

The 2024 Presidential and Congressional Elections: Small Wave, Seismic Effects

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Abstract

This article examines aggregate and survey data to describe and explain what happened in the 2024 presidential and congressional elections. It argues that Donald Trump's return to the White House resulted primarily from the unwavering support from the majority of ordinary Republicans who refused to acknowledge any serious wrongdoing on his part and who thus assured his nomination, and from the willingness of swing voters in the general election who were sufficiently unhappy with the economy and illegal immigration to overlook Trump's character and transgressions for the promise of better economic times and tighter borders. His narrow victory, along with the congressional election results, provide no evidence for any mandate beyond lowering prices and tightening borders, and certainly none for Trump's chaotic authoritarian assaults on a wide range of national and international institutions, rules, and norms.

Keywords: 2024 election; Trump; Biden; Harris; Congress; mandate

*"I think that he's a piece of s**t. I think he's crazy. I think he lies. I think he's just a horrible human being. But, like, I have to admit, as much as I hate Donald Trump when he was in office, I saw more in my paycheck, the prices were down, things were better. Hate was up, of course, hate was up but I could afford to live at that point and these past four years dramatically made things so much tougher"*—Participant in a focus group of 2024 Biden-to-Trump switchers.¹

The 2024 elections returned Donald Trump to the White House and put Republicans in control of the Senate and House of Representatives. Trump immediately ordered radical changes in national policy on trade, immigration, the environment, regulation, health care, civil rights, education, and foreign affairs, as well as in the federal government's structure and staffing. The president's manifest contempt for institutions or rules that might limit his power, in addition to his thirst for revenge against anyone who has sought to hold him accountable for his lies and misdeeds, threaten equally radical assaults on the rule of law. American democracy now faces a severe test of its resiliency, with no guarantee that it will pass.

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¹ Lee Moran, "Donald Trump Voter Utterly Shreds Him As 'Piece Of S**t' Before Astonishing 180," *Huffpost*, 18 December 2024, quoting "The Focus Group with Sarah Longwell," *The Bulwark*, 14 December 2024, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/voter-podcast-trump-reason-voting_n_676295dfe4b0ec5756fdd98.

How did Trump get the opportunity to initiate sweeping, reckless changes in national policies, programs, and institutions? Trump's return to the White House rested on two basic pillars: unwavering support from a substantial majority of ordinary Republican voters who simply refused to acknowledge any serious wrongdoing of any kind on his part, and the willingness of enough swing voters unhappy with illegal immigration and Joe Biden's economy to overlook Trump's crimes and moral squalor for the promise of better economic times and fewer immigrants. The first was manifest most clearly in Trump's nomination, the second, in his general election victory. It was a narrow victory, and nothing in it or in the congressional election results justifies claims of a mandate for much beyond lower prices and tighter borders. But elections have consequences, and the 2024 results opened the way for Trump's reach for unconstrained power and concerted efforts by far-right ideologues appointed to his administration to dismantle large parts of the federal government and to restore the cultural and economic primacy of straight White Christian males.

My examination of this singularly consequential election begins with a review of popular responses to Trump's indictments and felony convictions, focusing on understanding why a large majority of ordinary Republicans refused to believe or condemn the actions that had led to them and thus continued to support him. With that support, Trump easily won the Republican nomination, discussed in the second section, which also includes an account of the events that led to the Democrats' choice of Kamala Harris as their candidate. The third section covers the campaigns, noting that the "shocks" that dominated the news—the presidential debates, Biden's withdrawal, the attempts to assassinate Trump—had very modest effects on voters' intentions against a background of fundamentals—widespread popular discontent with the direction of the country fueled by price inflation and porous borders—that strongly favored the Republican cause. These fundamentals ultimately determined the outcome, as Harris proved unable to escape Joe Biden's legacy or to convince enough voters that the election was about abortion or the survival of democracy rather than the economy and immigration.

The fourth section places the presidential results in historical context. The aggregate voting data reveal extraordinary levels of stability and continuity in voting patterns across states. They show that the swing to Trump, though decisive in effect, was small by historical standards, and they offer no support for the claim that Trump won a massive mandate of any kind, let alone for what has ensued. The fifth section reviews survey data on the 2024 electorate that confirm the importance of negative views of the economy and border policies for the entire electorate and, in particular, for the ethnic minority and younger voters who gave Trump greater support in 2024 than in 2020. It also describes Republican gains in party identification between 2020 and 2024, large enough to account for Trump's win in an era of very high party loyalty. These gains were mostly achieved by the 2022 midterm, evidence that they were driven more by a negative reaction to the Biden presidency than by a positive reaction to Trump.

The sixth section covers the House and Senate elections, finding that, as in 2020, they were highly nationalized and president-centered affairs. It notes that Trump's narrow victory helped preserve the House majority Republicans had won 2022 but failed to augment it. The configuration of Senate seats won

in 2024 guaranteed Republicans would take control, but Democrats limited their losses by retaining four seats in states that switched from Biden to Trump. A seventh section takes a brief look at the huge investment of money in the 2024 campaigns and what this says about the current state of American politics. The final section summarizes the election's immediate consequence—Trump's authoritarian assaults on a wide range of national and international institutions, rules, and norms—and raises the question of how people who thought they were voting for price stability and secure borders will respond to what they are actually experiencing.

Trump's Comeback

Trump's return from exile in Mar-a-Lago to win the Republican nomination defied the ignominy of two impeachments, the 6 January 2021 Capitol invasion, and a host of subsequent legal troubles. After leaving office, Trump lost three civil suits and a criminal case. In May 2023, a jury found him liable for sexually abusing journalist E. Jean Carroll and in January 2024 a second jury ordered Trump to pay her \$83 million in damages for defamation; the judge in these cases said Trump had, in the common meaning of the term, raped her.² In September 2023, a New York judge ruled that Trump's real estate company had for years fraudulently manipulated its property's values to get better insurance and tax rates and subsequently ordered it to pay more than \$450 million in penalties and interest.³ In May 2024, he was convicted by a New York jury on all 34 felony counts of falsifying business records to cover up his payment of hush money to a porn star to keep news of their tryst from the 2016 electorate.⁴ He also faced federal indictments in Florida (for mishandling classified documents and obstructing government efforts to retrieve them) and the District of Columbia (for conspiring to obstruct official proceedings and overturn the 2020 election) and a state indictment in Georgia (for conspiring with to overturn Biden's victory there). These three cases were delayed by court decisions friendly to Trump, particularly the Supreme Court's decision granting presidents immunity for "official acts" that left it up to lower courts to determine which if any of the crimes he was charged with were not official acts and thus still subject to prosecution.⁵ None of these cases went to trial before the election, and its outcome guarantees that none ever will.

Aside from this unprecedented cascade of legal troubles, Trump had lost to Biden in 2020. Only once before in American history has a defeated president won his party's nomination four years later—Grover Cleveland in 1892. Most losing presidents do not even try; the stigma of defeat frustrates comeback ambitions because party activists and elites prefer to nominate a winner (Cleveland had won the popular vote while losing the electoral vote). Trump was able to escape this stigma by persuading a large majority of ordinary Republicans that he didn't

² Benjamin Weiser et al., "Jury Orders Trump to Pay Carroll \$83.3 Million After Years of Insults," *New York Times*, 26 January, 2024; Aaron Blake, "Judge Clarifies: Yes, Trump Was Found to Have Raped E. Jean Carroll," *Washington Post*, 19 July 2023.

³ Jonathan O'Connell, "Hefty Fines, Penalties Will Rock Trump Family's Business and Fortune," *Washington Post*, 14 February 2024.

⁴ Lazaro Gamio et al., "The Trump Manhattan Criminal Verdict, Count By Count," *New York Times*, 20 May 2024.

⁵ *Trump v. the United States*, No. 23-939, 1 July 2024.

actually lose. Trump's endlessly repeated lie that he won the 2020 election "by a landslide" only to have it fraudulently stolen from him is preposterous on its face, devoid of evidence, and exhaustively discredited; it is doubtful that even Trump is self-deluding enough to believe it.⁶ Only tiny proportion of voters who did not vote for Trump—on the order of 3 percent—endorsed the stolen election lie, but it immediately became orthodoxy among Republican and other Trump supporters, where it remains firmly entrenched. In polls taken in 2024 that asked the question of election legitimacy ($N=34$), an average of 69 percent of Republicans and 72 percent of prospective Trump voters said Trump, not Biden, was the legitimate winner in 2020.⁷

Acceptance of the stolen election lie by his supporters was fundamental to Trump's political resurrection. It led most of them to absolve him of blame for the 6 January Capitol invasion and all of his other efforts to nullify the election; blame belonged to the election thieves, not Trump, who was only trying to rescue democracy by blocking an illegitimate president from taking office. Thus, although the Capitol would not have been invaded and trashed had Trump not refused to concede defeat and summoned supporters to Washington on 6 January to "stop the steal," a large majority of Republicans hold him blameless for the event. As the first two columns in figure 1 show, although most Americans with an opinion thought Trump was responsible for the debacle, less than a quarter of Republicans did so, and even fewer wanted him impeached for it.

This set a pattern that was repeated across all of the other charges, indictments, and court losses: At least three-quarters of Republicans hold him innocent of these or (in the last column of figure 1) any crime at any time in his life. Thus Trump was able to win the nomination because a large majority of ordinary Republicans refused to believe that any of the charges against him were warranted and accepted his claim that he was an innocent victim of scheming partisan Democrats and a corrupt judicial system.⁸ After the hush money verdict, for example, an average

⁶ For assessments of election fraud claims, see Gary King, "Expert Report of Gary King, in *Bowyer et al. v. Ducey* (Governor) et al., US District Court, District of Arizona," 6 December 2020; Jonathan Rodden, "Expert Report of Jonathan Rodden in *Pearson v. Kemp* (Case No. 1:20-cv-4809-TCB United States District Court for Northern District of Georgia)," 5 December 2020; Andrew C. Eggers, Haritz Garro and Justin Grimmer, "No Evidence for Systematic Voter Fraud: A Guide to Statistical Claims about the 2020 Election," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 45 (November 2021); John Danforth et al., "Lost, Not Stolen: The Conservative Case that Trump Lost and Biden Won the 2020 Presidential Election," 25 July 2022, <https://lostnotstolen.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Lost-Not-Stolen-The-Conservative-Case-that-Trump-Lost-and-Biden-Won-the-2020-Presidential-Election-July-2022.pdf>; Daniel Dale, "10 Trump Election Lies His Own Officials Called False," CNN, 16 June 2022, www.cnn.com/2022/06/16/politics/fact-check-trump-officials-testimony-debunking-election-lies/index.html; Bernard Grofman and Jonathan Cervas, "Statistical Fallacies in Claims about 'Massive and Widespread Fraud' in the 2020 Presidential Election: Examining Claims Based on Aggregate Election Results," *Statistics and Public Policy* (December 2023), <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uspp20>; Christina A. Cassidy, "Far Too Little Vote Fraud to Tip Election to Trump, AP Finds," AP News, 14 December 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/voter-fraud-election-2020-joe-biden-donald-trump-7fcb6f134e528fee8237c7601db3328f>.

⁷ Gary C. Jacobson, "The Dimensions, Origins, and Consequences of Belief in Donald Trump's Big Lie," *Political Science Quarterly* 138, no. 2 (Summer 2023): 133–66; 2024 data are from ABC, CBS, CNN, Economist YouGov, Fox News, IDP/TIPP, Harris X, Marist, Marquette, Monmouth University, UMass/YouGov, *Washington Post*, and Yahoo/YouGov polls.

⁸ Dareh Gregorian and Jasmine Cui, "Trump Ramps Up Attacks on the Justice System When Trials and Key Rulings Loom, Analysis Shows," NBC News, 12 January 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-trials-attacks-judges-rcna131916>; Gary C. Jacobson, "Popular Reactions to Donald Trump's Indictments and Trials: Implications for the 2024 Election," prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 5–8 September 2024.

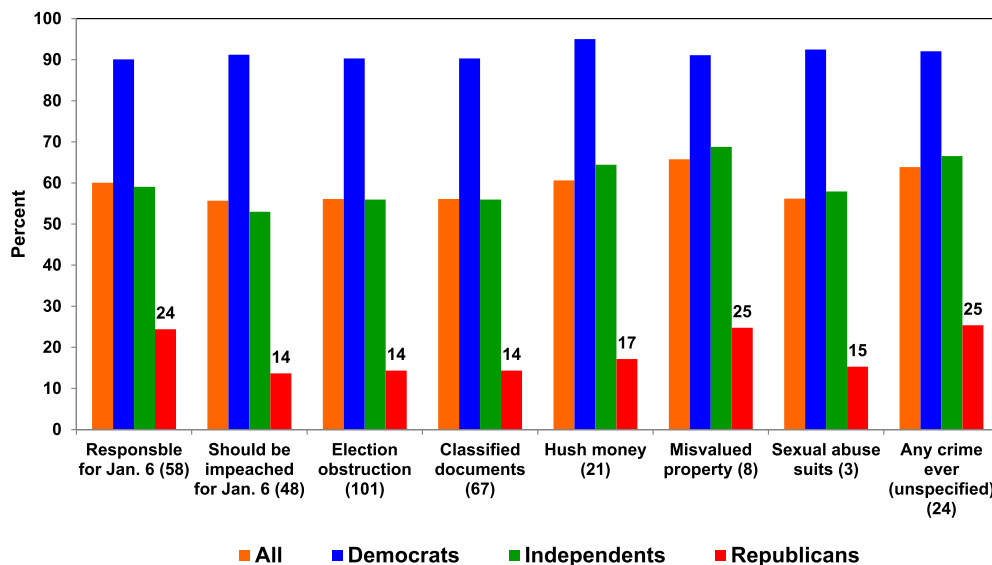


Figure 1. Belief in Donald Trump’s Culpability (Respondents with an Opinion)

Source: See the [Appendix](#).

