic sentiment among the electorate, or the broader political environment that could be detrimental to an incumbent party's electoral fortunes, though in the waning days of campaigns it can tempting to think of them that way as anecdotes about excited volunteers and millions of door knocks are promoted by the campaigns. 2024 marked a return to the field for Democrats and a retreat for Republicans, and while that didn't correlate with victory this year, campaigns will likely be back out in the field renting storefronts and filling them with enthusiastic volunteers in 2028.

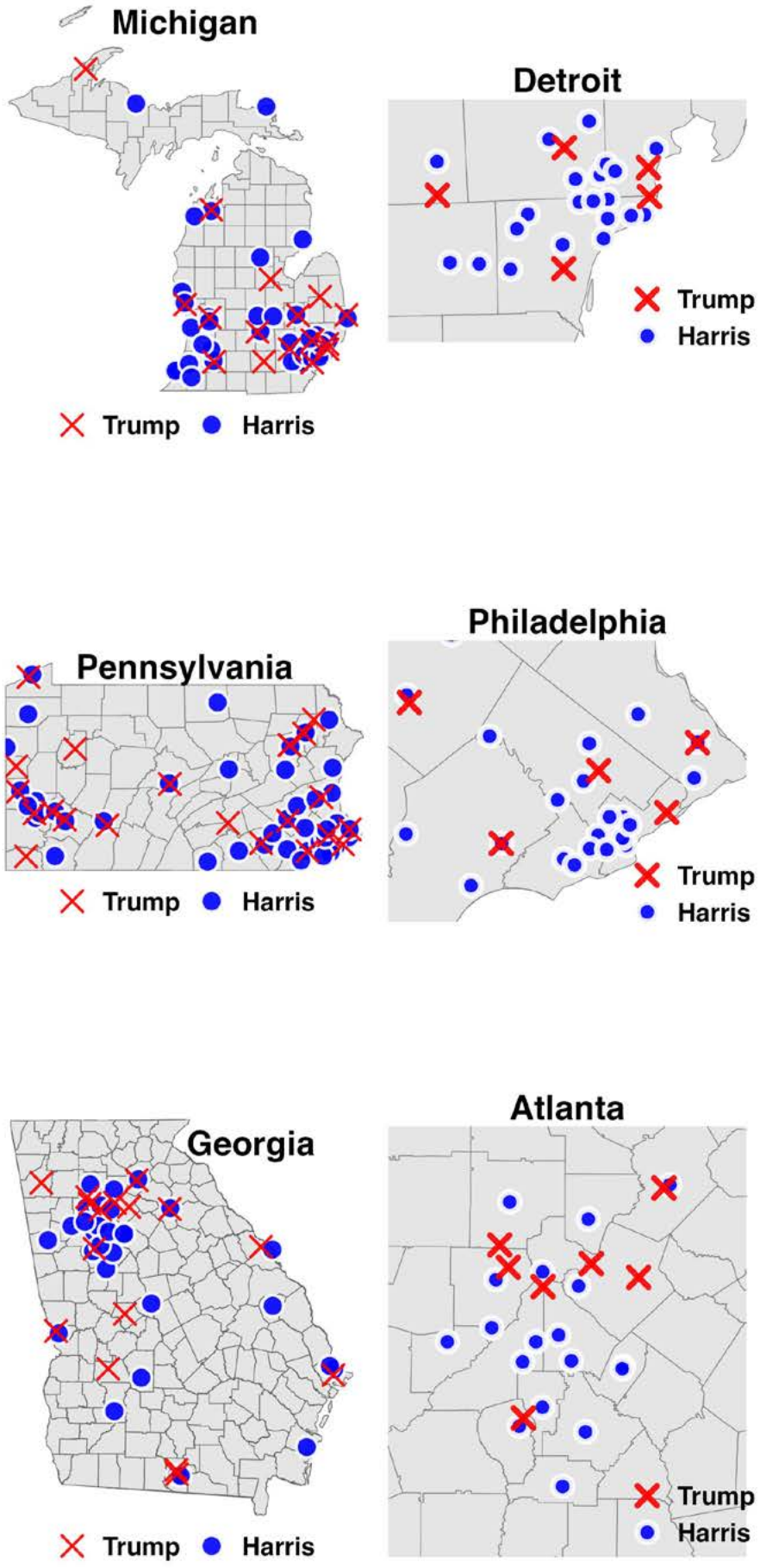

Figure 1. 2024 campaign field office locations in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Georgia

Kamala Harris: Idealisation and persecution

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Kamala Harris has become the second woman to run in a presidential election for one of the major political parties in the United States, and she is the first woman of colour. She entered this election as the first woman Vice President and began a historic but ultimately unsuccessful campaign.

Political leadership at the executive level remains a battleground for women. Gender stereotypes are entrenched and resistant to change and this impacts the way in which women not only run for office, but how they are evaluated once they gain office. Harris as Vice President was subjected to harsh criticism both from her supporters and the opposition. She was often seen as ineffective and absent from the main thrust of political discourse. At the same time, she has become an iconic figure in popular culture in terms of her embracing Charlie XCX's brat summer, appearing on *Saturday Night Live* with her counterpart Maya Rudolph, and being joined on stage by icons such as Beyonce, J-Lo, and Bruce Springsteen, not to mention a glowing endorsement from Taylor Swift.

From a psychosocial perspective the polarising responses to Harris are fascinating and speak to the wider pressures placed on women in the public sphere. By employing Melanie Klein's object relations theory, I will explore the drivers behind these responses and the potential hazards of them.

Klein wrote of idealisation in *Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms.* She argues idealisation starts with the first object, the breast, which takes the shape of the "good" object and leads to idealisation of said object. Klein argues that in times of heightened anxiety this idealisation can become excessive and used as a means to escape perceived persecution. In *The Origins of Transference* Klein writes,

"The infant's relative security is based on turning the good object into an ideal one as protection against the dangerous and persecuting object."

Applying Klein's idealisation theory in a psychosocial reading of the responses to Harris, it could be argued that she has come to represent the "good" object for many of her supporters. Harris is seen as an antidote to President Trump's toxic masculinity and the voice for women across American fighting for reproductive rights. She has framed herself as a pioneer for women's rights, promising to turn the tide on restrictions on reproductive rights, and positioning herself as an empathetic, transformational leader. Her campaign has leaned heavily into her as a frank and honest leader who is unafraid of challenging patriarchal discourse.

Klein argues that, when in the paranoid schizoid position, the splitting of objects occurs as a defence mechanism. Objects are only "good" and "bad", integration is not possible. Klein argues that the alternative position to this is the depressive position, in which objects are integrated as a mix of both the "good" and the "bad". Within the polarising environment that is the United States in 2024 it could be argued that splitting, in the paranoid schizoid position, is at an all-time high. For many followers of Harris, she is a representation of the "good" and an antidote to the "bad" that is the right-wing, patriarchal politics of the MAGA movement. She is also the "good" in terms of women's equality and an answer to the patriarchal dominance. So too can she be seen as an embodiment of the "bad" for her detractors.

Throughout the campaign of 2024 we have seen Harris framed as a potentially historic figure; she has been held up as the potential first woman and woman of colour who would change the tides of patriarchal power. However, for her detractors she has been labelled "crazy" and "dangerous", seen as a culmination of the left-wing woke agenda. Klein argues that as the idealisation of the object is a defence against the perceived persecutory object it is unstable and liable to break down.

At the start of the 2024 election, when she became the Democrat nominee, Harris was seen by her supporters as the "good" object on to which all phantasies of the perfect woman leader could be projected. This is an unsustainable position to be in, especially when one is running for the highest office in the country. Once the result of the election became evident, the move into persecution started with pundits calling her a weak candidate. Whilst women politicians running for president remain a novelty haunted by the "first" frame, so is the potential for them to be idealised and subsequently persecuted ever present. Only by allowing women to move into the same integrated state as men will such a lens be removed from women candidates. Then, as integrated objects in the minds of their followers, will they be able to make the same mistakes as men and be seen as viable candidates for executive office.

Kamala Harris campaign failed to keep Democratic social coalition together

There was a consensus among party elites that Harris was the best suited to replace Biden in the contest with a resurgent former President Donald Trump. The assumption was that sidestepping Harris with any other candidate would not have gone down well with the base of the party. Harris' loss to former president Donald Trump seemed to be a remote possibility to her campaign.

But on November 6 the world woke up to a second Trump presidency. How did this happen? It has been argued the 2024 presidential contest was always going to be difficult for any Democrat with more than two-thirds of Americans saying that the country was on the wrong track. Trump became the working class and anti-war candidate in 2024, and on the economy he had a record that could not be ignored despite all the sophistry from his opponents.

That said, what has been stunning is that for the first time since 2001 a Republican has not only won the electoral college but also the popular vote, and majorities in the Senate and the House. Trump got more votes compared to 2020 in almost all but a few states. Even in deep blue states Trump got gained by +3 to +11 in New York. This must be seen as a landslide.

How does one make sense of such a clear verdict for a candidate who clearly has numerous character flaws? All the indications from the exit polls suggest a significant realignment in the social base of the two parties. This must be seen as voters' signaling approval/rejection of the policy preferences of the two parties and campaign platforms of the candidates.

All elections are won or lost depending on how campaigns articulate a series of issues in minds of voters to bring together a winning social coalition. Historically the Democratic base comprised of racial minorities, women, LGBTQ+, and the working class. The base of the party was aligned to progressive agendas on economics and culture. Whereas the Republican base comprised of White men, business owners, upper-middle-class professionals, and evangelicals aligned with tax cuts and cultural issues such as restrictions on abortion rights.

The expectation was that Harris would succeed in building a larger social coalition with the likelihood of electing the first Black woman president. But in 2024, the Trump-led Republican party has become more a working-class party that attracts working men cutting across social differences in race and ethnicity including Latinos and Blacks. The shift had started in 2016 when Trump took over the Republican party in an insurgent campaign. Democrats were leery to acknowledge that Trump-led Republicans have cut into the traditional Democratic base and make the necessary course correction on issues like the economy, immigration, and interventionist wars. But the Harris campaign chose go tactical by cutting their losses among Black and Latino men while increasing the turnout in their favor among women. They even resorted to scolding these groups for ignoring serious flaws in Trump's character and likely furthering misogynism.

It was expected her position on reproductive rights would help save the blue wall in battle-ground states. Just a few days before the voting day a poll dropped that appeared to back the claim that women may likely help Harris win despite the social realignment in the base of the two parties. Trump's campaign succeeded in countering the reproductive rights issue with its message of protecting women from criminals among immigrants and transgender men in bathrooms. Trump got more women, especially among Latinos, votes compared to 2020.

Harris failed to counter Trump's forging of a new social coalition. Trump's attacks calling Harris a "California liberal" forced her to disavow past left-leaning policy positions on some crucial issues such as the economy and immigration and moving to the center, thus vacating the left space.

There was an opportunity for Harris to reset the campaign in her image. Harris tried to reinvent herself as a centrist politician largely as a response to the Republican line of attack. However, in the process, Harris lost the authenticity that she had displayed in her performance on the Senate committees that propelled her into the national limelight as a strong woman leader.

The problem was that it was easier to change the sound bites and campaign narrative but tough to change the authentic identity of Vice President Harris. When Harris said in interviews that her policy positions had changed but her values were the same, it only played into the inauthenticity problem.

Does this mean that Trump has changed the Republican party to a more working-class and open to minorities for the good? This depends on how social coalitions were forged. Was the new coalition entirely based on shared policy preferences? In some cases, coalitions come together because of shared antagonism towards some groups as the other, especially migrants coming across the southern border. We see this in ethno-nationalist-populist movements across many democracies. Scholars will have to dig deeper into the increased support of Blacks and Latino for Trump's Republican party to see if this is a one-off case or if we are witnessing a realignment in the social base of the two parties.

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Revisiting Indian-American identity in the 2024 U.S. presidential election

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In my previous U.S. Election Analysis published in 2020, I argued that non-white Democratic political candidates are more likely than their Republican counterparts to highlight their racial identities. This trend was particularly evident when comparing Vice President Kamala Harris' engagement with her Indian heritage to that of former Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal. During the 2020 election cycle, Harris was vocal about her Indian roots, reflecting the Democratic Party's emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism. In contrast, Jindal downplayed his ethnic identity, focusing instead on his Christian faith and tough stance on immigration. While Harris has remained consistent in her approach to her Indian heritage, the 2024 presidential election cycle reveals a shift in how Indian identity is being discussed within the Republican Party. Rising figures like Vivek Ramaswamy and Usha Vance have outwardly embraced their Indian and Hindu backgrounds, framing them as assets to the Republican Party and the nation.

To understand this shift, one must look at the changing political alignment of Indian-Americans. Historically, Indian-Americans have been a reliably Democratic voting bloc. Many saw the Democratic Party as more welcoming to racial minorities and immigrant communities. However, this trend has begun to change since the 2020 election. According to the 2024 Indian American Attitudes survey by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the percentage of Indian-American voters identifying with the Democratic Party has decreased from 56% in 2020 to 47% in 2024. Meanwhile, the percentage identifying with the Republican Party has risen from 15% to 21%. Additionally, there has been a 9 percentage-point increase in Trump support among Indian Americans between 2020 and 2024.

Among these changing dynamics, a notable finding is the increase in support for Trump among younger, U.S.-born Indian-American men. The survey revealed that support for Trump among Indian-American men under 40 surged from 23% in 2020 to 48% in 2024. This dramatic shift suggests that shared identity with a candidate, which was once thought to drive support, may need to be reevaluated by researchers studying voting patterns. Harris' case in 2024 reveals an interesting nuance, that shared identity may resonate more for first-generation immigrants than for their U.S.-born counterparts, who navigate a different set of cultural and political dynamics.

When it comes to Harris specifically, previous research has attributed the waning support to factors like anti-Black sentiments within the Indian-American community or fiscally conservative views, given that Indian-Americans are among the highest earning immigrant groups in the U.S. While these are certainly factors, a deeper look suggests that Harris' engagement with identity politics, which often centers race and gender, may have alienated some Indian-American voters, particularly younger men.

The *Juggernaut*, a media platform that covers stories on the South Asian diaspora, summarized some of the reasons for the dimming enthusiasm amongst young Indian-American men. These range from Harris' association with what this demographic perceives as "too liberal" and "woke" policies to the fact that they are simply reluctant to vote for a woman. This is of course not unique to the Indian-American context. The appeal of Trump's hyper-masculine rhetoric has resonated with a broad demographic of young men who feel threatened by discourse around identity and the idea of a female president. For Indian-American men, many of whom feel marginalized in mainstream American culture, Trump's embrace of traditional masculinity presents a powerful counter-narrative to the history of emasculated portrayals of South Asian American men in popular media.

Vivek Ramaswamy, a Republican presidential candidate in the 2024 race, represents a new kind of Indian-American politician who has fully embraced his heritage while aligning himself with conservative values. Unlike Bobby Jindal, who distanced himself from his Indian roots during his political career, Ramaswamy frames his Indian and Hindu identity as his distinguishing factor and as central to his personal and political philosophy. In interviews, he highlights how his Hindu upbringing shapes his desire to make American "concepts like faith, and family, and patriotism cool again for the next generation."

Further, Ramaswamy's anti-"woke" rhetoric, which challenges the Democratic Party's approach to race and identity, may have resonated with young Indian-American men who are growing critical of what they view as the over-politicization of race. Ramaswamy's calls for a return to merit-based systems, self-reliance, and the celebration of individual success reflect the very values that the model minority narrative has historically associated with Indian-Americans. His rhetoric challenges the idea that identity should define political affiliation, positioning himself as someone who embraces his background without being confined by it.

This shift raises important questions for the future of the Republican Party. Can the GOP attract the growing Indian-American vote without alienating its traditional base? Ultimately, the increasing number of Indian-Americans, particularly men, identifying with the Republican Party may be part of a broader realignment in U.S. politics — one in which gender may be more determinative of party affiliation than ethnic and cultural identities. In the aftermath of the 2024 election cycle, the Republican Party's relationship with the Indian-American community will be a key dynamic to track.

Harris missed an opportunity to sway swing voters by not morally reframing her message

Millions of people watch the Democratic and Republican national conventions every four years to learn about and evaluate the presidential candidates. In 2024, there were 28.9 million viewers for Kamala Harris' acceptance address and 28.4 million for Donald Trump's acceptance speech. A presidential nomination acceptance address is an important opportunity to speak to both the party faithful and politically independent swing voters, which can increase a candidate's electability. A growing body of research on the concept of moral reframing shows that an effective way for politicians to sway voters who are not members of their political party is to use language that matches those voters' moral values. By that standard, Harris' acceptance speech represents a missed opportunity to expand her base of support, while Trump morally reframed more often.

Moral reframing is part of Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), which argues that conservatives are more persuaded by appeals focused on the moral values of loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation, while liberals are moved by care/harm and fairness/cheating moral appeals. Based on these insights, moral reframing research has demonstrated that those on the political left and right can have their views and voting preferences changed when presented with arguments that are consistent with their moral values. For example, conservatives are more supportive of same-sex marriage and universal healthcare when those political positions are argued using loyalty and sanctity moral values, respectively. Liberals increase their support of high military spending when exposed to a fairness moral appeal. Interestingly, morally reframing an issue changes more minds than compromising on an issue, while failing to reframe an issue can harden voters' existing views. Moreover, reframing issues to speak the moral language of the other side does not upset a candidate's core ideological supporters.

As a result, there was a real incentive for Harris and Trump to morally reframe when they discussed their political views. Doing so could help broaden their coalition. To find out how successful each candidate was at moral reframing, I examined the transcripts of their acceptance speeches (as provided by The American Presidency Project at the University of California at Santa Barbara) using eMFDScore, an open-source Python library based on the extended Moral Foundations Dictionary (eMFD), which includes thousands of words related to the five moral values of Moral Foundations Theory. Whenever a passage in the transcripts included words in the eMFD, eMFDScore determined which of the five moral foundations was the most dominant. Transcript passages from Harris were deemed to be morally reframed if eMFDScore found that loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, or sanctity/degradation moral values dominated. Trump's passages were considered morally reframed if care/harm or fairness/cheating values dominated. Also, eMFDScore determined whether the sentiment of the dominant moral foundation in each passage was positive or negative. In addition to analyzing the whole transcripts of Harris and Trump, eMFDScore examined specific passages dealing with the top issues of Americans, according to Gallup polling in July 2024: poor leadership, immigration, economy in general, inflation, and unifying the country.

Findings indicate that Trump morally reframed more than Harris. Of the five top issues examined, Trump reframed all but leadership, and his whole transcript was also morally reframed. Harris reframed only the economy and leadership. For example, Harris' reframing of the economy used loyalty/betrayal moral appeals to make the case that she is loyal to the middle class while Trump betrays middle-class voters in favor of billionaires:

I will bring together labor and workers, and small-business owners and entrepreneurs and American companies to create jobs, to grow our economy, and to lower the cost of everyday needs like health care and housing and groceries. We will provide access to capital for small-business owners and entrepreneurs and founders. And we will end America's housing shortage, and protect Social Security and Medicare. Now compare that to Donald Trump, because I think everyone here knows he doesn't actually fight for the middle class. Not, he doesn't actually fight for the middle class. Instead, he fights for himself and his billionaire friends.

An example of Trump's reframing is seen in his discussion of immigration, which includes care/harm moral language to argue that his opponent's border policy is hurting Americans:

Today, our cities are flooded with illegal aliens. Americans are being squeezed out of the labor force and their jobs are taken. By the way, you know who's taking the jobs, the jobs that are created? One hundred and seven percent of those jobs are taken by illegal aliens. And you know who's being hurt the most by millions of people pouring into our country? The Black population and the Hispanic population. Because they're taking the jobs from our Black population, our Hispanic population. And they're also taking them from unions. The unions are suffering because of it.

The fact that Trump morally reframed more than Harris is not surprising given that previous research has found that Republican presidential candidates are five times more likely than Democratic candidates to reframe. Surprising or not, the lack of moral reframing by Harris means she missed a chance to craft a message that could feel morally familiar to, and therefore resonate with, a broader spectrum of voters in an increasingly polarized country.

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In pursuit of the true populist at the dawn of America's golden age

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The U.S. presidential election is a highly publicized event, often regarded as the most extensively broadcasted election globally. In the weeks and months leading up to Election Day, candidates competing for the White House receive blanket media coverage, with every speech, rally, and debate widely disseminated across numerous platforms. Given the significant influence and authority vested in the presidency, this intense media focus is unsurprising, as the election outcome has substantial national and international implications.

The broadcast media's central role in the election process is well understood by campaign managers and party leaders, who carefully craft the public image of their candidates to appeal to voters nationwide. Leaders from both the Democratic and Republican parties work to present their candidates in a way that resonates with Americans from coast to coast, whether in California, New York, the redwood forests, or along the Gulf Stream waters. This curated media presence is essential for shaping public perception and garnering support in an election landscape where image can be as influential as policy.

However, given the stark ideological contrasts between the Democratic and Republican parties, there are inevitable differences in how figures like Kamala Harris and Donald Trump perform on television. Each brought a unique style that aligned with the values and expectations of their respective voter bases. These distinct performative approaches were carefully tailored to influence specific groups of voters; after all, if their media strategies didn't sway public opinion, there would be little reason to continue investing in such meticulously constructed personas (see e.g., Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote).

At first glance, both Kamala Harris and Donald Trump appeared to embody the ideological core of their respective parties. Harris represented the Democrat's emphasis on collective welfare and global cooperation, while Trump reflected the Republican focus on individual liberties, economic growth, and national sovereignty, all central themes of the conservative ideology. These attributes made each of them highly symbolic figures within their own specific political landscapes.

However though ideologically opposed, Harris and Trump did share similarities in their performative styles and appeal, both aligning with principles of effective populism (see e.g., The Power of Populists). Trump, however, was in a stronger position to capitalize on traditional populist narratives, swaying undecided voters who may favour a Republican president and support his potential return to the White House. His messaging resonated clearly with the national zeitgeist, reinforcing a brand that's already widely recognized. Harris, in contrast, faced the challenge of conveying a more complex populist narrative that balanced progressivism with inclusivity, requiring a more nuanced approach to connect with a broader audience who may be cautious about favouring her at the ballot box.

Harris, therefore, had to convey her authenticity effectively to persuade voters that she could genuinely advocate for the rights and interests of ordinary people. Such communication of authenticity is critical in establishing a connection with the public, that would have allowed her to build trust and resonate with voters on a personal level.

Mediated authenticity can indeed be a powerful asset in effective leadership, as it fosters relatability and credibility. However, few politicians manage to convey this trait convincingly, as it requires a careful balance of sincerity and strategic communication—a skill that only a handful of leaders master successfully.

The concept of mediated authenticity is well-illustrated by the political rise of Boris Johnson in the UK. Despite being polarizing and often unpopular, Johnson was perceived by many as authentic, which, combined with his distinctively performative style, helped him dominate the political landscape and secure a historic majority. His perceived genuineness gave him an edge over other politicians, resonating with voters in a way that overshadowed his low popularity scores and divisive reputation.

Johnson's eventual fall from grace, however, was not due to a typical democratic process or shifting voter sentiment. Instead, it was his disregard for his own government's policies and standards that led to his downfall, demonstrating how quickly public tolerance can wane when authenticity is coupled with perceived hypocrisy. His journey underscores the volatile power of authenticity in politics, showing both its capacity to elevate leaders and its potential to hasten their decline when trust is broken.

Prior to the election, both Harris and Trump were virtually parallel in terms of popularity. Which raised a crucial question regarding voter intentions: how will their distinct political styles influence their chances of success? Trump's traditional populist approach, characterized by performative rhetoric and strong emotional appeals, clearly resonated with the electorate. Meanwhile, Harris' emphasis on authenticity and genuine connection with voters failed to make a mark.

As the election unfolded, it was clear that Trump's performative style would successfully propel him back to the White House while Harris' authentic approach failed to create a compelling path to the Oval Office. The interplay between these contrasting styles determined not just the outcome of the election, but also the broader direction of American politics for the years to come.

Language and the floor in the 2024 Harris vs Trump televised presidential debate

The importance of televised presidential debates to the U.S presidential elections was underscored in 2024. In the first debate between Biden and Trump on June 27th, Biden's hesitant and ponderous performance undoubtably played a large part in his eventual resignation as the presidential candidate and his endorsement of Kamala Harris as his replacement less than month later. The second U.S. presidential televised debate was held by *ABC News* on September 10th, and although viewers' polls suggested that Harris had "won" the debate and performed well, there were some unusual communicative and linguistic features of this event.

One of the most noticeable aspects was the differing non-verbal communication of Harris and Trump. Both from the outset, when Harris appeared to surprise Trump by approaching him for a handshake as they took their places, and throughout the debate. Harris frequently turned towards Trump when he was speaking, smiling and laughing at his claims and shaking her head. In contrast, Trump faced resolutely ahead for the entire debate and did not look towards Harris at all, even when he addressed her directly. These stances were reinforced by the language the candidates used to address each other. Trump only referred to Harris as "she", frequently coupling her with "Biden" and using "they". He did not once refer to her by name. In contrast, Harris mainly referred to her opponent using his full name or as the "former president".

Political televised debates are designed to ensure the equal division of turns between the speakers and the Harris Vs Trump debate was no exception. The speakers were allowed to have two minutes to give an answer, two minutes for rebuttals and one minute for responses. There was no studio audience and the microphones of the speakers were turned off when it was not their speaking turn. Close examination of the debate floor shows that the debate proceeded in a much more disorderly fashion than this planned structure would suggest, however. For a debate format designed to permit the equalisation of turns between speakers, the division of the floor was actually all but equal with Donald Trump taking 73 speaking turns (approximately 8,000 words) and Kamala Harris only 32 turns (approximately 5,900 words).

Although the main questions were allocated equally by the moderators, Trump accrued more turns partly because the moderators intervened on his speaking turn to press him to answer the question or to factually correct a statement he had made. This was something Trump complained about after the debate, claiming the debate was biased as a "three to one" attack. However, the majority of speaking turns accrued by Trump were gained by resisting the moderator and interrupting in order to respond to a point that Harris had made against him or to refute a factual correction made by the moderator. Trump exerted control over the debate by taking his turn before the moderator invited him to do so, by resisting the moderators' requests to stop speaking and by taking unallocated turns by insisting "I need to respond to that" when it was not his turn. Notably, Harris only tried to insist on a response in this way twice in the whole debate, and was only successful in gaining a turn once.

It is not surprising that Harris did not attempt to break the interactional rules in this way, as previous researchhas shown that women can be judged extremely harshly for such transgressions. Political performances by women have been described as a tight-rope of impression management where they have to negotiate the perceived dissonance of femininity with political leadership. They must appear strong (as a leader) but not aggressive (as a woman), with negative judgements following gendered and racial assumptions about what is too loud, too aggressive and too dominant. Harris manages these competing expectations well and mitigates her attacks on Trump for his views and policies with her smiling facial expressions and open posture.

While it is unclear whether capturing the debate floor in this aggressive way gave Trump an advantage with the viewing public, it is clear that he dominated the interaction and gained more than his fair share of the speaking time. Certainly, the interruptions, disdain for the rules, for Harris and the moderators did not appear to disadvantage him, as these aspects were not mentioned in post-debate commentaries, which tended to focus on Harris' success. It is equally clear that despite operating skilfully within the parameters available to her, Harris would not have been given these affordances.

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Nullifying the noise of a racialized claim: Nonverbal communication and the 2024 Harris-Trump debate

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Debating populists is not an easy task for mainstream politicians. Populists tend to harp on a few pet issues at the expense of other pressing policy concerns and engage in a 'post-truth' mode of discourse that opens fissures and strikes at emotional tone setting. Reasoned retorts can rarely undo the initial impression that a wild accusation can make. But nonverbal displays can sometimes offer helpful cues.

