



Michael Cox

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## Long Read: Trump's election victory shows that the US is 'one country' but 'two nations'



*Following Donald Trump's election victory in November, **Michael Cox** looks at some of the many explanations advanced to explain why either Kamala Harris lost, or Trump won. In a deeply polarized society, it is hardly surprising to discover that no consensus has thus far emerged to explain the deeper causes and meaning of Trump's victory. Of one thing we can be certain however: the United States and the world are in for a very bumpy ride.*

### The comeback kid

Four years ago, Donald Trump appeared to be a beaten man. Indeed, his defeat to Joe Biden in 2020 seemed to sound his political death knell. Even those who had once served in his earlier administration – many of whom went on to write highly critical accounts of their time in his White House – didn't give him much of a chance. He was even lucky to have survived 2024, missing certain death by only a few millimetres in July, and then being **targeted again** in September when he was playing golf at his country club near West Palm Beach.

Yet he survived, and as we now know went on in November to win the White House and both Houses of Congress. As the BBC was moved to remark on the day he was elected on November 5<sup>th</sup>, it was by any measure a '**historic comeback**'. The next day it went one stage further claiming now it was '**an incredible comeback**'. Either way it was, as the CNN put it on 7<sup>th</sup> November, the '**ultimate comeback**'. Indeed, it was.

The election was remarkable in one other way too: nearly 153 million Americans voted for one of the two candidates (predicted to rise by another 5 million when all the votes are counted). Admittedly, this was somewhat lower than the 158 million who had voted back in 2020. Even so it was high. The big difference this time round however was that whereas a high turnout worked to the Democrats advantage in the previous election, it **helped the Republicans this time round**.

Finally, Trump did something he failed to do in 2016: **he won a majority of votes**: c77,300,000+ compared to Vice President Kamala Harris' c75,000,000+, making gains everywhere, though the key to victory was increasing his vote by over 2.5 million compared to 2020, while winning all seven key 'battleground' states. But perhaps the biggest takeaway in 2024 was the decline in Harris' vote. As the BBC **put it** several weeks after the election, the "real story of 2024" was "Harris's inability to mobilise people who voted for Biden in 2020".



*"Former President Donald Trump Holds Camp" (CC BY-SA 2.0) by liam.enea*

## Why did Harris lose and Trump win?

So why did the election go the way it did? There is no one single explanation. However, there are at least 12 possible answers, some no doubt more convincing than others.

- 1. Harris as candidate:** "It was painfully obvious that Harris was lacking in substance. What little she had to offer was not in the form of concrete policies, and what policy insight she offered was in stark contrast to the same positions she offered during her ill-fated run in the 2020 Democratic primary". *The Gazette*, 10 November 2024.
- 2. Biden's legacy and late departure:** "Had the president gotten out sooner, there may have been other candidates in the race," former US House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, *New York Times*, 8 November 2024.
- 3. Trump had a clear message:** 'Almost nine out of ten voters who supported Donald Trump for US President believe that America's values, traditions and future economic prosperity are under threat – double the number of Kamala Harris supporters'. [11 November 2024. Cambridge University's [Political Psychology lab](#)]
- 4. Short term economic problems:** "Are you better off now than you were two years ago?" *Trump*. "Frustration over inflation propelled the former president to a second term" *Oxford Economics*, 8 November 2024.

5. **Long term economic stress:** “Our country has suffered from rising income inequality and chronically slow growth in the living standards of low- and moderate-income Americans. This disappointing living-standards growth—which was in fact caused by rising income inequality—preceded the Great Recession and continues to this day”. *Economic Policy Institute*, January 2015.
6. **Incumbency:** “From America’s Democrats to Britain’s Tories, Emmanuel’s Macron’s Ensemble coalition to Japan’s Liberal Democrats, even to Narendra Modi’s erstwhile dominant BJP, governing parties and leaders have undergone an unprecedented series of reversals this year”. *Financial Times*, 7 November 2024.
7. **Immigration:** “Over 15 years of asking registered voters what they considered the most important issue facing the United States, the percentage of respondents choosing immigration has grown almost consistently”. *YouGov*, 15 October 2024
8. **Gender I:** “Democrats had bet on women showing up in force. They didn’t” *BBC*, 8 November 2024.
9. **Gender II:** “Biden’s Lead With Women Is Smaller Than Trump’s With Men, a Warning for Democrats” *New York Times*, 20 June 2024.
10. **Class:** “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.” *Bernie Sanders*, 6 November 2024
11. **Religion/race:** “White Christians remain the largest religious segment of the country, making up about 42 percent of the population. For Donald Trump, their support has once again proved key to his victory...72 percent of white Protestants and 61 percent of white Catholics said they voted for Trump. Among white voters, 81 percent of those identified as born-again or evangelical supported Trump, up from 76 percent in 2020 and similar to the 80 percent of support Trump received in 2016”. *Baptist Standard*, 6 November 2024.
12. **Media:** “The answer is the right-wing media. Today, the right-wing media sets the news agenda in this country. And they fed their audiences a diet of slanted and distorted information that made it possible for Trump to win”. *The New Republic*, 8 November 2024.

## Is there a deeper meaning to the Trump victory?

Trump and his supporters have talked of the election as being defining, almost as if it was a tipping point moment in American history. This may well turn out to be the case. We can only wait and see. But impressive though his victory was, it was not comparable to say the 1932 election which changed the political landscape of the United States for at least a generation by building what soon came to be known as a ‘New Deal coalition’. Trump has constructed a coalition of sorts. But it is nowhere near as solid and stable as many have claimed. His victory moreover was not the

'landslide' that some of his backers – including **those on this side of the Atlantic** – have been claiming.