Notes: The Number of Surveys Averaged is in Parentheses.

of 78 percent of Republicans and 86 percent of prospective Trump voters said the prosecution, trial, judge, or jury had been unfair.⁹

Trump’s recovery of the good opinion of ordinary Republicans after some initial dismay over the events of 6 January and later disappointment with the 2022 mid-term is evident in the proportion of respondents expressing somewhat or very favorable views or attitudes toward him in polls from his inauguration in 2017 through the 2024 election (fig. 2).¹⁰ His favorability ratings among the entire population have remained quite stable, fluctuating narrowly around an average in the low 40s. A huge partisan gap has also persisted from the beginning, growing even wider during election seasons. Trump’s ratings among Republicans have varied somewhat more than his overall ratings. The average dropped about 10 points after the Capitol invasion but remained above 80 percent. It was unaffected by the House hearings on the matter in the summer of 2022 that produced a detailed report highly critical of Trump’s actions.¹¹ It did fall off after an anticipated “red wave” failed to materialize in the 2022 midterm, a failure attributed in part to defeats of some inferior candidates who had won Trump’s favor and thereby nominations as enthusiastic proponents of his stolen election lie.¹²

⁹ Based, respectively, on fifteen and six postconviction surveys from CBS/YouGov, Data for Progress, *Economist/YouGov*, Fox, Harris x, Ipsos/Reuters, Navigator, *New York Times*/Sienna Politico/Ipsos, Quinnipiac, Survey Monkey, and YouGov polls.

¹⁰ The data in figure 2 are from 804 surveys reported by the organizations listed in the appendix; solid lines are the lowest-smoothed trends.

¹¹ U.S. House of Representatives, *Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol* (H.R. Rep. No. 117-613), 117th Cong., 2nd Sess., 22 December 2022).

¹² Jacobson, “Belief in Donald Trump’s Big Lie”; Michael Heseltine, “Assessing Trump’s Presidential Endorsements While In and Out of Office (2018–2022),” *Electoral Studies* 85 (October 2023): 1–18; Jamie Carson and Stewart Ulrich, “In the Shadow of Trump: The 2022 Midterm Elections,” *Journal of Political Marketing* 23, no. 2 (May 2024): 211–26.

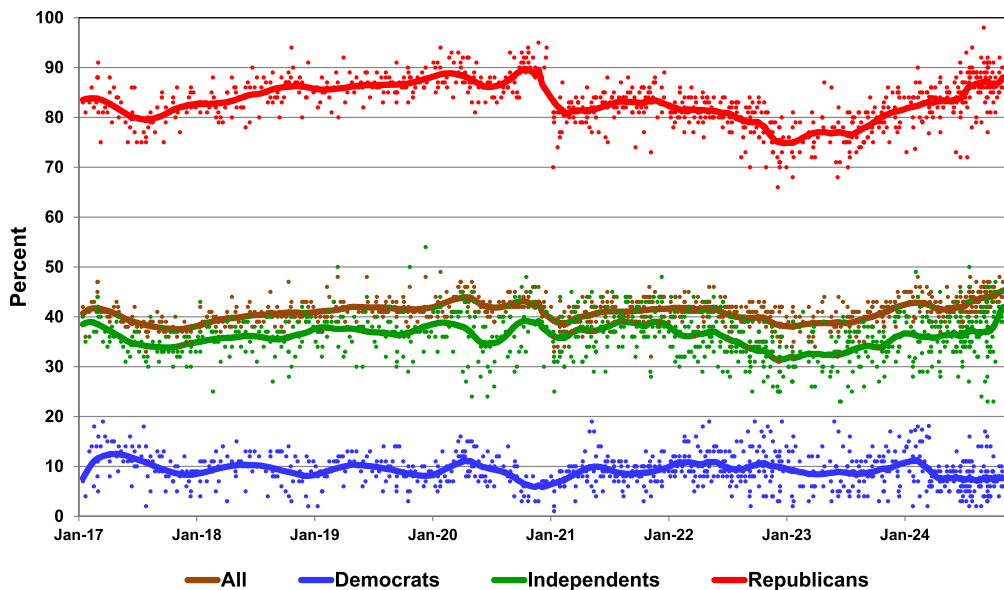


Figure 2. Favorable Opinions of Donald Trump, 2017–2024

Source: See the [Appendix](#).

Trump formally announced his 2024 candidacy immediately after the mid-term, but his favorability numbers among Republicans did not begin to improve until his federal indictments in the summer of 2023, rising through the election season to their highest level since the fall of 2020 and peaking after his near martyrdom just before the Republican convention. The data suggest that Trump’s indictments moved some Republicans to rally to his defense; at the very least, they did no damage to his political standing with the party’s base. This is entirely consistent with past Republican reactions to events that might have raised questions about Trump’s fitness for office: his bragging about sexually assaulting women, his obstructing the Mueller investigation, his calling racist demonstrators “fine people,” his attempt to extort Ukraine to go after Biden, his inept and lethal handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and his lies and schemes that led to the January 6 debacle. Each succeeding incident or revelation has been taken by people outside the MAGA fold as yet further confirmation of Trump’s bad character and unfitness for office, while leaving his followers within it unmoved.¹³

Trump’s Tenacious Support

The sources of Trump’s appeal and tenacious support have been analyzed at length in the popular and scholarly literature.¹⁴ My summary reading is that they reflect a

¹³ Jacobson, “Trump’s Indictments and Trials.”

¹⁴ Ashley Jardana, *White Identity Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); John Sides, Michael Tessler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck, *The Bitter End: The 2020 Presidential Campaign and the Challenge to America Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022); Steven Hassan, *The Cult of Trump* (New York: The Free Press, 2020); John R. Hibbing, *The Securitarian Personality: What Really Motivates Trump’s Base and Why It Matters for the Post-Trump Era*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Nathan Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason, *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for*

sense of shared identity Trump has forged with his MAGA followers by presenting himself as the champion of (mainly) White Americans who feel besieged economically and culturally by globalism, immigration, feminism, secularism, and the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the country.¹⁵ Trump voices and validates the resentments, grievances, and fears of people who feel ignored and belittled by cultural, corporate and political elites in both parties, conventional Republicans, as well as Democrats. He expresses their sentiments in their language; they are excited and entertained rather than put off by his crass ridicule of opponents, disdain for norms, authoritarian swagger, and hints of violent retribution against their common enemies.¹⁶ Appeals to racial resentment and xenophobia are no small part of the package.¹⁷ Trump has succeeded in persuading millions of disaffected Americans, especially less educated nonurban Whites and White evangelical Christians, that they, like him, have been treated unfairly, that he is on their side, that his enemies are their enemies, and that attacks on him are attacks on them.¹⁸ In the Manichean world Trump conjures up, his MAGA followers are the genuine Americans, while his opponents are evil “Marxists, fascists, and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country.”¹⁹

Trump’s invocation of shared victimhood has been effective, and people who see him as their ally and champion in the battle against malign forces threatening their security and way of life have a powerful incentive to use one or more modes of motivated reasoning to protect their good opinion of him—avoiding, ignoring, disbelieving, discounting, excusing, or dismissing as irrelevant anything suggesting that he might not deserve their support.²⁰ And most do, as evidenced by their reactions to his indictments, conviction, and civil suit losses. Trump has convinced most of his followers that any person or institution who dares to criticize him or hold him accountable is their common enemy and therefore to be despised and distrusted: the Democratic Party and its leaders, insufficiently sycophantic Republicans, the mainstream news media, and large swaths of the judicial system, including the FBI, the Justice Department, and the prosecutors, judges, and jurors in every court

Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022); Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane, “Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support,” *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 4 (2021): 1508–16; Jennifer Mercieca, *Demagogue For President: The Rhetorical Genius Of Donald Trump* (College Station TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2020); Robert Hartman McNamara, *Everyday People: Understanding the Rise of Trump Supporters* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024).

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, “Cultural Issues and the 2024 Election,” Research Report, 6 June 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/06/cultural-issues-and-the-2024-election/>.

¹⁶ Sides, Tessler, and Vareck, *Identity Crisis*.

¹⁷ Alan Abramowitz and Jennifer McCoy, “United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump’s America,” *Annals of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 681, no. 1 (2018): 137–56; Michael Tesler, “Views About Race Mattered More in Electing Trump than in Electing Obama,” *Washington Post*, 22 November 2016; Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassonneville, “Explaining the Trump Vote: The Effect of Racist Resentment and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 3 (2018): 528–34; Brian F. Schaffner, Matthew MacWilliams, and Tatishe Nteta, “Understanding White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: The Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism,” *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 9–34.

¹⁸ Jacobson, “Reactions to the 6 January 2021, Invasion of the U.S. Capitol.”

¹⁹ Danielle Kurtzleben, “Why Trump’s Authoritarian Language About ‘Vermin’ Matters,” NPR, 17 November 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/17/1213746885/trump-vermin-hitler-immigration-authoritarian-republican-primary>.

²⁰ Milton Lodge and Charles Tabor, *The Reasoning Voter* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Ziva Kunda, “The Case for Motivated Reasoning,” *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (1990): 480–98; Dan M. Kahan. “The Politically Motivated Reasoning Paradigm,” *Emerging Trends in Social & Behavioral Sciences* (November 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0417>.

where he has failed to get his way.²¹ Demonizing anyone who exposes or refutes any of his incessant lies, Trump forces his supporters to choose between believing him or them. The great majority have chosen to believe him.²²

Choosing to side with Trump requires, among other things, accepting a variety of factual claims ranging from the extremely dubious to the demonstrably false. Trump's supporters not only agree with Trump's stolen election lie but also refuse to acknowledge some of its obvious byproducts: that Trump was at least partially responsible for the 6 January Capitol invasion, that he and the rioters sought to overturn the election, that he pressured Georgia's secretary of state to reverse that state's results, that he sought to prevent or delay certification of the results, and that he hid classified documents at Mar-a-Lago. Few Republicans or Trump voters accept the factual conclusions reached by jurors in the cases Trump lost at trial. On average, only 33 percent acknowledge that he had relations with Stormy Daniels; 36 percent, that he paid her hush money; 17 percent, that he falsified business records; and 9 percent, that he assaulted E. Jean Carroll.²³

The refusal of so many Trump supporters to acknowledge awkward facts suggests widespread *motivated ignorance*. Motivated ignorance differs from the more familiar concept of rational ignorance in that "ignorance is motivated by the anticipated costs of possessing knowledge, not acquiring it."²⁴ That is, it is not simply that the benefits of accurate political knowledge may be less than the cost of attaining it and thus not worth pursuing²⁵ but that the costs of *having* accurate information exceed the benefits. When expressed opinions and beliefs signal identification with a group, it is rational to stay ignorant of contradictory facts that, if acknowledged, would threaten to impose personal and social identity costs for the uncertain benefits of accurate knowledge.²⁶ Only by remaining ignorant can Trump supporters avoid facing the painful possibility that they might have been wrong about him and their despised enemies, right. Such a realization could unsettle their self and social identities, estranging them from family and friends who remain within the MAGA world.

Staying ignorant, deliberately or unconsciously, is thus rational. And of course, numerous would-be opinion leaders are eager to help in that endeavor. People looking for confirmation of false beliefs about these matters can easily find it among conservative news programs and social media hustlers pursuing audiences, and among Republican politicians pursuing votes, who are willing to pander to the misinformed despite knowing better. They, too, have judged that the benefits of indulging their followers' ignorance exceed whatever reputational costs arise from doing so.²⁷

²¹ Jacobson, "Reactions to Trump's Indictments and Trials."

²² Among Republicans responding to the fourteen Quinnipiac Polls taken during his presidency that asked who they trusted more to tell the truth, Trump or the news media, an average of 78 percent said Trump, 13 percent, the news media. Quinnipiac Polls are available at <https://poll.qu.edu/poll-results/>.

²³ For more details on these beliefs, see Jacobson, "Reactions to the January 6, 2021, Invasion of the U.S. Capitol."

²⁴ Daniel Williams, "Motivated Ignorance, Rationality, and Democratic Politics," *Synthese* 198 (2021): 7807–27, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02549-8>.

²⁵ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. (New York: Harper, 1957).

²⁶ Williams, "Motivated Ignorance"; Kahan, "Politically Motivated Reasoning."

²⁷ Jacobson, "Reactions to the 6 January 2021, Invasion of the U.S. Capitol."

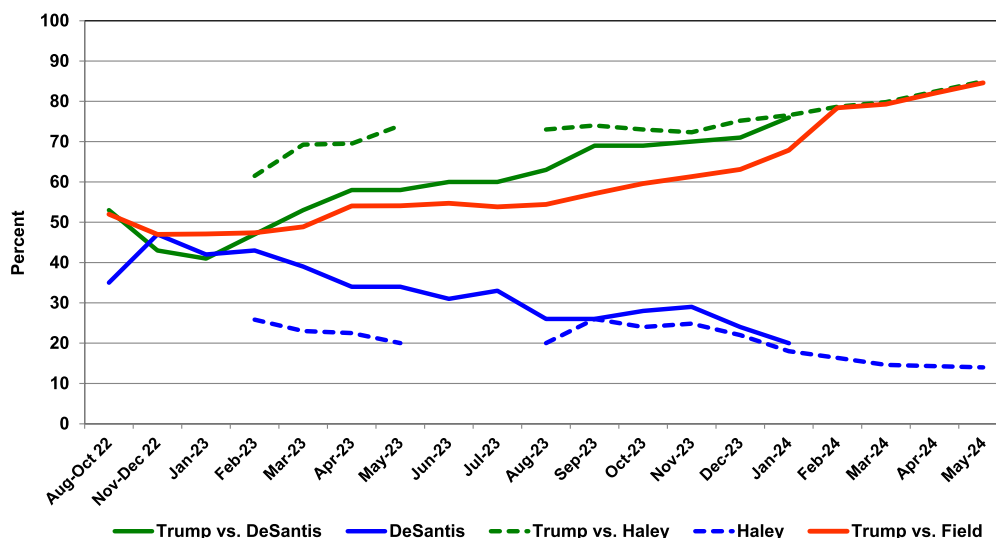


Figure 3. Support for Trump and His Opponents in Primary Election Polls (Monthly Averages)

Source: See the [Appendix](#).