Thus, it was that towards the end of the 2024 general election debate, after Kamala Harris accused Donald Trump of killing an immigration bill that was being considered in Congress last February and taunted him about the length and vacuousness of his rallies, that he defended his rally attendance and asserted with full throated confidence that:

"In Springfield, they're eating the dogs. The people that came in [Haitian immigrants], they're eating the cats. They're eating… they're eating the pets of the people that live there."

In the split screen format of the debate, Harris' expression shifted from a critical but engaged stare in Trump's direction to a dismissive laugh of disbelief and head shaking at what she had just heard. According to *The Guardian*, the false accusation had apparently originated from a viral video of a Springfield resident complaining at a city council meeting, without proof, that immigrants had killed ducks from a local park to eat for food.

Because of its virality and racial undertones, this fabricated trope—exaggerated beyond even the original claim to household pets—was now being asserted as a dog whistle to anti-immigrant voters in an American presidential debate.

Harris' reaction captured the shock and absurdity of the moment but it was Trump's voice, channeling the faux outrage of a professional wrestler, that then went viral in the biggest meme of the campaign season. In the creative culture of the internet, pugs were suddenly shown in frying pans while cats peered out from deep skillets, all to a synchronized beat and Trump's absurdist claims. Harris' point about his efforts to kill the immigration bill was all but lost.

With rational discussion over legitimate policy differences evacuated from political debate, visual and nonverbal communication take on outsized importance. Indeed, over the past decade our research into social media response to presidential debates has consistently shown that viewers respond more to visual and tonal channels of candidate performance than to the substance of what's said.

Similar to his 2016 debate against Hillary Clinton, Trump was much less bound to the norms of rational discourse than his more erudite and articulate opponent. Whether due to gender dynamics, a sense of propriety, or even their legal background as lawyers, both Clinton and Harris followed the rules whereas Trump felt free to blather anything that came to mind. A recent analysis by Ezra Klein of the *New York Times* has described this propensity as an extreme lack of inhibition, the inverse of conscientiousness.

Along with signs of cognitive decline widely noted in mainstream news coverage, one wonders how this lack of inhibition will play out in a second Trump presidency.

Trump's performative spontaneity, hyperbolic phrasing, use of comedic gestures, and put downs of opponents and disliked groups are weaponized elements of his communication repertoire. In populist delivery, the conviction with which assertions are made stands in for verifiable facts because it feels emotionally compelling. Coupled with the visible display of anger, ever present in populist speeches and appearances, targets of blame are clearly identified. And therein lies a danger.

In the days following the election, the *Associated Press* reported racist text messages invoking slavery, some referencing the incoming presidential administration, were sent across the country to Black men, women and students, including middle schoolers, prompting an investigation by the FBI and FCC. Dog whistles, even when comedically performed and circulated as memes, find their intended audience.

Many factors go into an individual's vote for president but arguments by the Harris campaign about democratic stability, dangers posed by Trump, and the enthusiasm voters should have for status quo politics fell short. While progressive Democrats were wildly enthusiastic about Harris' emergence onto the presidential stage with an initial message of hope over fear, not every element of the traditional Democratic coalition was equally enthused, younger Black and Hispanic male voters in particular.

Harris arguably did most things right, but the truncated campaign only really started with the Democratic National Convention in mid-August and allowed little time to adjust. Like Hillary Clinton before her, Harris was caught in the bind of campaigning as a highly accomplished woman (of color) against a transgressive opponent who reveled in racialized, misogynistic attack and flaunted the rules of civilized debate. Nullifying the noise while communicating a message of hope was always going to be a tough assignment.

A pseudo-scientific revolution? The puzzling relationship between science deference and denial

Science and other forms of expertise were very much on the ballot in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election. And while partisan divisions in deference to scientific authority are longstanding, I argue that science was politicized in new and paradoxical ways in 2024.

As I argue in my book *Anti-Scientific Americans,* Republicans' attitudes toward the scientific community have become hostile (and often highly personal) following the rise of the Tea Party movement. Reminiscent of J.D. Vance's comments in the 2024 vice presidential debate – where he claimed that PhD economists "don't have common sense and don't have wisdom," and that "listening to common sense" over "listening to experts" is the most effective way to resolve trade disputes – I show that Republicans have become increasingly likely to believe that policy ought to be guided by common sense wisdom, over expert evidence.

Correspondingly, public preferences for the role that scientists play in the policymaking process has become polarized on the basis of political partisanship. For example, Vice President Harris raised concerns about former President Trump's relationship with the authors of Project 2025, which -- as part of its policy vision for a second Trump presidency -- would empower the president to remove scientists and other credentialed experts from positions within the federal bureaucracy. That includes climate scientists working for the Environmental Protection Agency, economists working in the Department of Labor, and medical/health professionals working in the Department of Health and Human Services.

Yet, beyond the typical fault lines lies an interesting paradox in the way that science-skeptical candidates - including the Republican nominee for President Donald Trump and independent candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (RFK) - talked about their relationship with science.

Take, for example, former President Trump. In his only debate with Vice President Harris in September 2024, his opponent claimed that economics professors at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business (Trump's alma mater) viewed his protectionist economic policies as financially unsound. Trump's response was not (as it has been in the past) to deride economic experts, but to claim that the evidence was on his side. Trump argued:

"Look, I went to the Wharton School of Finance and many of those professors, the top professors, think my plan is a brilliant plan, it's a great plan."

Similarly, noted vaccine skeptic and third-party presidential candidate RFK Jr., routinely (and falsely) claimed that he was "not anti-vaccine" on the 2024 campaign trail. In support of this view, the non-profit Children's Defense Fund – his non-profit anti-vaccine advocacy group – hosts a repository of hundreds of selectively-picked and fringe scientific articles claiming that a wide range of vaccines are unsafe and/or ineffective. RFK regularly made mention of studies like these on the 2024 campaign trail.

Here, we again see RFK Jr. co-opting the language of science – i.e., attempting to provide evidence-based insights from peer-reviewed academic articles in support of his talking points – in order to cast doubt on scientific consensus. And perhaps it is precisely because Kennedy and Trump speak the same language on this score that Trump promised Kennedy the opportunity to "go wild on the medicines [sic]" in exchange for his political endorsement.

These examples raise an important question: why do science skeptical candidates appeal to scientific authority, in order to reject it?

The answer, I argue, may be that we may be witnessing what I call a "pseudo-scientific revolution" in American politics, particularly on the ideological right.

Conservatives' faith in expertise has been souring for years and decreased precipitously since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This may in part result from views that scientists and academics are politically motivated to protect liberal worldviews has increased; perhaps because left-leaning policymakers are more likely to draw on scientific consensus when formulating their policy responses to pressing climate, economic, health, and other issues.

While conservatives' views toward experts and expertise have soured, however, it is not necessarily the case that they display less mastery of or respect for the scientific method. As Dan Kahan demonstrates, Democrats and Republicans tend to display similar levels of science-related knowledge and scientific reasoning; so long as the metrics used to evaluate science-related competencies make no mention of issues that have become politically polarizing.

And so, it may be the case that candidates like Donald Trump and RFK Jr. are engaging in a pseudo-reclamation of scientific expertise by drawing a distinction between what they portray "real" (conservative) science that lies at the fringes of scientific credibility, and "politically biased" or "fake" science that more accurately reflects expert research and policy opinion. In many ways, this project mirrors the right's efforts to portray mainstream press outlets as "fake news," while elevating alternative conservative media sources -- that routinely engage in the spread of political and science-related misinformation -- as the "real truth."

This psuedo-scientific revolution could fundamentally change American politics in the years to come. Characterized by a paradoxical relationship between scientific deference and denial on the ideological right, it threatens to undermine evidence-based policymaking by trading falsehoods from pseudo-scientific discourse in place of expert consensus.

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Amidst recent lows for women congressional candidates, women at the state level thrive

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The number of women running for the House of Representatives in 2024 dropped by more than 100 from 2022. While having a woman running for president would typically encourage more women to run for Congress, Kamala Harris' campaign has been quite short. The goal of reaching gender parity is focused on recruiting women to run for office at the local, state, and national levels. This goal is supported by numerous organizations such as Emily's List; Sally's List; Vote, Run, Lead; and Represent Women. Despite these broad efforts, the number of women in Congress has yet to reach parity, and fewer women are running for office in notably visible roles.

Although many efforts have been made to recruit women to office, the drop in women running for Congress indicates that women are not returning. Increasing the number of women in office is not only about recruiting women but also about retaining the ones who serve. Why is it that in a world of strong incumbency advantage, women do not stay in office?

Why women won't stay. Expectations are key and are often the underlying issue differentiating men and women in office. Women face barriers to elected office that men typically do not, including personal attacks and electoral challenges

The high profile of women in Congress means that women are often targeted. In fact, women are "three times more likely" to be on the receiving end of threats than men. Most notably, women running for office are often on the receiving end of overtly sexual comments, harassment from constituents, and threatening behavior.

The discrepancy between men and women is amplified by the general lack of electoral support that women receive. Men, however, are placed in better seats and face fewer pressures when running for office. When a party is well-positioned to win a district women are encouraged to drop out of the race.

Where are the women? While women may not be running at the top of the legislative ticket, more than 4,000 women are running for office in U.S. state legislatures. In 2024, every state legislative chamber holding an election has at least one woman running for office. It is worth noting that Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Virginia hold elections in off years. Additionally, Alabama, Maryland, and the Michigan Senate are elected on 4-year terms and not holding state legislative elections in the 2024 cycle.

The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) compiles information on women across all offices each election. For the 2024 general election, of the 4,000 women running, 1,679 are incumbents and 1,282 are electoral challengers.

Figure 1 shows the states where there are more women incumbents and challengers (for the general election). By comparing the number of women running to the number of seats in each legislative chamber, we can see where women are more apt to be successful.

The top five states with the highest percentage of incumbents running, as compared to seats in the chamber, are New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Washington, and Illinois. In New Mexico and Arizona, the number of women running is equal to the number of seats in the legislature. California, Nevada, and Colorado's lower chambers have more women running than there are seats in the chamber. When evaluating all the states with elections, there are 52 state legislative chambers with enough women running that 50% of the current seats could be filled by women.

The percentage of women incumbents in state senates is quite low, but some states, like California, are seeing more women challengers than incumbents. In the Primary election, incumbent women were very successful, winning 95.6% of the time. Newcomers were also quite successful; challengers won primaries at a rate of 87.7%. Where women fared the worst was in open-seat elections—at 67.1%.

Why lower-level offices matter. There is a pipeline to be considered—for women to rise to state legislative office and, later, Congress. They need to be viewed as competitive with men, often meaning they need more experience. Colorado, a state that continually has high rates of women in the state legislature, is also the state with the most women serving in local government.

As women continue to attain more seats in state legislatures, the emphasis on retention will become increasingly important. The Nevada legislature has (and maintains) a majority-women legislature. The success of women in state legislative elections during the 2024 cycle will foreshadow the success of women in Congress over the next few elections, as women extend their careers beyond the state. Seeing women in office at the local and state levels encourages women to run for office in the future. The illustration of attainability is not to be underrated.

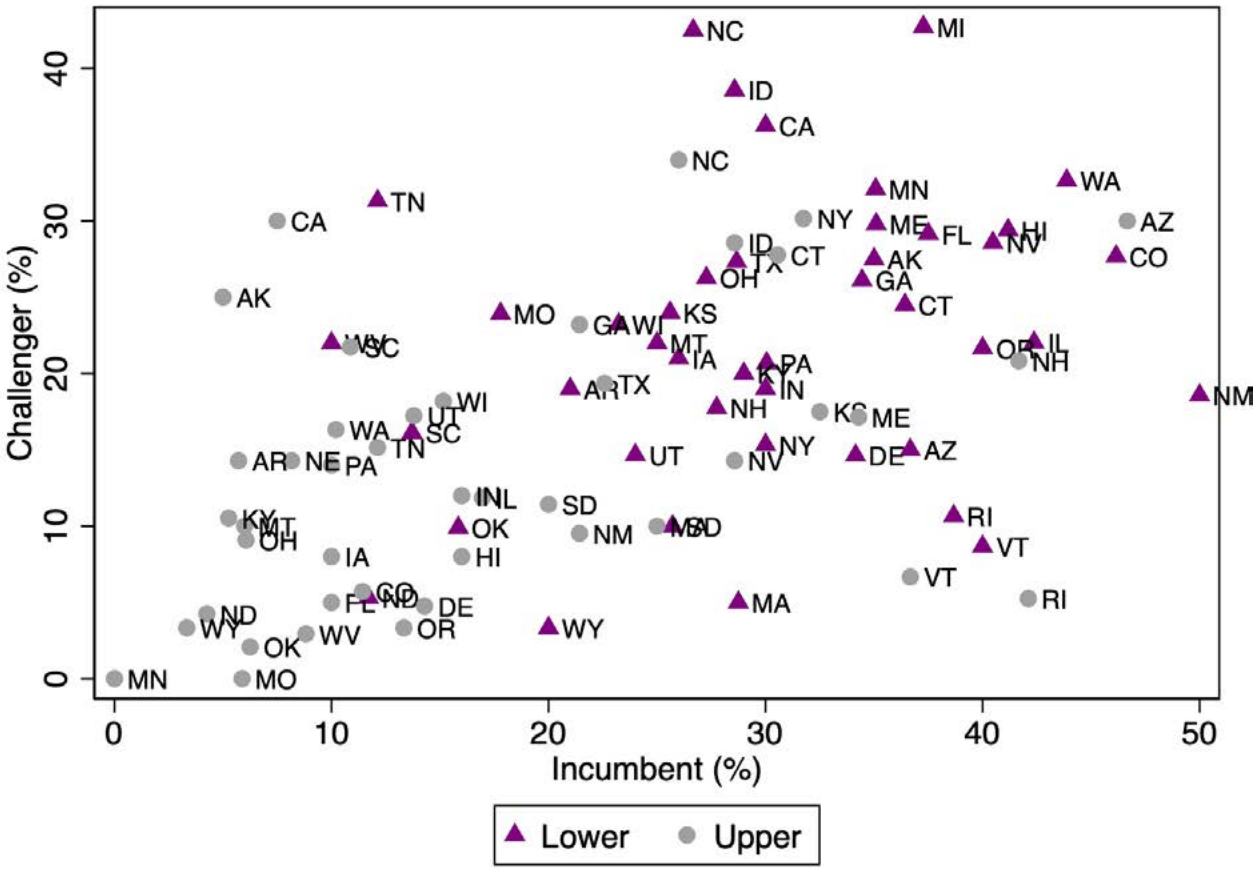

Figure 1: The Percentage of Women Incumbents and Challengers in the 2024 State Legislative Elections (compared to total legislative seats)

(Compiled by the author using CAWP, 2024 Women State Legislative Candidates)

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News and journalism

The powers that aren't: News organizations and the 2024 election

Just six years ago, journalists mounted a collective front against Trump, in 2024, they stood down.

We're in round two, but it's already been a knockout insofar as standing up to President Donald Trump's assault on professional journalism. News organizations have short memories of just how badly Donald Trump treated the American news media—weaponizing the term "fake news" to describe the real news that he didn't like.

In this 2024 election cycle, both the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* declined to endorse a president for candidate. Their non-endorsements got the most attention from the chattering class, especially as both newspapers are owned by billionaires and represent the fourth and sixth largest newspapers by circulation in the U.S.

The non-endorsement trend goes far beyond these newspapers, though. As per an Axios analysis, only about 30% of the nation's top 100-circulation newspapers endorsed a presidential candidate in 2024. That's down from 80% in 2016. Gannett's 200+ newspapers, including *U.S. Today*, did not endorse anyone this election cycle, while Hedge-fund owned Tribune Publishing and MediaNews Group made the call in 2022 that their collective 68+ dailies and 300 weekly papers would not endorse anyone for president, according to Axios' reporting.

These endorsements tell us where a news organization – where the institution of journalism itself – stand as a pillar of civil society. Journalists are "custodians of conscience," and can challenge power even within the framework of objectivity insofar as they are pushing against the excess and corruption of powerful institutions and people, as scholars James Ettema and Theodore Glasser argued.

This failure to endorse a presidential candidate must be seen as not just an abdication of moral leadership, but a deeply concerning sign that the economic fragility of the American news media has compromised news judgement itself.

Perhaps news organizations have been hit just once too hard on their institutional heads by the crisis facing the news industry to remember what they once did together, sick of being bullied and denigrated by the then-president. On August 16, 2018, about 350 newspapers across the U.S. collectively stood up against Trump's anti-media attacks, using their editorial pages to defend the importance of journalism and the freedom of the press, many with the message, "We are not the enemy."

As Matt Carlson, Sue Robinson, and Seth C. Lewis write in their book, *News after Trump*, "they went beyond just chiding Trump in their fight to reclaim power over… "journalism's grand narrative; they were seeking to reclaim relevance." By the end of the month, more than 600 news organizations had pushed back, from student newspapers to radio outlets to community papers, according to the authors.

Despite Kamala Harris' best intentions, we are indeed going back – back to a president that said two days before the 2024 election that he wouldn't "mind so much" if journalists were shot at his rallies.

But somehow, news organizations far and wide have chosen not to weigh in on suitability of this candidate for office. Most journalists themselves would admit what the social science tells us, which is that presidential endorsements really don't shape public opinion. And if endorsements don't matter to the public, then a news organization tipping its hat either way likely wouldn't do much to undermine public trust. With this in mind, *Washington Post* publisher William Lewis' claim that a non-endorsement is actually "a statement in support of our readers' ability to make up their own minds on this, the most consequential of American decisions" seem at best circumspect and at worst, a dishonest excuse for backing down."

News organizations have fact-checked ad nauseum the presidential campaign. Ordinary journalism that would typically take down candidates did not. The will of the people has spoken, and democracy means that people pick winners and losers.

Journalists do not have to be the opposition or the resistance. In fact, the *Washington Post* steadfastly denied this role during Trump's first term, with then-editor Marty Baron saying, "We're not at war with the administration, we're at work." If just six years ago, news organizations banded together to denounce Trump's treatment of journalists, and now most newspapers are unwilling to even take a stand, we should really be worried about whether news organizations will be able to even "do the work."

But sometimes, the winners of democratic elections can also undermine the democratic processes that brought them to power. The mainstream news media may not be able to just do "work" as usual because the work has not been enough to check power. A robust defense of democracy needn't be politically-aligned; but it is clear that many news organizations are led by executives who may find that simply doing journalism by checking the excess of power is too political and too risky to the bottom line.

The only recourse journalists have if their reporting isn't sticking may be moral leadership, and the question is whether news organizations and their owners will step up to the call to battle against democratic backsliding – but we shouldn't hold our breath hoping.

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Newspaper presidential endorsements: Silence during consequential moment in history

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This was supposed to be an essay about the frames and discourse in American newspaper editorial endorsements of the two leading presidential candidates – Kamala Harris and Donald J. Trump, just like my two previous essays in the 2016 and 2020 editions.

The revered *Washington Post* changed all of that on October 25th when it announced the mind-bogging and mind-blowing decision that it would not endorse a presidential candidate for the first time in 36 years. The newspaper that is credited with exposing the scandal that brought down a president, did not endorse a presidential candidate in the most consequential American presidential election ever. The *Los Angeles Times* had announced the same thing a few days earlier, although it would later say in a news story this is "one of the most astonishing presidential election cycles in modern American history."

More than 5,000 online subscribers of the *Washington Post* cancelled their subscriptions within an hour; by Election Day, more than 250,000 digital subscriptions were cancelled. The *Los Angeles Times*' editorial page editor and two editorial board members resigned. At the *Washington Post*, three editorial board members resigned; leading columnists, including Pulitzer Prize winners, protested the decision, calling it a mistake. More than 32,000 comments were left on the website.

On the heels of the *Los Angeles Times*' and *Washington Post*'s non-endorsement decisions, Gannett Media – the nation's largest newspaper chain, which includes *U.S. Today* (the fourth largest newspaper) – announced that its newspapers would not be endorsing in the presidential race. Others have done the same, whether in 2024 or before.

But was this all so unpredictable?

In the journal article "Editorial advocacy frames explanatory model: An analysis of newspapers withdrawing from presidential endorsements," in 2016, coauthor Ernie Wiggins and I addressed the disturbing trend of major newspapers not endorsing in presidential races. We noted, "In what has been one of the most consistent public forums for the exchange of ideas, which is considered a foundation of democracy, key voices are choosing silence. And these may be voices that are among the most reasoned and well informed, despite attacks on their credibility." Since then, the number of major American newspapers endorsing in presidential elections has dropped to about 35, with Harris endorsed by 30-plus and Trump three.

The primary reasons, which Wiggins and I identified back in 2016, are:

- Impartiality: The public does not separate news pages from editorials, thus endorsements create a sense of bias on the news pages.
- Information: Voters have more access to information these days, especially in the digital age, therefore they are as well-informed as editorialists.
- Independence: Voters should not be told how to vote.
- Influence: There is no evidence that newspaper endorsements are influential.

Even if those reasons ring true, we noted that newspapers endorsements have been an important voice in the public forum. "They are – certainly should be – a voice of reason, which is sorely needed in today's polarization," we wrote, particularly given the presence of misinformation and malinformation.

While we acknowledged that newspaper endorsements might influence only a few thousand people to vote a certain way, those might be the votes that put a candidate over the top, especially in a swing state. But influence is more than telling people how to vote, influence is helping readers understand and reason in order to come to the best decision. We discussed endorsements in the context of mass communications frames, or meaning as a result of the way information and opinion are presented. We pointed out that frames are always present in journalistic content, whether outwardly promoted or not. Thus, newspapers are not avoiding influencing voters by not endorsing.

As noted at the beginning, this was supposed to be an essay about the frames and discourse in newspaper editorial endorsements of the two leading presidential candidates, so let's turn our attention there for a moment. The fact is, the newspaper frames of Donald Trump in the endorsements of his opponent Joe Biden in 2020 did not change in the 2024 endorsements of Harris. That made the non-endorsement decisions in 2024 more puzzling. Those frames, often strongly stated, are he's unfit and has the wrong temperament for the presidency, and he's dangerous to democracy. The frames of Harris focused on her optimism and leadership, but were typically moderate in tone.

It difficult to ignore that newspapers chose to pull out of endorsements when a Woman of Color was at the top of the ticket, even though they opposed her opponent previously and had supported a woman in 2016. It is also difficult to ignore the self-serving business interests of the billionaire owners of the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* who led this year's parade of non-endorsements.

Wiggins and I suggested that the newspapers should realize that their endorsements are advocacy frames that promote a position to help voters make up their minds or reaffirm a decision. As such, they are a significant voice in American democracy.

Trump after news: A moral voice in an empty room?

On January 6, 2021, as we were finishing the final draft of our book News After Trump, we watched in horror as Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol building with the purpose of disrupting the certification of a free and fair election. It was an upsetting moment as well as a warning that all our concerns about Donald Trump and his relationship with journalism were not idle speculation, but in fact tapped into broader concerns about whether the U.S. could remain a functioning republic.

We argued in our book that journalists need to feel empowered to adopt what we call a "moral voice," one that allows them to break from stifling journalistic norms and openly stand up for democracy when it is under threat. This is a moral imperative. Even with a lack of universal agreement about what is or is not moral, such quibbling should not get in the way of journalists' duty to democracy.

Moving ahead to the 2024 election, journalists, in our observations, were more aggressive in defending democracy. In the final weeks of the campaign, we saw clearly Trump's calls for revenge (even violence) against his political opponents and those insufficiently loyal to him, all conveyed through daily news reporting across every medium. Certainly plenty of news coverage normalized Trump as a conventional candidate. But, even if paying minimal attention to news, it would have been hard to miss Trump's authoritarian threats.

In our book, we speak of a "media culture" rather than a system or environment or ecology because we want to capture the range of attributes that a culture possesses: habits, actions, beliefs, community norms, enemies. We have seen in the past few elections a fracturing of this media culture into smaller subcultures, making it difficult to corral attention and bring awareness to what the candidates are doing or saying. In 2024, what was most startling was the deep chasm between the information environments of right-leaning and left-leaning people. We now nurture two mainstream public discourses, and they do not overlap. And further, people who voted for Trump do not believe all of the negative news, from the inappropriateness of his lewd comments and gestures to the legitimacy of his conviction as a felon. It all becomes unproven rumors. When the liberal media is out to get their Trump, voting is a way to right that injustice.

We need to recognize that serious news produced by established journalists is only a small component of the much larger media culture, and a preponderance of competing options, coupled with growing levels of news fatigue and avoidance, makes it difficult for news to break through and actually reach people, let alone influence them. In this election, there were far fewer moments of "Trump versus journalists"—a major topic of *News After Trump* and the landscape that existed in 2015-2020— because Trump had little need to engage with journalists at all, ignoring interview opportunities and bypassing the press to go direct to his supporters via rallies, podcasts, and Truth Social posts.

So, what do we take away from the 2024 election?

We see two major shifts. First, there has been a decentering of journalism as either a news source or an agenda-setter. In its place is a "sprawling network of online content creators that the Trump campaign centered in its media strategy, ultimately granting him unprecedented reach to win over voters and delivering him the election," as Taylor Lorenz wrote for *The Hollywood Reporter*, summing up the impact of influencers such as Joe Rogan, Adin Ross, and Theo Von. Meanwhile, Harris sought to reach young people via influential podcasts like *Call Her Daddy* and a *Saturday Night Live* appearance.

Second, media cultures are even more fractured. A Pew Research Center survey on where people were getting their 2024 election news turned up hundreds of different news sources—a far cry from the more concentrated media environment of the past.

These shifts have implications for how well we understand media cultures, how we study them as researchers, and whether our object of study (journalism) retains its currency. It is to our detriment that we marginalize the study of popular communicators like entertainers, comedians, and influencers; these need to be central to understandings of how media and politics work. As a thought experiment, what if we started over and mapped the media culture as it exists now, rather than based on normative assumptions or past visions? If we did this, where would mainstream journalism go?

We are far from the first to make this observation. We have seen decades of such claims as we have watched the transition from mass communication dominance to platform proliferation. But it is precisely because this trend has become so enduring that we need to pause and look around and realize that *this* election reflects the consequences of a fractured media culture. This is not a call to move backwards, as impossible as that would be, but to recognize in all its fullness the challenges that lie ahead.

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Under media oligarchy: Profit and power trumped democracy once again

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Once again, the 2024 election provided us an opportunity to test whether the U.S. media system can withstand the pressures of an authoritarian threat. And once again, we observed a media system that far too often privileged profit over democratic concerns. This capitulation was, in some ways, more subtle than what we witnessed before, especially in 2016, when coverage of Trump's campaign was marked by overt sensationalism. Yet, media's role during the 2024 election season was no less troubling for what it bodes for U.S. democracy's future.

Media malpractice

Media outlets should have been well prepared this time. Everyone knew exactly what to expect. There were no ambivalences or ambiguities about Trump's incessant lying or his rabidly xenophobic, transphobic, racist, and misogynistic rhetoric. And yet, despite it all, our media institutions didn't rise to the occasion to challenge the obvious dangers that Trump posed to democracy. While billionaire owners blocked endorsements of Kamala Harris or outright weaponized their media properties, as in the case of Elon Musk and X, much media coverage was, once again, complicit in normalizing Trump.

From "sanewashing" (sanitizing Trump's outlandish rhetoric and behavior) to false equivalence, from trivializing policy implications to horse race coverage and the fetishizing of polls, we saw it all over again. The inveterate media critic Jay Rosen had long pleaded with journalists to emphasize "not the odds, but the stakes." But too often, milquetoast media coverage reverted to a kind of he said/she said anodyne "bothsidesing" narration that left audiences insufficiently alarmed at what policies Trump was proposing.

