



Thomas Gift

Jonathan Monten

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Why attacking Donald Trump as a threat to democracy may not sway voters to Kamala Harris



The Kamala Harris campaign has intensified claims that President Donald Trump would be a threat to democracy if he were to win the 2024 election.

Thomas Gift and **Jonathan Monten** write that as a final appeal to Americans, accusing Trump of being anti-democratic is unlikely to court swing voters, and could even be counterproductive by galvanizing Republicans against Harris.

With just days left until Americans go to the polls, Vice President Kamala Harris is doubling down on a familiar theme: that democracy itself is on the ballot on November 5th. After Democrats **softened** this language in the aftermath of the first assassination attempt against former president Donald Trump, Harris is intensifying the claim in the final stretch of her campaign. Following Trump's former chief of staff John Kelly's **comment** that Trump would rule as an authoritarian, Harris **declared** that Trump is a "facist" who craves "unchecked power." Earlier this week at a speech near the U.S. Capitol, Harris **assured** Americans that she wouldn't cede power to a "wannabe dictator" and "petty tyrant. It's clear that this kind of language resonates with Harris's base. But as a closing pitch to voters, will it sway minds? There's reason for doubt. Here's why.

In a time of partisan polarization, democracy isn't as important to voters as some think

First, for many voters, democracy itself is not a salient issue. While it's true that a large fraction of Americans are concerned about the health of US democracy – 72 percent of Democrats and 55 percent of Republicans say that it's at risk, according to a **new poll by the Associated Press** – these numbers are misleading. Most polls don't require respondents to weigh concerns about democracy against other priorities. When they do, democracy falls by the wayside. Gallup, for example, reports that just three percent of Americans **say** that "democracy" is the most important problem facing

America in 2024. Everyday economic concerns (44 percent) such as the rising costs of food and gas, as well as immigration (22 percent), rate considerably higher. Compared to the concrete issues that touch people's lives, democracy is an abstract and distant worry.

Second, rising and entrenched partisan polarization undercuts the power of democracy as an issue. Both of the main political parties have become more **ideologically set**, attracting fewer swing voters, split-ticket voters, or genuine independents than in the past. Voters with strongly held policy views or partisan attachments are unlikely to cross party lines to vote against their core beliefs on major issues such as taxes, inflation, reproductive choice, or immigration. For these voters, supporting the other party to uphold the neutral, democratic "rules of the game" would result in electing officials who may hold starkly different values or policy views than their own. The farther the opposing candidate is from them on issues, the higher the price that cross-party voters pay in trading off their ideals.

Each side thinks the other is the threat to democracy

Third, claiming that democracy is under siege is just as likely to push Republicans away from Harris as it is to win them over. Being told that their candidate of choice represents a threat to democracy risks being taken as a personal affront to Trump-leaning moderates. Meanwhile, to the extent that other Republicans do believe that democracy is on the ballot, they're likely to think that it's Harris, not Trump, who is the threat. For the roughly **two out of three Republican voters who still believe the 2020 election was stolen**, claiming that democracy is at stake is credible insofar as they think it's Democrats who are usurping power. Labeling Trump a threat to democracy also strengthens his political seductiveness and inflates his importance among the MAGA base. Even more, many disaffected or Republican voters who are less likely to vote may subscribe to the notion that democracy isn't delivering for them. For them, Trump's challenge to an allegedly "rigged" democratic system could even be a plus.



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Fourth, even if the democracy argument could attract some voters, some say that Democrats may have used it too many times for it to be impactful. By framing Trump's actions both large (denying the results of the 2020 election) but also small (ambiguously promising to be a "dictator for a day") as threats to democracy, the phrase may lose its force. Stephen Richer, the Republican county recorder in Maricopa County, Arizona best known for [pushing back on Trump's stolen election claims](#) in the key swing state, has [noted](#) that "[i]f we label everything as a threat to democracy, we will undermine the credibility of our public comments, we will impede attempts at election reform, we will exasperate good-faith actors who simply have different policy priorities, and we will cause outrage fatigue." The bottom line is that an overuse of the threat to democracy language can desensitize the public to the real risks posed by Trump, making it hard to discern when Trump does and doesn't violate executive norms.

Trump may or may not be a threat to democracy – but the path to defeating Trump runs through a compelling policy case, not through the issue of democracy. Paradoxically, Kamala Harris and her supporters may have to forget about democracy to save it.

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About the author



Thomas Gift

Thomas Gift is Associate Professor of Political Science at UCL, where he is director of the Centre on US Politics (CUSP).



Jonathan Monten

Jonathan Monten is Associate Professor in Political Science and Director of the International Public Policy Programme at UCL. His research and teaching interests are in the areas of international relations, international security, and U.S. foreign policy.

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