The Primaries

Although Trump's grip on the Republican base seemed solid, his legal troubles raised the possibility, however remote, that he would somehow become vulnerable or might even be forced to abandon the race. Thus his announcement of candidacy did not clear the field of other potential Republican candidates. Thirteen eventually sought the nomination.

Trump's Republican Challengers

Trump's strongest Republican opponent turned out to be Ron DeSantis, reelected Florida governor in 2022 by a wide margin, followed distantly by Nikki Haley, former governor of South Carolina and Trump's UN ambassador during his first term. Early in the campaign, DeSantis seemed a genuine threat, running on average about four points ahead of Trump in the twenty-one prenomination polls taken between November 2022 and January 2023 (fig. 3).²⁸ But DeSantis's maladroit campaign failed to exploit this initial advantage,²⁹ and by the time he formally announced his candidacy in May, he was running more than twenty points behind Trump. From March 2023 onward, Trump led in every poll, and his last remaining opponent, Haley, never got close.

Even if DeSantis had run an exemplary campaign, Trump's popularity among Republicans made his task or that of any other candidate virtually impossible. Far ahead in the polls, Trump pointedly declined to participate in any of the Republicans' five preprimary debates held between August 2023 and January 2024. Most candidates who did participate, aware of Trump's popularity with the party base and coveting his MAGA following, criticized him obliquely if at

²⁸ Data are from <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-primary-r/2024/national/>; DeSantis ran ahead in fourteen of these polls, Trump in six, with one tie.

²⁹ Kimberly Leonard, Sally Goldenbert, and Gary Fineout, "How DeSantis collapsed in the glare of a presidential campaign," *Politico*, 21 January 2024 <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/01/21/desantis-collapse-presidential-campaign-00136856>.

all, refusing to call out the stolen election lie and denouncing his indictments. Six of the eight participants in the first Republican debate in August 2023, including DeSantis and former vice president Mike Pence, promised to back Trump even if he were convicted of a felony; only two considered his indictments (and the actions that led to them) as reason to oppose his nomination.³⁰ Tellingly, the combined support in primary election polls for the six loyalists in the month after the debate averaged 34 percent compared to 4 percent for the two Trump critics. Of course, candidates who condemned the indictments, opposed holding Trump accountable, and praised most of his achievements as president struggled to explain why people should vote for them rather than him; Trump's average share in these polls was 54 percent.³¹

The four subsequent debates involved a declining number of participants (as criteria for inclusion became stricter) and dwindling audiences (Trump engaged in counter-programming to divert attention from them) and did nothing to slow Trumps rise in the polls (fig. 3). DeSantis quit after a distant second place finish in the January Iowa caucuses; Haley was the last to drop out two weeks later. In the end, Trump easily swept the Republican primaries, winning everywhere except Vermont and the District of Columbia and clinching the nomination in early March. He ended up with 76 percent of the total votes cast and 97 percent of convention delegates. On July 13, two days before the Republican convention, Trump survived an attempted assassination at a rally in Pennsylvania. His near martyrdom further enhanced his already lofty standing among Republicans, and the convention's four-day celebration of Trump underscored his complete dominance of the party.

Trump made two consequential choices around the time of the convention. First, he picked as his running mate Ohio senator J.D. Vance, a one-time critic who had become a fervent loyalist, evidently confident that, after Joe Biden's disastrous performance in their June 27 debate, he could win without selecting someone whose appeal extended beyond his own. Second, Trump quickly abandoned the "national unity" theme he briefly advanced after his attempted assassination, reverting in his acceptance speech and afterward to the familiar angry and divisive rhetorical riffs relished by his core supporters.³² Republicans came out of their convention believing they had the wind at their backs and were in for a banner year. Democrats saw the same trends and feared the worst—inspiring actions that shifted the election's dynamic but ultimately failed to change its outcome.

The Democratic Nomination

Joe Biden dominated his party's primaries even more than Trump had his, drawing no prominent opponent and winning 87 percent of total votes cast and nearly 99 percent of convention delegates.³³ But that success masked a softness of his

³⁰ The other candidates who said they would vote for Trump were Nikki Haley, Tim Scott, Vavek Ramaswamy, and Doug Burgum; the two Trump critics were Chris Christie and Asa Hutchinson; see Kierra Frazier et al., "The Spiciest Moment of the First Debate," *Politico*, 24 August 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/08/23/first-republican-debate-highlights-00112617>.

³¹ <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-primary-r/2024/national/>.

³² Brett Samuels, "Calls for Unity After Trump Shooting Quickly Dissipate," *The Hill*, 28 July 2024, <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/4795219-trump-shooting-unity-dissipate/>.

³³ His best-known challenger (because of his family name) was Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., who dropped out before the primaries to run as an independent and eventually endorsed Trump, who later appointed him head of Department of Health and Human Services. The others were author Marianne Williamson, Minnesota congressman Dean Phillips, and Maryland businessman Jason Palmer, who among them managed to win seven delegates.

support among Democrats that was fully exposed after his performance in the debate with Trump on June 27. Polling data show that from the beginning, a substantial proportion of Democrats—about one-third—did not want Biden to run for reelection, and even larger proportions did not want him to be the nominee; responding to ten surveys taken in 2022 and 2023 asking if their party should nominate Biden or someone else, an average of 38 percent said Biden, and 58 percent said someone else.³⁴ But there was no consensus on that someone else, and after Biden announced for reelection in April 2023, Democratic voters became increasingly reconciled to if not more enthusiastic about his renomination. Their reservations reflected in part some disappointment about his job performance,³⁵ but the greater problem was the perception that he was physically and cognitively incapable of winning or serving a second term. By early 2024, about two-thirds of Americans had decided Biden was too old for the job, including more than 40 percent of Democrats.³⁶

These perceptions were reinforced by Biden's disastrous debate performance, in which he appeared at times both physically fragile and mentally unfocused. The proportion of Democratic voters wanting him to stay in the race fell immediately after the debate and dropped even further when reviews of his performance by the media and Democratic leaders came in; most Democrats now said he was too old and wanted him to step aside. Biden was reluctant to do so, but Democratic congressional leaders and major campaign contributors, fearing Biden would lose badly to Trump and pull down the whole party ticket, mounted a successful campaign to change his mind; their chief argument was that he put his whole legacy at risk if he persisted in running but would go out a Democratic hero celebrated for his legislative achievements if he ended his campaign.³⁷ He reluctantly stood down on July 21, endorsing vice president Kamala Harris as his successor.

Biden's late departure left little time for a nominating contest, and the looming specter of a second Trump presidency sparked an immediate rally around Harris as the only available hope to prevent it. Harris had not been a particularly popular figure among Democrats and was held in low esteem by independents until Biden's poor debate performance and later withdrawal altered the context (fig. 4).³⁸ There was a palpable sense of relief among ordinary Democrats and elites alike when Biden withdrew, and Harris was a beneficiary; tellingly, her campaign raised a one-day record \$81 million the very next day.³⁹ In polls taken during the

³⁴ Polls sponsored by ABC, CNN, NBC, and the Kaiser Family Foundation.

³⁵ In the weekly *Economist/YouGov* polls taken in 2024, for example, 20 percent of Democrats disapproved of his performance overall; about one-quarter disapproved of his handling of the economy, inflation, and foreign policy; and nearly one-third of his handling of the Israel-Hamas conflict.

³⁶ In thirteen surveys taken by Yahoo/YouGov, *New York Times*/Sienna, Quinnipiac, Echelon, and Harvard Harris, an average of 66 percent of all respondents, 43 percent of Democrats, 71 percent of independents, and 87 percent of Republicans said Biden was too old for the job.

³⁷ Carl Hulse, "How Biden's Senate Allies Helped Push Him From the Race," *New York Times*, 29 August 2024; Seema Mehta, "Public Deference, Private Power: How Nancy Pelosi Navigated the Biden Withdrawal." *Los Angeles Times*, 23 July 2024; June Kim et al., "How the Pressure Grew for Biden to Drop Out," *New York Times*, 21 July 2024; Kenneth P. Vogel, Theodore Schleifer, and Lauren Hirsch, "Major Democratic Donors Devise Plans to Pressure Biden to Step Aside," *New York Times*, 4 July 2024.

³⁸ From 136 national surveys from twenty-three of the survey organizations listed in the appendix.

³⁹ Harris's campaign received 888,000 donations from individuals that day, 500,000 of them from first time donors in the 2024 election cycle; Stephen Peoples, "Kamala Harris smashes fundraising record with stunning \$81 million haul over 24 hours," APNews, 22 July 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/kamala-harris-fundraising-democrat-president-biden-trump-434a55ea1eb29e5da92cc9b1f9cb401f>.

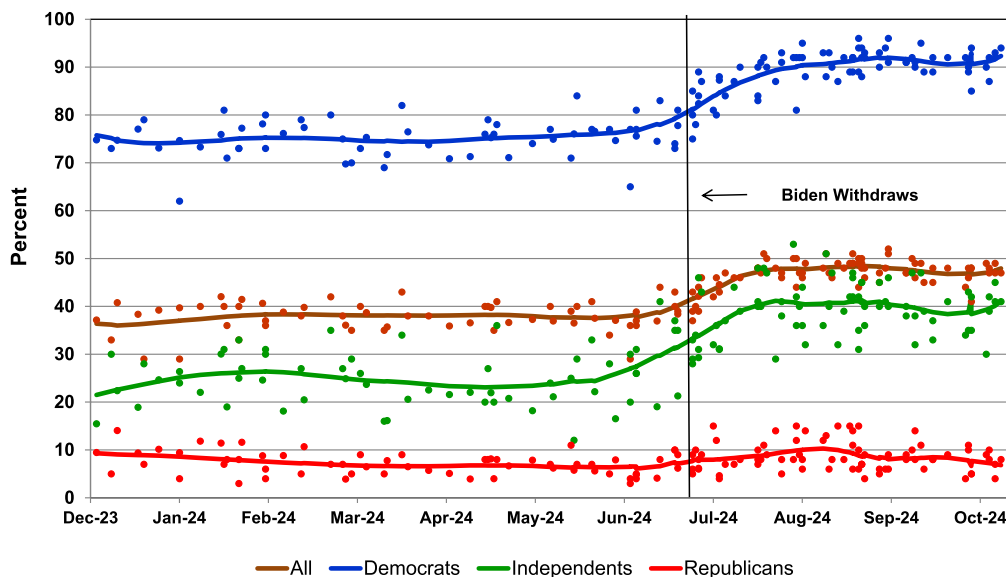


Figure 4. Favorable Opinions of Kamala Harris, 2024

Source: See the [Appendix](#).

following week, averages of 87 percent of Democrats approved of Biden’s departure, 86 percent endorsed Harris’s nomination, and 76 percent thought convention delegates should go ahead and unite behind her rather than consider other candidates.⁴⁰ They did; 99 percent voted for Harris in a virtual roll call vote held August 1–5, and she came out of the Democratic convention later that month with a united, energized, and newly hopeful party behind her.⁴¹ Her choice of running mate, Minnesota governor Tim Walz, a White male Midwesterner, was classic ticket-balancing, and initially at least, he proved to be more appealing to voters than Vance.⁴² Harris’s favorability numbers rose sharply among Democrats and independents, although Republicans remained unmoved.

The Second Debate

Trump’s campaign had been optimized to target Biden and adjusted uncertainly to the fresh challenge posed by Harris. Republicans reacted to Biden’s withdrawal with both scathing attacks on Biden (Trump denouncing him as “the Worst President, by far, in the History of our Nation”) and complaints that he had been unfairly forced out in an antidemocratic coup.⁴³ Clearly unnerved by losing Biden as his opponent, Trump went so far as to fantasize that the president would crash the Democratic convention to reclaim the nomination.⁴⁴ His first and only

⁴⁰ These three questions were asked by five, five, and four surveys, respectively.

⁴¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Democrats Drive Surge in Election Enthusiasm,” Gallup Report, 29 August 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/649397/democrats-drive-surge-election-enthusiasm.aspx>.

⁴² In the month after he joined the ticket, Walz’s favorable to unfavorable ratio averaged 42:38; in the same twenty-three surveys, Vance’s ratio was 36:46.

⁴³ Richard Luscombe, “Trump leads Republican taunts of Biden after president drops out of the 2024 race,” *The Guardian*, 21 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/21/trump-truth-social-biden-drops-out>.

⁴⁴ Anna Commander, “Donald Trump Suggests Biden May Try to ‘Take Back The Nomination,’” *Newsweek*, 6 August 2024.