To be sure, it's tempting to conclude that, in an era of social media influencers and innumerable podcasters, legacy media no longer matter. In this light, blaming news media institutions seems as pointless as it is inaccurate. After all, few Trump voters are turning to the *New York Times* for guidance on how to vote. But our elite and incumbent media still play an outsized role in setting discursive parameters and establishing official narratives. The border crisis, run-amok urban crime, the tanking economy—all these crises, to varying degrees, were manufactured and amplified through media.

Such recurring narrative patterns bring into focus more subtle and less measurable—though potentially more profound—media effects worthy of further consideration. In addition to the general problem of pervasive, low-quality information, a long-term problem is the ideological policing and hegemonic narratives that accrete over time. I flag these issues for future areas of concern that deserve more attention from media scholars, who tend to focus on short-term effects.

Uncovering structural roots

If we were to pan out for a moment and consider the big picture, we might be more likely to see how the predictable patterns of selection, omission, and emphasis in media coverage suggest a common structural underpinning—that many problems in standard election reporting stem from deeper pathologies, especially those connected to commercial logics.

Extreme commercialism afflicts most aspects of the U.S. media system. Pegging news media so directly to market relationships has led to systemic failures: Racial and class-based redlining, market censorship, ever-expanding news deserts, and degraded information. It also creates the conditions for monopolistic control over entire sectors of our communication and information infrastructures that allow oligarchs to capture them.

Indeed, "media oligarchy" is an apt phrase for describing our current state of affairs: From the right-wing tech titans such as Elon Musk and his ilk, to opportunistic monopolists like Jeff Bezos, to the villainous media baron Rupert Murdoch and his progeny. These unaccountable billionaires own and control vast swathes of U.S. information and communication infrastructure—a dangerous predicament according to the most elementary democratic theory.

The challenge ahead

Ultimately, these moments of crisis can be clarifying. They cast into stark relief the power structures that shape our media. They illuminate just how ill-equipped our media institutions are to perform the basic tasks of democracy. And they point to pressure points that we can exploit to create a better system, one that actually serves our information and communication needs.

The fact that Trump prevailed is a damning statement on the health of our media systems. These institutions have all failed us. This means that we must radically reform them, especially our media, at a systemic level from the ground up. But to do so requires a structural critique of commercial media—one that treats capitalism as an independent variable—and the anti-democratic institutions that sustain these systems.

Most media scholarship, especially in the U.S., takes the commercial system for granted, treating capitalism as the natural steward of journalism. While journalism scholars are quick to indict the practices and routines of individual news organizations and journalists, better norms will not save us. We need a structural overhaul of our media institutions. This requires renewed emphasis on political economy and policy as well as ideology and discourse. We have much work ahead of us.

The challenge of pro-democracy journalism

In the 2024 election season a scandal-plagued, twice-impeached businessman with multiple bankruptcies (to name a few seemingly disqualifying traits) enjoyed rock-steady support among half the voting public. Part of the explanation lies in the way the asymmetric media and political ecosystems have mapped onto each other, supporting a dysfunctional detachment of much of the public from evidence-based voting. That evidence has been traditionally supplied by knowledge-producing institutions, including the press, which found itself under attack and increasingly mistrusted while struggling to promote a "democratic frame" (also described as through the "lens of democracy" or "democracy-worthy" coverage). In a 2016 analysis I thought voters would eventually realize that Trump couldn't deliver on his MAGA promise to bring back a world gone by, but instead his "Us vs. Them" framing grew stronger, deflecting blame for any policy failures and leaving his support intact. His re-election ultimately followed, but not without taking a toll on the reality-based political infrastructure.

Tribes have been sorted more strongly now by partisanship, showing not just different policy preferences but mutually reinforcing divisions of class, geography, and faith. Cultural attachments have come to outweigh more material class interests that might otherwise affect voting preferences. Those on the losing side of capitalism's growing wealth inequality may understandably lose faith in the system that allowed it—and its more abstract democratic values, which surveys showed had low priority among the electorate. Indeed, even authoritarianism has become more appealing if thought to operate on behalf of the right people in offering easy answers to long-simmering resentments. As a result, two major tribes appear now to occupy strikingly different worlds. In addition to being more White, fundamentalist, rural, and less educated, the psychology of Trump supporters showed them to be more politically intuitionist. Calls for national purity and fear of the "other," especially the immigrant, appealed to them disproportionately. The anti-Trump tribe was, in contrast, relatively more rationalist in style, racially diverse, coalitionist, and upwardly mobile—less suspicious of elites and the knowledge-producing institutions associated with them, including journalism.

Thus, worrisome tribal differences have emerged in how members relate to empirical facts—with many voters either impervious to the truth, not exposed to it, or constructing their own reality. The "stolen 2020 election" became, of course, not just a matter for evidentiary dispute but an article of faith for MAGA Republicans. Those struggling to understand an increasingly complex world became easy prey to the over-simplified sureties of opportunistic leaders and monetizing grifters. They more likely embraced conspiracy theories, requiring a "leap of faith" into an insular, self-reinforcing world of epistemic closure. Its supporting media eco-system offered little impediment to lying and helped further amplify this tribal asymmetry. Success can be claimed despite contradicting evidence, with failure blamed on the "deep state" and the "enemy within." The Trump-supporting Christian evangelical community models another kind of this faith-based conviction, which becomes an authoritarian impulse to the extent that it places a candidate beyond any moral framework, requiring only that self and tribal interests be served. This asymmetry is further reflected in the related challenge of mitigating disinformation. If found disproportionately on the right, which has been the case, then any effort to control it also appears disproportionate and subject to charges of partisan unfairness. The practice of factchecking, intended to settle questions of evidence, is similarly rejected by right-wing critics, who are more likely to charge bias in critiquing the factcheck itself.

In responding to this challenge, the traditional press has been an imperfect defender of democratic norms. The news institution has eroded, with new hybrid forms still emerging, but a core of accountability journalism remains intact and sets the tone for electoral coverage. Although journalists did adapt over the years to the norm-busting Trump, documenting his incessant lying and illiberal tendencies, the enduring institutional routines of balance, horse-race coverage, and "both sidesism" often have been out of step with the more one-sided democratic threat—like expecting sportsmanship in a street fight. Trump has exploited these routines for a long time, using the "birtherism" playbook to attack the candidacy of former president Obama. Similarly, he accused Kamala Harris without evidence of not having worked at McDonald's in college as she claimed, with his campaign even staging a media-event of Trump posing for reporters at one of the burger shops wearing an employee apron. Rather than ignoring this transparent sideshow, journalists instinctively sought a response from Harris. At the corporate level, ownership pressure enforced this both-sidesism at two of the country's most prominent news organizations, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, taking refuge in editorial "balance" to block at the last minute an already prepared endorsement for Harris.

This disconnect between the media and political eco-systems will not be soon resolved, but the press, especially at its accountability reporting core, must continue to do its job: countering the disinformation media space, emphasizing verification, resisting the amplification of extremist voices, and documenting illiberal threats. To serve its true function journalism must promote democracy and not normalize its collapse.

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Grievance and animosity: Fracturing the digital news ecosystem

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We live in fractured societies, and in the election coverage coming from a fractured digital news ecosystem we are constantly reminded of this. Just as the divisions in our body politic are evident in election results, differences between online media were apparent in the alternative news responses to Trump's victory. From the left, coverage was mournful. From the right, it was laced with animus and a sense of political vengeance.

All of this was clear as the inevitable was unfolding. Early Wednesday, the left-wing *Raw Story* reported from Pennsylvania that Democrats had "all but given up." *Talking Points* Memo's editor Josh Marshall saw a "crushing result" looming. And from the right? Once *Fox News* moved to call the race for Trump, the election liveblog at PJ Media changed its headline from "Kamala HQ is Having a ROUGH Night" to instead read "Trump Wins the Presidency. Cue the Meltdown." Gateway Pundit heralded Trump's victory as a "THREE-PEAT!!", brazenly implying he had actually won in 2020 less than a month after they settled a defamation lawsuit for spreading that same lie. The hyper-partisan *Breitbart* chose to top its election news "livewire" with the headline "TRUMP TOWERS!," going on to use the linguistic idiosyncrasies of an idiosyncratic candidate to describe Trump's win as an "American Realignment: His Yugest Tent Ever!"

While the politics these media align with are clearly different, the sites themselves have some similarities. They all launched in the early 2000s, seeing an opportunity for a brash approach to political journalism emerging in the spaces that the web provided. Each was able to establish a reputation for providing alternative, politically informed, news and commentary, and catered to a public that was eager for something different. By distinguishing themselves as a response to a complacent, commercial, and traditional approach to political reporting by the journalistic "core," these "peripheral journalistic actors" promoted themselves as more independent, more honest, and (at least according to their own narratives) as an improvement on the journalism they saw around them.

However, that is where similarities end and as time has moved on sharp differences have emerged between those who continue to pursue journalism with a critical voice, and those who promote destructive animosity instead. Recognizing this, I argued we need to distinguish between those who act journalistically – even if alternatively – and those who instead prioritize political outcomes in work disguised as journalism. This call for distinction has become urgent this in the 2024 context.

For anyone who studies these media the boldness with which sites like *Breitbart* and *Gateway Pundit* foreground their conservative support and opposition to progressive politics is unsurprising. But their antagonism towards their opponents has become pronounced in the past few election cycles. They have gone from primarily targeting Democrats and mainstream media to also critiquing Republicans who opposed Trump and anyone in the right-wing media ecosystem who is not deferential to the MAGA agenda. In 2020, they attacked *Fox News* for calling the election for Joe Biden. By 2024, they were going after Matt Drudge and the *Drudge Report* for criticizing Trump. *Gateway Pundit* unironically called Drudge "Leftist," and *Breitbart* laughed off "whatever that thing the *Drudge Report* has become."

In some ways, this defies expectations and allegiances. Without conservative sites like the Drudge Report opening the door for right-wing news blogs in the late 1990s, the online conservative media ecosystem might have looked very different. In a similar counterfactual, if you look at early archives of *Breitbart* you might ask, had Andrew Breitbart not died in 2012 and Steve Bannon taken over, whether its 2024 headlines would be so aggressive and its election triumphalism so profound. But *Breitbart* did grow more hyper-partisan after Bannon took over, just as *Gateway Pundit* grew more propagandistic and PJ Media went from being an independent, conservative news alternative to becoming a "parrot" of the right-wing.

Indeed, what was already apparent in 2020 has become even more obvious since. In these four years, politicized peripheral news media — what the podcaster Jon Lovett described as a "purposeful political media apparatus" — have continued to promote their content within fractured, divisive, antagonistic relationships. They have followed the same trajectory Republican politics has also traveled, echoing the fealty that seems entrenched in the MAGA movement.

In the wake of another victory for right-wing politics in the United States, we risk becoming inured to narratives of difference and grievance as once independent media steep the news and political commentary they produce in a language of animosity. But these dynamics should instead be ringing alarms. They should also sound beyond the United States, as in the UK and Europe antagonistic, peripheral media have also become more polarizing, and more political. As I argue in *Journalism in a Fractured World*, peripheral media still present their work as news, but on the right they have adopted affective, polarized language to address their audiences, in an effort to reach a so-called "unheard" and "abandoned" populist public. They are dividing rather than informing the public, widening the cracks in our already fractured societies.

Considering the risk of attacks on journalists during the U.S. election

During the 2024 presidential election, many journalists experienced online and in-person attacks. A public example of this happened during a panel at the National Association of Black Journalists, Trump attacked an *ABC News* female Black journalist for being imbalanced because of her line of questioning. Also, in Spring 2024, an online campaign started as Trump demanded to defund *NPR* on social media.

Attacks on journalists are not new but they have increased substantially worldwide and are heightened during election cycles. These attacks have risen in the past ten years due to rising authoritarian and populist movements, increasing polarization, and expanding public access to social and digital means of production. As the examples above show, attacks on journalists also follow gendered and racialized logic meant to maintain existing structures with actors leveraging racism, misogyny, and xenophobic sentiments.

What is new is a growing sense among journalism that media organizations cannot simply push the burden of these attacks onto their employees. While efforts to support journalists systematically have been more prevalent in Europe because of legislative efforts, U.S. news organizations still have a long way to go, with a few large organizations developing processes to support journalists, such as through risk assessments.

In preparation for the election season, professional associations and centers reinforced the need to develop a systemic approach to support journalists. PEN America in collaboration with the Committee to Protect Journalists and the International Women Foundation, launched U.S. Election Safety Summer, a free webinar series for journalists. The webinars taught journalists how to safely cover the elections, from how journalists can deal with aggression and situational awareness to how news organizations can implement risk assessment plans.

As journalists consider the dangers they could face on election assignments, the Committee to Protect Journalists urged journalists covering the elections to complete a risk assessment to mitigate those risks. Mitigation included an established communication infrastructure, including check-in, point of contact, and emergency call-in procedures. In doing so, they provide an editor's checklist for physical safety and online abuse. However, U.S. newsrooms' efforts are still nascent. A few legacy newsrooms implemented risk assessments. Generally, research has shown that these assessments tend to be conducted without a formal closing-the-loop process or documentation. They are also largely operated through legal or human resources departments.

A major narrative has been that journalists have been left to themselves to cope with attacks and take care of their well-being. Even if well intended, with their focus on risk management, training for harassment, and social media policies, among other tools, have been there to protect media organizations, not their journalists. Besides, online abuse is identity-based, with journalists being attacked because of their race, sexual orientation, and gender identity, showing a need to go beyond tools that have been used in the past. Not much has changed on the election front but there is an opportunity for newsrooms to take these attacks seriously and develop best practices in risk management.

Research has shown that rare events and crises help news organizations innovate. In *Innovation Through Crisis*, Mona Kristin Solvoll from BI Norwegian Business School and Ragnhild Kristine Olsen showed how news organizations swiftly adapted to crises such as with digital tools and introducing new services. As Junai Mtchedlidze said, "The need for information in the population; initiative among the news staff; existing technological expertise in the newsrooms; and collaboration among editorial developers and journalists" constitute important factors driving innovation during crises.

Yet nefarious actors with their tactics and journalists' countermeasures and consequences of the actors and tactics have constituted hazards or risks accepted as part of news work. A complex set of circumstances specific to journalism and political contexts among other things, are driving these risks. They do not start or end with elections. They also apply to other professionals such as female politicians or influencers. Still, with an eye on events like elections, media organizations must implement interventions such as offering safety training and creating assessment policies before engaging in risk work.

As we reflect on the U.S. election and the rising violence against journalists, newsroom leaders, including news editors and researchers should take note of the innovation that the election has spurred to support the well-being of their journalists. As the election and protests across the U.S. show, attacks against journalism will persist. To take care of our democracy we need to consider the institutions that support it.

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What can sentiment in cable news coverage tells us about the 2024 campaign?

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Media coverage often provides a valuable indicator of the "tone" of the campaign, capturing some combination of journalists' assessments of the candidates, changes in the public's electoral preferences, and the sentiment of the campaigns and candidates as well. Examining how news covers the candidates consequently provides some useful information—perhaps more diagnostic than predictive—about election campaign dynamics.

We have accordingly been tracking the tone of media coverage of both Kamala Harris and Donald Trump throughout the 2024 election campaign. Our data include all sentences mentioning either Kamala Harris, the Democratic presidential candidate, or Donald Trump, the Republican presidential candidate, in all archived broadcast transcripts from Nexis Uni, for two major cable news channels: *CNN* and *Fox News*.

Once sentences are extracted from news transcripts, each sentence is scored for sentiment by counting the number of positive and negative words using the *Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary*. Each sentence is assigned a net sentiment score, the difference between the numbers of positive words and negative words. Following past work, it is calculated as follows: log((positive words + .5) / (negative words + .5)). Weekly results then capture the mean of net sentiment in all Republican-candidate sentences, and the mean of net sentiment in all Democratic-candidate sentences. All sentences, regardless of channel, are given equal weight in this measure.

The figure below accordingly shows the sentiment of news coverage of the Democratic and Republican candidates for president on *CNN* and *Fox News* during the lead-up to the 2024 election. The x-axis shows the start date for each week. Circles indicate the average sentiment for each candidate during each week, with whiskers showing 95% confidence intervals.

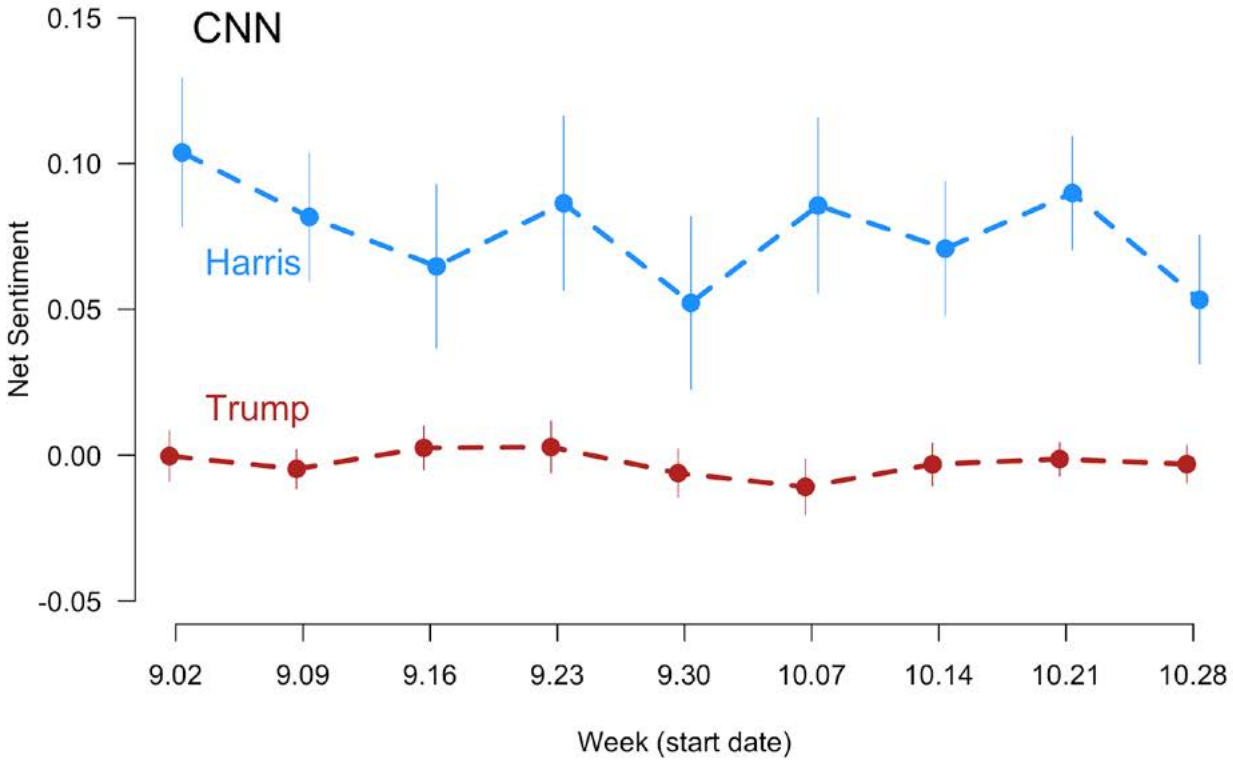
The top panel of Figure 1 shows that *CNN* coverage has systematically favored the Harris campaign, describing it with more positive language than the Trump campaign. Note that Harris' relative advantage in news sentiment is driven by highly positive coverage of her, not by negative coverage of Trump. Indeed, as the figure shows, *CNN*'s coverage of Trump remained stable and near 0—neither positive nor negative—regardless of events in either campaign. That coverage of Trump is, on balance, neutral, is of some significance given that the typical sentiment of news coverage is slightly negative. Coverage of Trump was thus more favorable than the baseline signal of "average" media coverage, despite intuitions about mainstream media criticism and/or bias against him.

The bottom panel of the figure shows that *Fox News* coverage also included more positive sentiment about Harris, at least at first. Like *CNN*, *Fox*'s coverage of Trump is consistently neutral.

While there were certainly differences in news content between the left-leaning *CNN* and the right-leaning *Fox News*—in particular, *CNN*'s coverage of Harris was clearly more positive than *Fox News*' coverage—the pattern of each network's coverage of the two candidates was broadly similar, especially in the early weeks of the fall. This finding underscores that news sentiment about the candidates is not driven entirely by partisan bias and the tone of journalistic commentary. Rather, the sentiment of coverage likely also reflects the tone of the candidates' own messaging. Harris' messaging was generally positive, especially before the last two weeks of the campaign. To this point, Harris' relatively positive coverage on *Fox* was evident throughout September. By October, however, the sentiment of *Fox*'s coverage of Harris had declined to 0 (matching its coverage of Trump), likely due to a combination of shifting public attitudes toward Harris and the Harris campaign's changing messaging.

In short, election coverage from *CNN* and *Fox News* was consistent with the partisan leanings of these networks. Coverage of the Harris campaign was substantially less positive on *Fox* (and more similar to coverage of Trump) than on *CNN*. These partisan leanings were not overwhelming for most of the Fall campaign: both networks covered Harris positively (albeit to different extents), and both networks' coverage of Trump was ambivalent. In the days leading up to the election, the partisan differences in news sentiment became much clearer. *CNN* viewers received relatively positive content about Harris; *Fox* viewers did not.

The electoral consequences of these differences are unclear. Generally positive coverage of Harris throughout the campaign did not appear to translate into meaningful advantages in electoral support: even during the weeks of consistently positive coverage of the Harris campaign in September, the two candidates were essentially tied in most polls. We take this as an indication—in this campaign, at least—that differences in media sentiment were more likely a function of journalistic commentary and campaign messaging than public preferences. Indeed, the positive sentiment of coverage, especially on *CNN* (and other left-leaning networks) may have masked rather than illustrated the nature of voter preferences during the campaign.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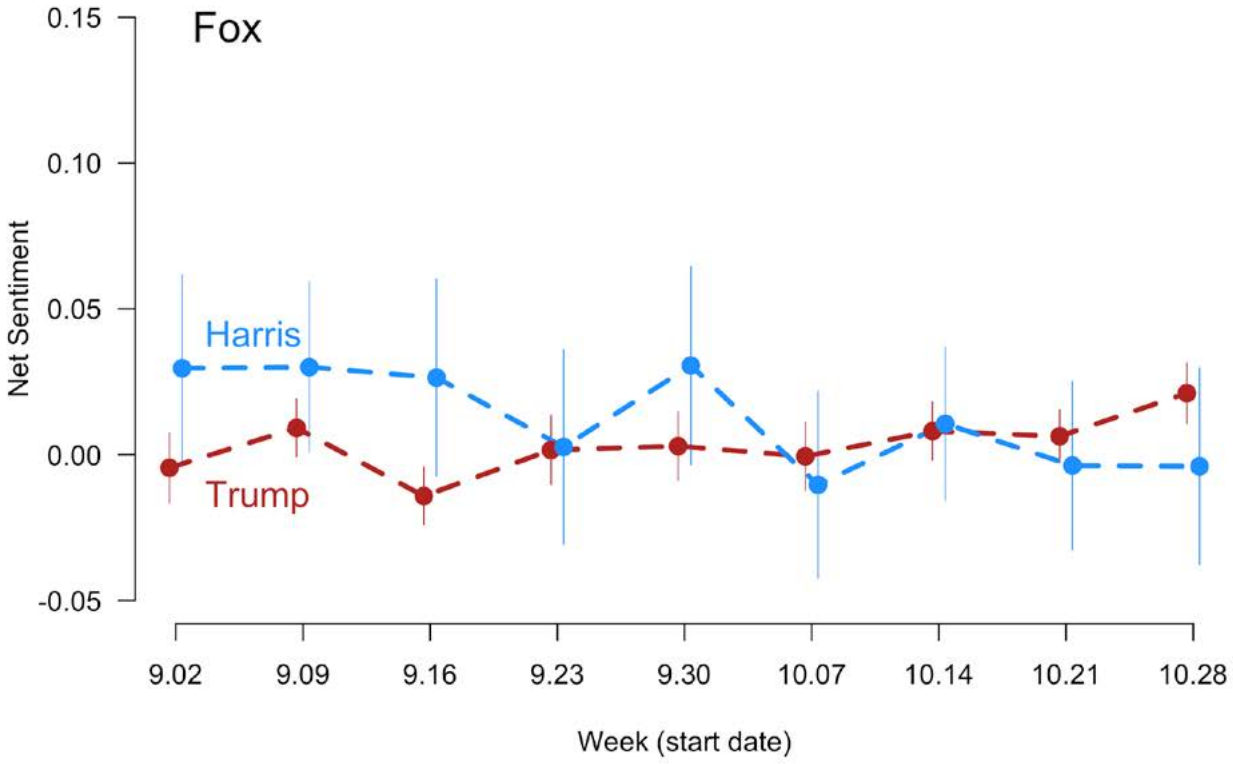
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The case for happy election news: Why it matters and what stands in the way

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The election is over. For some, it is a time of rejoicing. For others, anger. And for yet others, a time of confusion or sadness. For partisans on both sides, however, the weeks and months leading up to the election brought an exhausting mix of anxiety-inducing ups and downs from the election coverage. For everyone else, it was disgust at how negative it all seemed. In this moment, we must try to imagine how news coverage of presidential campaigns could be more uplifting and potentially help us find common ground.

We are not suggesting that it should all be puppies and ice cream. It may well be that a certain amount of negative coverage is necessary to keep people feeling interested and motivated or to reflect realities about the world or the campaigns' messages. But perhaps a sprinkling of more positive, less polarizing stories would help stave off despair while still maintaining interest.

News avoidance, often linked to feelings that news is too depressing, has skyrocketed in recent years. News organizations around the world are now experimenting with various ways to combat news-is-too-negative perceptions, from solutions journalism, to good-news newsletters, to happy podcasts. And yet, as researchers studying positive news, we found in recent months that these initiatives almost always excluded election news altogether.

Which is concerning because that is where they arguably matter most. Positive emotions are not trivial in the political arena. They broaden our perspectives and help us build the resources necessary to take action. If election coverage is so relentlessly negative people turn away from it completely, get too depressed to act, or feel so traumatized by the whole process they have few emotional reserves to recover from the result and fight for change, we have a problem.

That said, it makes sense that these happy news projects have largely steered clear of the election. It is hard to imagine uplifting campaign coverage that does not alienate opposing partisans or people who do not like politics to begin with. For partisan news lovers, good news is any inside baseball or horse race coverage that shows their preferred athlete is winning. But the same news makes the other side despair. "Trump ahead in polls in 3 swing states," is great news for strong Republicans, but excruciating for strong Democrats, for whom the exact opposite headline would constitute good news.

Meanwhile, for people who are not strongly committed to either party, this probably all just looks like crowing, and gloating, and arguing—more of what turns them off news and politics to begin with. There are few, if any, stories that all three of these groups—strong partisans on both sides and nonpartisans alike—would agree are "good" news.

This struck us recently because in preparation to field an experiment on positivity in news we had to collect happy news headlines. Granted, we were working a month before election day, but we found it all but impossible to find any election stories in major mainstream news outlets that most people across the political spectrum would agree were positive.

