

# BROOKINGS

COMMENTARY

## Why Donald Trump won and Kamala Harris lost: An early analysis of the results

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- If the exit polls turn out to be accurate, Trump made strides among Latinos and African Americans, especially men.
- The public's judgment of Biden's performance on two core issues—inflation and immigration—was harshly negative, and Harris inherited this disapproval.
- Women's share of the total vote rose only marginally from its level in 2020, and Harris' share of the women who voted did not increase from Biden's 2020 levels.

Trump won a personal victory in the 2024 election, sweeping all the swing states, improving his vote share just about everywhere, and—unlike his 2016 victory—garnering an outright majority of the popular vote. In addition, he led the Republican Party to a larger-than-expected Senate majority and, although many House races remain to be called, an expanded House majority may result as well. These gains are more than incremental; indeed, they may signal a new era in American politics.

Political scientists and historians will spend years analyzing the causes and significance of this election. My focus is more immediate. Although the data are imperfect and incomplete, I will offer preliminary answers to two questions, which are really two sides of the same coin: Why did Donald Trump win the 2024 presidential election, and why did Kamala Harris lose?

### Trump's victory

**Donald Trump's theory of the case was broadly correct.** He and his campaign managers believed that it was possible to build on Republicans' growing strength among white working-class voters to create a multi-ethnic working-class coalition. He was right: If the exit polls turn out to be accurate, he made strides among Latinos and African Americans, especially men. He increased his share of the Black male vote from 12% to 20% and carried Hispanic men by nine points, 54% to 45%.

The Trump campaign also believed that they could improve their performance among young adults, and they did—from 35% in 2020 to 42% this year. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most of this gain reflected a shift toward Trump among young men. Trump spent lots of time on podcasts, such as Joe Rogan's, whose principal audiences are this otherwise hard-to-reach group.

After the Republican primaries, the victorious Trump forces faced a choice: They could moderate their message to reach out to disappointed backers of Nikki Haley, who ran a traditional Reagan conservative campaign, or they could continue their all-out appeal to the Republican base while enjoying the grudging support of his defeated adversary. They chose the latter course and won the gamble that the party would unite around them. Donald Trump received 94% of the Republican vote and as a bonus, reduced the Democratic edge among Independents from nine points in 2020 to five points this year.

**The Trump campaign's tactical choices paid off.** Three turned out to be critical. First: Convinced that Trump's intense personal bond with his supporters would do most of the mobilizing work, the campaign decided not to invest heavily in traditional get-out-the-vote organizing and instead outsourced it to supporting organizations. Although the Harris campaign touted its advantage in the "ground game," there is little evidence that it made much of a difference.

Second: The Trump campaign decided that Harris' stance on transgender issues was the Willie Horton of 2024 and invested heavily in negative advertising that dominated the airwaves throughout the South.<sup>1</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that this campaign helped weaken Harris' effort to portray herself as a common-sense center-left candidate rather than an emissary from San Francisco.

Third: Donald Trump chose to modulate his stance on abortion by declaring early on that each state should decide this matter for itself and then doubling down by vowing to veto a national abortion ban. Many longtime foes of abortion were disappointed, and

some were outraged. Nevertheless, Trump paid no price, winning 81% of the white evangelical vote—virtually unchanged from four years ago.

## Harris' defeat

The Harris campaign was always running uphill. She served as vice president to a president whose approval rating plunged in the middle of his first year in office and never recovered. The public's judgment of his performance on two core issues—inflation and immigration—was harshly negative, and Harris inherited this disapproval when Joe Biden abandoned his quest for a second term.

The fact that Biden waited so long to leave the race also worked against Harris. The president's tardy decision deprived her of the opportunity to sharpen her arguments in a primary fight and shortened the time she had to introduce herself to the voters. She did the best she could in the circumstances by quickly unifying the party and building on Biden's campaign apparatus rather than starting from scratch, but she never entirely overcame the difficulties stemming from Biden's timetable.

Harris' theory of the case was flawed. Looking at examples from the 2022 elections, she assumed that putting reproductive rights at the center of her agenda would mobilize an army of angry women and move them to the polls in record numbers. This did not happen. Women's share of the total vote rose only marginally from its level in 2020, and Harris' share of the women who voted did not increase from Biden's 2020 levels. It is hard to judge how much this emphasis on abortion contributed to Harris' poor showing among men—just 43%, down from Biden's 48% in 2020—but it did nothing to convince them that a Harris administration would be sensitive to their concerns.

Her closing argument—that Donald Trump posed a clear and present danger to democracy—fared little better. This happened in part because many Republicans and Independents saw Harris and the Democrats as the real threats to democracy, and also because the charge offered no new information that would sway voters whose minds weren't made up. Donald Trump may be the best-known candidate in modern American history, making it difficult to change anyone's view of him.

Harris' tactical choices made her problems worse. First, she spurned opportunities to create a clearer political profile. Although Biden's unpopularity burdened her

campaign, she refused to separate herself from him in any way that broke through to persuadable voters. Similarly, by refusing to explain why she had abandoned the progressive positions on crime, immigration, health care, and climate change, she blurred the public's perception of her and opened the door to the Trump campaign's charge that she was a closet radical. Thinking back to the successful campaign of Bill Clinton in 1992, some Democrats were hoping Harris would have a "Sister Souljah" moment in which she broke with some party orthodoxy in order to show her independence, but this did not happen.

Second, Harris' decision to avoid media interviews during the first half of her campaign created the impression that she was dependent on scripted remarks and afraid to think on her feet. Answering tough questions can enhance a candidate's reputation for competence and character, a potential upside to which Harris and her campaign seemed oblivious for much too long.

## Conclusion

Democrats knew that the election would be close, but the scope of their defeat will likely trigger recriminations first and then an extended period of soul-searching. As was the case after Michael Dukakis' defeat in 1988, the party will be forced to engage in a debate about the causes of its defeat, and what is sure to be a long and lively primary campaign will determine the path forward.

Meanwhile, President Trump will be challenged to honor the sweeping promises he made during his campaign. It remains to be seen whether he can impose massive tariffs without raising costs for average families and triggering another round of inflation. Also uncertain is whether he can quell conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East as quickly as he claims while reducing America's global commitments. And it is possible that trying to deport millions of immigrants present in the U.S. could blow up in his face by creating civil strife and a backlash among Latino voters who have rallied to this cause. If he fails to meet the hopes that he has aroused, especially in the new supporters who provided his majority, he and his party may pay a price in 2026 and beyond.