Table 1. Opinions on Who Won the Debates

	June 27		September 10	
	Trump	Biden	Trump	Harris
All	59	21	33	56
Democrats	23	44	4	94
Independents	60	14	29	56
Republicans	91	2	69	17
Number of polls averaged	11		11	

Source: Compiled by author.

debate with Harris on September 10 showed he was right to want Biden back. Maintaining a calm, mocking demeanor, Harris peppered Trump with belittling points that pricked his ego, put him on the defensive, and goaded him into the florid mendacity typical of his stump speeches but off-putting to people outside the MAGA fold. To pick the most memorable example, Trump’s articulation of his signature issue, the evils of immigration, swerved into the bizarre canard that Haitian immigrants in Ohio were stealing and eating their neighbors’ pet dogs and cats.⁴⁵ Harris sought to shift attention to Trump’s character and record and away from her past positions and the administration’s performance. Her composure contrasted with his angry scowls and furious rants, helping her to appear “presidential” before an audience who did not know her well. Majorities in every postdebate poll viewed her as the winner, with an average of 56 percent compared to the 33 percent who named Trump, inverting the June debate pattern (Table 1). Reactions to both debates were of course highly partisan, but an average of 17 percent of Republicans thought Harris had been more effective, only a few points lower the share of Democrats who said Trump had bested Biden in the June debate. The debate gave Harris a boost, but it turned out to be small, temporary, and insufficient in the face of the adverse fundamentals bequeathed by the administration she had served in.

The Campaigns

Despite their dominance of the news, the “shocks” delivered by both debates, as well as by Biden’s withdrawal and the attempts to assassinate Trump, had surprisingly modest effects on voters’ expressed preferences in the preelection polls, with each incident moving the needle only a point or two in the direction of the favored candidate.⁴⁶ In an era of “calcified partisanship,”⁴⁷ with polarized attitudes and contempt for the other party keeping voters from crossing party lines, such events

⁴⁵ This fable illustrates the extent to which Trump’s supporters will endorse anything he says; in a YouGov poll taken immediately after the debate (September 11–12), 52 percent of Trump voters and 48 percent of Republicans said it was definitely or probably true that “Haitian immigrants are abducting and eating pet dogs and cats.” Only 8 percent of Democrats and 4 percent of Harris voters agreed. A CBS News/YouGov poll taken a week later (September 18–20) reported 77 percent of Republicans saying that this story was certainly or probably true.

⁴⁶ Gary C. Jacobson, “The Congress: Choosing A (Precariously) Unified Government,” *The Elections of 2024*, ed. Michael Nelson (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, forthcoming).

⁴⁷ The concept is from Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck, *The Bitter End*.

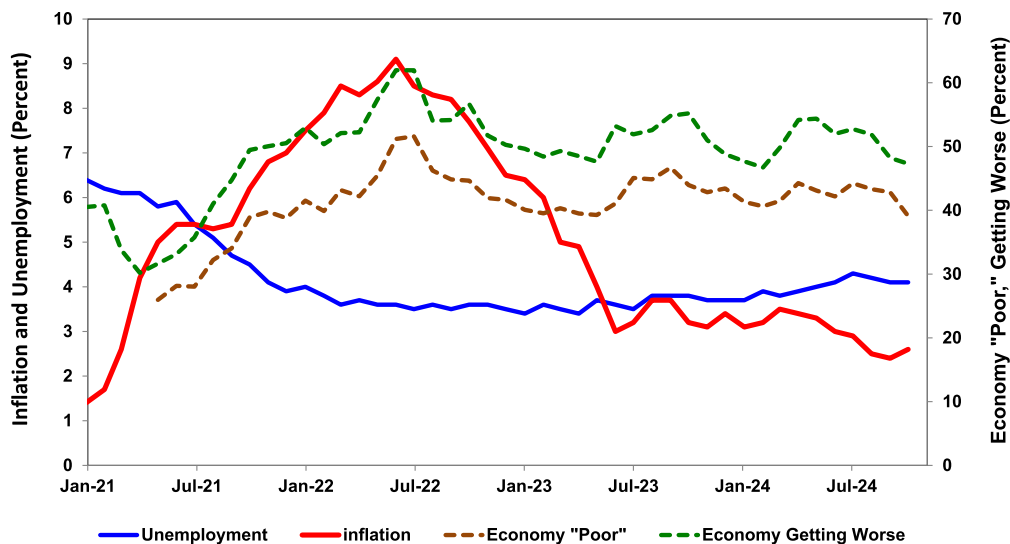


Figure 5. Inflation, Unemployment, and the Rating the Economy

Source: Inflation and Unemployment, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; Economic Evaluations, Monthly Averages from Weekly *Economist/YouGov* Surveys.

changed few minds. More importantly, they occurred against a background of fundamentals that clearly favored the Republican cause and ultimately determined the election's outcome.

About two-thirds of Americans thought the country was on the wrong track.⁴⁸ The economy, consistently topping voters' "most important problem" lists, was the main reason. Majorities in the weekly *Economist/YouGov* polls taken during 2024 deemed the economy in poor (42 percent) or only fair (27 percent) shape, with more than half saying it was getting worse.⁴⁹ These opinions were a legacy of inflation. Consumer prices rose steeply during Biden's first eighteen months in office, with inflation peaking at 9 percent in June 2022 (fig. 5). Although unemployment fell over the same period and remained below 4 percent for the longest stretch in U.S. history, views of the economy did not soften.⁵⁰ Over the next two years, inflation came down, the economy grew steadily, and stock prices reached all-time highs, but the share of the public rating the economy "poor" remained above 40 percent, with about half thinking it was actually getting worse, wrong by any standard economic indicator but a sign of how people viewed their economic prospects. The problem for Harris and the Democrats was that elevated prices at gas stations, supermarkets, restaurants, and in the housing market don't fall when inflation slows—they just don't go up as fast. Economic growth may have been robust, and the stock market may have been setting new records in 2024, but

⁴⁸ "Right/Wrong Track Polls," *The Hill*, 14 October 2024, <https://elections2024.thehill.com/national/right-wrong-track/>.

⁴⁹ *Economist/YouGov* weekly polls, https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/explore/topic/The_Economist_YouGov_polls?content=surveys.

⁵⁰ When asked in the March 10–12, 2024, *Economist/YouGov* survey, "Which of the following do you consider the best measure of how the national economy is doing?" 55 percent of respondents chose inflation, 16 percent chose unemployment, 5 percent said the stock market, 9 percent their own personal finances. Presumably, the balance would be different in a period of high unemployment and low inflation.

ordinary Americans remained stuck with substantially higher prices for many necessities than when Biden took office, and disposable incomes were slow to catch up.

The situation was ripe for what Lynn Vavreck labels a “clarifying campaign” in which the candidate benefitting from economic conditions makes the economy the central issue of their campaign and the rival candidate tries to change the subject.⁵¹ Trump’s campaign exploited economic discontent effectively, and he held an average 10-point advantage on the question of which candidate would handle the economy better in polls taken during the final month of the campaign.⁵² Harris tried to change the subject, emphasizing Trump’s threat to American democracy, abortion rights, and civil liberties, but the economy remained the dominant issue for most voters throughout the election season and was ultimately decisive, as exemplified so vividly by the opening quotation.

The Republican cause was also favored by what most voters saw as the second most important issue in 2024—illegal immigration, and Trump ended up with an average 10-point advantage on handling this issue, as well.⁵³ Trump wove his obsession with immigrants into a broader dystopian vision of Biden’s America and an apocalyptic nightmare of worse to come if Harris won. He depicted a country overrun by violent criminals and invading hordes of illegal immigrants taking over and destroying communities: in addition to snatching and eating pet dogs and cats, “they grab young girls and slice them up right in front of their parents.”⁵⁴ It is place where “you can’t walk across the street to get a loaf of bread; you get shot, you get mugged, you get raped” and where “your child goes to school and they don’t even call you, and they change the sex of your child” via a “brutal operation.”⁵⁵ It is beset with “communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left thugs.”⁵⁶ It has “the dumbest leaders in the . . . history of the world.” If the “mentally impaired” Harris is elected, “the country will be over”; “we’re going to end up in World War III,” and “a 1929-style depression.”⁵⁷ “One year, two years, Israel will no longer exist.”⁵⁸

Stirring hatred and fear have always been a Trump specialty, but his rhetoric reached grotesque new extremes after his indictments raised his personal stake in the 2024 outcome. His fevered messaging was aimed primarily at the MAGA base, evoking horror scenarios that Trump and right-wing pundits had been

⁵¹ Lynn Vavreck, *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁵² Based on eight CNN, ABC News, Ipsos, Quinnipiac University, Suffolk University/*USA Today*, and Marquette University polls, accessed through the Roper Center; an average of 49 percent chose Trump, 39 percent, Harris.

⁵³ In the eight surveys, an average of 48 percent thought Trump would handle immigration better, 38 percent, Harris.

⁵⁴ James Oliphant, “Trump’s Already Harsh Rhetoric on Migrants Is Turning Darker as Election Day Nears,” Reuters, 4 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trumps-already-harsh-rhetoric-migrants-is-turning-darker-election-day-nears-2024-10-04/>.

⁵⁵ Danielle Kurtzlebenc, “Trump Turns to Darker Rhetoric as Voting Begins,” NPR, 30 September 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/30/g-s1-25459/trump-speech-insult-harris-biden-mentally-impaired-police-rough>.

⁵⁶ Soo Rin Kim and Lalee Ibssa, “Trump Compares Political Opponents to ‘Vermin’ Who He Will ‘Root Out,’ Alarming Historians,” ABC News, 13 November 2023.

⁵⁷ From a Truth Social statement, 26 September 2024, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/he-s-panicking-donaldtrump-criticized-for-claiming-kamala-harris-will-lead-the-u-s-into-ww3-and-1929-style-great-depression/vi-AA1rhjrU>.

⁵⁸ Michael Gold, “Trump’s Consistent Message Online and Onstage: Be Afraid,” *New York Times*, 1 October 2024.

sketching throughout the Biden administration, but it was also meant to frighten inattentive “irregular voters” to the polls.⁵⁹ Its lurid emphasis on the immigrant threat sought to exploit popular anxieties provoked by a very real surge in immigrants entering the United States during the Biden administration; according to one conservative estimate, some eight million immigrants arrived during Biden’s term, five million of them undocumented.⁶⁰ Traffic at the Mexican border dropped off sharply in 2024, but not before handing the Republicans a powerful issue.⁶¹ The border surge had increased public animosity toward undocumented immigrants, including among many Latinos with legal status, with majorities of Americans now favoring Trump’s promised mass deportations.⁶² Bipartisan legislation addressing the problem died in Congress when Trump, loathe to lose such a potent issue, insisted that Republican members oppose it.

Changing the Subject?

The Supreme Court’s June 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*,⁶³ had overturned *Roe v. Wade* and ended half-century of constitutional protection for abortion rights. Solid majorities disapproved of the Dobbs decision, and mobilized prochoice Democrats helped dampen an anticipated “red wave” in 2022.⁶⁴ Democrats sought to make it a salient issue again in 2024. Harris made protecting a woman’s right to choose a center piece of her campaign. It joined what had been the central theme of Biden’s campaign before he dropped out, a promise to protect American democracy from the threat posed by Trump, exemplified but by no means limited to his attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 election. Voters who believed abortion rights and the protection of American democracy were the top issues voted overwhelmingly for Harris, but they were in the minority.⁶⁵ Harris was unable to change the subject because she failed to separate herself from the Biden administration’s highly unpopular economic record—saying, presumably to her lasting regret, “nothing comes to mind” when an interviewer ask if she would do anything differently from Biden⁶⁶—and could not make herself the more credible agent of change at a time when so many voters were deeply unhappy with the direction of the country and its current political leaders.

Would the argument that Trump was a threat to democracy have been more potent if he had been tried and convicted of scheming to overturn the election or hiding classified documents at Mar-a-Lago? Survey evidence suggests that conviction

⁵⁹ Jonah Goldberg, “The Strategy Behind Trump’s Dark Rhetoric,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 October 2024.

⁶⁰ David Leonhardt, “An Unprecedented Surge,” *New York Times*, 11 December 2024.

⁶¹ Lori Robertson, “Breaking Down the Immigration Figures,” [FactCheck.org](https://www.factcheck.org/2024/02/breaking-down-the-immigration-figures/), 27 February 2024, <https://www.factcheck.org/2024/02/breaking-down-the-immigration-figures/>.

⁶² Rogé Karma, “The Most Dramatic Shift in U.S. Public Opinion,” *The Atlantic*, 9 October 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2024/10/immigration-public-opinion-reversal/680196/>; Sahana Mukherjee and Jens Manuel Krogstad, “Trump and Harris Supporters Differ on Deportations but Favor Border Security, High-Skilled Immigration”, Pew Report, 27 September 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2024/09/27/trump-and-harris-supporters-differ-on-mass-deportations-but-favor-border-security-high-skilled-immigration/>.

⁶³ No. 19-1392, 597 U.S. ____ (2022).

⁶⁴ Gary C. Jacobson, “The 2022 Elections: A Test of Democracy’s Resilience and the Referendum Theory of Midterms,” *Political Science Quarterly* 138, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqad002>.

⁶⁵ CNN, “Election 2024: Exit Polls,” accessed 1 December 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/election/2024/exit-polls/national-results/general/president/0>.