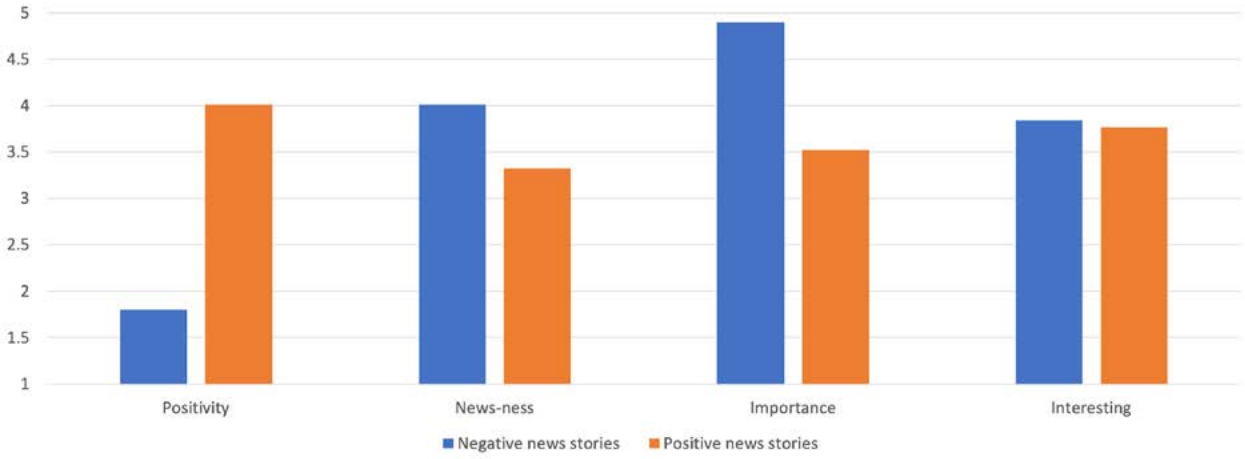
So, we ended up excluding election stories altogether. Instead, we asked a sample of 623 American adults to rate 6 non-political news headlines for positive/negative valence, importance, and interest. Although the headlines were not about the election, the results offer some suggestions about what more uplifting, non-polarizing election coverage could look like.

News has a long-established negativity bias, so we were not surprised that respondents tended to rank negative headlines significantly higher on importance and "news-ness" than positive headlines. But they still ranked positive headlines as more important than not, and they found them equally as interesting as the more negative headlines.

And there were clear patterns among the types of headlines respondents considered almost universally positive: acts of altruism, medical or scientific breakthroughs that stood to benefit many people, and positive national economic trends. Notably, these stories were almost always stories about common citizens, including children, as opposed to the power elite. And animals. Lots of animals.

What might this suggest about potentially positive, nonpartisan election coverage? We have to be creative here, because these kinds of stories are rare, when they occur at all. The focus should be on citizens, as opposed to candidates and other politicians, and not on whom they plan to vote for, but rather on participating, and especially helping others participate. The goal should be to inspire, or even just to have fun. People helping others get to the polls, or children raising money for an animal shelter by selling lemonade to voters waiting in line. A technological innovation that facilitates participation. The town with the highest voter turnout in the country. Service animals assisting voters. The history of campaign paraphernalia. Voters who persevere to make it to the polls despite various obstacles. Poll workers who fall in love.

Of course, even these stories may seem partisan to the most ideologically extreme among us. But emphasis on American identity has been found to mitigate affective polarization, and there is little more American than voting itself. And again, we are not suggesting these stories supplant coverage of candidates and policies altogether, only that these cohabitate. Give us all a little more hope, and a reminder of shared humanity, rather than a relentless drumbeat of division.



Note: T-tests were used to compare the evaluations of positive vs. negative news headlines. The differences in positivity, news-ness, and importance between headlines is significant, p<.001; the difference in interesting is not, p=.21.

Figure 1: Evaluation of news headlines

Broadcast television use and the 2024 U.S. presidential election

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Despite the attention that cable television, digital news outlets, and social media receive in the era of our fragmented environment, broadcast television is still king. Concerns about how the fragmented media landscape is responsible for increasing political polarization abound, even though most people get their political information from traditional, mainstream sources like *ABC*, *NBC*, and *CBS*. In this essay, we describe differences between 1) broadcast news use as compared to cable news use, 2) those who consume both broadcast and cable outlets, 3) the intended vote choice for broadcast news viewers as compared to cable news viewers, and 4) political knowledge among those who watch network television and those who do not. Overall, we show that despite an increasingly fragmented media environment, more people use broadcast news than other television sources. Moreover, broadcast viewers were more supportive of Kamala Harris than Donald Trump and were more politically knowledgeable than those who avoided *NBC*, *CBS*, and *ABC* during the 2024 campaign season.

Changes to the U.S. information environment

In the mid 20th century, broadcast television news made political information accessible for the majority of Americans, even decreasing political knowledge gaps for viewers with less education or prior political knowledge. With limited options available on television, most citizens consumerd broadcast news, and thus, learned about national politics, from *ABC*, *CBS* or *NBC*. Network news audiences were at their peak in the 1970s and 1980s, both in terms of their audience sizes and the considerable level of trust Americans had in them.

However, the introduction of cable television and the internet began to peel way broadcast news audiences as individuals *gained* options for what to watch on television. Some consumers selected out of news altogether and turned toward pure entertainment, others *began to watch partisan news outlets*. The transition from a low-choice to a high-choice media environment has resulted in a highly fractured media environment. As such, political communication scholars have focused much of their attention on cable television news, digital news, and social media content about politics. While these are important and worthy areas of inquiry, it is important to continue to understand how the most-watched national political news source, broadcast television news, is associated with vote choice and political knowledge.

Descriptive analyses of broadcast news use and the 2024 presidential election

A Wisconsin Communication and Election Studies survey of 2,000 adults administered by YouGov one week prior to the 2024 U.S. presidential election found that 61.3% of respondents watched broadcast news during the election season, considerably more than the 49% who watched *Fox News*, 49% who watched *CNN*, and 42% who watched *MSNBC* at some point during the 2024 campaign season.

Of course, people consume more than one type of news as part of their political communication repertoires. 43% of adults watched broadcast news and *CNN*, 37% watched broadcast news and *Fox News*, and 38% watched broadcast news and *MSNBC*.

More than half (55.6%) of broadcast news viewers reported they would vote for Kamala Harris for president while 38% planned to vote for Donald Trump. Harris led among *CNN* viewers (61%) and *MSNBC* watchers (65%) while Trump was the favorite of *Fox* viewers (60%).

Considering broadcast viewers who also consumed cable television news, broadcast news viewing appears to have been a net benefit for Harris. While Trump captured 60% of *Fox* viewers, only 50% of *Fox* viewers who *also*watched broadcast news were planning to vote for Trump. This suggests that broadcast news viewing might serve as a moderating force for conservative television news viewers. Broadcast viewers who also watched *CNN* went for Harris 63 to 33% and *MSNBC* viewers who also watched a major network were for Harris 65% to 30%. This suggests that broadcast news use is not only a moderating source and may operate differently for more liberal viewers.

Broadcast news viewers were also more politically knowledgeable than those who did not watch broadcast news. Questions of facts related to 10 political issues such as abortion, health care, Gaza, and immigration were more likely to be answered correctly by network television news viewers.

While Harris had the advantage from broadcast news viewers, Trump still won the election. This suggests that while it remains important to understand the effects that the most-used sources of political information have on vote choice and political knowledge, a comprehensive examination of the information environment—and of those who increasingly avoid political information—is necessary to fully explain the results of the 2024 presidential election.

Kamala Harris' representation in mainstream and Black media

News media remain critical to public understanding of election-related information and candidates. Candidate representations matter, and in many ways inform much of the public discourse that shapes how people vote. Despite their historical differences, mainstream and Black news outlets were often aligned in their coverage of Kamala Harris, providing contextualized and fair coverage of her campaign. However, the media genres differed in their coverage of Harris' loss with mainstream using problematic framing and the Black press providing supportive coverage.

Harris has been in the media spotlight for decades, though her ascension to some of the most powerful political positions in the United States as the first Black/South Asian/Mixed-Race/woman to hold these positions helped her maintain novelty throughout her tenure. However, scholars of gender have long described the double bind women face when entering politics. They find that necessary character traits for quality leadership like strength, compassion, and competence are assessed in ways that also diminish women in power. This "damned-if-you-do/don't" bind helps explain the double standards women are often held to in politics. Currently, the best examples of double binds in the media appear in media spaces that are ideologically asymmetrical from women candidates. For Harris, conservative news outlets, such as *Fox News*, produced racist and sexist content that either intentionally demonized her, or included depictions that placed her in a double bind.

Mainstream news outlets have historically and contemporaneously stereotyped or ignored the Black community in ways that exacerbate double binds and other consequential stereotypes. Contrarily, the Black press has always worked to counter inadequate mainstream media narratives about Black people. Black news outlets center humanizing coverage of Black people and include historical contexts for events like the Black Lives Matter protests well before the mainstream considers these components. Black achievement is core to the Black press's news values, and as such they are more likely to cover the accomplishments of Black people than white-led media counterparts.

The differences in the histories of Black and mainstream news organizations reflect the widely different purposes and approaches they have served, but it's difficult to discern the two as distinctly different when it comes to Harris' presidential campaign coverage. In both kinds of news outlets, you'll find examples of in-depth coverage about Harris' ascension to the Democratic presidential candidacy. In August, Essence, a popular Black women's magazine, gave her the September/October cover. The same month, Harris appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine*, donning the title "Her Moment." Both mainstream and Black press outlets found ways to integrate culturally specific topics such as Harris being a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority and an alumna of Howard University, a Historically Black College and University. While overall the mainstream produced more coverage about Harris than the Black press, given their larger staffs, preliminary evidence suggests journalism from both kinds of news outlets included elements that humanized Harris during her campaign.

While news narrative patterns about Harris appear promising, news outlet endorsements were haphazard in the 2024 election among both mainstream and Black media. While some mainstream newspapers, like the *New York Times* and *Boston Globe*, and Black press outlets, like *The Grio* and *The Atlanta Inquirer*, made declarations in support of Harris, others broke tradition and declined to make endorsements. Mainstream newspapers, such as the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *U.S. Today*, chose not to endorse anyone and some Black news outlets also withheld endorsements. For example, the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), which is the Black press' trade organization representing over 200 publications, previously endorsed Barack Obama for both of his election campaigns but withheld an official endorsement of Harris. These non-endorsements created discourse about the news media's role in democracy, and for some it signaled the lackluster support for the first Black woman to secure the presidential nomination for the Democratic party.

There will certainly be decades of research that looks into media representations of Harris' campaign and its impact on the outcome of the 2024 election. Day of and post-election coverage is where we predict researchers will find the clearest differences in press narrative trends. The mainstream focused on traditional and problematic strategies, such as relying on horse race framing. News anchors and headlines consistently compared her performance to Biden, speculating her "underperformance." Narratives abandoned previously discussed challenges and institutional barriers the vice president faced as she took on the campaign for president just months before the election. They also diminished her extensive role in the Biden campaign's "overperformance" that led to the 2020 win where she served as vice president. Meanwhile, the Black press's coverage stayed true to its legacy, humanizing Harris, celebrating her work, describing her as "overwhelmingly qualified" and recognizing the impact her loss had on its audiences. They covered her concession speech and expressed hope that she might run again while also acknowledging America's history of racism and sexism. In the end, both the Black and mainstream media returned to divergent patterns that aligned with their histories – a realignment that, in some ways, mirrored the outcome of the election.

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Team Trump and the altercation at the Arlington military cemetery

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In August 2024, in the lead up to the U.S. presidential elections, Donald Trump travelled with his team to an event at Arlington National Cemetery. The *Washington Post* described it as "sacred ground for many Americans," with a cemetery statement saying "ANC is a national shrine to the honored dead of the Armed Forces." The media had not been allowed to accompany Trump's team to a specific part of the cemetery (Section 60) that is reserved for the most recent graves. The issue arose because the Trump team's own photographer and videographer sought to capture images of Trump in this space. At this point, a physical altercation occurred between his team and an Arlington employee.

Trump and his supporters have created a strong online presence. Images and videos captured at Arlington were shared with them, across platforms. There is a TikTok of the visit, in addition to images posted on X (formerly Twitter). Previously the rules around media attendance had been effective in preventing the portrayal of the most sensitive parts of Arlington. The changing (new) media landscape means that the rules have less of an impact because Team Trump posted their own images, with massive public reach. This received widespread coverage in the (old) media, across the spectrum of political leanings. Coverage of this event tells us a lot about the relationship between the political establishment and the military, especially around the labels of "politics" and "neutrality," and media coverage of political norms.

As another *Washington Post* article about the Arlington incident puts it, Trump behaves "in ways that flout American norms." Trump has some quirks when it comes to press and publicity, including his tendency to smile and give the thumbs up at inappropriate moments. One example of this here is the thumbs up he gave at the grave of Marine Sargeant Nicole Gee. Beyond military interactions, Trump is someone who ignores social norms and simply does what he wants. This is something that James Pfiffner has written about. It is a behavior that seems to appeal to the section of the electorate who "don't like being told what to do" by government or society.

Given the Trump brand of acting as he pleases, it is interesting that press coverage of the incident quotes his team as emphasising that they had permission. While Trump and his team therefore are happy to break many norms, the triangle between Trump, the military, and war dead appears to be an area where this is at least partially constrained (e.g., *Fox News*). Another *Fox News* article also quotes Trump himself: "they [Biden and Harris] tell me that I used their graves for public relations services, and I didn't." This tells us something about the reverence that many Americans have for the military as an institution. Interestingly, other coverage of Trump's relationship with the military highlights that he was able to avoid the military draft in Vietnam, but mostly this was not a focus.

The incident also reminds us that some things are labelled "political" and other things are not. There is a federal-level law that "prohibits "partisan political activities" at national military cemeteries" and a different article notes that the military was wary of being sucked into "politics," giving the Trump team ground rules for their visit. As a *Washington Post* article states, the military was trying to enforce the "no politics rule" at Arlington when the altercation occurred. This was also echoed by remarks from military personnel, who feel that "self-serving" activities, such as videoing Section 60, are not compatible with military ethos. Trump's opponent, Kamala Harris, is quoted in one *Fox News* article promising to "never politicize" the military, while another *Fox News* article accused Harris of "playing politics" in her criticism of the incident. The bounds of what counts as "political" are therefore contested and played out within the media.

Central to the idea of what counts as "political" is the role of military families, across both right and left-leaning publications. Families of dead soldiers are quoted throughout the reporting. Some are in support of Trump, saying they had invited him to visit their loved ones' graves at Arlington. Counter to accusations of being self-serving, one family member is quoted in *Fox News* as saying "Why did we want Trump there? It wasn't to help his political campaign … We wanted a leader. That explains why you and Joe didn't get a call." Other articles quote bereaved families saying that his visit was not appropriate and "there's just no respect." Collectively, this chimes with a rich body of work demonstrating the importance of military families in legitimizing military activities. It also demonstrates that they are an important force within the de/legitimisation of political candidates domestically.

Pulling their punches: On the limits of sports metaphor in political media

Following Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 U.S. presidential election, political observers have focused considerable energy trying to explain the outcome: Joe Biden waited too long to drop out of the race; Kamala Harris expended too much energy courting centrists and neo-cons; Trump exerts a charismatic hold on many voters in spite of his obvious flaws; global trends point to voters rejecting incumbents; political media normalized an abnormal candidate. A recurring theme in these explanations is that political practices—and media coverage of those practices—have fundamentally changed.

Typical campaign coverage frames elections in purely strategic terms, a perspective that parallels the language of sports. Campaigns are most often characterized through the metaphor of the "horse race" and other sports, especially boxing. Verbal exchanges become "jabs" and "punches," and a particularly effective statement might be a "knockout blow." The vocabulary is so familiar now that audiences may not even recognize the connections to the sport. Such language risks positioning audiences as passive spectators and reducing substantive policy discussions to gameplans and playbooks. It is also frequently the case that sports metaphors fail to capture campaign developments in accurate terms. As political scientists Peter Schrott and David Lanoue conclude, "despite the promiscuous use of the word, no presidential debate has ever resulted in a knockout. Even the worst performers go the distance."

The September 10th debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump was an emphatic victory for the Vice President, and the clarity of her superior performance lent itself especially well to the familiar boxing metaphor. *MSNBC*'s "Morning Joe" suggested "the vice president knocked the GOP candidate off balance the moment they touched gloves." *NPR* declared, "if he was a boxer, Trump was cut and bleeding in the middle of the fight, and by the end, was TKO'd." A Republican operative told *NBC News*, "that Harris was able to 'bait' Trump with her comments about his rallies and that 'he hasn't been off the ropes since."

One example of the boxing metaphor stood out: the "rope-a-dope," a strategy made famous by Muhammad Ali in his "Rumble in the Jungle" bout with George Foreman in 1975. Although it requires the boxer to take repeated blows, the payoff results from a worn-out opponent who is increasingly vulnerable to a flurry of counterpunches and a potential knockout. The presumed parallel in 2024 was found in Harris' strategy of baiting Trump into rambling, at times incoherent, diatribes about the sizes of his rallies or (discredited) allegations of immigrants stealing and eating pets. Headlines invoked the famous boxing strategy, including *The Atlantic* ("How Harris Roped a Dope") and *The Nation* ("With Her Rope-a-Dope Strategy, Kamala Harris Baited Trump into Scaring Swing Voters"). Elsewhere, columnists claimed Harris "rope-a-doped Trump," "had the dope on the ropes," or "used a carefully constructed rope-a-dope strategy to derail Donald Trump during their debate." Meanwhile, a range of observers on social media echoed the theme as well, including journalists, academics, and celebrities.

Part of the problem here is that the specific metaphor is ill-suited to the occasion. Ali's gambit against Foreman required not that he distracted his opponent, but that he withstood an onslaught of legitimate punches. In the debate, Trump flailed wildly but he rarely made any impact on Harris. Ali exhausted Foreman; Harris let Trump self-destruct. Yet, therein lies the larger problem with the metaphor: in 1975, a rapidly tiring Foreman faltered in the eighth round, leading the fight to be stopped; in 2024, a comprehensively defeated Trump simply ignored his own performance, avoided additional debates, and focused on his own peculiar campaign tactics.

There is no causal link between political media's misuse of boxing metaphors and its confusion over the election's outcome, but they are similarly symptomatic of an inability to interpret a political landscape permanently altered by Trump and a changing electorate. Voters no longer rely on either the conventional architecture or wisdom of legacy media; and boxing, once among the most popular sports in the United States, is now the subject of marginal interest. There was a time when being "heavyweight champion of the world" was a revered status; today, there is more enthusiasm for mixed martial arts (MMA) and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).

At the risk of oversimplifying the politics of UFC and its fan base, it is clear that the emergent sport appeals to younger white men, a key constituent for Donald Trump. To that point, *Slate* describes a UFC event from the summer of 2024 in which the various ingredients of white masculine political identity—MAGA, podcaster Joe Rogan, MMA, and Black Rifle Coffee Company—constituted a recipe for Trump's eventual triumph. In short, the contexts in which electoral politics are staged and the rules by which they are judged have shifted. Boxing is an artifact of the past. Increasingly, so too is legacy political media.

I do not mean to suggest these shifts explain all of the factors that affected the 2024 presidential election. Nevertheless, political media cannot continue to rely on the historical practices that have guided our understanding of elections in the 20th century. Trading punches and knockout blows may provide color to campaign analysis, but they reflect a frame that rarely characterizes modern campaigns. It isn't merely that the "rope-a-dope" doesn't apply to Harris' debate performance in a way that could forecast the election's outcome; it's that her opponent was engaged in an altogether different contest.

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6

Digital campaign

Reversion to the meme: A return to grassroots content

While memes have long simmered in the background of digital politics, the August 2024 exaltation of political memes and meme culture more broadly felt a return to 2012, an election cycle already christened the meme election. Then, gaffes like Romney's "Binders Full of Women" and Obama's "You didn't Build That" made for heavily memed, politically salient content. While fun, memes were always considered incidental to success, but they can tell us about culture, salient messages, and campaigns' and candidates' willingness to embrace those. Across party lines, the memes of the 2024 election represent a broader connection to grassroots, less campaign-controlled actions than in years prior. Although some of the generic conventions of memes from 2012 continue over a decade later, their style and content has shifted. On the right, memes were less connected to viral moments, and used lots of AI-generated imagery. On the left, they skewed toward non-political internet culture, both in what was grassroots supported, and within the more built-out organizational infrastructure of digital campaigning. Broadly, campaigns embraced grassroots content that was more vulgar and negative too.

Organizationally speaking, 2024 election memes came from supporters, with campaigns then following suit, rather than top-down campaign-produced memes. The Trump campaign, hamstrung by the candidate's own absence from Twitter until late August of 2024, was buoyed by the active #MAGA contingent on Twitter, tweeting AI-generated images of Trump, ridiculing Biden's age and poor debate performance, and celebrating Trump's campaign stop at McDonalds. Once Trump was back on the platform, he routinely retweeted these supporter-created posts, as he had in 2016. The Harris campaign's grassroots memetic support that immediately followed her move into the candidacy was massive, multi-platform, and also driven by a Twitter based fan community: the K-Hive. Although the campaign embraced and winked at the memes, they were not actively driving their uptake or directing topics of the memes. That was left to supporters, who ultimately acted similarly to fan communities on the internet, creating content that showed their support and engaging with each others' work. That was in contrast to the approach the campaign had taken to creating Biden-oriented memes while he was still at the top of the ticket. These memes, while popular among Biden fans on Twitter, did not have the same virality of the grassroots content, affirming that the more grassroots content is valued more heavily.

In terms of content, many memes followed the long tradition of amplifying campaign gaffes. The political right mocked Harris' laugh, and Biden's long pauses routinely. The left jumped on Trump's outlandish statements, most notably his lies about Haitian immigrants, "they're eating the dogs; they're eating the cats," and J.D. Vance's derogatory reference to liberal women as "childless cat ladies." But there was more going on than the long tradition of finding a way to humorously criticize your opponent, too.

On the grassroots right, rather than memes about viral topics or a particular, catalyzing gaffe or event, there was a constant, steady stream of AI-generated art depicting a general love of Trump or mocking of a broad set of liberal policies. Many of these images trafficked in hero imagery: a strong leader above the masses, occasionally riding a lion. Some of them responded to Democratic criticisms–especially salient were responses to the liberal condemnation of his lies about Haitians eating pets, featuring Trump cuddling up to cats and ducks–but were shared widely outside of that memetic moment and context, with the animals becoming part of the broader pro-Trump.

On the grassroots left, many of the most popular memes were relatively removed from policy or political imagery. Kamala is brat, being coconut-pilled, and reclaiming her laugh all gained immense attention and brought energy to a lifeless campaign, and they also demonstrated a particular imagery of internet culture more than of political culture-what Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner have called a combination of "micheviousness", oddity, and antagonism." Even the campaign-led efforts from the Biden campaign before Harris became the nominee reflected this internet imagery. The Biden campaigns' "Dark Brandon" content was a vehicle for the campaign to engage in critiques that were more crass and antagonistic than other Biden's voice.

Memes on both sides covered topics that previous campaigns would have distanced themselves from or been scared to be associated with. Anti-Harris memes across the entire time of her candidacy were often vulgar and explicitly sexist, accusing the Vice President of trading sexual favors to further her career. While almost any campaign would have distanced itself from such content, Trump's Truth Social account re-posted it. Even the Democrats were less afraid of memes that skewed vulgar, like J.D. Vance having sex with a couch. Despite blurred lines between disinformation and internet humor and the parodic, these memes were not simply ignored by the campaign, but embraced with a wink by Governor Walz in a stump speech.

Overall, the memes of 2024 looked different from the memes of 2012, with campaigns allowing the grassroots fan-supporters to take the messaging lead, and not only relinquishing control, but embracing the less controlled state of campaign communications.

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From platform politics to partisan platforms

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Social media platforms have now played a prominent role in three U.S. presidential elections. In 2016, the core narrative was the way in which platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were essentially asleep at the switch and thus foreign actors were able to disseminate disinformation and politically polarizing content. In 2020, the platforms worked to avoid a repeat of 2016; however, their efforts failed to prevent the circulation of domestically-produced election disinformation that became a driving force behind the January 6th, 2021 insurrection.

In both elections, despite frequent (and unsubstantiated) accusations of anti-conservative bias, the notion of the platforms themselves as overt political actors was more a case of concerned speculation than verifiable fact. With the 2024 election, however, we have officially entered the era of partisan platforms.

We of course begin with the transformation of Twitter to X under the ownership of billionaire and far-right activist Elon Musk. Musk purchased Twitter in 2022 for $44 billion. He took the company private and quickly initiated a wholesale remaking of the platform that included the dissolution of much of the company's trust and security workforce. The platform quickly became awash with disinformation and hate speech.

Subsequent actions were more overtly political, particularly as the 2024 presidential election approached. Musk lifted the platform's ban on political ads. He also ordered his engineers to ensure that his posts, which became increasingly focused on far-right rhetoric and disinformation, reached the bulk of X users, regardless of whether they followed Musk's account. In addition, an analysis of the platform's curation algorithm found that it places right-wing political content in front of users, regardless of their preferences. Musk even hosted a campaign event for Trump on X – an act that has resulted in a complaint to the Federal Election Commission that the event represented a corporate campaign contribution that violated campaign finance laws.

It is no surprise, therefore, that in the days before the election, X was described as Musk's "political weapon." After Trump's victory, many experts contended that X's concerted efforts on behalf of the Trump campaign played a role in influencing some voters.

The overt politicization of X is not the only indicator of how social media platforms have become partisan. Another key trend over the past four years has been the general fragmentation of the social media space – in particular, the rise of overtly right-leaning platforms such as Gab, Parler, and Rumble. The growth of these platforms owed much to the actions of the more mainstream platforms in the wake of the January 6th, 2021 insurrection, when platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube deplatformed thousands of accounts, including those of Donald Trump.

Of course, Trump responded to his banishment from mainstream social media by creating his own partisan platform, Truth Social. Truth Social became Trump's primary mode of social media communication throughout the 2024 election cycle. It has also become his most valuable asset. Research has shown that the platform has a tendency to favor right-leaning over left-leaning posts in its content moderation practices.

The notion of a sitting president being the majority shareholder of a major social media platform flies in the face of the kind of separation of powers that seems essential to preserving the integrity of our democracy; and yet, there are no regulatory guardrails preventing this situation. Surprisingly, in the aftermath of Trump's electoral victory, this topic of a sitting president owning a major social media platform is not receiving any substantive discussion in the media.

Finally, it is worth noting ongoing concerns about TikTok, and whether its ownership by a Chinese company provides a mechanism for the Chinese government to monitor and influence the social media feeds of millions of American TikTok users. In April of 2024, such concerns led President Biden to sign a bill banning TikTok within a year, unless its Chinese owner, ByteDance, divested itself of the app. ByteDance is challenging the ban in court.

President Trump has reversed his initial stance in favor of a TikTok ban; and so even if the ban is upheld in court, it remains to be seen whether it would actually be put into effect under the next Trump administration. Canada's recent decision to order ByteDance to close its offices in Canada due to national security concerns is a reminder that concerns about the utilization of TikTok as a tool for political influence by its owner persist globally, even if evidence of the overt politicization of the platform remains less apparent than in the other cases discussed above.

Partisan platforms have, over the past four years, evolved from an unsubstantiated concern of the far right to, ironically, an important tool of the far right and a key component of our contemporary political reality. As with previous media forms, such as talk radio and cable news, it is the conservative side of the partisan spectrum that is most aggressively exploiting the medium as a political tool. The 2024 election marks the key moment in which these partisan platforms truly began to make their presence felt.

The fragmented social media landscape in the 2024 U.S. election

The proliferation of new social media platforms in 2024 set this U.S. general election apart from recent campaigns. Previously, a small number of platforms dominated the information ecosystem (e.g., Facebook (Meta) and Twitter (X)). More platforms now attract attention across different citizen groups, resulting in changes in political communication and affecting how campaigns make strategic communication decisions.