Even so, his win has impressed many pundits, some not even Trump supporters. Quite a few moreover see the election as representing a deep shift in the United States, with Biden in 2020 now being viewed as the anomaly and Trumpism (If not Trump himself) representing the future. Francis Fukuyama for one **thinks** we are entering “a new era” or a “new phase in American history” brought about by two long term shifts, one being the historic turn against neoliberalism and free trade, and the other being the Democrats getting hooked on identity politics which he senses is not going to be a vote winner going forward.

It is understandable therefore why writers like Simon Kuper in the *Financial Times* **believes** we are witnessing the end of liberal America. But it is not all doom and gloom for the Democrats. Harris in fact did better than at first thought, picking up over 48 percent of vote, and managing to do so in a hastily constructed campaign lasting only four months. The gap between her and Trump was also not massive – less than 1.5 percent at the end of the day in an election where Trump himself won less than 50 percent of the popular vote.

Thus, however traumatic defeat was for the Democrats, they can still make a comeback though will almost certainly have to do so with a different candidate, and equally important, with a different agenda that will appeal to more Americans than it did in 2024. Trump it should also be noted will also not be around in 2028. This could be important for about 30 percent of Republican supporters say they would vote Trump even if he stood as an independent.



**“Lancaster, Ohio” (Public Domain) by dankeck**

## A divided America

If Kamala Harris was the most obvious casualty in November, another were the many pollsters who failed to call it right. Indeed, according to one survey, even 43 per cent of Republicans were surprised by Trump's win! But as a well-established researcher **pointed out**, getting an accurate barometer of voting intentions "when polarization" is so "high" is nigh on impossible.

Indeed, however one reads 2024, one thing becomes startlingly obvious: the US today is more split than it was just 10 years ago when Pew's survey data **was already warning** that the country was becoming dangerously divided. Moreover, the coming apart of the US has been long in the making. In fact, even in the early 1990s, analysts were already starting to talk of polarization. In 1991 for instance, the historian Arthur Schlesinger talked on the theme in his **book** *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. As far back as 1997, the British journalist Gavin Esler wrote *The United States of Anger*, a lengthy study describing a nation after the Cold War that was far from happy with itself. By 2019, Peter Trubowitz and Peter Harris had also **identified** at least three factors – increased partisanship at home, the increasing vulnerability of working Americans to the changes wrought by globalization and trade liberalization, and the end of the cold war itself – which together were making it increasingly difficult for the United States to pursue a consistent and consistently internationalist foreign policy.

Meanwhile, at home the chasm looks almost unbridgeable. Impacting on nearly everything including where you live, who you would like to live near, who you marry, and of course reproductive rights. Even where you get your news is polarizing. Nor does history suggest much in the way of optimism. Thus whereas in 1994, 20 percent in both parties **viewed** people in the other party 'very unfavourably', by 2022 that figure had **doubled**. It is true that in 2023, a report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace did **show** that "American voters" were "less ideologically polarized" than they thought they were. That said, they also reported that, "American politicians are highly ideologically polarized. In other words, they believe in and vote for different sets of policies, with little overlap. This trend has grown in a steady, unpunctuated manner for decades".

## Finally, what about the world?

Those of us who followed the election from abroad were told time and again that the election of 2024 had little or nothing to do with foreign policy. Yet it was always there lurking in the background. Trump in fact made much of his views on the world arguing that America would come first, that America's allies were a burden not a force multiplier, that globalization was a bad thing, and tariffs a good thing. He also made clear his opposition to US involvement abroad whether past (Iraq), present (Ukraine) or possibly future (Syria). And the message clearly struck home, indeed may have worked only too well by tapping into a deep strain of isolationism which has very 'deep roots' **says** Georgetown University's Charles Kupchan.

Of course, many of his critics hope that his bark will turn out to be much worse than his bite. Perhaps so. But what happens if it isn't? Where could all this lead? Imposing tariffs on friend and

enemies alike could lead to trade wars. Peace imposed on Ukraine could easily encourage Putin to become even more intransigent. And uncritical support for Israel might make the Middle East even less stable than it is right now.

It is also not beyond the bounds of possibility that if he follows through on his election promise of making America “Great Again”, his policies abroad could just as easily lead to the opposite. Trump it would seem is none too keen on American leading or sustaining what used to be known (but is no longer) as ‘Pax Americana’. Many will no doubt applaud this. Yet many within the foreign policy establishment do not, fearing that without an active America shaping what is by now a much more dangerous world than it was when Trump was last in the White House, the world could be heading for the cliff.

And even it isn’t, America could still turn out to be the loser. After all, when he was President between 2016-2020, America’s overall image in the world fell away to its lowest point in nearly two decades. It is just as likely as not that it could do so again after Trump takes over in 2025. Americans recall have a long tradition worrying about their own decline, and Trump in his attempt to reverse it, could easily end up achieving the opposite. We can only wait and see what he actually does – as opposed to what he has been threatening to do for the last year – to make a final assessment on the presidency of a man who has done more than anybody else over the last few years to redefine what America is and how it is viewed in the world.

- *This article is based on remarks made by Professor Michael Cox at the LSE public lecture, hosted by the LSE Department of Government: [A republic if you can keep it: one country – two nations](#) on 19 November 2024.*
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Michael Cox is Emeritus Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics (LSE) and Founding Director of LSE IDEAS. He is an associate Fellow in the US and Americas Programme at Chatham House where he established its original United States

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