⁶⁶ Monica Segar, “Harris Says ‘Not a Thing Comes to Mind’ That She’d Do Differently Than Biden,” *Newsweek*, 8 October 2024.

on any of these charges would probably have reduced his vote by a modest amount but conceivably enough to cost him his victory in such a close election. As observed in [figure 1](#), majorities of Americans who expressed an opinion believed Trump was guilty as charged in these cases, but with very wide partisan differences. His indictments and convictions in the various cases consistently raised the proportion thinking him guilty as charged for the transgression by about 3 percentage points; the average net movement (changes in the percent “guilty” minus the percent “not guilty”) was 4.2 points for all respondents, 5.3 points for Democrats, 7.9 points for independents, but only 1.7 points for Republicans.⁶⁷ Judicial actions adverse to Trump did have an impact on beliefs about his criminality, but it was not large and barely extended to Republican voters.

Would an upsurge in the belief that Trump had committed crimes have cost him votes? We can only speculate. Survey data indicate that, in the abstract, a felony conviction would severely damage if not totally destroy a candidate’s prospects.⁶⁸ In reality, however, Trump’s conviction in the hush money and property values cases did nothing to hinder his comeback. One reason is that many more people decided they were open to voting for a convicted felon once Trump had become one. In two YouGov surveys taken just before and just after his hush money conviction, the proportion of Republicans saying they were willing to vote for a felon rose from 49 percent to 74 percent; among 2020 Trump voters, the increase was from 52 to 85 percent.⁶⁹

Still, a potentially decisive fraction (14 percent of Republicans, 7 percent of Trump voters) continued to say they were not willing to vote for a felon. Other data, however, suggest that even these responses overstate the potential effect on the vote of a conviction in these or any other of Trump’s felony cases. Five Yahoo/YouGov surveys posed the presidential vote question early in the interview and then later asked how respondents would vote if Trump were convicted of a serious crime. Responses suggest an overall vote penalty for conviction of about 3 net percentage points ([Table 2](#)). They also indicate the penalty was largely a product of subtraction: fewer votes for Trump rather than more votes for Biden (his opponent when these surveys were conducted). This is particularly clear among Republicans; they would desert Trump in appreciable numbers, but very few of them said they would then vote for Biden. Among voters in these surveys who initially said they would vote for Trump, an average of 84.6 percent said they would still vote for him if he were convicted, 9.8 were unsure, 3.8 percent would not vote, but only 1.8 percent said they would vote for Biden.

These responses point to a crucial reason why Trump’s indictments and trial losses did so little to move the needle in Biden’s favor: Most Republicans and independent Trump supporters had developed an intense antipathy toward the Biden that made voting for him unthinkable. He had the lowest average Gallup Poll approval ratings among rival-party identifiers ever recorded for any president going back to Truman, 5.7 percent; for 2024, the average was 4.7 percent. In the weekly *Economist*/YouGov surveys taken in 2024 through July, 92.6 percent of Republicans expressed very (83.3 percent) or somewhat (9.3) unfavorable

⁶⁷ For details, see Jacobson, “Reactions to Trump’s Indictments and Trials.”

⁶⁸ Jacobson, “Reactions to Trump’s Indictments and Trials.”

⁶⁹ YouGov surveys, “before” April 1-8, 2024, “after” May 31-2 June 2024, https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/crosstabs_Felonies_and_Employment_20240418.pdf; https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/crosstabs_Reactions_to_Trumps_Hush-Money_Conviction.pdf.

Table 2. The Effect of a Hypothetical Trump Conviction on Vote Intentions

	All		Democrats		Independents		Republicans	
	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump	Biden	Trump
Initial vote	44.8	43.6	90.8	3.2	36.4	42.4	4.4	88.8
If convicted	45.8	38.6	91.4	2.6	38.2	37.2	4.8	79.2
Difference	1.0	-5.0	0.6	-0.6	1.8	-5.2	0.4	-9.6

Source: Average of five Yahoo/YouGov surveys taken between August 2023 and May 2024.

opinions of Biden.⁷⁰ Republican hostility toward Biden reflected the belief that his presidency was illegitimate as well as the success of a sustained campaign by right-wing media outlets and Republican politicians in Congress and elsewhere to convince their followers that Biden was an incompetent, corrupt, radically leftist dotard.⁷¹ It also reflected hostility toward Democrats generally, so substituting Harris for Biden barely altered the picture. She was about as unpopular among Republicans as Biden, with 91.6 percent viewing her very (82.5 percent) or somewhat (9.1 percent) unfavorably in the *Economist*/YouGov surveys taken after she became the candidate. Few ordinary Republicans seemed open to voting for either Democrat under any circumstances; strongly negative attitudes toward both would likely have kept most of those who were not sure how they would react to a Trump conviction from voting for either of them. They might, however, have been moved to stay home or vote for a minor party candidate in numbers appreciable enough to make a difference in a very close election, especially if independent voters leaning toward Trump reacted similarly. It is plausible, then, that additional convictions would have led to a small but potentially decisive drop in Trump's electoral support. If so, the Republican-appointed judges on the Supreme Court and in Miami, by issuing decisions that kept the elections and documents cases from being tried before the election, may have tipped the balance in Trump's favor, although we will never know for sure.

The Presidential Election Results in Historical Context

Figure 6 displays the presidential election results by state. Five of the six states that flipped from Biden in 2020 to Trump in 2024—Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—had flipped from Trump in 2016 to Biden in 2020. The sixth state was Nevada. These states had all been considered tossups, as was North Carolina, and Trump's sweep of all seven states was a significant achievement. Trump claimed a "massive" mandate,⁷² but the "wave" that gave Republicans full control of the federal government and opened the door to radical changes in American politics and policy was small by historical standards. Trump's share of the popular vote rose from 46.8 percent in 2020 to 49.8 percent in 2024, a rise stemming more from a decrease in votes for the Democrat (Kamala Harris won 6.3 million fewer votes than Joe Biden) than

⁷⁰ $N = 18,959$; the numbers are virtually identical for the job approval question.

⁷¹ Gary Jacobson, "Joe Biden's Public Standing and its Implications for 2024," prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, 3-7 April 2024.

⁷² Transcript of interview with Time Magazine, 25 November 2024, <https://time.com/7201565/person-of-the-year-2024-donald-trump-transcript/>.

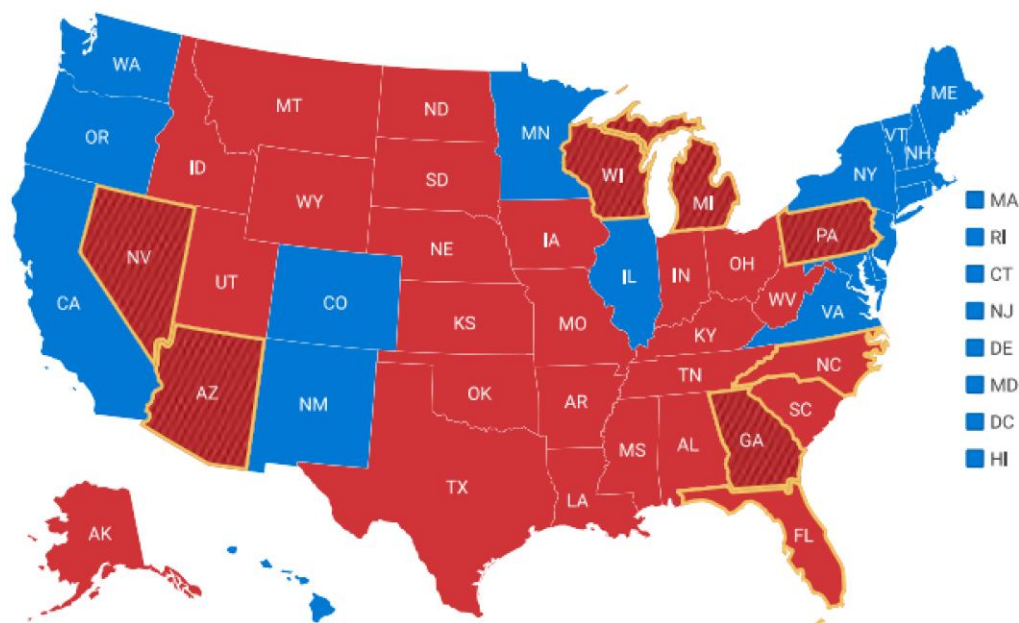


Figure 6. 2024 Election Results by State

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/11/05/us/elections/results-president.html>.

from an increase in support for Trump (up 3.1 million votes over 2020). Trump's average gain across all states was 2.2 percentage points; in the six states that switched from Biden in 2020 to Trump in 2024, giving him his Electoral College victory, his average gain in the major party vote share was 1.9 points. Trump's electoral vote count, 312 (of 538), exceeded his 2016 and Biden's 2020 totals by six votes but was twenty fewer than Obama had won in 2012 and fifty-three fewer than he had won in 2008.

Table 3 summarizes the results in the three elections contested by Trump. Although he won the national vote for the first time in 2024, winning 50.8 percent of major party votes, he fell short of winning a majority of votes cast for president. Turnout, which had soared to a 100-year high in 2020, fell in 2024 but was still second highest since 1908. Democrats lost more presidential votes than Trump gained, but it would be a mistake to attribute Trump's victory to stay-at-home Democrats. As Table 4 shows, the drop in Democratic votes was concentrated in noncompetitive states, especially those won by Harris. In the swing states, Trump's total grew substantially, while the Democrats' totals did not fall. The Trump campaign's success in bringing new voters to the polls and attracting former Biden voters in the most competitive states more than offset the Harris campaign's focused mobilization efforts in these states.

By historical standards, the swing to Trump was small for a party taking the White House from the rival party (Table 5). Prior to 2016, elections in which the incumbent president's party lost produced notably larger partisan shifts in the winner's favor, always more than 5 percentage points and sometimes much more.⁷³ In the most recent three elections, average swings across states have been much smaller

⁷³ The same historical pattern holds if we substitute the national major party vote swing for the average state vote swing; the two are correlated at 0.92, and the smallest three are 2016, 2020, and 2024.

Table 3. Results of the Three Elections with Trump on the Ballot

	Turnout %	Votes (Millions)	% of All Votes	% of Major Party Votes	Electoral Votes	States Won
2016	60.1					
Hilary Clinton		65.9	48.2	51.1	232	20
Donald Trump		63.0	46.1	48.9	306	30
2020	66.5					
Joe Biden		81.3	51.3	52.3	306	25
Donald Trump		74.2	46.8	47.7	232	25
2024	63.9					
Kamala Harris		75.0	48.3	49.2	226	19
Donald Trump		77.0	49.8	50.8	312	31
Δ 2016–2020	6.4					
Joe Biden		15.4	3.1	1.5	74	5
Donald Trump		11.2	0.7	−1.5	−74	−5
Δ 2020–2024	−2.6					
Kamala Harris		−6.3	−3.0	−3.1	−80	−6
Donald Trump		3.1	3.0	3.1	80	6

Source: Compiled by author.

Table 4. Vote Swings Between 2020 and 2024, by State Competitiveness (Percent)

	State Majority		
	Biden to Trump (6)	Trump Both Elections (25)	Democrat Both Elections (19)
Change in total votes			
Trump	6.5	3.8	2.7
Harris	0.4	−7.5	−12.5
Average state vote change			
Trump	2.0	2.1	2.4
Harris	−1.7	−1.8	−3.0
Average change in Trump's share	1.9	2.0	2.7

Source: Compiled by author.

and more uniform, with the very small standard deviations revealing just how thoroughly nationalized responses to presidential candidates have become (the smaller the standard deviation, the more uniform the swing across states and thus the more nationalized the vote). The correlation between current and previous outcomes across the states, reaching 0.99 in the two most recent elections, underlines the extraordinary continuity in aggregate voting patterns across elections during the Trump era. The small, uniform interelection swings characterizing the three elections with Trump on the ballot reflect a rigidity in voting behavior aptly characterized as “calcification.” Yet continuity was clearly not perfect—Trump did increase his vote share, and electoral behavior changed in other notable ways, as well.

Table 5. Change, Nationalization and Continuity in Presidential Elections Lost by the Incumbent Party, 1952–2024

Year	Swing to Winning Party (State Average)	Standard Deviation of the Swing	Correlation with Previous Election (State Vote)
1952	11.5	6.2	0.78
1960	5.2	10.7	0.43
1968	10.9	11.8	0.27
1976	13.9	9.0	0.23
1980	7.0	4.4	0.83
1992	6.9	3.8	0.78
2000	5.8	3.3	0.93
2008	5.1	3.8	0.93
2016	2.1	3.6	0.94
2020	1.8	1.4	0.99
2024	2.2	1.3	0.99

Source: Compiled by author.

The 2024 Electorate

Survey data confirm the overwhelming influence of partisanship on the vote in 2024. On average in preelection polls taken after Harris replaced Biden ($N = 142$), 95 percent of partisans on both sides planned to vote for their own party's candidate. After the election, 96.7 percent of both Democrats and Republicans interviewed by the Cooperative Election Study (CES) said they had done so.⁷⁴ The comparable loyalty rates in the CES for 2020 had been 95.8 percent among Democrats and 94.2 among Republicans.⁷⁵ According to these two surveys, Trump's vote increased not only because Republicans were more loyal in 2024 but also because, compared to 2020, the Republicans' share of party identifiers was higher by 4.1 points, reaching 46.4 percent, while the Democrats' share was 3.3 points lower, down to 44.8 percent. This swing to the Republicans was at the high end of estimated shifts in aggregate partisanship during the Biden administration, but all six major national surveys that allow comparisons between the 2020 and 2024 electorates report declines in the relative proportion of Democrat identifiers (partisan leaners included), averaging 2.7 points, and increases in proportion of Republican identifiers, averaging 2.9 points.⁷⁶ With party loyalty at record levels, the increased Republican share of party identifiers can account for almost all of the swing to Trump between 2020 and 2024. Thus, it is significant that the four surveys reporting data on party identification for

⁷⁴ Brian Schaffner et al., "Cooperative Election Study Common Content, 2024," <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/X11EP6>. Harvard Dataverse, V4; the sample includes 43,552 presidential voters. In the preliminary version of the 2024 ANES Time Series study, party loyalty averaged 94.7 percent (92.5 percent among Republicans, 96.6 percent among Democrats (American National Election Studies. 2025. ANES 2024 Time Series Study Preliminary Release: Combined Pre-Election and Post-Election Data [dataset and documentation]. 30 April 2025 version. www.electionstudies.org).