The shift in the social media landscape can be traced to decisions by social media companies in the wake of the 2020 election. Trump's rejection of his 2020 election defeat and communication connected to the insurrection on January 6, 2021, resulted in online platforms including Facebook and Twitter banning Trump. Even technology companies like Amazon, Google, and Apple refused to host the niche right-wing social media platform Parler after Trump's move there. Trump launched a hyper-partisan social media platform, Truth Social, in 2022, providing him spotlight and distribution. Despite Truth Social's small user base, Trump's messages were amplified by journalists, pundits, and supporters across other online platforms and media. Even after many platforms allowed Trump to rejoin, Truth Social remained central to communication for his campaign.

Trump's deplatforming was one catalyst for the fragmentation of new online platforms, but changes to the previously dominant platforms also motivated the shift. For example, Meta willingly relinquished its concentrated power in online news and politics in 2024 after three increasingly divisive general election campaigns coincided with increasing distrust of Facebook. Meta dismantled their trust and safety team, sunsetted CrowdTangle – a data sharing technology used by researchers and journalists, and demoted news and politics in their newsfeeds. This deemphasis of news meant that Meta platforms, especially Facebook, were less central to politics than we've seen in more than a decade.

Similarly, X's (formerly Twitter) role in the 2024 election significantly changed compared to prior election cycles. Twitter always had fewer users than Facebook, but it's prominence in U.S. elections was due to two main factors: elite use and data accessibility. Twitter was the preferred platform of many politicians, journalists, and political researchers in the 2008-2020 campaigns. This was best illustrated by Donald Trump's prolific use of the platform in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns. However, Elon Musk's 2022 purchase and subsequent changes to the platform resulted in an exodus of users. Musk dismantled the trust and safety team, espoused and amplified conservative messages, and made data access for research prohibitively expensive. Many journalists, academics, and left-leaning activists abandoned the platform, making it less central to newsmaking than in previous elections. Simultaneously, content on X tacked rightward.

As a whole, these events and platform decisions have led partisans to gravitate to platforms with like-minded users. New platforms have tended to draw ideologically homogenous audiences: Parler, Gab, Rumbl, and Truth Social served as social media spaces preferred by conservative-leaning individuals, while Mastodon, BlueSky, and Threads drew more liberal-leaning audiences.

Platform fragmentation also resulted in changes relative to media distribution, consumption, and political power compared to the 2008-2020 elections. For example, communication became less centralized. Social media influencers that are not part of the mainstream media have grown audiences that span across platforms, making their content an important place for political campaigns to focus their message distribution. Moreover, algorithmic recommendations gained power with the proliferation of TikTok and short-form video content on copycat platforms. This shift represents perhaps the biggest change in online political content consumption. Instead of the algorithm showing users content from friends and family who may hold divergent views on topics, the opaque recommendation algorithms on these platforms provide content based on previous viewing behaviors, which may decrease the likelihood of seeing opposing information.

Another important shift away from dominant online platforms has been the explosion of interest in podcasts. While podcasting technology has existed for over two decades, the ascendent popularity of streaming platforms has allowed for long-form content like podcasts to flourish. This format is especially attractive as it can be cheaply produced and easily packaged into short-form videos.

The shift away from large dominant online platforms to a fragmented environment dominated by influencers and podcasts has resulted in campaigns rethinking their media strategies during the 2024 election. In addition to social media communication, campaigns historically relied on traditional mainstream media coverage such as interviews with mainstream news outlets. However, during 2024 the candidates spent notable time interviewing with prominent podcasters like Joe Rogan (Trump) and Alex Cooper (Harris), while fewer interviews were granted to mainstream media outlets.

The fragmentation of the online political information ecosystem, including social media platforms, led to tactical campaign innovation, setting it apart from previous election cycles. Individual media platforms and channels ceded power to influencers and podcast producers who operate across platforms. Trump's 2024 victory might suggest that his heightened use of these new platforms and distribution methods is a winning strategy. However, these changes came alongside other prominent factors including eroding trust in institutions, economic inflation, Biden's belated rejection of the Democratic nomination, and unprecedented campaign spending. These dynamics will likely have downstream effects in political communication including how we understand audiences, polarization, effective messaging, political norms, and political behaviors.

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Outside organization advertising on Meta platforms: Coordination and duplicity

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While much attention was paid to the presidential candidates' ad spending, including on social media platforms, less attention was paid to outside organizations advertising on social media. We tracked ad messaging, spending, and targets on Meta platforms beyond the candidates to "Extended-Party Networks", which include the political parties, political action committees (PACS), Super-PACS, and even individuals and shady groups with unclear origins and motives. We found a remarkable number of coordinated pages that are tied together through shared administrators or links to websites, and that are engaging in deceptive messaging practices, including credit card scams. Their activity continues to raise questions about Meta's own regulatory practices and profit motives.

To identify outside organizations engaged in messaging around the campaign, we collected ads that ran on Facebook and Instagram from September 1st, 2023 during the pre-primaries through August 31st, 2024, which marks the end of the political conventions. We searched the Meta Ad Library API for ads that mentioned any of the presidential primary candidates and the vice-presidential nominees.

We found 3,483 Facebook pages that ran ads around the presidential campaign. We estimate that they spent $55 million on those ads and had over 3 billion impressions (Meta provides an upper and lower bound for spending and impressions. We take the mid-point of an ad buy to estimate these two metrics). These organizations spent heavily once Kamala Harris became the nominee in July (see Figure 1).

We received data on ad targets from Meta, including gender, and age. Overall, the ads targeted primarily older Facebook and Instagram users, but especially older women (see Figure 2).

Of the roughly 3500 Facebook pages, we found a surprising number that appeared to be independent but were actually interconnected. Using metadata, we were able to identify pages that shared an administrator email address, telephone number or postal address for the organization, or the sponsor of the ad (i.e. who paid for it). We identified 252 networks of pages where at least 2 pages shared data elements.

Some of these networks are expected. For example, Donald Trump's Facebook page was tied to five other pages that included a campaign manager as well his daughter-in-law and now head of the Republican National Committee. They likely share a consulting firm that is assisting with their social media accounts. One surprising page, however, was that of Ronny Jackson, a candidate running for a U.S. House race in Texas. Jackson was Trump's physician, and we suspect that Trump or his campaign staff helped Jackson to use the same consulting firm (see Figure 3).

More surprising, we identified several networks that appear to be targeting supporters of Donald Trump with a credit card scam. The largest network included 55 Facebook pages that we estimate spent at least $2.5 million on ads. One Facebook page in the network is Frontier of Freedom. The page spent an estimated $5,339 running ads in our time period of analysis. Like similar ads in the network, one ad attacks Democrats and promotes Trump's agenda, and makes false statements about immigrants engaging in "horrific crimes." At the end of the ad, the announcer urges viewers to click the link at the bottom of the ad to fill out a poll and claim a Trump 2024 flag to show support for Trump. The URL to the link is to a four-question poll, and then asks for contact information. After completing that, it resolves to a new page that asks that Shipping & Handling be paid for to receive the flag. Buried at the very bottom of the page, however, is a statement in micro-font that stated that by giving credit card information, the target agrees to pay $79.97/month for a membership to the Patriot American Club. There is little evidence such a club exists or what its purpose is (see Figure 4).

The existence of scammers capitalizing on the enthusiasm of voters this election is troubling. Although we notified Meta in June to the existence of this scam network, we found that while several pages had been disabled, additional pages had launched later in the year running similar scam ads that were active during the general election. The continued existence on Meta platforms of scammers that are taking advantage of the political moment to both advance false and misleading claims while also scamming citizens speaks to the inadequacy and inattentiveness of the tech company to police itself when profit is at stake.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank my student research team including: Saklain Zaman, Jill Karia, and Amol Borkar.

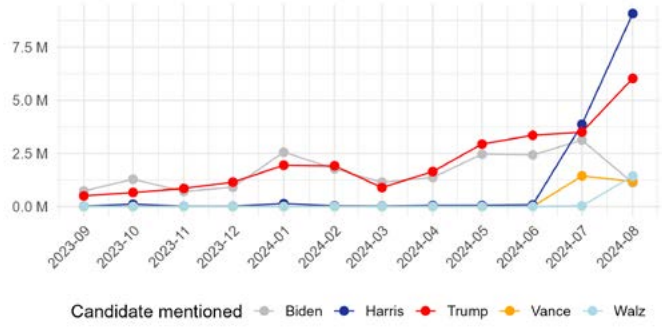

Figure 1: Outside organization ad spend mentioning candidates

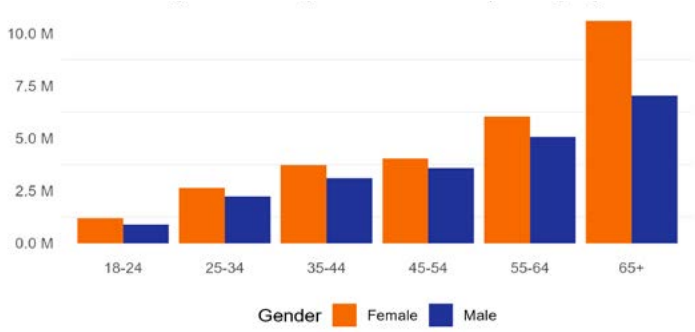

Figure 2: Outside orgs mentioning candidates ad spend by age and gender

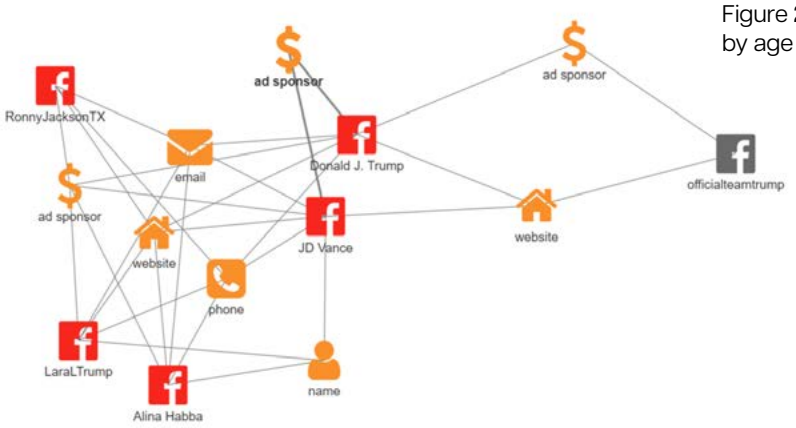

Figure 3: Interconnections

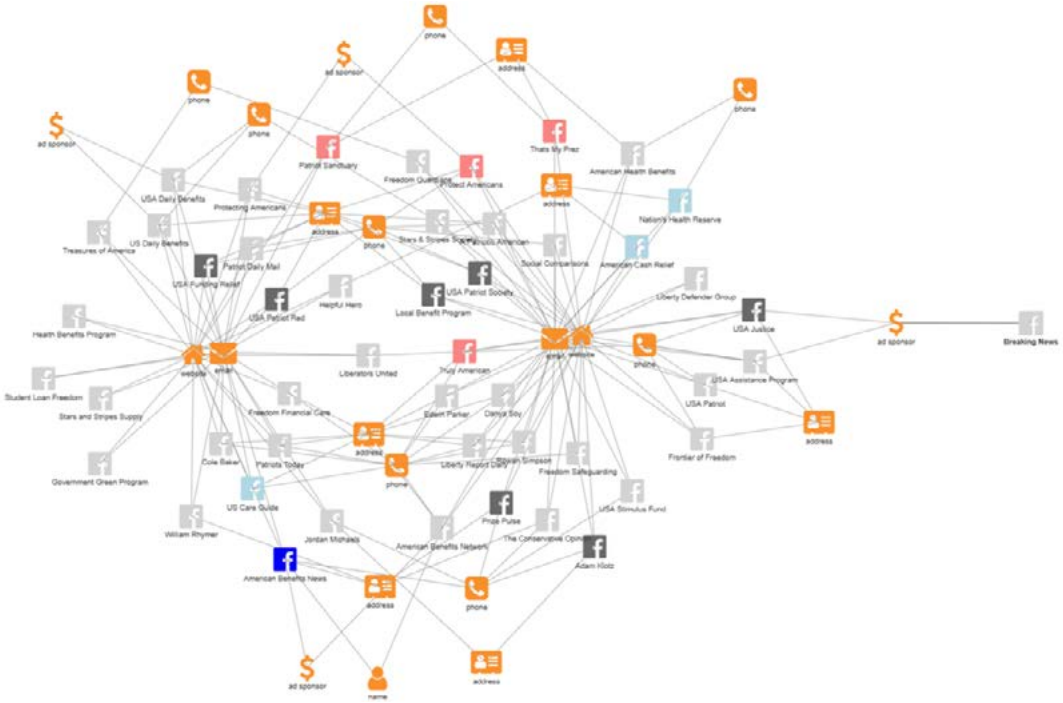

Figure 4: Interconnections

Prejudice and priming in the online political sphere

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It had to be the weirdest, but among the most disturbing examples of how political priming can be effectively used to spread disinformation. The case illustrates the intersection between the Trump presidential campaign, partisan media, and the rapid ricocheting of bogus claims across social media in a digital environment where truth can be difficult to determine but can be strategically exploited for political gain. The story illustrates the power of priming, a classical political psychological media effect where media messages access partisan attitudes and prejudices, channeling them to influence voting behavior.

Here is the backdrop. In recent years, Springfield, Ohio, a small city in southwestern Ohio, suffering from the strains of globalization, transformed its economy, in part by luring about 20,000 legal Haitian immigrants to work in manufacturing industries, boosting the financial health of the community. Although the influx of immigrants had a positive influence on the city's economy, the sheer number of newcomers strained Springfield's resources, likely accessing anti-immigrant attitudes among some, but by no means a majority, of the city's residents. This negative affect was exacerbated by a tragic car accident in August 2023 that occurred when a Haitian resident, driving illegally, crashed into a school bus, killing an 11-year-old boy.

Although some of the stereotype seeds had been planted in the community, things calmed down until early September of 2024, when a Springfield resident, writing in a local Facebook group, claimed she heard that a neighbor's daughter's friend, who had lost her cat, discovered it was hanging from a tree branch at a Haitian neighbor's house, butchered and carved up to be eaten. The rumor was false, but it linked up in some residents' minds with online claims that Haitians were eating ducks and swans in city parks, also false. None of this would have had a political impact had the claims not been deliberately spread online by neo-Nazi groups, right-wing media influencers, disinformation platforms like InfoWars, and, in particular by the president of the conservative platform Turning Point U.S., whose X post was viewed nearly 4 million times. It all played into a racist narrative with a long history in the U.S. that depicts foreigners as consuming undesirable animals and engaging in primitive bestial behavior, a narrative that congealed with prejudices some Americans harbored toward immigrants.

Immigration was the key. Republicans had been emphasizing immigration as a key national problem for years, developing its agenda-setting potential, even though undocumented immigrants exert little impact on the bulk of Americans and claims about their deleterious impact on jobs and crime were unfounded. But the time was ripe for priming.

Thus, on September 9, the day before the Trump-Harris debate, J.D. Vance tweeted that Springfield residents had pets eaten by "people who shouldn't be in this country," and Trump amplified it exponentially before a national audience of 67 million viewers at the presidential debate, claiming that illegal immigrants were "eating the pets of the people that live there."

As cognitive psychological research suggests, the false association between illegal immigration and Haitians' eating animals likely spread through sympathetic voters' political cognitive networks, activating ideas linked in terms of their semantic meaning, such as misconceptions of immigration, and racial stereotypes, in this way helping to access prejudices allied with Trump's political narrative. Republicans also sought, through priming, to make illegal immigration more accessible in memory so voters would be more likely to weight the agenda item heavily in their voting decisions, in hopes of producing a wave of Trump votes.

We don't yet know the empirical effects that these priming efforts exerted on voting decisions. The misinformation clearly resonated with some pro-Trump voters, and its political impact is strongly suggested by research showing that conspiracy theories and falsehoods shared online amplify prejudices and strengthen confirmation biases about out-groups.

Not content to focus on the bizarre Springfield story, Trump sought to prime falsehoods about illegal immigration anew in October, claiming that government hurricane disaster-relief funds were spent to house illegal immigrants who crossed into the U.S. This disinformation too spread through online platforms, amplified by online opinion leaders' affirmation, showing how the confluence of misinformation, partisan prejudices, and an intent to spread falsehoods can have modest, but politically consequential, effects on political attitudes.

Under particular conditions, fact-checks can alter incorrect beliefs such as these, but in today's echo chamber environment, they are just not going to reach the highly partisan voters who are primed by misinformation, the falsehoods serving a variety of psychological and political functions.

Decades ago, scholars yearned for an era in which the major media hegemons were supplemented by politically diverse platforms in a more ideologically differentiated media ecosystem. It's a "be careful what you wish for" moment, for now the platforms are more diverse, but populated by extremist actors who can manipulate the psychology of the information environment to influence beliefs that seem impervious to influence.

Perceptions of social media in the 2024 presidential election

Every presidential election has its own popular narrative about the role of technology in politics. In 1960, it was the power of Television in the Kennedy vs. Nixon Debate. In 2008, it was the Obama campaign's innovative use of Facebook. In 2024, algorithmic social media (e.g., TikTok, Instagram) emerged as key technologies in the contest between Trump and Harris. The most obvious episode of this came in the form of the "Brat Summer" phenomenon, in which TikTok culture surrounding the singer Charlie XCX was breathlessly remixed to anoint Kamala Harris as culturally cool (i.e., "brat"). As "Brat" Summer turned into Fall, the tone of social media turned from jubilance to darker themes related to consequences of the election. More broadly, social media have been framed as either exciting spaces for building political solidarity or channels for misinformation and outrage.

Given the fraught history of social media's role in U.S. politics, we wanted to better understand how Americans with different political and social identities viewed the role of social media in politics in the days before the election. Previous studies suggests that people have very different perceptions of the role of social media, depending on the groups they belong to. In turn, these perceptions can drive political behavior and can shape peoples' relationships with politics.

To examine these questions, we conducted a survey of 2,500 American social media users during the Fall of 2024. Three initial findings are helpful in characterizing how Americans were thinking about social media during the election.

1. **Overall, social media was viewed as a useful, but exhausting context for politics, with significant potential for harm.** Majorities of respondents in our survey viewed social media as at least "moderately" *personally* useful for learning about politics and expressing their political opinions. Yet, exhaustion was the most frequent emotion expressed, particularly among Democrats and women. In addition, nearly half of respondents perceived social media as negative for America in general. This highlights the complex reality that many Americans rely upon social media to engage in politics, while at the same time perceiving these environments as exhausting and harmful/ineffective.

2. Democrats and Black Americans were the most optimistic about the role of social media. Our data show that across partisan and racial/ethnic groups, Democrats and Black Americans stand out as perceiving social media as a more positive force in American politics compared to other groups. This may reflect the unique nature of Kamala Harris' viral campaign presence, but also is further evidence of long-standing enthusiasm among liberals and marginalized groups for social media as contexts for positive social change.

3. Americans with stronger social and political identities saw social media differently. Across a range of measures, those who more strongly identified with their political party felt more positive emotions when they saw politics on social media and viewed social media as more positive (and less negative) for their own groups. In some cases, these dedicated group members also viewed social media as less harmful for *other* groups. For example, respondents who strongly identified as white perceived social media as *less* negative for racial minorities. This pattern of findings highlights that people are likely processing their experiences of social media through lens of their identities. Overall, our data paint a complex portrait of American's perceptions of social media. These technologies are seen as both valuable and harmful, evoking feelings of hope, anger, and exhaustion. Experiences vary across some of the most important sociopolitical identities in the American politics and likely shape how different groups engage in politics. Given the outcome of the election, some critical reflection about the role of social media is in order. Did emotional reactions to politics on social media inhibit or motivate further political action? Why do people have such different perceptions of social media and what are the consequences in terms of how Americans think about regulation and moderation of social media platforms? Was optimism about social media among certain groups productive or misplaced? As a new political reality sets in, questions like these will be newly posed about the role of technology in shaping the outcome of another American election and the way people imagine politics moving forward.

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Modeling public Facebook comments on the attempted assassination of President Trump

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Few will forget the iconic images of former President Donald Trump emerging with a bloodied face after an assassination attempt at an election rally in Pennsylvania on July 14th, 2024. It adds to the United States' tragic, long history of assassination attempts on presidents with nearly one in 11 killed (four sitting presidents assassinated, and two surviving a shooting). As communication scholars, our interest is how modern media communicate news of these attempts (successful and otherwise), how the general public respond to this news, and what these discourses might say about the state of American politics. For example, entire volumes have documented the deeply personal impact of news of the assassination of John F. Kennedy (e.g. Russo & Moses's *Where were you? America remembers the JFK assassination*) and survival of Ronald Reagan (e.g. Pillemer's *Flashbulb memories*).

Thomas Matthew Crooks' shooting of President Trump during the 2024 election campaign continues this dark history of attempts on U.S. presidents' lives. Nevertheless, the latest event occurs in an era where social media—instead of newspapers, radio, and television—dominate our communicative landscape. It therefore offers a unique opportunity to reveal almost real-time public responses to breaking news of an assassination attempt on a (former) President running for office.

While there will no doubt be more extensive analyses in the future, our first effort draws from a unique data source: approximately 26 thousand Facebook comments to "breaking news" of the attempt on Trump from six posts from major cable (*CNN*, *FNC*, *MSNBC*) and broadcast news (*ABC, CBS, NBC*) outlets' Facebook public pages in the first 24 hours after Crooks pulled the trigger. The comments come from Meta's new Content Library, which requires substantial oversight in how scholars use, analyse, and present the data.

While Meta's conditions of use restrict exploration of individual's comments, it approved our presentation of the following topic model (i.e. Table 1), which largely explains the thematic spread of comments responding to breaking news of the assassination attempt on Trump. For those interested in the technical details, the model was created using soft clustering of dimensionally reduced sentence embeddings from a large language model (for more see Phillips, Carson, and Jackman, 2024).

Table 1 displays the topic names (derived from statistically representative sentences and words), the "likes" each topic received (as a percentage), and the category's relative size. We see three immediate themes emerging from the data, they are examples of: dismay; trolling, and the public's conspiratorial thinking from both sides of the political spectrum. While some comments express dismay at the attempt, be it emotional (see Table 1 example GG), spiritual (T) or democratic (HHH), other comments are rife with attributing blame for the attack (e.g. Democrats: A), expressing conspiracy beliefs (e.g. Staged: J), and reacting with what we consider are troll-like responses. To more clearly explain the latter, see the comments of repulsion to others' use of the laughing emoji (D) in response to the attack. As we have written elsewhere (Phillips, 2023), this RIP-trolling act wields laughing emojis as weapons to publicly attack, mock, and demean the grief of others on this platform. The six Trump assassination posts we analyzed prompted nearly nine thousand laughing emoji reactions. The unquestionably sarcastic deployment of "thoughts & prayers" (M) offers further evidence of these troll-like comments and reactions.

Conspiracy theories are also clearly present as self-contained topics in the data, ranging from characterizations of the shooting as a publicity stunt (W), and as a hoax (CCC), to criticizing Trump's supposed fake blood (JJ) and what some sarcastically ridicule as the President's Oscar-worthy performance (OO). However, we also note conspiracies saturate many of the other topics, for example suggesting "they" (e.g. Democrats) were unsuccessful in using the legal (II) or electoral system (VV) to defeat Trump, and so "they" have resorted to attempted murder—thereby casually inferring a conspiracy. In this way, the comments at times display an almost bipartisan belief in conspiracies, albeit different theories, used by both the politically left and right in direct response to the assassination attempt.

While there is little room to more deeply explore the data—both due to space and Meta legal constraints, there is obvious need for more detailed investigation of this kind. The comments themselves somewhat demand this, pointing to each other's Facebook responses as further evidence of a divided nation (H) on the brink of civil war (DDD) giving us insight into the state of polarization in U.S. politics. Our hope is that this brief contribution offers initial insights and sparks much-needed further research going forward.

Table 1: Topic model of Facebook comments on cable and broadcast news coverage of Trump (rally) assassination attempt

Topic	Likes	Size	Topic	Likes	Size
Blame Democrats (A)	5.86%	3.1%	Gun control laws (HH)	0.65%	1.33%
Obama, Biden, Harris (B)	5.05%	3.17%	Legal persecution, so kill (II)	0.64%	0.53%
Condemn/promote violence (C)	4.61%	1.65%	Fake blood (JJ)	0.63%	0.59%
Laughing emoji discussion (D)	3.99%	2.47%	Shots fired (KK)	0.47%	0.89%
Pithy disappointment (E)	3.73%	4%	47th POTUS (LL)	0.45%	0.82%
Ensured victory (F)	3.47%	1.35%	Preach/spew hate (MM)	0.42%	0.47%
Bible Versus (G)	3.26%	2.56%	Sending Prayers (NN)	0.34%	0.63%
Divided/United America (H)	3.12%	2.22%	Oscar worthy performance (OO)	0.34%	0.6%
Un/deserved (I)	3.1%	0.79%	Bound to happen (PP)	0.34%	0.5%
Staged (J)	2.84%	3.13%	Bullet (QQ)	0.33%	0.57%
Disgusting comments (K)	2.52%	1.62%	Bystanders (RR)	0.32%	0.45%
Planned setup (L)	1.82%	0.84%	Pure evil (SS)	0.29%	0.4%
Thoughts & prayers (M)	1.8%	1.03%	Gunshot sounds (TT)	0.25%	0.62%
Project 2025 (N)	1.76%	0.57%	Five shots/Fifth avenue (UU)	0.25%	0.66%
Crowd (O)	1.59%	1.1%	Can't beat, so kill (VV)	0.2%	0.71%
Fight, fight, fight! (P)	1.41%	0.7%	Prayers for victims (WW)	0.19%	0.53%
Trump's strength (Q)	1.35%	0.61%	Too bad they missed (XX)	0.17%	0.57%
Asking questions (R)	1.21%	0.47%	Crazy (YY)	0.13%	0.46%
Assassination attempt (S)	1.09%	1.82%	Iconic photo (ZZ)	0.12%	0.55%
Praying for Trump (T)	1.08%	0.92%	Shooter dead (AAA)	0.1%	1.07%
Secret Service (U)	1.02%	1.57%	Investigation (BBB)	0.07%	0.38%
Keep fighting (V)	1.02%	0.68%	Fake hoax (CCC)	0.07%	0.82%
Publicity stunt (W)	1%	0.43%	Civil war (DDD)	0.06%	0.35%
Trump's recovery (X)	0.91%	0.64%	MAGA (EEE)	0.05%	0.48%
Blame media (Y)	0.87%	3.17%	JFK/RFK/MLK/Reagan(FFF)	0.05%	0.51%
Failure vs. success (Z)	0.85%	1.14%	The libs (GGG)	0.05%	0.43%
Trump 2024 (AA)	0.81%	1.51%	Threat to democracy (HHH)	0.04%	0.5%
Headline criticism (BB)	0.73%	0.34%	Blame Trump/Republicans (III)	0.04%	0.79%
Vote intentions (CC)	0.72%	0.43%	Spanish (JJJ)	0.03%	1.93%
Radical left extremists (DD)	0.71%	0.92%	Rally security (KKK)	0.02%	0.38%
Trump's sacrifices (EE)	0.7%	0.88%	FJB (LLL)	0.02%	0.43%
Ear damage (FF)	0.68%	0.95%	Registered Republican shooter (MMM)	0.02%	0.4%
Sorrow (GG)	0.67%	0.71%			
					Note: **Number of comments (N = 26844)**
					Note: **Number of unique sentences (N = 37326)**
					Note: **Total noise sentences (N = 14376)**
					Note: **Total sentences (N = 44655)**

Source: Authors using Meta Platforms, Inc. (2024, October 17). *Meta Content Library and Content Library API*. Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [Distributor]. https://doi.org/10.48680/meta.metacontentlibraryapi.4.0

The memes of production: Grassroots-made digital content and the presidential campaign

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In the weeks after the disastrous Biden-Trump debate in June 2024, a clip of Kamala Harris, the then-VP, reemerged on social media and was subsequently memed across platforms. In the speech, Harris says 'You think you just fell out of a coconut tree? [laughter]. You exist in the context of all in which you live and what came before you'. Users commented on the comedic delivery and the slightly surreal nature of the quote. At this point in the campaign, the prospects for the Democrats seemed dire, with headlines about Biden's health a daily occurrence. The Harris meme provided some light relief among the doom and gloom. However, the meme seemed to die relatively quicky, until a few weeks later when it appeared that Harris was being lined up to replace Biden on the ticket. The coconut tree memes sprung forth once again, bringing Democratic supporters and other progressives together in a borderline carnival atmosphere. People added coconuts and palm trees to their screen names, a visual representation of community, and coconut tree memes were layered with other current pop culture moments (as we will discuss below). It appeared that the internet was determined to meme Harris into the Democratic nomination.

