

What Really Happened on Election Day?

Donald Trump scored a decisive victory in a deeply divided nation, winning over frustrated voters with bold promises that America-first economic populism and conservative culture would make their lives better. He will enter the White House on January 20, 2025 from an undisputed position of strength. With votes still being counted, he could become the first Republican in two decades to win the popular vote, along with control of both houses of Congress. In this issue, Operation Wildfire looks back to the days leading up to and including November 5 to determine what really happened on Election Day.

What Didn't Work

The Politics of Demonization

"I think that they went way over the top here – Hitler, fascist, picking up on these things – and I think the voters just tune those out eventually because they're way over the top," Mark Penn said when asked about Democratic strategy. "I think they wasted a lot of the campaign time doing that because, you know, fundamentally campaigns need to be about issues, not insults, not identity."¹

Fearmongering

Many talking heads, talk show hosts, journalists, even the President and Vice President repeated false claims about Donald Trump that were designed to instill fear. We've included only a few of them:

- **Jail his Enemies.** "His explicit intent to jail journalists, political opponents, and anyone he sees as the enemy." According to NPR, "...there's no explicit and specific policy from Trump on this..."
- **Cuts to Social Security and Medicare.** "We're not going back to when Donald Trump tried to cut Social Security and Medicare." The former president has pledged not to cut Social Security or Medicare. While he was in office, he did try, unsuccessfully, to cut benefits for those receiving disability payments from Social Security. But it should be noted that Social Security benefits could be cut within a decade, unless Congress takes steps to shore up the program.²
- **Implement Project 2025.** "We know what a second Trump term would look like. It's all laid out in Project 2025, written by his closest advisers. And its sum total is to pull our country back to the past." Project 2025 is the work of people with close ties to Trump through the Heritage Foundation but is not his.³
- **Establish a National Sales Tax.** "And all the while he intends to enact what, in effect, is a national sales tax? Call it a Trump tax that would raise prices on middle class families by almost \$4,000 a year." This appears to be a reference to tariffs. Trump raised tariffs sharply while he was in office, and, despite the fallout, the Biden/Harris administration left most of the Trump tariffs in place, while adding its own.⁴
- **Loss of Reproductive Rights.** "He and his allies would limit access to birth control, ban medication abortion, and enact a nationwide abortion ban with or without Congress...he plans to create a national anti-abortion coordinator and force states to report on women's miscarriages and abortions." Charges about this "agenda" appear to be based on the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025. Trump has consistently said that he would not impose a national abortion ban and, if legislation appeared on his desk, he would veto the bill. Trump hasn't opposed access to birth control or banned medication abortion. He also indicated that he supported IVF. Trump himself has said that abortion should be left up to the states but that he does believe in exceptions such as rape, incest and life of the mother.⁵

¹ Pollster says Democrats' 'demonization' of Trump was way 'over the top', <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/4994194-pollster-says-democrats-demonizing-trump-didnt-work/>

² 12 misleading or lacking-in-context claims from Harris' DNC speech, <https://www.npr.org/2024/08/25/g-s1-19480/harris-dnc-fact-check>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Operation Wildfire: Good Things Happen When YOU Vote

Woke Era Politics

The image stuck in people's minds that the Democrats wanted to defund the police, wanted to empty prisons and keep the border wide open created a sense of dishonor.⁶ Instead of saying 'Latinx', Democrats needed to embrace the public's opposition to certain trans rights, stop policing language and embrace an agenda more focused on the working class.⁷

Failure to Acknowledge Biden's Condition and Unpopularity

Democrats could have had a competitive primary to produce a candidate who could speak to voters' pain over inflation while also maintaining distance from Biden's record. This was something Harris refused to do in her now-infamous answer on "The View." "There is not a thing that comes to mind," Harris said when asked if there was anything she would have done differently than Biden. "And I've been part of most of the decisions that have had impact."⁸

What Did Work

Focus on Immigration, Economy and Culture

Trump ultimately won over voters with promises to improve the economy, block the flow of immigrants on the Southern border and "make America great again."⁹ The Trump campaign was based on issues, not feelings.

Stakes for Democracy¹⁰

- Half of the voters identified democracy as the single most important motivating factor for their vote. That was higher than the share of voters who answered the same way about inflation, the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border, abortion policy or free speech, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters nationwide.
- About one-third of Trump's supporters said democracy was the most important factor for their vote. About 8 in 10 Trump voters felt electing Harris would bring the country closer to authoritarianism.
- The question was whether the country would be as peaceful if the outcome were different and how would the nation close that fissure in the future when a "very vocal cross section" of the American public sees democracy working only "when my side wins, but tyranny when your side wins?"

Trump's New Coalition¹¹

- Black voters – men and women – have been the bedrock of the Democratic Party, and in recent years, Latinos and young voters have joined them. Trump made significant gains in all categories and, collectively, those small gains yielded an outsize outcome.
- 'Bro' politics beat out abortion concerns in the first presidential election after the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade.
- Trump's criminal convictions and additional pending indictments were not a sufficient concern to keep tens of millions of Americans from voting for him.
- Trump convinced voters that he represented change, even though he has been the central figure in American politics for nine years.

⁶ James Carville Blames Democrats' Losses on 'Woke Era' Politics, <https://www.newsweek.com/james-carville-harris-loss-woke-politics-1982035>

⁷ How Biden's Critical Failure Gave Trump Another Shot At The White House, <https://www.aol.com/biden-critical-failure-gave-trump-130021218.html>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Election takeaways: Trump's decisive victory in a deeply divided nation, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/early-election-takeaways-trump-weakens-democrats-coalition/ar-AA1tAjBC>

¹⁰ Democracy was a motivating factor for both Harris and Trump voters, but for very different reasons, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/democracy-was-a-motivating-factor-both-harris-and-trump-voters-but-for-very-different-reasons/ar-AA1tNcAU>

¹¹ Election takeaways: Trump's decisive victory in a deeply divided nation, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/early-election-takeaways-trump-weakens-democrats-coalition/ar-AA1tAjBC>