⁷⁵ Brian Schaffner, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Sam Luks, "Cooperative Election Study Common Content," 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/E9N6PH>. Harvard Dataverse, V4; the sample includes 45,348 voters.

⁷⁶ The surveys are those provided by Gallup, Pew, the American National Election Study (pre-election waves), AP VoteCast, and *Economist/YouGov* (annual averages from weekly surveys) surveys in addition to the CES; yearly data are available from Gallup, Pew, and *Economist/YouGov*, and 2022 data are available from the CES.

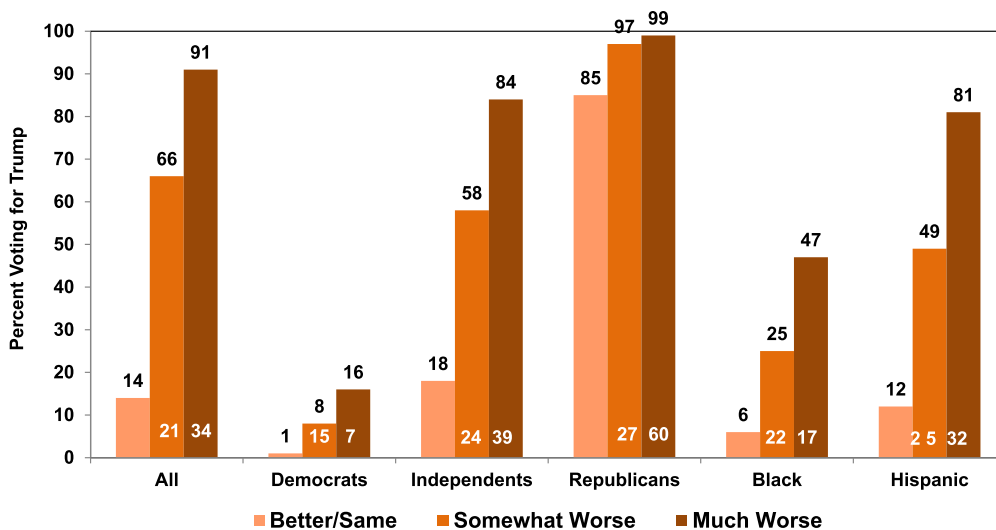


Figure 7. Opinions of the Economy over the Past Year and the Vote for Trump Among Partisans and Ethnic Minorities

Source: 2024 Cooperative Election Study.

Notes: The percentage of respondents in the category is listed at the bottom of the columns.

years between the two presidential elections show that, on average, about three-quarters of Republican gains accrued during Biden's first two years in office. That is, most of the pro-Republican shift in party identification had already registered by the time of the 2022 midterm, a pattern suggesting that it was more the product of negative reactions to Biden's presidency than of positive reactions to Trump's third MAGA campaign.

The same is true of another notable electoral shift in 2024, the increase in support for Trump among Black and Hispanic voters compared to 2020. The national surveys report widely different estimates of these shifts, but on average in the CES, AP VoteCast, American National Election Study (ANES), and the National Election Pool exit polls, support for Trump among Black voters rose about 4 points, to 14 percent; among Hispanic voters, it was up 10 points, to 40 percent. These changes were foreshadowed by pro-Republican shifts in party identification before 2024, as well as during the election year and reflected dissatisfaction with the economy and immigration during the Biden presidency. [Figure 7](#) displays the relationship between opinions of the economy's performance over the past year and Trump's share of the vote reported in the CES for all respondents and for partisan and ethnic subgroups. Views of the economy were of course strongly skewed by partisanship, with only 22 percent of Democrats thinking it had gotten worse and only 13 percent of Republicans thinking it had not. Party loyalty was very high, but most partisans who did defect held views of the economy contrary to their party's consensus. The votes of (pure, nonleaning) independents were strongly related to opinions of the economy, as were the votes of Blacks and Hispanics. Their greater support for the Republican presidential candidate in 2024 was closely linked to unhappiness with the Biden's (and by extension, Harris's) economy. Among Blacks who said they had voted for Biden in 2020 and thought the economy had gotten worse over the past year, 12.0 percent switched to Trump in

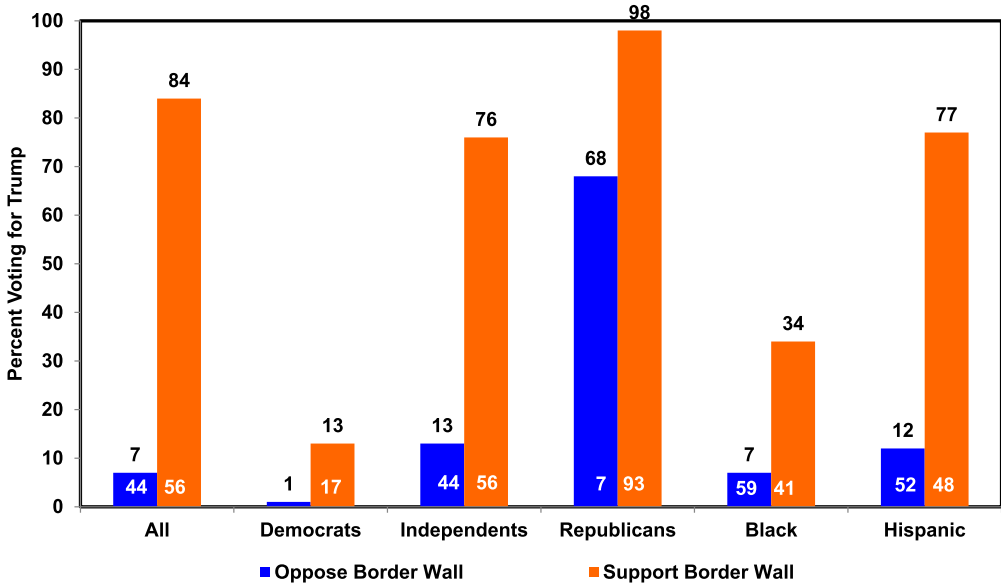


Figure 8. Support for a Border Wall and the Vote for Trump in 2024

Source: 2024 Cooperative Election Study.

Notes: The percentage of respondents in the category is listed at the bottom of the columns.

2024 compared to 2.3 percent of those who did not think it had gotten worse; the respective figures for Hispanics were 21.8 percent and 3.2 percent.⁷⁷

The swing to Trump among Hispanics and Blacks also reflects unhappiness with the porous southern border. The CES asked several questions related to immigration, but one question stands out as differentiating voters decisively: whether they supported building a wall on the Mexican border. Support for a border wall had been a minority position during Trump’s first term but became a majority position under Biden. In the 2024 CES, 56 percent supported building the wall, and opinions on the issue were very strongly associated with the presidential vote (fig. 8). The numbers for Hispanic voters are especially striking, with nearly half (48 percent) favoring a wall and more than three-quarters of those who did voting for Trump. Of those Hispanics who reported voting for Biden in 2020, 26.8 percent of those supporting the wall switched to Trump compared to 5.2 percent of those who did not.

The movement of Blacks and Hispanics toward Trump is also evident in the aggregate election data. Regressing the percentage-point swing to Trump between 2020 and 2024 on the proportion of Blacks and Hispanics in the state produces coefficients of 0.042 (SE = 0.015, $p < .05$) and 0.054 (SE = 0.014, $p < .001$), respectively. The coefficients project the swing to Trump to be 1.5 points greater in the state with the largest compared to the smallest proportion of Blacks, and 2.4 points greater in the state with the largest compared to the smallest proportion of Hispanics.⁷⁸ Comparable analysis of congressional district–level data produced

⁷⁷ Comparable data in the preliminary version of the ANES study for 2024 also show large differences across economic evaluation categories, although the gradients are not quite as steep.

⁷⁸ The coefficient for Blacks and Hispanics combined was 0.050 (SE = 0.015, $p < .001$), estimating a difference of 2.4 points between states with the lowest and highest total proportion of these minority groups.

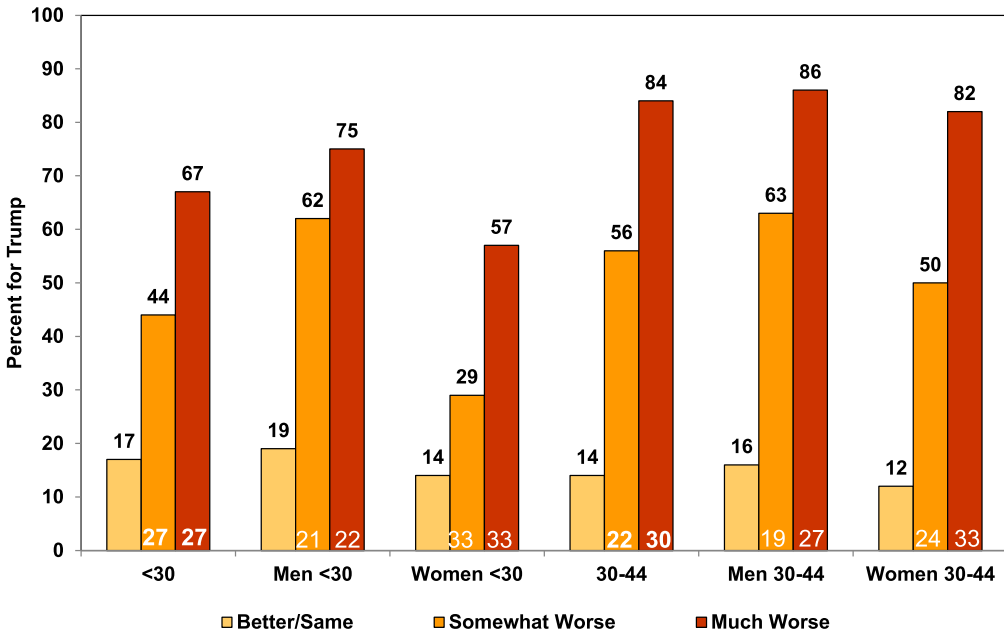


Figure 9. Views of the Economy and Voting for Trump Among Younger Voters

Source: 2024 Cooperative Election Study.

Notes: The percentage of respondents in the category is listed at the bottom of the columns.

coefficients of 0.026 (SE = 0.010, $p < .01$) and 0.099 (SE = 0.004, $p < .001$), projecting that the swing to Trump would be 1.6 points greater in the district with the largest compared to the smallest proportion of Blacks, and 8.7 points greater in the district with the largest compared to the smallest proportion of Hispanics. Whether these represent durable shifts in political alignment among these groups is uncertain, but evidence from the House elections, analyzed in the next section, shows that so far, Trump’s attraction to Blacks and Hispanics has not extended to other Republican candidates.

The other notable shift toward Trump in 2024 occurred among younger voters. His support in the CES surveys grew from 33 percent in 2020 to 38 percent in 2024 among voters under thirty years old, and from 38 percent to 44 percent among those aged thirty to forty-four. The National Election Pool exit poll, ANES Time Series survey, and AP VoteCast polls also reported swings to Trump among younger voters. Again, negative views of the economy were strongly associated with their vote choice (fig. 9), with Trump’s support much higher among those who thought the economy had gotten worse.⁷⁹ Among voters under thirty, the swing to Trump was larger for men (6.3 points) than for women (3.9 points), and the association between views of the economy and the vote was stronger for men, even though a larger share of women viewed the economy negatively (66 percent compared to 44 percent). Among voters under thirty who reported voting for Biden in 2020, 17 percent of those who said the economy had gotten worse switched to Trump (men, 25 percent,

⁷⁹ These patterns are replicated the ANES data, with the exception of the gender differences among voters under 30.

women, 14 percent) compared to 4 percent of those who said it was the same or better. Opinions of the economy were even more strongly related to the vote for the thirty to forty-four age cohort; 20 percent who said the economy was worse said they switched to Trump compared to 3 percent of the rest.

The immigration issue was less central than the economy to younger voters. In the AP VoteCast survey, for example, only 12 percent of voters under 40 deemed it the most important issue, compared to 23 percent of older voters; younger voters were also more inclined to rate the economy as most important (42 percent) than older voters (38 percent). Support for building the wall was a minority view among voters under forty-four in the CES survey; it remained a strong predictor of their votes but less so than for older voters.

Views of the economy and support for building a wall on the border are of course endogenous, as is evident from the partisan breakdowns in figures 7 and 8. But in multivariate models of the presidential vote choice using the CES data that control for party identification, ideology, evaluations of Harris's performance as vice president, and other potential explanatory variables, respondents' views of the economy and support for the wall continue to have a significant independent impact on the vote choice.

Overall, the survey data on the 2024 electorate support the conclusion that negative reactions to the economy and immigration under Biden were a major and, as it turned out, insurmountable problem for Harris. Assessments of Harris were tightly bound to assessments of Biden; their job approval ratings were correlated at 0.94 in the CES.⁸⁰ About half the voters in this survey disapproved of how both Democrats handled their jobs, and 91 percent of the double disapprovers voted for Trump. Among those who approved of both, 97 percent voted for Harris, but they comprised only 36 percent of the electorate.