This was cemented on July 22nd when Charli xcx – the popstar of the moment who had just released her highly successful (and already highly-memed) album 'brat' – tweeted 'Kamala IS brat'. This went viral – receiving a third of a million likes and sparking a new set of Harris memes. It was seen by many as a comment on the slightly chaotic, authentic and somewhat 'messy' nature of some of the Harris clips. As Charli xcx herself had explained, being 'brat' could be summed up as "that girl who is a little messy and likes to party … Who feels herself but maybe also has a breakdown … is very honest, very blunt, a little bit volatile". The description seemed to capture elements of Harris' projected internet persona.

Other candidates were also subject to memes. In a less-flattering meme, the Republican Vice Presidential pick J.D. Vance was subject to a "shitpost" (a sub-type of meme), claiming that he had confessed in his bestselling autobiography 'Hillbilly Elergy' to having pleasured himself with the aid of an item of living room furniture. This was not true but fit well with the attack line being pursued at the time by Governor Tim Walz (the eventual Democratic VP pick) that the Republicans were 'weird'. The J.D. Vance "couch meme" was picked up and spun further by an already frenzied online army of Harris supporters who were keen to keep up the energy and momentum that the coconut tree and brat memes had seemingly created for the Democratic campaign.

There is nothing new about politics and memes, which have now become a mainstream means of discussing politics. However, what appears different about these two examples is that these were referenced, albeit cautiously, by the formal campaigns. Kamala HQ – the official campaign Twitter account – changed their header to instantly recognisable 'brat' branding (peridot green with blurry ariel font) and updated their bio to 'providing context' in a clear nod to the coconut tree speech. This strategy was a continuation of the Biden era with Biden referencing the 'Dark Brandon' meme about himself via his own social media. At the Democratic convention, two speeches – one by Walz and another by Elizabeth Warren – referred to the J.D. Vance 'couch' meme. Warren was more subtle saying she would not trust Trump and Vance to 'move [my] couch' but Walz added a 'see what I did there?' after his joke in case anyone was under any illusion as to what he referred to.

It is notable that the campaign understood the importance of only 'nodding' to these memes – nothing kills a joke online like a politician co-opting it. Nonetheless, the Democratic campaign seemed to understand the importance of harnessing this online energy and of embracing this way of mobilizing their base. These memes, and their subtle referencing by the formal campaign, did appear to drag the Democratic campaign, or the mood of it at least, out of the doldrums and re-energise the voter base over the summer. Adopting the language of calling their opponents 'weird' also had the hallmark of an online flame war but one which, for a time at least, appeared to work in their favour. Although the latter portions of the campaign lacked this energy and shifted to a far more serious tone, it is likely that parties will continue to attempt to tap into and reference online user-generated content as it relates to themselves and their opponents. This free labor and free mobilisation, although largely firing up the base rather than converting undecided voters, as the results of the election showed, is now firmly part of the modern campaign. Memes and politics are here to stay, and it will be interesting to see how formal campaigns deal with them going forward.

The gendered dynamics of presidential campaign tweets in 2024

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During the 2024 U.S. presidential election, it was impossible to escape conversations surrounding gender and its potential impact in the race. Not only did we have a second woman running against Donald Trump for the presidency, but in the summer of 2022, *Roe v Wade* was overturned by the Supreme Court and was key in mobilization and turnout efforts in the previous midterm election. Heading into Election Day 2024, while the economy and concerns about democracy rang out as the most important issues identified by the American public, voters—especially self-identified Democrats—also mentioned issues like education, healthcare, and abortion (all defined as so-called "women's issues"). Gender was also identified by pollsters as having a large impact on understanding voter decision making, with predictions that this particular race would result in the largest "gender gap" in our history, with women picking Vice President Kamala Harris and men picking former President Donald Trump by as much as a 51-point gap especially among men and women under 30 (*CNN – NYT*/Sienna College Poll).

Given our previous published research on the impact of gender on the campaigning styles of female candidates for Congress, and regarding how Trump and Clinton campaigned in 2016, we would like to share how gender played a role in this presidential election on Twitter/X. Our previous research highlights three key findings:

1. Women candidates send more tweets than men. From 2012 to 2022, women running for seats in the U.S. Congress have consistently sent more tweets on average than male candidates. During the presidential election of 2016, Clinton also sent significantly more tweets than Donald Trump.

2. Women candidates are more likely to attack their opponents. In our previous work, we have shown that female congressional candidates are also consistently more likely to "go negative" about their opponents. The same was true for the last presidential election with a female candidate. While proportionately, both Clinton and Trump spent the same amount of total tweet time focused on negativity, Clinton had almost twice the number of tweets attacking Trump as he did attacking her (he had a decent number of tweets focused on attacking other individuals and institutions, like the government or media).

3. Female candidates are more likely to discuss "women's issues." Our research shows that women are more likely to talk about all issues on Twitter, especially the so-called "women's issues." Clinton also was significantly more likely to discuss "women's issues" in 2016, sending triple the number of tweets as Trump did on these topics.

To examine whether these findings hold in 2024, we collected tweets sent by Harris and Trump from September 1 to November 4th. It is important to note that Twitter/X as a platform has changed considerably since the 2022 Midterms. Elon Musk bought the platform in October of 2022, and many political candidates have either stopped using the social networking site or are using it less often. Trump was also banned from the platform after January 6th, 2021, and was then allowed to re-join the platform by Musk in November 2022 (directly after the purchase of the site). He did not use the platform again until he posted his mugshot in August of 2023.

Consistent with our previous findings, Harris tweeted over four times as often as Trump from the beginning of September to Election Day (986 tweets to 245). We coded each candidate's tweets to determine whether they attacked their opponent. Our second major finding also holds. Harris sent 301 tweets (30.53%) criticizing Trump, while Trump sent 60 tweets (24.49%) criticizing Harris.

When we examine the tweets further in terms of their policy content, we find that Trump only sent a total of 12 tweets, or 4.90% of total tweets, about "women's issues," while Harris sent 222 tweets, or 22.52% of her total tweets, discussing these topics. As Figure 1 shows, Harris sent more tweets across all issues affecting women as a group, with the highest numbers being about family (77 tweets) and women (67 tweets). By contrast, Trump only sent 10% as many tweets about family (7 tweets total), which was the highest number of tweets he sent that referenced any of these topics, most of which had 0 tweets. The framing of these issues also differed for Harris and Trump. Trump's tweets about women or girls tended to focus on young girls, like Mimi Ramirez Rodriguez, being kidnapped and murdered by an illegal alien; while Harris' tweets about women or girls tended to focus on stories about how abortion bans have affected women or supporting women's reproductive freedom. Trump's tweets about families focused on how Harris' economic policies would harm average American families, while Harris' tweets about families focused on how Trump's policies would harm middle class families, her policies would lift up middle class families, and how Trump's policies would prevent families having access to IVF.

Our analysis of these campaign tweets confirms our previous findings. Harris used Twitter/X very similarly to Clinton, both in terms of the number of posts, tone, and content, while Trump rarely discussed "women's issues." Ultimately, Clinton and Harris' concerted appeals to women voters were not enough to garner the support needed to win the election.

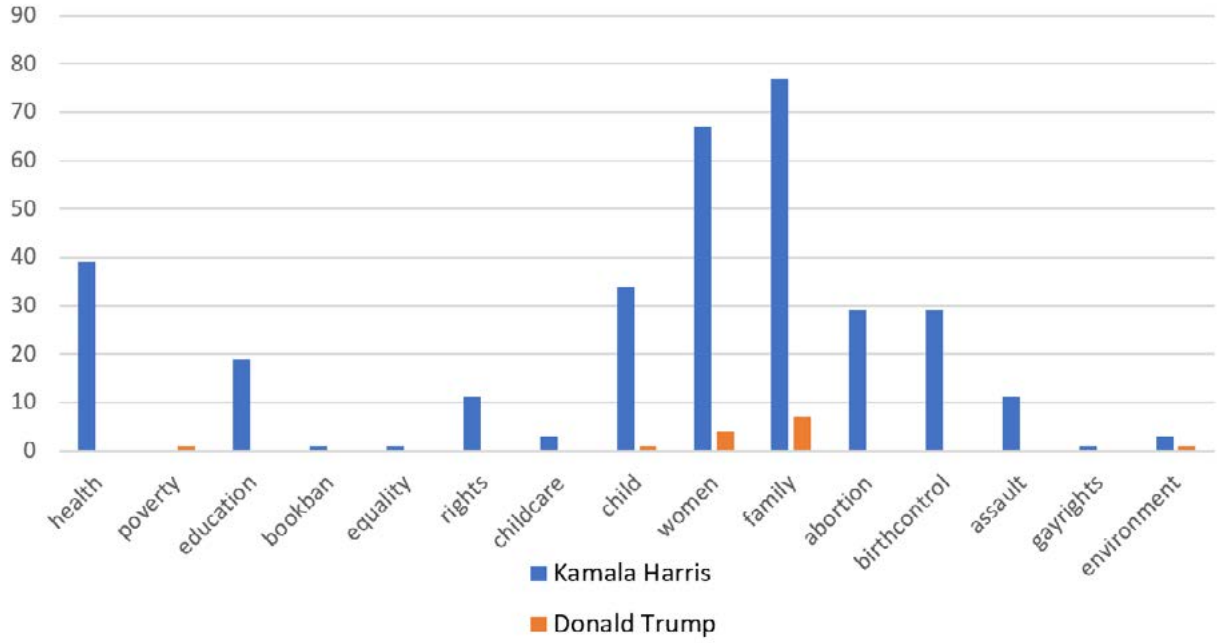

Figure 1: Number of tweets about women's issues in 2024

Threads and TikTok adoption among 2024 congressional candidates in battleground states

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Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and YouTube, have become essential communication tools for most politicians. It is no longer a question of whether to use these platforms, but, rather, how much advertising money to spend, how frequently to post, and, ultimately, which social media platforms to adopt (or abandon). The 2024 congressional election season brought with it new platforms to consider adopting (e.g., Threads and TikTok) and concerns regarding data security, foreign influence, content political bias, and mental health. In fact, numerous U.S. states (Republican-leaning majority) have banned the use of TikTok on government devices, and Montana attempted to ban its citizens' TikTok use entirely. So, do the benefits of these platforms outweigh the concerns of U.S. Congress members?

Understanding which politicians will be early adopters of social media platforms allows us to better predict who might influence political communication. These individuals will have an advantage in crafting a political narrative. Our research applies Rogers' diffusion of innovation framework to better understand predictors of early adoption among congressional candidate. It is also informed by previous scholarship on both U.S. and international elections, drawing upon research conducted on Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, and Instagram. No political adoption research has yet been conducted on Threads or TikTok.

Both social media technology affordances and characteristics of politician's influence adoption decisions. TikTok and Threads provide potential users with numerous innovative features, such as relative advantage, trialability, observability, low complexity, and compatibility, that encourage faster adoption. Previous research provides varying and sometimes inconsistent demographic and party characteristics adoption predictors depending on the social media platform. To illustrate, studies addressing gender have found women more likely to adopt Twitter (X) and Instagram, whereas other studies found no significant gender differences between platforms. Politicians in leadership positions and incumbents may make more extensive use of Facebook, Twitter (X), and YouTube; however, they may not be the first to adopt them. Party affiliation differences can be found between Republicans adopting Twitter (X) and YouTube earlier, compared to Democrats on Facebook. Although some studies found no significant party differences. These conflicting findings illuminate the differences between social media platforms and election cycles. Hence, there is a need to examine Threads and TikTok.

We examine the adoption of emerging social media platforms, Threads and TikTok, among major party candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives in seven battleground states (Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) during the 2024 election cycle. We explore how adoption rates on these newer platforms might vary based on candidates' political and demographic characteristics, including party affiliation, incumbency, race, and gender. We also examine if candidates who are more likely to engage online are more likely to adopt Threads and TikTok. We assessed this propensity by counting the number of candidates who already use all four established social platforms—Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, and YouTube.

From August to October 2024, we tracked 156 congressional candidates and found widespread use of established social media platforms. Facebook and (Twitter) X were used by 99% of the candidates, followed by Instagram (94%) and YouTube (82%). By contrast, less than half of the candidates had adopted Threads (42%), and only 22% had incorporated TikTok into their campaign strategies. Almost 80% of candidates have adopted all four established social media platforms.

Among candidates who adopted Threads (N = 65), Democrats were notably more likely to adopt, with 74% adopting compared to 26% of Republicans. Additionally, incumbents were slightly more inclined to adopt Threads (54%), suggesting that established candidates have more resources to invest in emerging and untested digital platforms. Demographic patterns also emerged: White candidates (68%) adopted Threads more than non-white (32%) candidates, and men (62%) were more likely than women (39%) to engage with the platform. Nearly half of the candidates (45%) who have adopted all four established social media have added Threads to their digital repertoire.

TikTok adoption was lower across the board, with only 22% of candidates (N = 35) utilizing the video-sharing platform. Democratic candidates were more likely to adopt TikTok (77%) than Republicans. Seven of those using TikTok were incumbents, while no challengers had adopted the platform. Like Threads, White candidates adopted TikTok at a slightly higher rate (54%) than non-whites (46%), and more men adopted TikTok (63%) than women (37%). Women and minority candidates may be less inclined to adopt newer platforms, as established platforms may offer more predictable returns on their resources or the established platforms already reach the audiences they need. Only 26% of candidates who have adopted all four established social media have added TikTok to their digital toolbox. The relatively low adoption of TikTok reflects its controversial status.

Adoption trends reveal that congressional candidates who are highly engaged online, Democrats, incumbents, Whites, and males are more likely to adopt emerging platforms. These findings contrast with some earlier adoption research and highlight the need to approach communication strategies on varying social media strategies differently. These data also capture a growing pushback to social media adoption with implications for future political communication.

Who would extraterrestrials side with if they were watching us on social media?

One of the social sciences' longest-running, if unprovable, imaginings is that aliens might one day arrive on Earth to observe us. In the 1950s, the questions were refreshingly straightforward: "What might Martians think of all the love and sex in modern mass media?" Today, while we feel fairly confident there are no Martians, the answer to that question remains elusive. We've yet to meet aliens watching TV (at least not to our knowledge!).

But let's entertain another hypothetical: suppose Martians—or something close enough—had secretly landed in 1950s America. We can't know what conclusions they might have drawn back then, but imagine they left and recently returned to make another covert visit to the U.S. If nothing else, one observation would be undeniable: Americans have changed.

This time around, they wouldn't waste time with TV antennas; instead, they'd dive into the internet, creating social media profiles to blend in. With diligent preliminary research, they might craft two personas: one, a U.S. citizen, Black woman in her 20s, Democrat, college-educated, living in an urban, middle-income area; and the other, a white man in his 50s, Republican, high-school-educated, rural, upper-middle income. Soon, they would notice how fiercely opposed these two profiles seem to be on many issues. They might wonder: "What on Earth makes it possible for these people to live together?"

In earlier decades, the answer seemed obvious. The U.S. had democracy as a coordinating system that encouraged people from opposing backgrounds to build coalitions based on shared interests. Urban and rural areas clashed, but the working class found ways to unite, so us-and-them lines didn't always split down the obvious divides. However, by the late 1990s, things began to shift, and the rift between rural and urban voting preferences for Democrats versus Republicans continued to grow, reaching a 21-point difference in the 2020s. This gap grew even larger in the 2024 presidential election. "How can they keep living together?" Aliens might wonder.

But it's too early to be surprised. Then, something unfamiliar appears. The prominent feature on social media isn't about romance; it's about gender. This is both baffling and revealing—a new fault line, or perhaps one that was hidden beneath the surface: "What changed?" Like many others, we've detected this shift as well. Our team at Michigan State University's Civic Infrastructure Lab has been conducting a nationwide panel survey to track these changes. Since mid-October, we've been gathering data from a representative sample, segmented by geographic units, and have been following the same individuals over time. Data collection is still ongoing post-election, and our preliminary analysis suggests that gender is, indeed, a new front line.

Taken for granted, aliens might have already understood in the 1950s that politicians mobilized existing social cleavages to align voters with their agendas. But the fact that gender could be wielded as a political wedge might surprise them. It's not social class, geography, or race; now, women are more likely to support Democratic candidates, while men tend to lean Republican. Former President Donald Trump seemed to enjoy this new crack, famously going on a "Bro" podcast tour leading up to Election Day. And much like carefully coordinated tours that connect various stops and attractions, these bros are forming close-knit networks across multiple social media platforms.

Yet, observing social media alone doesn't capture the full picture. To gain deeper insights, our Martians might turn to data—like ours—that explores the relationship between social media use and political engagement. Here, they uncover something intriguing: while young users who engage with political content on social media are more likely to vote, this relationship sharply weakens with age. Aliens might ask themselves: "Should this pattern be layered onto other contexts, such as…gender?"

Patterns begin to emerge. Among voters under 30, the gender divide in candidate preference is especially pronounced. Now, aliens could deduce: "Is social media a tool politicians use to deepen this emerging socio-political divide?" Perhaps—but they'd hold off on conclusions, knowing they still have much to learn about this ever-evolving tool.

Observing what they see on the surface, aliens would record: First, gender has become a powerful social cleavage in American politics. Second, this chasm is wider among young voters. Third, social media uniquely mobilizes these young voters. Finally, once politicians detect an effective social cleavage and the means to activate it, they won't leave it idle.

Expanding their gaze beyond America, aliens would find a consistent generational pattern across the globe: younger people tend to view the U.S. more favorably than their elders. Then, they might finally wonder: "How might gender influence alliances between young people in the U.S. and their peers on the other side of Earth? Could a shared sense of future be enough to unite them? Who, after all, would refuse solidarity for the future?"

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AI and voter suppression in the 2024 election

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The 2024 contest has been dubbed "the first election of the AI era." Some observers go so far as to claim that AI is a new participant in campaigns. Thousands of voters sought basic campaign information about how and where to cast their ballots from chatbots. AI-generated attack ads promoted false messages and images against opponents. AI campaign volunteers chatted with voters about issues, and even conducted conversations in different languages. Foreign governments spread deepfake videos across social media in attempts to interfere in the election.

AI was a shadowy presence in the election from the very start. It was widely used during the nomination campaign. AI-generated images depicted Donald Trump with members of constituency groups he was courting. In one photo, Trump is surrounded by a group of young Black men in what appears to be their neighborhood. Democrats in New Hampshire who opposed Joe Biden's nomination used an AI-generated robocall that replicated Biden's voice telling people to save their vote and not turn out. Taylor Swift brought awareness to AI in the election immediately following the September presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Trump. A doctored AI-generated image originally created by a Biden supporter appeared on a pro-Trump account on X, which read: "Taylor wants you to vote for Donald Trump." Trump reposted the image on his Truth Social account with the caption, "I accept!" In endorsing Harris, Swift wrote, "Recently I was made aware that AI of 'me' endorsing Donald Trump's presidential run was posted to his site. It really conjured up my fears around AI, and the dangers of spreading misinformation."

There has been much speculation and increasing evidence about the dangers of AI in elections. A shrouded and underreported peril is AI's potential to suppress voter turnout. The U.S. has a long history of restricting voting. Barriers – such as literacy tests and poll taxes – prohibited racial minorities, poor people, younger voters, older voters, and people with disabilities from casting a ballot. While the Voting Rights Act of 1964 was successful in curbing voter suppression for several decades, states began enacting policies to keep minority groups from voting following the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Twenty-four states have implemented more restrictive voting policies since 2020. During the 2024 election, eligible voters were purged from the voting rolls in Virginia. In the battleground state of Georgia, it was illegal for political organizations to hand out bottles of water to people standing in line at polling places.

AI can be used to suppress voting by spreading disinformation and through manipulation and intimidation of voters. Traditional techniques for this type of voter suppression employ flyers, robocalls, and emails. AI can work to disengage and alarm voters more quickly, easily, and efficiently than these tactics. The proliferation of disinformation generated by AI may be the most consequential new development in the 2024 election cycle. AI can create content that promotes voter apathy and distrust. A study by the AI Democracy Project found that chatbots that simulate human conversation were regularly tricked into providing wrong, controversial, offensive, or dangerous information to voters. When five commonly used chatbots were asked if Biden legitimately won the 2020 presidential election, three correctly indicated that Biden had beaten Trump, one said that the election was still undecided, and another responded that the election was stolen. AI can create false "evidence" of crimes and malfeasance that casts doubt on the security of the voting process. It can be used to sensationalize election stories and invent scandals. The Center for Countering Digital Hate found that 41% of images of alleged election tampering in 2020 were created by AI, including photos of boxes of ballots in a dumpster and ballots in a ditch in Arizona.

AI was used to micro-target marginalized communities to generate fear and keep voters away from the polls. Voters were confused by fake text messages about voter registration and phony emails telling them to go to the wrong polling place. Campaigns used AI to target voters they believe supported the opposition by telling them to vote at home, which is not possible in any state, to avoid long lines at the polls. Migrant communities were sent messages that the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement would be patrolling polling places looking to deport voters. AI disseminated deceptive rumors that voter fraud in 2024 was rampant. Tools, such as EagleAI, were used to scrutinize voter rolls and cast doubts on voter eligibility. These challenges were rarely upheld, but they cast doubt on election results.

AI's capacity to influence campaigns remains largely unknown. The implications of AI in elections depend on how people use the technology – for good or for ill. The AI environment is largely unregulated, opening opportunities for abuse. In 2024, serious issues with AI contributed to an already difficult and chaotic election and mitigated the positive potential of the technology. The question of how powerful AI will become in future elections is yet to be determined.

Should we trust news from AI? ChatGPT and political information

ChatGPT has become a popular source to gain an overview of topical issues quickly and easily, including politics. But how accurate is it for political information? A central tenet of democracy is that voters (and citizens in general) should have sufficient information about the policies and actions of those who govern them to make an informed decision about who to vote for. As generative artificial intelligence becomes more embedded into our work and private lives, what then are the possibilities offered by such tools like ChatGPT to provide the public with meaningful political information?

With the 50 States or Bust! project, we set out to explore these types of questions in a systematic rather than an anecdotal fashion. We began by developing a standard list of ChatGPT4 prompts that could be tweaked for all US states and territories. These prompts were designed to provide insight into how ChatGPT4 would respond to inquiries about the history and politics of US states and territories, and to see which sources of information would be provided when requested by the prompts. The prompts were put into ChatGPT4 for all states and territories, generating 56 profiles.

Following the creation of these profiles we began speaking to academic experts on the respective states and territories about these profiles. Using a standard list of questions, we asked the experts to share information about the states and territories they study and to qualitatively and quantitatively rate the ChatGPT responses. At the time of this writing, we have carried out 19 interviews with experts; the interviews have been developed into short podcasts as well. Our results so far provide initial insights into how generative AI contributes to biases around the nationalization of US politics.

Generally speaking, ChatGPT4 is not a reliable source for political information. Our experts find more than 40% of the profiles generated contained factual inaccuracies. Further, despite the fact that our prompts asked for sources in all instances, the information provided was often so vague as to be of little use. Our interviewees find that ChatGPT has a tendency to hallucinate false information, meaning that it is hard to judge the validity of any information or factual assertions it provides. ChatGPT also hallucinates citations, drawing from "sources" that do not exist. We find these hallucinated responses occur far more frequently than previous studies have suggested.

In addition to the misinformation in ChatGPT responses to prompts related to US politics, we also observed how information provision can affect ChatGPT outputs. As a generative AI tool, ChatGPT draws on information that is already available. But what if there are issues in the source information? For instance, our analysis of the ChatGPT profiles of all US states and territories shows that the nationalization of US politics is very much reflected in the amount and quality of information provided by ChatGPT. With more local news "deserts" across the US, ChatGPT has few and sometimes no sources to draw upon in order to provide information on local political issues or state-level races. Similarly, the expert interviews suggest that the profiles were biased towards national politics. As a result, users of ChatGPT are vulnerable to receiving incomplete information or misinformation based on hallucinated sources. As we know from previous research on media and politics, what people see in the media – or in their preferred news sources – can have significant effects on their political behavior, which may impact how they discuss politics with their peers or online, and even how they vote. A broader concern arising out of the study findings is the potential for the almost unlimited generation of large amounts of AI generated content, untethered from evidence, to undermine public faith in evidence or the idea of truthful narratives.

Overall, preliminary results of our project show that ChatGPT is not a reliable source for political information across US states and territories, raising substantial implications for democracy and information technology. Regarding the former, democracy depends on an educated citizenry and is threatened when voters act based on mis- and disinformation; to the extent that AI provides false or misleading political information, it may exacerbate democratic erosion. Regarding the latter, there is an urgent need for technology companies to work towards ensuring that their generative AI tools can provide reliable information and, if they cannot, to ensure that users are informed of the inability of these tools to meet high standards for accuracy and transparency. As voters continue to rely on alternative news sources, including generative AI, there is a clear need for more research and policy attention on these technologies to understand not only what information voters receive but also how to improve the information provision in ChatGPT and other generative AI tools so that they can serve more effectively as political sources.

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Analyzing the perceived humanness of AI-generated social media content around the presidential debate

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While many raised concerns about generative AI influencing elections in 2024, the impact on the United States 2024 elections was likely minimal. However, how individuals *perceive* the content they encounter online is currently unknown–can the general public effectively identify AI-generated content?

We analyzed how people perceive election-related content they might encounter online, particularly when this content is generated by AI (without being labeled as such). We selected two widely-used public social media platforms in the U.S. for news consumption, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube. We focused on content discussing the U.S. presidential debate that took place on September 10th, 2024, the only debate between the final presidential candidates from the two major American political parties.

The American public's perception of AI-generated content around the election is mixed, but leans toward caution. A 2024 Pew Research Report showed that while use of generative AI chatbot tools like ChatGPT is on the rise, nearly 40% of Americans express low to no trust in election information from ChatGPT (even less when excluding those that haven't heard of the tools). Despite this general skepticism, incidents like the fabricated hurricane alerts in October 2024 illustrate a paradox: even when aware of the potential for inaccuracy, people sometimes believe the AI-generated misinformation. This tension between skepticism and susceptibility suggests a need to further understand how effectively people can identify AI-generated content.

Method

To explore this dynamic, we recruited 504 online workers (via Connect) to annotate 7,500 pairwise comparisons of real content collected from X/Twitter and YouTube and content generated from GPT-4o (OpenAI's current, freely available model) discussing the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate. We collected real posts from X/Twitter (mentioning #DebateNight and #Debate2024) and real YouTube comments from 10 debate recap videos. Then, we instructed GPT-4o to generate similar posts in the voice of five different political personas (e.g., a liberal commentator with a left-leaning political stance in the U.S.) based on the debate transcript. To build the content pairs for annotation, we sampled 250 posts from the platforms, with an equal split between X/Twitter and YouTube, and 500 posts from the generated data, with an equal split between the platforms and the personas. Holding the platform constant, each post was randomly paired with another 10 posts, generating a total of 7,500 pairs.