The Congressional Elections

Trump's claims of a massive mandate, inconsistent with the presidential vote data, are also belied by the results of the 2024 congressional elections, which registered considerably smaller shifts in voter preferences to the Republican side than the presidential race (Table 6). Republicans lost one seat net in the House, shrinking their already precarious margin over the Democrats to five. Had it not been for a successful 2023 partisan gerrymander in North Carolina that gave Republicans three additional seats, Democrats would have won a 218–217 majority.⁸¹ Republicans took the Senate by defeating three Democratic incumbents and taking one open seat, with all but one of their gains occurring in deeply red states won easily by Trump.

⁸⁰ Based on 5-point scales ranging from strongly approving to strongly disapproving; in the ANES survey, their ratings on the 101-point "feeling thermometer" scale were correlated at 0.88.

⁸¹ The gerrymander turned an even 7-7 party balance into a 10-4 Republican majority in a state where the parties are closely balanced (Trump won the state in 2024 by three points, but Democrats won the other statewide offices, governor and lieutenant governor, by fifteen and two points, respectively). The North Carolina Supreme Court had rejected an earlier Republican gerrymander, but after the 2022 election turned a 4-3 Democratic court majority to a 5-2 Republican majority, the new majority decided it had no authority over redistricting, enabling the Republican legislative majority to do as it pleased; see Sarah Michels, "Why have NC Congressional Districts Changed for 2024?" *North Carolina Public Press*, 1 November 2024, <https://carolinapublicpress.org/66873/why-have-nc-congressional-districts-changed-for-2024/>.

Table 6. Membership Changes in the House and Senate in 2024

	Republicans	Democrats	Independents
<i>House of Representatives</i>			
Elected in 2022	222	213	
Prior to the 2024 election	221	214	
Elected in 2024	220	215	
Incumbents reelected	187	181	
Incumbents defeated	7	4	
Open seats retained	25	25	
Open seats lost	2	4	
<i>Senate</i>			
After the 2022 election	49	49	2 ^a
Prior to the 2024 election	49	47	4 ^a
Elected in 2024	53	45	2 ^a
Incumbents reelected	9	12	
Incumbents defeated	0	3	
Open seats retained	2	6	
Open seats lost	0	1	

Source: Compiled by author.

^aThe two independents, Bernie Sanders (VT) and Angus King (ME), caucus with the Democrats; Joe Manchin (WV) and Kyrsten Sinema (AZ) switched to independent after being elected as Democrats in 2022; neither ran for reelection in 2024.

The House of Representatives

The 2020 House elections had been the most nationalized and president-centered on record,⁸² but the 2024 elections matched or exceeded them in this regard (Table 7). The correlation between the 2024 House and presidential votes equaled the record high of 0.987 set in 2020. Only sixteen of the 435 districts were won by the party whose presidential candidate had lost the district in 2024—thirteen won by Democrats and three by Republicans—equaling the previous lowest reached in 2020. A logit model estimating the impact of the district presidential vote on a party's probability of winning the seat predicted the actual winner with 96 percent accuracy. The House elections set a new record for nationalization, with the smallest standard deviation of the inter-election swing (the partisan vote change across stable districts with major party competition in both elections) ever observed.⁸³ The district-level swing itself averaged only 0.4 percentage points in the Republicans' favor. The party's national victory in 2024 helped them retain the majority they had won in 2022 (with a net pickup of nine seats) but failed to augment it.

The growing primacy of party identification and presidential preferences in shaping the vote for House candidates has reduced the once-formidable

⁸² Gary C. Jacobson, "The Presidential and Congressional Elections of 2020: A National Referendum on the Trump Presidency," *Political Science Quarterly* 136, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 11–45.

⁸³ Again, the smaller the standard deviation, the more uniform the swing across districts, and thus the more nationalized the election; all previous postwar election swings have larger standard deviations; the figure cannot be computed for years ending in 2 because redistricting destroys comparability.

Table 7. The District-Level Presidential Vote and House Results, 2000–2024

House Election Year	Presidential Vote Year	House/ President Vote Correlation	Districts with Split Results	% Winners Correctly Predicted	Value of Incumbency	Standard Deviation of Vote Swing
2000	2000	0.803	87	80.4	8.6	6.4
2002	2000	0.805	63	86.2	8.5	
2004	2004	0.839	60	86.4	6.8	5.5
2006	2004	0.839	69	83.5	6.5	6.0
2008	2008	0.851	83	80.7	7.1	6.0
2010	2008	0.917	73	91.3	4.8	6.3
2012	2012	0.952	26	94.0	2.5	
2014	2012	0.942	31	94.3	3.7	4.3
2016	2016	0.950	35	94.7	2.9	4.6
2018	2016	0.974	34	96.1	1.4	4.3
2020	2020	0.987	16	95.9	1.5	3.0
2022	2020	0.983	23	94.7	1.5	
2024	2024	0.987	16	96.1	1.2	2.3

Source: Compiled by author.

incumbency advantage sharply.⁸⁴ The estimated value in votes of House incumbency was a mere 1.2 percentage points in 2024, a level not seen since the 1950s. For the same reasons, the effect of candidate quality as measured by previous experience in elected office was also very small in 2024; its estimated value was only 0.6 percentage points, the lowest for the postwar period.⁸⁵ The personal House vote—a choice based on candidates as individuals, detached from their party label—has grown increasingly rare. In 2024, the share of both loyal partisans and straight ticket voters for president and representative stood at 95 percent in both the CES and ANES surveys, matching or exceeding the highest levels ever recorded. A fully nationalized president- and party-centered electoral regime has almost completely superseded the candidate-focused electoral order prevailing in the final decades of the Twentieth Century.

Incumbents remain highly successful, to be sure, but only because the great majority serve districts that favor their party. Those seeking reelection in 2024 rarely failed. Only four, two from each party, lost to primary election challengers.⁸⁶ Ten of the eleven incumbents who lost general elections were defending districts that favored the rival party's presidential candidate in 2024. Six of them were freshmen

⁸⁴ The value of incumbency is estimated here by a modified version of the Gelman-King index which substitutes the district level presidential vote in the current or, for midterms, most recent presidential election for the lagged vote, allowing years ending in "2" and districts redraw between apportionment decades to be included; for details, see Gary C. Jacobson, "It's Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections," *Journal of Politics* 77, no. 3 (July 2015): 861–73.

⁸⁵ For comparison, see Jamie Carson and Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, 11 ed. (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), 42 and 63.

⁸⁶ Republican Jerry Carl lost to fellow Republican incumbent Barry Moore in Alabama's reconfigured second district; Republican Bob Good, who had made the mistake of supporting Ron DeSantis in the presidential primary, lost Virginia's 5th district to John McGuire, an election denier strongly supported by Trump. Two Democrats, Jamaal Bowman (NY 16) and Cori Bush (MO 1) lost to challengers supported by more than \$10 million in spending by pro-Israel super PACS who objected to their pro-Palestinian sympathies. The incumbent party held onto all four seats in the general election.

serving their first terms. Overall, of the seventeen districts that changed party hands in 2024, sixteen went to the party of the presidential winner. In five of these cases, the losses were the consequence of new districts drawn after the 2022 election rather than any change in voters' party preferences.⁸⁷ Like Trump, Republican House candidates benefitted collectively more from a falloff in votes for Democrats than from an increase in votes for them. Compared to 2020, the Democratic House vote was down by 6.6 million, the Republican vote was up by 2.1 million. Republican control of the House in 2024 was essentially a product of the 2022 midterm swing against the president's party;⁸⁸ Trump's coattails, such as they were, merely kept them from losing it.

CES data suggest that, as in the presidential election, the increase in the Republican share of the total House vote between 2020 and 2024 was a largely a product of Republican gains in party identification accrued mostly by 2022. In all three election years, party loyalty rates were very high in House elections, exceeding 95 percent for all partisans except for Democrats in the 2022 midterm (93.3 percent). The vast majority—about 95 percent—also voted a straight ticket in both presidential election years. Like Trump, Republican House candidates won a larger share of reported votes from Blacks and Hispanics in 2024 than in 2020, but the increase was largely achieved in 2022 when Trump was not on the ticket. Among Blacks, the major-party vote for Republican House candidates grew from 12 percent in 2020 to 18 percent in both 2022 and 2024; among Hispanics, it grew from 33 percent in 2020 to 40 percent in 2022 and to 41 percent in 2024.

Trump's success among these groups in 2024 was not shared by Republican House candidates; the larger the percentage of Blacks or Hispanics in a district, the more the Republican House candidate underperformed Trump. Regressing the difference between Trump's vote and the House Republican's vote on the proportion of Hispanics in the district produces a coefficient of 0.041 (SE = 0.007, $p < .001$), estimating the gap to be 3.6 points greater in the most compared to the least Hispanic district. The comparable estimate for the share of Blacks in the district was 0.034 (SE = 0.010, $p < .001$), estimating a gap of 2.1 points between districts with the highest and lowest share of Blacks. The CES data also indicate that Trump's coattails were attenuated among these groups. Blacks who voted for Trump voted for the House Democrat 19.7 percent of the time, while only 3.6 percent of Harris voters opted for the House Republican; among Hispanic voters, the rate of ticket splitting was 9.4 percent among Trump voters, 3.8 percent among Harris voters.

Ultimately, Republicans picked up only one seat from the 120 districts with at least 20 percent Hispanic population, while losing four, and they picked up no new seats from the eighty-one House districts where the Black population exceeded 20 percent. Among unaltered House districts, Republicans gained two seats where the combined Hispanic and Black populations exceeded 20 percent, while losing four; if we include the gerrymandered seats in North Carolina and new Democratic seats drawn in Alabama and Louisiana, they gained five while losing six. Down-ballot Republican candidates may eventually reap the benefit of

⁸⁷ In addition to the North Carolina gerrymander noted earlier, courts had ordered the creation of new districts in Alabama and Louisiana designed to allow Black voters a chance to elect candidates of their choice, producing two new solidly Democratic districts in the process.

⁸⁸ Jacobson, "The 2022 Elections."

Table 8. Results in States Held by Senate Democrats and Won by Trump in 2024

	Presidential Winner		Major Party Vote Share (%)		
	2020	2024	Democrat	Harris	Difference
Glenn Elliott, WV	Trump	Trump	28.8	28.7	0.1
Jon Tester, MT	Trump	Trump	46.4	39.7	6.7
Sherrod Brown, OH	Trump	Trump	48.1	44.3	3.8
Bob Casey, PA	Biden	Trump	49.9	49.1	0.8
Elissa Slotkin, MI	Biden	Trump	50.2	49.3	0.9
Tammy Baldwin, WI	Biden	Trump	50.4	49.6	0.8
Jacky Rosen, NV	Biden	Trump	50.9	48.4	2.5
Ruben Gallego, AZ	Biden	Trump	51.2	47.2	4.0

Source: Compiled by author.

Trump's success in winning over an enlarged share of minority voters, but they did not do so in 2024, casting additional doubt on the mandate claim.

The Senate

Going into the 2024 election, Democrats controlled the Senate by a thread. Republicans held 49 seats, Democrats only 47, but they had the support of three of the four independents, Bernie Sanders, (Vermont), Angus King (Maine), and Joe Manchin (West Virginia). The fourth, Krysten Sinema (Arizona), had recently left the Democratic Party but declined to caucus with the Republicans, leaving Democrats with a bare 50–49 majority. The configuration of states with Senate elections in 2024 gave them little chance of keeping it. Democrats held twenty-three of the thirty-four seats in play, three in states won handily by Trump in 2020 (Ohio, Montana, and West Virginia). None of the eleven seats defended by Republicans were in states won by Biden. To retain control, the Democrats would have had to win in at least three states won by Trump in 2020 and 2024 while holding onto seats in the five states narrowly won by Biden in 2020 that switched to Trump in 2024: Arizona, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Not surprisingly, they fell short. [Table 8](#) summarizes the results for these states. West Virginia, Trump's second-best state (after Wyoming) in all three of his elections, was a sure Republican takeover once Joe Manchin retired. Republican challengers also defeated the Democratic incumbents in Montana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. All three Democrats had previously had the good fortune to run in years favorable to their party (2006, 2012, and 2018); in 2024 their luck ran out. In Montana, Jon Tester had won in 2012 by outpolling Barack Obama by 6.9 percentage points, 48.6 percent to 41.7 percent, with the help of the 6.6 points drained off by a Libertarian Party candidate. In 2024, Tester again ran well ahead of the top of the ticket but not by nearly enough to overcome Harris's poor showing. Ohio's Sherrod Brown had run slightly ahead of Obama, who won the state narrowly in 2012. By 2024 Ohio had turned reliably red; Brown ran 3.8 points ahead of Harris, insufficient when Harris was winning only 44.3 percent of the vote.

The only state in this category where the Democrats' loss was not foreordained was Pennsylvania, where Bob Casey, running less than a point ahead of Harris, came up short with 49.9 percent of the vote. The four other Democrat incumbents in the same situation—states won Biden but lost by Harris—were successful. Elizabeth Slotkin (Michigan), Tammy Baldwin (Wisconsin), and Jacky Rosen (Nevada) all pulled out narrow victories in states Harris lost narrowly. Ruben Gallego outpolled Harris by the widest margin of any in this group, essential to his victory in light of Harris's weak performance in Arizona. He was helped by drawing as his opponent Kari Lake, who was most noted for refusing to concede her loss in the race for governor in 2022 and persisting in the specious claim that she and Trump were fellow victims of electoral theft.