Using the Bradley-Terry scaling statistical model to measure latent "ability" from pairwise contests, we estimated a perceived humanness score, normalized from -1 to 1, where scores closer to -1 indicated stronger perceptions of human origin and closer to 1 suggested AI generation. This approach for scaling human perceptions based on pairwise contexts has been widely used in other social science tasks, such as measuring the persuasiveness of arguments, ideological scaling of politicians, and textual complexity. This method provides a nuanced understanding of how individuals perceive the authenticity of election-related content online.

Results and discussion

We present the density distribution of the humanness scores, separated by platform and the source of the text, in Figure 1. Our most critical finding indicates that participants could generally distinguish between human-authored versus AI-generated content on both X/Twitter and YouTube. However, the platform context appears to significantly influence this ability. The separation between human and AI content was more blurred for YouTube than X/Twitter. One potential explanation is the inherent difference in content type: Youtube features comments that respond to videos, while X/Twitter focuses on original posts. This distinction may shape how users perceive content, as comments on Youtube often adopt a more informal, verbose and free-form writing style (See Table 1 for the differences in average length of posts).

Next, we examine the effects of semantic and emotional features, classified with the TweetEval pre-trained model, on human perceptions. TweetEval's emotion detection is trained using the affect of tweets that corresponds to human experience. Figure 2 presents the marginal effects of these features using a linear mixed model regressing the humanness scores on these textual features. Content exhibiting positive sentiment was more frequently perceived as AI-authored, while content containing negative sentiment was more likely to be perceived as human. Offensive language also served as an indicator of human authorship, while irony and hateful speech were less distinguishing features. Strong emotional markers like "joy" were indications of humanness, while "sadness" was linked to AI-authored content. These patterns suggest that humans may use text tone, civility, and emotion to identify AI-generated content.

Our results indicate that humans can generally differentiate between AI-generated and human-authored content, particularly by relying on tone, civility, and emotion markers. Negative sentiment, offensive language, and "joy" tended to be associated with human authorship, while positive sentiment and "sadness" were associated with AI-generated content. This suggests that public concerns about AI's ability to fully replicate human nuances in text might be somewhat overblown, at least with the current generation of tools available.

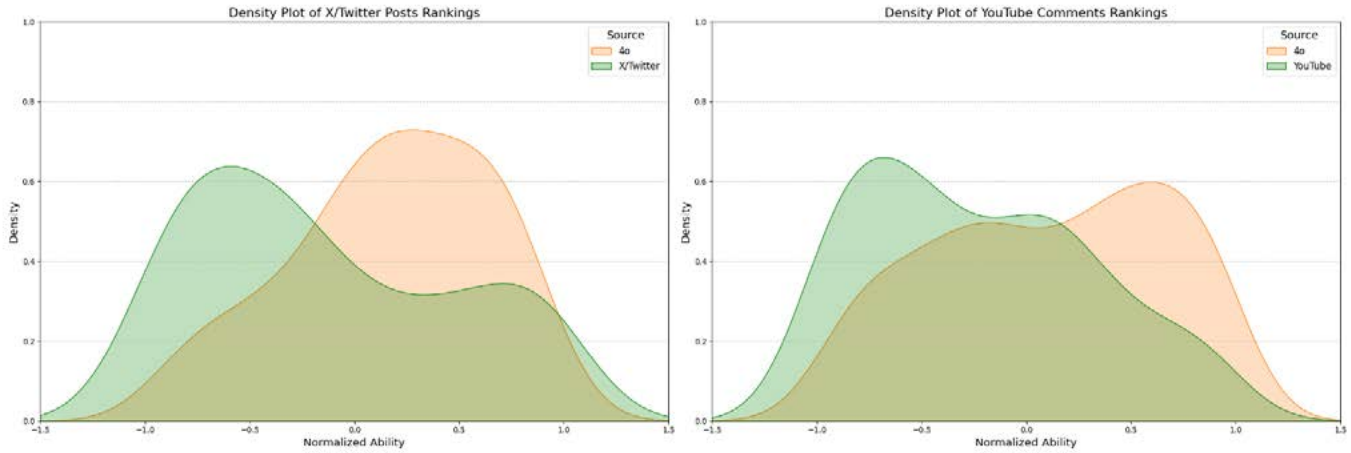


Figure 1: Comparative Density Distribution of Humanness Scores Across Platforms[1]

Platform	Author	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
X/Twitter Posts	Combined	18.89	12.00	8.28
	AI-Generated	16.53	16.00	2.73
	Human-Authored	20.84	19.00	10.54
YouTube Comments	Combined	21.73	16.00	38.97
	AI-Generated	15.43	15.00	3.40
	Human-Authored	34.50	20.50	65.93

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Word Counts Across Platforms and Authors

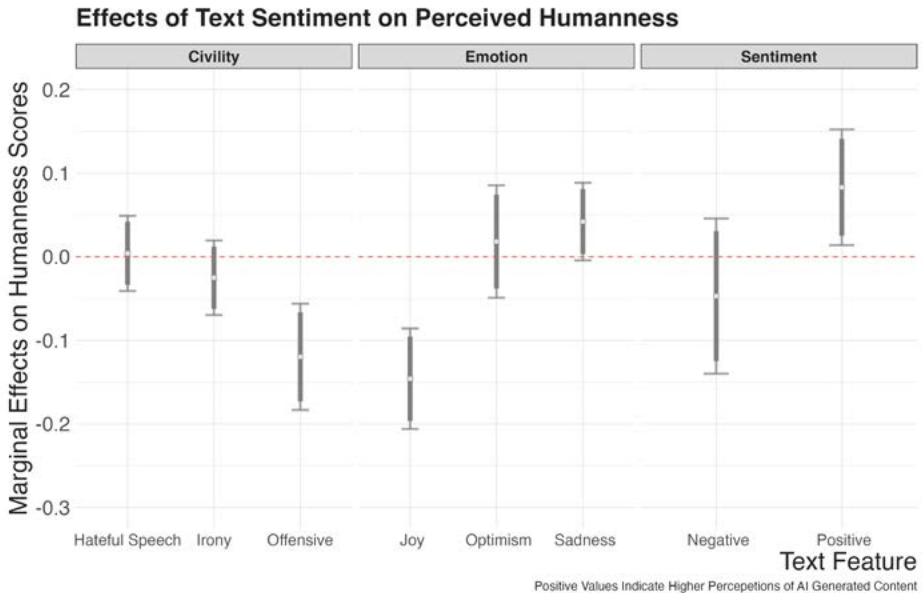
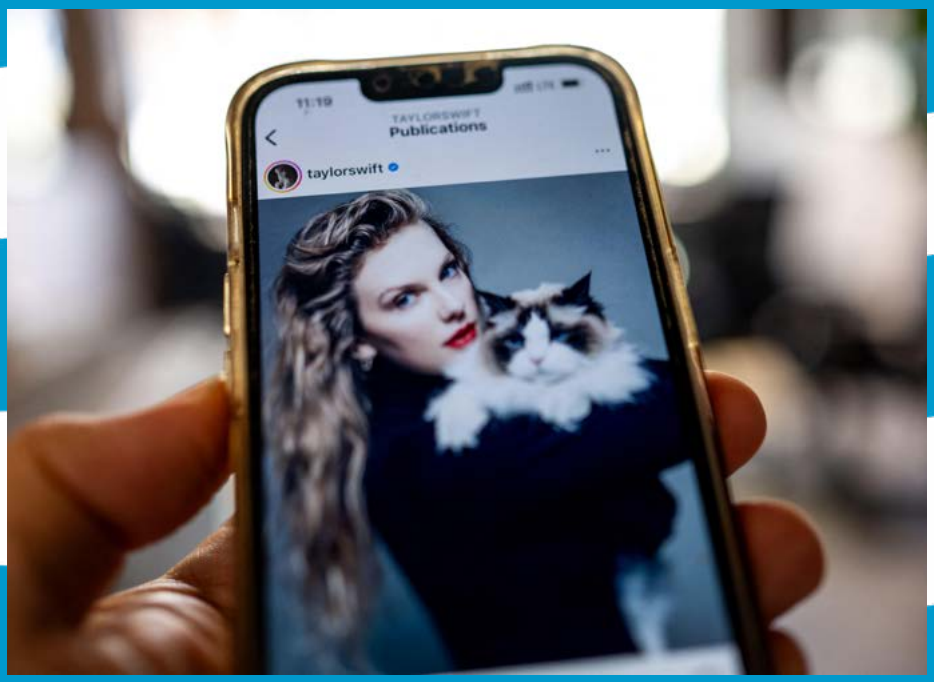


Figure 2: Pooled Marginal Effects of Associated Sentiment and Emotion in Text on Perceived Humanness Scores[2]

[1] Note: The density plots reveal how participants perceived the humanness of real and AI-generated posts on X and YouTube. Each plot shows two distributions: one for real content and one for AI-generated content. The x-axis represents a "humanness score" ranging from -1 to 1, where scores closer to -1 indicate stronger perceptions of human origin, and scores closer to 1 indicate stronger perceptions of AI generation.

[2] Note: Point-Estimates Presented with 90% and 95% Confidence Intervals. To estimate the marginal effects, we use a linear mixed-effects model using a random intercept for the platforms (Twitter/X and YouTube). We classified the sentiment and emotions in the text using TweetEval Pre-Trained Model (TweetEval)



7

Popular culture

Momentum is a meme

Conveying momentum was a crucial campaign goal for both the Democrats and Republicans during the 2024 U.S. presidential election.

Republicans needed to portray former President Donald Trump as a winner despite his electoral college loss in 2020 and his popular vote losses in both 2020 and 2016. They also needed to declare "we are winning" throughout the campaign so they could falsely claim "the election was stolen" if they lost, a strategy Trump implemented as late as 4:39 PM on election day.

Democrats needed to portray Vice President Kamala Harris as a winner despite her serving with an unpopular president and representing a party that handed her the reigns without a primary. She also needed to convince the electorate that her unprecedented, breakneck 107-day campaign was a populist groundswell, assuaging fears that she didn't have enough time to "introduce herself" to voters before the election.

If elections are meme wars, then "momentum" was a bombastic 2024 battleground. Each campaign and its supporters tried to meme momentum into existence by declaring momentum, showcasing momentum, and hoping that momentum would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The goal for each campaign was not just to win support but to show that they *had* won support so that others would join the movement and head to the polls. Thus, social media brimmed with yard sign counts, crowd size comparisons, and anecdotes about converted neighbors.

The algorithms played their part, guiding users to specific stories. X, owned by Trump surrogate Elon Musk, reportedly juiced rightwing content and amplified Republican politicians. Meanwhile, 12-year-old influencer Knowa De Baraso told Sky News, "Kamala Harris is winning the fyp battle," saying her content was beating out Trump's on TikTok's "for you page" and that her celebrity endorsements were getting more attention than his.

As 2024 wore on, the electorate read the early-vote tea leaves, interpreted polling averages (which, noticeably, this cycle included more rightwing pollsters), and rode the immaculate vibes to the precipice of victory. Each side memed their momentum into existence so well that two completely counterfactual tweets appeared in my X "for you page" on election day, one right next to the other.

Republican entrepreneur and Trump backer Vivek Ramaswamy proclaimed on November 4th that there are "two possibilities: we're in an echo chamber, or Trump wins big. My gut says the latter." Meanwhile, former Republican congressman and Trump detractor Joe Walsh speculated on November 5th, "I think she's gonna win by more than people think." Each post got more than 2.5 million views. The algorithm must have noticed my inability to predict a winner and fed me both futures at once.

But Schrödenger's momentum can't exist in two states forever, and eventually, we had to open the box. Somebody had to carry the day. That was Trump and the Republicans, who won the Presidential electoral college and the popular vote and took control of the Senate. As this is being drafted, they're also inching closer to a narrow majority in the House of Representatives.

Still, to say that Trump and the Republicans must really have had the momentum all along is a misinterpretation, as it would have been to declare the contrary had Harris and the Democrats won. Electoral momentum was a meme, after all, which means it existed because people proclaimed it into existence by hearing it, internalizing it, and spreading it. It existed as a narrative, as a story we speculated into being in the moment and will revise with hindsight in the aftermath. A key revision we'll have to make about 2024 is that all this talk of momentum didn't coincide with record voting; turnout was about 65% of the electorate, slightly below the 67% we saw in 2020.

The impulse to narrativize momentum underlies damaging "horserace" coverage that imagines each candidate jockeying to a metaphorical finish line. It also underlies the tendency to cover vote counts as real-time back-and-forth lead changes. As if we're watching a football game and not incremental reports of a result settled before we opened the box. No lead "changes hands" on election night despite the red and blue mirages we see as we refresh our feeds. And no amount of screaming "STOP THE COUNT!" will change the actual number of votes cast for any candidate.

The best short-term advice for each election cycle may be to ignore the horserace coverage, the polls, the early vote totals, the crowd sizes, the signs, and the meta memeing on all of it and just vote. One ballot, still and quiet in the middle of a bandwagon tempest of good and bad vibes. When we can't know what's momentum and what's mirage, we need to find our motivation internally and consistently.

The best long-term advice for capturing true momentum may be to build it from the ground up. Not in 107 days or even a two-year campaign cycle. But through sustained grassroots pushes and slow, intentional organizing. By a consistent message, clear outcomes, and connected leaders. Vibes are good, but vibes won't save us. Momentum has to be more than an election season meme.

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Partisan memes and how they were perceived in the 2024 U.S. presidential election

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Whether you are a news buff or barely pay attention, political memes were unavoidable in the 2024 election. Trendy jokes and memes dominated social media, portraying candidates in ways that ranged from supportive ("brat" and "coconut tree" memes for Kamala Harris, AI-generated memes depicting Donald Trump as a savior) to mocking ("I have concepts of a plan" memes about Trump, jabs at Harris' laughter) and sometimes just bizarre (off-color "couch" jokes about J.D. Vance). About a week before the election, humor took a serious turn when a comedian at Trump's Madison Square Garden rally made a racist, xenophobic remark about Puerto Rico, prompting hesitant laughter. Criticism of the joke's divisive tone was met with defensive pushback, with supporters dismissing it as "just a joke" and accusing critics of lacking a "sense of humor" who do not "get" insult comedy.

Popular speculation about the influence of political jokes and memes ranges from dismissing them as irrelevant to viewing them as a gateway to political mobilization. Nonetheless, little is known empirically about the extent to which people consume and engage with such humor. Are political memes and online political humor content consumed widely? Do people enjoy memes only when they target the opposing party, or do they engage with humor regardless of whom it targets?

In a survey of 2,500 American social media users in the months leading up to the 2024 election, the following patterns of political humor consumption and perceptions emerged:

Americans viewed political memes and funny videos, especially those about the Republican party. Over 58% of the sample across political affiliations reported seeing funny political videos or memes on social media on a weekly basis, with over 31% reporting seeing them at least once daily. Similar trends were observed for online content mocking specific political parties, with both Democrats and Republicans reporting they saw more memes and videos about the Republican Party than the Democratic Party. Thus, online political humor about the Republican party seemed to dominate social media feeds across the board.

Democrats generally enjoyed political humor more than others, but Democrats and Republicans equally enjoyed ridiculing each other. Across the sample, over 62% of the survey participants enjoyed political humor at least to a moderate level, with Democrats reporting higher levels of political humor enjoyment than Republicans. However, both Democrats and Republicans similarly reported a tendency to prefer jokes at the expense of the other party over their own. About 78% of the sample reported enjoying jokes about their own party at least a little, whereas about 85% enjoyed jokes about the other party. Thus, even though Republicans seem less open to political humor than Democrats, they tend to enjoy memes about Democrats just as much as Democrats enjoy memes about Republicans.

Democrats perceived greater polarization in how people enjoyed partisan humor. Survey participants were asked to assess how other people might respond to partisan humor. Both Democrats and Republicans believed that jokes targeting a specific party or candidate are more enjoyed by supporters of the opposing party than by their own. This pattern indicates a "polarization" in humor perception, akin to the notion of affective polarization, which is the tendency of Republicans or Democrats to view co-partisans positively and opposing partisans negatively. Additionally, Democrats perceived this polarization in humor enjoyment to a greater extent than Republicans did, implying a greater tendency among Democrats to view humor preferences as divided along partisan lines.

Taken together, the consumption and perceptions of political humor and memes were deeply connected to partisan identities in the 2024 election. Both Democrats and Republicans expressed polarized perceptions of humor enjoyment, finding greater joy in jokes and memes ridiculing the other party. Democrats enjoyed political humor more than Republicans overall, with Republican memes—widely enjoyed by Democrats—being the most visible on social media.

This evidence makes it hard to dismiss political humor in the 2024 election as "just a joke." In fact, partisan humor in the form of ridicule and insult against the opposing candidate seemed to have bolstered partisan group divisions. Humor can be less divisive when the source of the joke is willing to be as accepting of ridicule as they would like the "targets" of their jokes to be. Such an acceptance seemed absent in the 2024 presidential election, where political memes and jokes were yet another tool to assert symbolic dominance over the opposing partisan group. Given its strong ties to political identity, it is imperative that we take seriously the influence of partisan humor and memes on voting choices and the overall tone of online political discourse.

The intersection of misogyny, race, and political memes... America has a long way to go, baby!

On Sunday, July 21, 2024 while traveling, my phone started buzzing with alerts. News reports flashed across the screen, announcing that President Joseph R. Biden was suspending his reelection campaign and endorsing his Vice President, Kamala Harris, for the presidency. Over the next 48 hours, social media buzzed with political pundits and influencers sharing content and memes to build excitement around Harris' campaign. One standout was a high-energy endorsement from UK singer Charli XCX, featuring a dynamic meme highlighting critical moments in Harris' political and cultural journey. The Gen Z-focused meme closed with the bold statement: "Kamala IS brat."

Looking back nearly 115 days, this meme was one of the high points of the campaign, as it resonated with both youth and Generation Z, introducing people to Kamala Harris as both a politician and a person. It highlighted her identity as a Black woman who is accomplished and relatable. As the campaign launched, I was struck by a largely positive portrayal of the vice president. As the days and weeks passed, the national memes maintained a level of civil discourse and dignity. The memes generally made fun of Mrs. Harris' laugh, the vice president running from a "red wave," or even MAGA memes illustrating her policies. These visual frames were meant to bring awareness to viewers and demonstrate an alternative ideology or way of visually representing an issue. Mia Moody, a meme scholar at Baylor University, notes, "Studies have indicated that themes of race and gender are important to examine in political discourse. Today's scholars have extended their vein of research from traditional platforms like newspapers and magazines to new media platforms and user-generated content to assess if the representations have changed, improved, or remained the same."

Infusion of race

For Harris, there was a noted shift in the "memeisphere" in how she was represented following former president Donald Trump's panel interview with members of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) during the organization's Chicago conference. During this interview, Trump talked about Harris' race, stating, "I have known her for a long time, indirectly, …she was always of Indian heritage, … only promoting Indian heritage. I did not know she was black until a number of years ago when she happened to identify as black, and now she wants to be known as black." This infusion of race exposed a level of politics and what Stuart Hall refers to as "signifying racial difference." Moody adds that when content producers generate content absent of a gatekeeper, there is an increase in historical stereotypes in media messages. The shift offered a divisive historical reference in which race and gender stereotypes were embedded in the messages.

Misogyny and Hottentot

As election day drew nearer, some political ads and memes continued the misogynistic representations of the vice president. One ad developed by Elon Musk's PAC referred to Harris as the 'Big Ole C Word'. But there were a series of memes that resurfaced in the final hours of the election results becoming known. One meme features the face of Harris superimposed on a woman leaning on the Resolute Desk dressed in provocative blue lingerie with her buttocks exposed. The headline on the meme reads, "BREAKING: KAMALA HARRIS TO LAUNCH ONLYFANS ACCOUNT FOLLOWING ELECTION LOSS."

This meme conjures up the imagery of 19th century Sara Baartman (Hottentot Venus), aka "La Belle Hottentote," the woman who was sex trafficked through freak shows in the UK and Europe. She was put on display for her accentuated breasts and buttocks. Jan Nederveen Pieterse posits, "Initially, the Hottentot female was regarded as the prototype of the African or Black woman, (where) sexuality was equated with female sexuality generally." The underbelly of this exotification of the vice president is concerning.

Conclusion

So, what are the implications of race, gender, and misogyny in this year's political season? Why have digital content producers resorted to developing offensive memes that can harm candidates? And what are the implications of this content in future elections? It's about race and gender, and change in America. According to Moody, memes provide a "creative way for digital content producers to exchange ideas, form communities, and participate in cultural discourse." Keith Boykin's post-election analysis argues that Trump does not represent the policies of America but instead represents the cultural resentment against a changing America. Perhaps these content producers highlight the ideological significance of the MAGA movement and are leaning into the worst parts of American history while also monetizing the stereotypes that harm.

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Needs Musk: Trump turns to the manosphere

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In order to burnish his outsiderly credentials, Donald Trump has been obliged to continually reassert his political eccentricity and amplify the outrage. In acting the renegade, this election saw an explicit and focused strategy from the Republican candidate and his team to cultivate the support of male influencers. The months leading up to election day saw the president-elect cast aside political convention to grant interviews with podcasters Joe Rogan, Lex Fridman, Logan Paul and Adin Ross, Ross having recently interviewed Andrew Tate (currently awaiting trial for the trafficking of women) and Nick Fuentes (advocate of white supremacy and misogyny). This fellowship and their chosen vibe has been characterised as toxic masculine posturing, which matches well with Trump's populist idiolect. This strategy has yielded electoral rewards, with Trump enjoying increasing support amongst male voters across racial and social demographics. These advances may have been aided by the late (though hardly unexpected) endorsement of podcaster Rogan, who had also interviewed Kamala Harris, prompting Trump onto TikTok to laud Rogan as "a fantastic guy".

Since Barack Obama's election team realised the power of social media in 2008, politicians have used it to lend their campaigns a personal and seemingly spontaneous touch. Campaign strategy has drawn increasingly on the established followings of celebrities and influencers in maximising social media impact. In the Democrat camp, celebrity supporters promoted issues of equality and inclusivity, and Kamala Harris' pledge to reinstate female reproductive rights.

Which social media platforms come to and from dominance is in a continued state of flux. However, while in decline elsewhere, X (formerly Twitter) occupied a key role in Trump's election through the personality and allegiance of owner and Trump acolyte Elon Musk. Prior to Musk's acquisition, Trump had been removed from the platform accused of incitement to violence, prompting Trump to set up his own "open tent" platform Truth Social. Musk bought Twitter in 2023, changing its name to X while overseeing a return and amplification of the platform's tolerance for personal abuse, controversy and conspiracy theories. Musk himself used his platform to foreground his own anti-trans and anti-birth control opinions. While large numbers of users and advertisers left the platform, this style of management laid the ground for Trump's triumphant return to the platform in August 2024.

Musk and Trump present similar forms of hypermasculinity, articulating gendered performance with material success and an aggressive intolerance of "wokeness" and dissenting views in general. Musk sweetens this with references to popular culture. Matrix imagery is associated with the Republican conceit of anti-establishment thinking in the urge to "swallow the red pill". Musk also styles himself "dark MAGA", wearing a Trump MAGA cap in black and deftly combining Trump's branding with the aesthetic affectation of a comic book hero.

Using X, Musk produced his own pro-Trump echo chamber. Whether following Musk or not, users would see his repostings of other influencers' perspectives on Trump, with either an approving bullseye emoji if positive, or a strongly disapproving comment if negative. Profiles selected for approval included Autism Capital, which claims to be a citizen journalist account aligned with tech and right-wing politics (including memes promoting hypermasculinity). Such was his enthusiasm, Musk breached even the limited standards that survived his X cull and reposted conspiratorial material that carried fact-check warnings from his own company. Musk's reposts drew upon a limited pool of blue-tick (paid for and verified) accounts, including some associated with his America political funding group, and several that carried the acronym DOGE ("Department of Government Efficiency"), citing a governmental role promised to Musk in the event of a Republican victory.

In addition, with an eye on balance perhaps, Musk reposted testimonies from various blue-ticked accounts that claimed to be former Democrats turning their vote to Trump for the first time. Accounts identifying as from women and that accorded with Musk and Trump's views on gender rights were also featured. These included female ex-army mothers such as Insurrection Barbie and, in the days immediately before the election day itself, supportive contributions from his mother, Maye Musk's, account. As well as giving support to the Republican line on women's rights, this increase in repostings from female-identified X users coincided with the Democrats' pro-women policy push.

It is easy to see the attraction of Trump for those aspiring to stand out in the manosphere. Trump's selling points are his supposed straightforwardness and the enticing prospect of an incendiary remark. Trump offers eyeballs and the allure of power. Trump can also deliver material advantages to the likes of Musk, both protecting the X platform from legislation and offering presidential consent to Musk's wider business interests. As this presidency seem likely to show, influencers gonna influence.

“Wooing the manosphere: He‘s just a bro.” Donald Trump’s digital transactions with "dude" influencers

In the 2024 Presidential campaign, Donald Trump’s winning 2.0 strategy of “transgression as entertainment” was evident in his decision to target a disaffected demographic of largely young white male voters (the “manosphere”) within the key swing states. Instead of appearing on legacy news channels designed to challenge him including Cable News Network (*CNN*) or Microsoft National Broadcasting Corporation (*MSNBC*) (or even on his conventional media mogul “ally” Rupert Murdoch’s right-wing *Fox News* Network (*FNN*)), Trump reached out online to attract the so-called “bro” vote. As such, he appeared on several “Dude” or “Gen-Alpha” social media influencers’ podcasts. These included: the US’s most popular podcaster Joe Rogan; Theo Von’s show, a right-wing comedian; the internet pranksters – the Nelk Boys founded by Kyle Forgeard and Jesse Sebastiani; the YouTube site of brothers Logan and Jake Paul; Lex Fridman’s platform, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) affiliated computer scientist, and the online channels of live gamer Adin Ross.

With 14.5 million Spotify followers and 17.5 million YouTube subscribers, the *Joe Rogan Experience* (*JRE*) has a vast, mostly young male, audience. For Trump the three-hour interview on the *JRE* represented his most significant online engagement. Although Rogan had supported progressive Democratic Party Senator Bernie Sanders and, in 2022, had declared Trump as an existential threat to democracy, he and the Republican Party’s nominee vibed on their mutual friendship with the “super bro” Elon Musk and their love of the mixed-martial arts Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). In the *JRE* podcast, a typically rambling Trump was allowed by Rogan to renew his personal attacks on his opponent Kamala Harris' IQ, to blame Covid-19 on allowing the Democrats to steal the 2020 election, to make unchecked anti-immigrant rants, to accuse his ex-Chief of Staff John Kelly of being “disloyal” and to accuse his former hawkish International Security spokesperson John Bolton of being an “idiot”. An enthusiastic Rogan concluded that interviewing Trump was fun, the Republicans were now the punk rock rebels and the liberals were censors whose cancel culture undermined freedom of speech. A beaming Trump responded by stating that it was the “woke” elites who came after their political opponents like third-world dictators.

Earlier in the campaign, on Von’s “*The Past Weekend*” podcast, Trump strayed into more personal territory when he talked about the death of his older, alcoholic brother Fred Trump Junior. The pair of “homies” went on to discuss the nature of addiction, the comparative differences between drinking and use of cocaine, and Trump’s life-long sobriety. Trump flattered his host when he appeared with the part-time wrestler Logan Paul on his “*Impaulsive*” podcast by informing the YouTube personality that Paul was 18-year-old Barron’s (Trump’s youngest son) favorite social media influencer. In tandem, The Nelk Boys were reported to be spearheading a voter registration drive that they hoped would be attractive to Trump’s fellow-travelers.