The CES data for these four races reveal how these Democrats survived Trump's victory in their states. On average, 4.2 percent of Trump voters in these states opted for the Democratic Senate candidate, while only 0.7 percent of Harris voters chose the Republican; viewed from another angle, the proportion of Republican identifiers defecting to the Democrat averaged 4.9 percent, while the proportion of defecting Democrats averaged 1.7 percent. These four Democrats thus won reelection through the extreme loyalty of their partisans combined with a modest degree of cross-party appeal to voters on the other side. Casey lost because he could not replicate this pattern, with partisan defection nearly even (4.2 percent among Republicans, 4.1 percent among Democrats); and only 2.7 percent of Trump voters supporting him, while 1.4 percent of Harris voters supported his opponent. Both Tester and Brown had large advantages in relative ticket splitting and defection rates, but not enough to overcome Trump's margins in their states.

In the two previous presidential elections when Trump headed the Republican ticket, 2016 and 2020, only one of sixty-nine Senate contests did not go to the party of the winning presidential candidate (Republican Susan Collins of Maine in 2020). The 2024 Senate elections showed that split verdicts were not entirely a thing of the past, but, as the last four entries in [Table 7](#) show, it was a close thing. The correlation between the presidential and Senate vote remained very high—in fact, at 0.957, higher than in any previous postwar election ([Table 9](#)). The tally of senators representing states won by their own party in the most recent presidential election fell to eighty-nine, still second highest on record. Only three states are now represented by senators from both parties. The 2024 Senate elections were slightly less nationalized and president-centered than in 2016 and 2020 only because Republican Senate candidates could not match Trump's vote share in four of the states that shifted to his side.

Money in the 2024 Campaigns

The fierce competition for control of the White House and Congress inspired massive investments aimed at shaping the results through donations to the candidates' campaign organizations and through independent spending campaigns mounted by the national parties and allied organizations and individuals. Harris's campaign spent \$1.251 billion, and outside groups spent another \$844 million on her behalf. Trump's official campaign spent much less—\$464 million—but outside spending, amounting to \$926 million, made up some of the difference.

Most of this spending was concentrated in the battleground states, one reason that average turnout rose in these states while it was falling elsewhere. How

Table 9. The Nationalization of Senate Elections, 1980–2024

Year	Same Party Victory (%)	Senate/President Vote Correlation	Senators From Party of Presidential Winner	Split Senate State Delegations
1980	61.8	0.528	54	25
1984	48.4	0.379	51	23
1988	48.4	0.174	47	21
1992	70.5	0.253	67	21
1996	70.5	0.625	63	19
2000	70.5	0.453	71	14
2004	79.4	0.578	75	17
2008	80.0	0.730	76	15
2012	81.8	0.798	79	18
2016	100.0	0.935	86	14
2020	97.1	0.950	94	6
2024	88.2	0.957	89	3

Source: Compiled by author.

effectively the money was spent is uncertain, but none of Harris’s defeats in states Biden had won could be blamed on a resource disadvantage.

Money was also abundant for candidates in competitive House and Senate races. House candidates in the general election spent a total of more than \$1.57 billion, and another \$987 million was spent on independent campaigns by party committees and allied outside groups. These resources were heavily concentrated in the small subset of districts winnable by either party. The forty-three districts classified by the authoritative Cook Political Report as tossups or only leaning toward a candidate comprise less than 10 percent of districts but accounted for 54 percent of campaign expenditures (35 percent of total candidate spending and 94 percent of total outside spending).⁸⁹ Average total spending by and for the candidates in these competitive districts was \$15.0 million. No candidate could blame the loss of a potentially winnable race on a lack of resources; in the twelve districts that changed party hands without the help of redistricting, the winner and loser both averaged \$19.5 million in total support. These are very large sums by historical standards.

Spending in the competitive Senate races was even more extravagant; in the seven hotly contested races shown in Table 8 (e.g., excluding West Virginia), average total spending by and for the candidates was \$124.2 million (Table 10). Ohio topped the list, with both candidates supported by more than \$200 million. The campaigns for Montana’s seat spent a total exceeding \$274 million in a state with only 880,000 eligible voters, the total amounting to more than \$306 per potential voter, more than 2.5 times as much as in any previous Senate election. Jon Tester did not lose for want of financial support; neither did Brown or Casey. All of the Democrats who won in states taken by Trump had spending advantages, but with the possible exception of Kari Lake in Arizona (her total was “only” \$46 million), their opponents were also more than competitively funded. Several

⁸⁹ “The CPR House Race Ratings,” *Cook Political Report*, 1 November 2024, <https://www.cookpolitical.com/ratings/house-race-ratings>. The Cook Report’s classifications were very accurate; all but one of the 413 races classified as favoring a party was won by that party; the tossups divided exactly in half, eleven won by Republicans, eleven, by Democrats.

Table 10. Campaign Spending in Competitive Senate Races in 2024

	Candidate	% Vote	Spending (\$Millions):			\$ Per Voter	% Outside
			Candidate	Outside	Total		
Ohio	<i>Sherrod Brown</i> (D)	46.5	101,356	181,473	202,015	22.58	22.6
	Bernie Moreno (R)	50.1	26,142	97,241	207,615	23.20	87.4
Pennsylvania	<i>Bob Casey</i> (D)	48.6	63,170	141,333	160,411	16.20	16.2
	Dave McCormick (R)	48.8	35,373	82,779	176,706	17.84	80.0
Montana	<i>Jon Tester</i> (D)	45.5	95,786	77,809	173,595	193.32	44.8
	Tim Sheey (R)	52.6	27,380	73,579	100,959	112.43	72.9
Michigan	Elissa Slotkin (D)	48.6	50,885	60,921	111,806	14.62	54.5
	Mike Rogers (R)	48.3	12,795	73,150	85,945	11.24	85.1
Wisconsin	<i>Tammy Baldwin</i> (D)	48.6	58,633	50,247	108,880	24.28	46.1
	Eric Hoyde (R)	48.3	31,514	49,911	81,425	18.16	61.3
Nevada	<i>Jackie Rosen</i> (D)	47.9	49,271	54,858	104,129	46.05	52.7
	Sam Brown (R)	46.2	23,231	41,028	64,259	28.42	63.8
Arizona	Ruben Gallego (D)	50.1	64,843	49,452	114,295	21.21	43.3
	Kari Lake (R)	47.7	25,890	20,353	46,243	8.58	44.0

Source: Compiled by author.

Notes: Incumbents are in italics.

challengers in other states—notably in Maryland and Texas—were also very well-funded but could not overcome inherent partisan disadvantage in states that were solidly red or blue.⁹⁰ Total spending in the Senate races exceeded \$2.7 billion, nearly two-thirds of it going for candidates in the seven most competitive races.

Candidates, parties, and their allied interest groups are caught up in a relentless financial arms race in the small subset of battleground states and districts that now decide who controls the federal government. Campaign spending is subject to diminishing returns, putting the value of extreme spending levels in doubt, but no campaign at any level wants to do the experiment it would take to find out when enough is enough. The supply of money keeps growing because both sides are desperate to win control of the White House and Congress in an era of close partisan balance and extreme partisan polarization, and the demand seems limitless, so saturation campaigning in any state or district in play is now the norm. The outside groups that play such a large financial role in the congressional races are national in scope and focus, contributing importantly to nationalizing the elections. Campaign finance practices also encourage party conformity in Congress because leaders direct the flow of contributions and outside party spending to favored candidates. The two parties' House and Senate party campaign committees spent more than \$1.6 billion trying to elect their candidates in 2024, and the winners are expected to express their gratitude by loyalty to the team.

Winning presidential candidates incur their own debts to the millionaires and billionaires who can spend unlimited sums on their behalf and who are routinely rewarded with such benefits as White House invitations, ambassadorial appointments, and a sympathetic hearing for their concerns. Both Harris and Trump

⁹⁰ Gary C. Jacobson, "The Congressional Elections of 2024," article delivered at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, 3–6 April 2025.

had billionaire backers in 2024, but Trump's were the more generous, with at least three spending more than \$100 million helping to elect him. The most generous was Elon Musk, the world's richest man, who devoted more than \$290 million to the Republican cause.⁹¹ Musk was joined at Trump's inauguration by other high-tech multi-billionaires, among them Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Mark Zuckerberg (Meta), Sergey Brin (Alphabet), and Sam Altman (OpenAI), adding a strong whiff of technoplutocracy to the celebration of a supposedly populist victory.

Trump 2.0

Elections have consequences, but none has been as instantly consequential as the Republicans' narrow victory in 2024. Components of Trump's supporting coalition had divergent views on how seriously to take his promises of high tariffs, mass deportations, reactionary social policies, decimated federal agencies, blocked climate initiatives, and vengeance against his critics and prosecutors. Those who dismissed them as campaign rhetoric, expecting something akin to Trump's first term if he won, miscalculated badly. Trump's first months in office showed that he meant it all. Claiming unlimited power, he issued more than 140 executive orders, some within his legal rights, some questionable, some clearly violating laws enacted by Congress or the Constitution itself. They ranged from frivolous to cruel to intentionally disruptive of large areas of American and global life. The strategy was described as "flooding the zone" with a large and diverse array of orders to diffuse attention and resistance.⁹² Accompanying them were pardons for the rioters who had assaulted Capitol police four years earlier, the selection of unqualified sycophants for major executive branch positions, and bizarre but menacing proposals to bring Greenland, Panama, Canada, and Gaza under American control. Enmity toward European allies, threats to abandon Ukraine, and praise for Vladimir Putin were part of the program. So was the erratic and indiscriminate imposition of tariffs that amounted to a wholesale attack on the global trading economy, along with attempts to bully prominent universities, law firms, and states governed by Democrats into submission. No previous election has produced anything close to this spectacle.

Trump's utter contempt for the institutions of American government was underlined by his appointment of Musk to head a newly conjured Department of Government Efficiency and giving him free rein to slash federal agency budgets, terminate programs, and purge personnel in direct defiance of congressional authority over such matters. The congressional Republicans' passive acceptance of Musk's lawless and destructive meddling in their own domain, and their consent to patently unfit cabinet nominees, made it clear that they had no stomach for defending their own institutional authority, the integrity of federal agencies, or the Constitution itself against Trump's onslaughts.⁹³ As long as Trump's approval

⁹¹ David Wright and Alex Leeds-Matthews. "Elon Musk Spent More than \$290 Million on the 2024 Election, Year-End FEC Filings Show," CNN, 1 February 2025.

⁹² Francesca Paris and Charlie Savage, "Is That Legal? A Guide to Trump's Big Moves So Far," *New York Times*, 20 February 2025.

⁹³ "Musk Trolls Critics and Federal Workers as DOGE Targets US Agencies," ABC News, 6 February 2025, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/musk-trolls-critics-and-federal-workers-as-doge-targets-us-agencies/ar-AA1yussj?ocid=BingNewsSerp>; Andrew Prokop, "All the Ways Elon Musk is Breaking the Law, Explained by a Law Professor," VOX, 6 February 2025, <https://www.vox.com/politics/398618/elon-musk-doge-illegal-lawbreaking-analysis>; Deirdre Walsh, "Republicans in Congress Mostly Shrug as Musk and DOGE Set Sights on Spending," NPR, 5 February 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/05/nx-s1-5286426/congress-republicans-musk-doge-usaid>.

rating among Republicans remains near 90 percent, profiles in courage will remain rare.

Over the short run, the defense of the American political system's legal and constitutional integrity is now in the uncertain hands of the federal courts and, ultimately, the Supreme Court. In the longer run, how far Trump succeeds in reordering American politics to gain the kind of license enjoyed by the autocrats he admires and envies⁹⁴ will depend on how ordinary Americans react to his reach for unchecked power and to the impact his administration's appointees and policies have on their lives. If the past is any guide, Trump's MAGA followers will accept any deflecting spin, no matter how farfetched, that he puts on any unwelcome outcome, and most will applaud his mass firing of "deep state" bureaucrats and his harrowing of individuals and groups they have been taught to hate and fear. More uncertain is how Trump voters outside the MAGA fold who thought they were voting for price relief and tighter immigration controls will respond to proposed foreign land grabs, alienation of long-standing allies, the betrayal of Ukraine, economic chaos provoked by tariff wars, and the loss of accustomed government services, programs, and protections. How will they react if Trump provokes a constitutional crisis by defying court decisions overturning his orders, including those issued by the Supreme Court? The first concrete sign will come in the 2026 midterm elections, when American democracy will again be on the ballot. How will it fare this time?

Appendix: Survey Sources

Survey data used in this article were acquired from survey reports and data accessed through the FiveThirtyEight website, the Roper Center, news reports, and the survey sponsors' websites.

ABC News/Ipsos
ABC News/*Washington Post*
American Perspectives Survey
ANES 2024 Pilot Study
AP-NORC
Axios/Momentive
Big Village
Bloomberg
Bright Line Watch
CBS News/YouGov
Civiqs
CNN
Data for Progress
Echelon Insights
Economist/YouGov
Emerson College
Fox News
Gallup

⁹⁴ Ruth Gen-Ghiat, "Opinion: Trump's Praise of Dictators Tells Us All We Need to Know," CNN, 5 February 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/14/opinions/trump-dictators-putin-xi-erdogan-ben-ghiat/index.html>.

Grinnell College
HarrisX
Harvard Harris
IDB/Tipp
Huffington Post/YouGov
Ipsos/Reuters
Leger
Marquette University
Monmouth University
Morning Consult
Navigator Research
NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*
New York Times/Sienna College
NPR/Marist College
Pew Research Center
PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute)
Public Policy Polling
Quinnipiac University
Suffolk University
Survey Monkey
University of Massachusetts/YouGov
Wall Street Journal/GBAO
Washington Post/ University of Maryland
Yahoo News/YouGov