Moreover, when appearing on Ross’s show, Trump admitted that he had only just come to terms with the possibilities of livestreaming on social media. Although he appreciated that the podcast was part of a “new wave” of information dissemination, Trump again maintained that it was Barron who had advised him to seek out Ross. Ross responded by putting aside his usual misogynistic rants and replacing them with a series of toned-down references focusing on Trump’s foreign and immigration policies. Finally, the host presented Trump with a Rolex watch and both men then occupied a descaled Tesla cyber truck manufactured by Trump’s most vocal supporter, the tech billionaire, Elon Musk. Inside the vehicle there was a picture of the ex-property tycoon standing in defiance of his July assassination attempt, along with patriotic images of a U.S. bald eagle and an American flag.

So Trump in his 2024 Presidential campaign embraced the often contrarian, testosterone-filled cyberspaces established by these conservative influencers on live streaming platforms including Twitch, Kick, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. His use of podcasts demonstrated how as a celebrity “outsider” Trump could utilize his Make America Great Again (MAGA) grassroots image as a “blue-collar billionaire” to manipulate the attitudes of a mainly apolitical set of white male voters. Trump’s dialogues with adoring male social media influencers suggest that a new phase of apparent “authenticity” has emerged in the era of online political advertising and marketing.

In reality, Trump’s “impression management” of his parasocial image masked a further race to the bottom wherein the tame questions provided by Rogan et.al gave him a “free pass” rather than any proper scrutiny. The allure of Trump’s maverick outsider status to these podcasters has serious implications for the provision of any pluralistic forms of American political content and turbo charges Trump’s claims towards plutocratic power. Through the social media influencers’ false ideological “discourse” there were major distortions of information with toxic post-truths embedded into the U.S. body politic. And so, on the eve of the election, Rogan happily endorsed Trump.

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Star supporters

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One of the strangest sentences, from an election campaign that did not lack for strangeness, was uttered by Tim Walz in his debate with J.D. Vance. "I'm as surprised as anybody of this coalition that Kamala Harris has built," he said, "from Bernie Sanders to Dick Cheney to Taylor Swift." He was wearing as he spoke, and as *Billboard* noted, "Eras Tour-inspired friendship bracelets."

Most political analysts might be comfortable with the idea of Cheney's or Sanders's political constituencies, even if it is a stretch to see them as part of a coalition. But they might – not unreasonably - be mystified by what is meant by the "constituency" of a global pop superstar. She may have passionate fans in prodigious numbers, but that is not the same as representing their interests or values.

Walz's claim followed Swift's much publicised (and much anticipated) endorsement of Harris after her only debate with Donald Trump. Swift told her 280+ million Instagram followers, "if you haven't already, now is a great time to do your research on the issues at hand and the stances these candidates take on the topics that matter to you the most." Then she announced her own decision: "I'm voting for @kamalaharris because she fights for the rights and causes I believe need a warrior to champion them." "Remember that in order to vote," she ended, 'you have to be registered!', signing off as "Taylor Swift, Childless Cat Lady."

This was not just another, albeit well expressed, celebrity endorsement. It was coming from an extraordinarily successful and highly skilled songwriter, with a vast army of supporters, whose fanbase had been carefully nurtured by Swift (and the corporate network that supports her) from adolescence to voting age. Nor was this her first entry into the political realm. She had taken stands on other public issues and encouraged voter registration in previous elections. She was Time's Person of the Year in 2023.

Harris was rather more cautious than her running mate in acknowledging her newly won celebrity advocate: "I am very proud to have the support of Taylor Swift. She's an incredible artist. I really respect the courage that she has had in her career to stand up for what she believes is right." Her campaign team were less reticent, using rally billboards – "I'm in my voting era" - that reminded supporters of Harris' famous admirer.

Swift's intervention was inevitably accompanied by much speculation about what, if any, significance it held for the election outcome. An unofficial "Swifties for Kamala" campaign group was formed, which, according to *Vogue*, raised $213k. A *BBC* story supplied anecdotal evidence of fans who said they had been swayed by their idol. More cautiously, the *New York Times* reported that "Ms. Swift's endorsement in September drove about 406,000 people to Vote.gov, a government-run website with voter-registration tools, but that number does not mean that many people actually registered to vote."

Swift may have been the most high profile musical celebrity recruited to the Democratic cause, but she was not alone. Beyoncé, Bruce Springsteen, Eminem, Insane Clown Posse, Willie Nelson and Jennifer Lopez were also part of the campaign, each welcomed, we might guess, because they are assumed to reach a particular demographic.

The Republicans, as always, struggled to find rival performers (if not rival billionaires), having to settle for the likes of Joe Aldean and Kid Rock. But, as is often noted, it is a mistake to assume that fandom translates directly to political support. Privileged superstars can inspire resentment as well as adoration, as Donald Trump seemed to recognise when he was reported to sneer at Beyoncé's involvement.

Nonetheless, there is research which suggests that endorsements can indeed make a difference. It is true that the findings often depend upon experimental work (with a captive audience of students), but sometimes it makes use of natural experiments in the world beyond the campus. Mostly, though, it predates the Swift phenomenon. However, a recent article in American Political Research concludes, on the basis of another university-based experiment, that Taylor Swift could have an impact. "A minor celebrity may influence a relatively small number of voters," the authors write, "but a super celebrity [like Swift] can potentially influence many more voters, and as long as presidential elections in the U.S. come down to several thousand voters in a handful of swing states, these celebrities ought to be taken seriously as political influencers."

Quite how seriously Taylor Swift affected this campaign, we may never know. We can be sure, though, that the media will continue to get excited by, speculate about, celebrity support and impact. And political scientists, while reluctant to adopt the idea of Cheney-Sanders-Swift coalitions, will be aware of how - in a post-democratic world - stars can be deemed more "considerate, competent, credible, intelligent and trustworthy than most politicians."

Pet sounds: Celebrity, meme culture and political messaging in the music of election 2024

For an election where the outcome seemed to be both a shock and – for many – inevitable in retrospect, its soundtrack was a comparable mix of the familiar and novel. The long shadow of elections past was felt in the now traditional run of disavowals and cease and desist letters from artists objecting to the use of their music at Donald Trump rallies. An eclectic bunch from the Foo Fighters, Celine Dion, Jack White, ABBA, and the Isaac Hayes estate were amongst those, joining an extensive list from previous campaigns. As before, matters were complicated by venues' public performance licenses and the licenses purchased by campaigns from performing rights organisations ASCAP and BMI, which cover millions of songs.

That still didn't stop a copyright infringement being added to the long list of Trump's other infractions as a federal judge found him to have breached the copyright in Eddie Grant's hit "Electric Avenue" when using it on social media during the 2020 campaign.

A long history of endorsements has run alongside these objections and the sight of Bruce Springsteen and others on the campaign trail was part of established practice. Trump didn't lack musical supporters, from the likes of Ye and Kid Rock – also par for the course – but the heaviest hitters in terms of star power, and sheer numbers, backed Kamala Harris, albeit to scant avail.

Celebrity and political cultures, then, have long been intertwined, not least given the winning candidate's background in reality TV. But just as the media and social media contexts have evolved, feeding wider division in the electorate, so has the soundtrack. While both campaigns, as previously, used popular music in predictable ways that either aligned with their base demographics (classic rock for Trump, and Kid Rock at the RNC) or with their core campaign messages (Beyoncé's "Freedom" in Harris' campaign launch video being a case in point), there was also evidence of shifting musical patterns.

Music became enmeshed in the wider culture of the campaigns beyond straightforward theme songs and advocacy. Surfing a wave of initial popularity, Kamala Harris' X/Twitter account adopted the lime green from Charli xcx's album cover when the singer described her as "brat" – a highly popular online lifestyle trope, rather than any kind of explicit policy-related statement.

Technological developments played their part too. For all the fears of AI-infused fakery being used around political candidates, it was machine generated images aligning Taylor Swift and her fandom with Trump, and reposted by him, that highlighted the complexity of regulating image likenesses in electoral contexts. Again, the debate was played out through the tropes of an online communicative culture. Amongst the fake images were those purporting to show the singer's fans in "Swifties for Trump" t-shirts. Her own response – and endorsement of Harris – cited the reposted fakes, as well as featuring a photograph of her with a cat in an explicit rebuke of Vice-Presidential candidate J.D. Vance's reference to "childless cat ladies".

The digitally mediated melange of political and musical content also involved two-way traffic. Trump's controversial, and wholly unsubstantiated, statement about immigrants in the 10th September debate became fodder for musicians:

"In Springfield, they're eating the dogs, the people that came in, they're eating the cats… they're eating the pets of the people that live there."

The adoption of Trump's words, and phrasing, demonstrated online artists' ravenous appetite for content, the fluidity of political messaging, and the speed with which it can be substantively recontextualized. From a trombone score to a makeover by virtuoso funk bassist and Grammy nominee MonoNeon, Trump's wild claim served as the basis for a bevvy of ironic musical responses. South African act The Kiffness, the artist name of musician David Scott, had a viral hit with his parody remix of the comments and was playing it live in Munich barely a week after the debate. "My initial desire to remix the quote was because I thought it was amusing and outlandish" he told Newsweek, "but I also recognized the melodic element to the statement. I decided to give it a shot and I had the basic idea for the song in a matter of minutes."

Scott shied away from overt political statements, noting both Republican and Democrat support, and that the main effect of his release was the money raised for a Springfield animal charity through donating his streaming revenues. The political nebulousness of online irony, though, allowed others to hook the remix trend to a more partisan stance. The Marine Rapper, a pro-Trump Marine Corps Veteran, also had playful, and viral, musical fun with the same sampled words. It would be difficult from the content alone to tell the difference between Trump critics, supporters or agnostics and, in a campaign amidst intense polarisation, each electoral tribe mapped their own predilections onto the ambiguous content.

This was 2024's underpinning musical development, and one that aligned with the results on the ground. Headline acts at rallies and conferences harked back to analogue electioneering and continuity, while musical and online cultures reflected voters' preferences back to them. Celebrity, music and politics remain entangled, but the terms of engagement have changed.

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The stars came out for the 2024 election. Did it make a difference?

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Could it have been the ongoing and seemingly obsessive support from the billionaire tech entrepreneur and social media-platform owner that changed voters' minds and, thus, the course of history? Could it have been the endorsement that came on the day before the election from the most popular podcaster in the United States? Could it have been the star NFL player who wore the "Make America Great Again" hat on primetime television's Sunday Night Football? And could it have been the throng of singers, online influencers, podcasters, and other celebrities who offered up their endorsements that helped win the day for President-elect Donald Trump?

If the answer is yes, does that mean that the cat-cuddling queen of pop's Instagram declaration supporting his opponent didn't move the needle? Or that the NBA's all-time leading scorer's support and that of more than a dozen Oscar winners meant nothing? Music stars, big screen actors and other Hollywood elites told their fans they supported Vice President Kamala Harris, but their backing did not translate into victory. But it could have.

About one in 10 U.S. citizens (11%) said that a celebrity caused them to rethink how they viewed a political issue, and about 7% said they ever supported a political candidate because of a celebrity endorsing them, according to a 2024 survey by pollster YouGov. Those percentages could be enough to turn a presidential election, especially when a state's outcome as "red" or "blue" is decided by just a few percentage points.

The endorsements were not necessarily meant to sway those on the other side or those sitting on the metaphorical fence. They predominantly serve to mobilize fans and supporters of the celebrities. Endorsements are most impactful at getting people enthusiastic. If folks are moved from one position or one candidate to another, then that's the icing on the cake. Also, endorsements can bolster civic engagement. A 2024 Harvard study found that there is significant evidence that celebrities have real impact in terms of voter registration.

Think about the number of fans celebrities have and can rally to their cause. Trump endorser and actor-turned-podcaster Joe Rogan boasts more than 11 million listeners per episode and more than 35 million combined YouTube and Instagram followers. Elon Musk, commander of X (formerly Twitter), has more than 200 million followers, using the biggest reach on X to support Trump. Pop star Taylor Swift, who endorsed Harris, has more than 90 million monthly listeners on Spotify and around 280 million Instagram followers. LeBron James, the NBA's most prolific scorer and Harris backer, has more than 150 million followers on Instagram and helps Nike sell millions of pairs of his shoes in the United States. How many followers laced up those trainers to walk into the ballot box is uncertain.

Celebrity endorsements aren't unusual, particularly in times of higher-than-usual polarization or when divisive societal issues have taken over the discourse in the public sphere. Some might think endorsements are risky for some celebrities as they have the ability to alienate parts of their fan bases. Considering the "cancel" culture where wrong utterances have elicited strong backlash, it is conceivable to think that an endorsement for president for a candidate fans did not support, also runs that risk. Some celebrities believe, however, that with great power and influence comes great responsibility. In the 2024 election, the phrase "right side of history" was used by some celebrities to indicate that the presidential election would have lasting significance and that there was a correct choice to make.

There are a few theories that talk about why survey numbers like those from YouGov might not tell the whole story of what influences public perception and to what extent. Consider the power of our parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships, through repeated exposure, are psychologically influential. People identify with celebrities and what they stand for. The desire, the need, to emulate celebrities with whom we identify and have "bonded" is often stronger than we might realize.

The value of a celebrity endorsement goes beyond just the backing of the celebrity. Think about the publicity a well-timed announcement could provide a candidate. During the final push of the campaign, leading podcaster Rogan, wielding millions of listeners and viewers, threw his weight behind Trump. Beyonce, without singing a note, trained the eyes of the public on her as she stood to endorse and introduce Harris just days before the election.

Not surprisingly the makeup of celebrity endorsements seemed to fall in line with the demographics of non-celebrity support, especially for Trump, whose big-name celebrity supporters were largely male. Like in 2016 and 2020, the 2024 election again found he did better with men than his opponent. Big-name women celebrities came out to support Harris, tracking with what happened at the ballot box.

The question will remain as to what extent celebrity endorsements might help or hurt a candidate. Do they reach the people that candidates need? How much should candidates acknowledge or play up the endorsements? It seems no matter the outcome of elections, celebrity endorsements are still welcome and coveted.

Podcasting as presidential campaign outreach

Donald Trump was joined for his post-midnight election victory address by his family; his running mate, J.D. Vance; House Speaker, Mike Johnson; and, co-campaign managers Susie Wiles and Chris LaCivita. One apparent outlier was Dana White, president of the Ultimate Fighting Championship. Speaking third, White thanked YouTube pranksters the Nelk Boys, Louisianan stand-up comedian and podcaster Theo Von, Kick streamer Adin Ross, and "the mighty and powerful Joe Rogan." Given the U.S. election result, White's description of the hugely popular podcaster seems apt.

In the leadup to November 5th, both Kamala Harris and Trump scheduled a string of sit downs with an eclectic mix of influencers, sports players, comedians, and media personalities. It's not hard to understand why. Almost half of Americans — an estimated 135 million people —say they listen to a podcast monthly, which is more than twice the share who said the same in 2016, during Trump's first presidential run. On Election Day, the two top streamers, right-wingers Dan Bongino and Steven Crowder, raked in around half a million viewers each, exceeding all media companies except for *Fox* and *NBC*.

The election results indicate the candidates did not garner equal success tapping into this new media space.

The porous ecosystem of the podcasting and streaming "manosphere" abuts stand-up comedy, mixed martial arts, and online bro culture, and it elevates figures such as Elon Musk, Ben Shapiro, and Jordan Peterson, who offer unapologetic claims for traditional gender roles and sorties against "wokeism." Rogan might be the gravitational center around which this ecosystem orbits, and it contours well with Trump's anti-establishment message and rebuke of mainstream media. The long and unstructured form of Rogan's and adjacent podcasts, and their politically and dispositionally sympathetic hosts, allows Trump's loose rhetorical style—his self-described "weave"—to land for audiences familiar with, and wanting, spontaneity and jocular flow. It seems likely that these appearances helped him to propel traditionally low-propensity young male voters to the ballot box.

In his bid to court the so-called "bro vote," Trump engaged dozens of podcasters and streamers on the political fringe that share a common audience of young, politically disengaged men. In the final days of the campaign, Trump—followed by Vance, then billionaire backer Musk—appeared on The Joe Rogan Experience, America's most-consumed podcast, which culminated in Rogan offering his endorsement of the Republican ticket, arguably the zenith for a U.S. presidential election where nontraditional media played an unprecedented role.

The Trump campaign's media strategy appears to have paid off. Trump scored massive gains among young men, winning this demographic 49% to Harris' 47%. This marks a dramatic swing from 2020, when Joe Biden picked up most of the young male vote (52% to Trump's 41%).

Trump also made significant inroads in wresting away votes from traditional Democratic constituencies. According to exit polls, Latino men veered to Trump in higher numbers than ever before, across red and blue states alike. Meanwhile, the Democrats' edge among Black men was blunted enough to tip the scale in Trump's favor in key swing states such as Georgia, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

There are few signs that Harris' approach to nontraditional media benefited her campaign, despite early enthusiasm among young people on social media. An appearance with Rogan, which was reportedly on the cards, ultimately fell through after the two parties were unable to agree on interview conditions. This was viewed by some as a missed opportunity for her campaign to engage with young men.

Harris' strategy instead largely focused on reaching Independent and moderate Republican women through appearing on shows like Call Her Daddy, a podcast that is hugely popular among women, most of whom are young and a sizeable chunk are Independent voters. And Harris' interviews with former NBA players Matt Barnes and Stephen Jackson for their podcast All the Smoke were seen as an attempt to shore up support among Black men.

Harris hemorrhaged votes to Trump on all fronts. The gender gap, though notably wide among young people, did not reach the historic margins that were expected in the so-called "gender election." Even among cohorts that Harris won — such as Black men, women, and young voters — she secured a far slimmer margin of victory compared to Hillary Clinton in 2016 or Biden in 2020.

As journalist Seema Mehta notes, the focus on non-traditional outlets this election cycle reflects the evolution of campaign "microtargeting," tailoring a message to specific blocs of voters rather than the masses. The benefits of engaging with these non-traditional outlets seem clear: cutting through a saturated media market; leveraging the parasocial relationships between hosts and their fans; less chance of pushback than from a trained journalist.

It also indicates just how ubiquitous "new media" has become, and their movement from the fringe to the center. Future campaign strategists will continue to adapt to a mediascape beyond the world of prime-time interviews and broadcast advertising. Trump's victory suggests that they will need to reckon with its gendered structure and composition that, for the most successful shows, speak to the desires and interests of young men.

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Value of TV debates reduced during Trump era

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We can't be certain whether the single presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump had much impact on the outcome of the 2024 election. Certainly, most called it as a victory for Harris, her answers seemingly more coherent than her opponent's. Trump's victory though, suggests that he learned from the experience and that his campaign was more effective thereafter.

If election strategists knew what had the greatest impact on the voting public, then of course, campaigns would become instantly more polarised and focused. In a fragmented, proliferated contemporary media landscape, "influence" might be wielded via a complex combination of messages across platforms. But ever since the first televised debate between Richard Nixon and John F Kennedy in 1960, they have been thought to have had some say in the final result. The first debate 65 years ago might not have been pivotal, but the *BBC* suggested that it certainly "accelerated Democratic support for Kennedy", who eventually went on to become president.

On that occasion, a wan-faced Nixon came up short versus his tanned, urbane opponent and suddenly, what you looked like in front of a TV camera seemed just as important as what you said. This was confirmed by Conservative MP Ian Gow in the first televised speech in the UK parliament in 1989, when he repeated an image consultant's assertion that while "the impression you make on television depends mainly on your image (55%)" and your voice and body language accounted for 38%, only 7% depends on "what you are actually saying".

So perhaps we can assume that these debates do actually matter (even as only visual touch-points), given that they are actually scheduled in the first place, that Donald Trump refused to do a second one in 2024, and that they draw such a huge audience. Indeed, over 67 million watched the debate in September 2024, but even this fell short of the first Clinton/Trump event in 2016, when 84 million tuned in.

The semiotics of the visual event aside, these debates offer a chance for voters to identify differences between the wider visions and detailed policies of each candidate. After all, policy coverage – or the lack of it – is the hardy annual of scholarship considering how elections are covered. Most empirical studies would reveal that the trials and tribulations of everyday campaigning usually overwhelm the details of who would do what in office, and how.

So TV debates provide a real-time opportunity to make these policy pledges and to add some detail, and to offer candidates the chance to speak to less politically engaged voters who don't routinely follow American politics.

But TV debates might also be problematic. The complete focus of attention on the party figurehead – the "presidentialization" of political coverage – is recognised by scholars and commentators as shining undue light on the candidates' personalities, appearance and idiosyncrasies.

Presidentialization also marginalises any wider party machinery, and other politicians likely to wield considerable power within any new administration. Joe Biden dropped out of the 2024 contest amid concerns about his health and cognitive ability, and there have been similar concerns about Trump. So knowing who – in extreme circumstances – might end up as a stand-in to the president seems increasingly important.

The other danger, we suggest, is perhaps more specific to the Trump era of American politics. When one candidate comes from reality TV and is a celebrity-turned-politician rather than the other way around, it seems inevitable that delivery and performance will always prevail over content in these televised debates.

But while the style over substance imbalance is perhaps inevitable, the way that Trump has essentially reduced political debate to its lowest common denominator is not. While Nixon and Kennedy had clear ideological differences, their interchanges were courteous and polite meaning that their policies remained the focus. Trump's insulting behaviour was clear during the debate and has been prominent in the campaign more widely. Moreover, with political scientists in Tennessee suggesting that Harris was almost matching Trump insult for insult, we argue that their value has been reduced to the extent that they are now unpleasant public "roasts" rather than useful points of reference for voters wanting to be better informed. While Harris' strategy made some sense when set against her opponent's emphasis on "owning" his opponent through direct insults, not many politicians will skew debate strategy to the extent that Donald Trump has.

Trump's victory in 2024 means that it's unlikely that the quality of political debate will improve. Trading barbs has been a successful strategy and so why would he change it? Whether he succeeds in his bid to "Make America Great Again" at his second attempt remains to be seen, but it seems unlikely that "making political debate great again" will be anywhere on his to-do-list.

America's "fun aunt": How gendered stereotypes can shape perceptions of women candidates

Political comedy has been found to have impacts on candidate evaluations, voting intentions, and political beliefs in the U.S. context and beyond. Quite famously, during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, Tina Fey's impersonation of Republican VP candidate Sarah Palin led to more negative evaluations of the real Palin.

Data from the 2016 U.S. election shows that 25% of Americans rely at least partly on political comedy programs on television. This is underlined by data from the 2020 American National Election Study (ANES) which shows that political comedy is one of the top media sources that U.S. voters interact with during campaigns. Indeed, *Saturday Night Live* (SNL), a sketch comedy show that has been particularly well-known for its political impressionist comedy, ranked higher than many traditional news media programs such as *CBS Evening News*, Meet the Press (*NBC*) or Tucker Carlson Tonight (*Fox*).

Candidates and political strategists are keenly aware of the power of political comedy. Research has shown that candidates engaging with political comedy programs and embracing the jokes about themselves can have positive effects on candidate evaluations. In past U.S. election cycles, programs such as SNL have thus become a key campaign stop for candidates from both sides of the political aisle, including Barack Obama and John McCain in 2008, Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in 2016, and most recently, Kamala Harris on the weekend before this year's election.

Beyond campaign strategy, political comedy can also have positive effects for democracy. Exposure to political comedy has been linked to political learning, particularly among people who were previously politically uninterested. The reason for the latter is simple: Some people will watch political comedy for entertainment but are nevertheless incidentally exposed to political information as a byproduct of that media choice.

But what if what audiences learn from political comedy is rooted in stereotypes and biases? As cultivation theory explains, repeated and frequent exposure to biased media representations is associated with audiences developing similar biases, for instance related to gender and race. Previous research has shown that coverage of the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections on programs such as SNL perpetuated gendered stereotypes, despite growing evidence of a decline in gendered stereotypes in traditional news media coverage.

When Harris entered the presidential race this summer, a substantial proportion of the social media discourse around the announcement was related to how SNL specifically would cover the campaign and whether actress Maya Rudolph, who played Harris on the show in 2020, would reprise her role. Rudolph did indeed return, much to the joy of social media users. But what were audiences exposed to on SNL this year?

Overall, the SNL coverage remained highly gendered during this presidential campaign. In the five sketches SNL broadcast about the campaign leading up to Election Day, there were stark differences in the framing of Trump and Harris. Trump was primarily framed through his role as a former president and SNL relied heavily on real Trump quotes as opposed to original jokes and content. As such, there was very little satirical commentary about Trump. Rather, SNL offered another platform to repeat his statements – albeit through James Austin Johnson who plays Trump on SNL.

For Harris, on the other hand, SNL got more creative, for instance imagining her private life on the campaign trail and showing her in domestic settings such as in her living room with her husband. Furthermore, instead of being referred to as Vice President, she was more commonly framed through her familial role and referred to as "fun aunt" or "Momala," an issue women candidates continue to face in media coverage. Some sketches also featured sexualization of the Vice President. For instance, in a sketch about Harris' *Fox News* interview, Alec Baldwin as Bret Baier asks whether Harris is aware that she is "very sexy when [she's] angry." Beyond the issue of sexualization of women candidates, this type of comedy writing also perpetuates gendered and racial stereotypes about the "angry Black woman" in politics.

SNL has previously engaged in more feminist comedy to draw attention to gendered stereotypes and biases in media coverage. While this year's SNL coverage relied heavily on gendered – and racial – stereotypes, there was also at least one element of feminist humor to be observed. When Rudolph-as-Harris was asked why she was not winning by a landslide given her range of qualifications, her response was a pained laugh followed by the comment "That's a question I scream into my pillow every morning." While very little, particularly given the overall coverage, this use of feminist humor resonated with social media users, as did previous SNL use of feminist humor in 2016 and 2020. This shows that there is a path toward comedy that relies less on stereotypes and biases and instead offers critical commentary of these very issues. Given the audience effects and relevance of political comedy as a news source in U.S. presidential campaigns, such a change in framing could have positive cultivation effects and contribute to decreases in biased perceptions about women presidential candidates in the future.

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Additional photo credits

Section 1 - Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump is surrounded by U.S. Secret Service agents after an assassination attempt at a campaign rally in Butler, Pa., July 13, 2024 - 2XJHGF7 - (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Section 2 - Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 4 November 2024. Supporters of the Harris Walz Democratic ticket wave women's rights signs in Carlisle, PA, USA - 2YFGPC4 - (John Lazenby/Alamy Live News)

Section 3 – Voters await the outcome of the presidential election on November 5, 2024 – 2YG2844 - (ZUMA Press / Alamy Stock Photo)

Section 4 - Democratic presidential nominee Vice President Kamala Harris, left, clasps her hand in the air with President Joe Biden at the Democratic National Convention, Monday, Aug. 19, 2024, in Chicago - 2XWHJRT - (AP Photo/ Jacquelyn Martin)

Section 5 - New York City, New York, USA - November 05 2024: The night of the US presidential election unfolding in Times Square - 2YG2JMD - (Erin Alexis Randolph / Alamy Stock Photo)

Section 6 - New York, United States. 27th Oct, 2024. CEO of Tesla Motors Elon Musk speaks before Republican Nominee and former President of the United States Donald J. Trump speaks at a rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City on Sunday, October 27, 2024 - 2YDRD5N - (John Angelillo/UPI Credit: UPI/Alamy Live News)

Section 7 - Paris, France. 11th Sep, 2024. Instagram message by Taylor Swift announcing she will ‘cast her vote' for US Presidential Democrat candidate Kamala Harris as seen in Paris, France, on September 11, 2024 - 2Y2NCMD - (Balkis Press/ABACAPRESS.COM Credit: Abaca Press/Alamy Live News)

Back cover - Republican presidential nominee former President Donald Trump, left, serves up french fries as an employee looks on during a camapign stop at a McDonald's in Feasterville-Trevose, Pa., Sunday, Oct. 20, 2024 - 2YC05YT - (Doug Mills/The New York Times via AP, Pool)

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