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Managing a Marginal Victory

Presidential Campaign Strategy in 2024

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Abstract

The 2024 United States presidential election cycle has been unprecedented in many aspects. From voter predictability to media presence and public opinion on pressing sociopolitical issues, this essay examines the events and campaign strategies that have made this cycle especially turbulent and different from those that came before it.

Résumé

Le cycle des élections présidentielles états-uniennes de 2024 a été sans précédent à bien des égards. De la prévisibilité des électeur·ice·s aux apparitions médiatiques des candidat·e·s et à l'opinion publique sur des questions sociopolitiques urgentes, cet essai examine les événements et les stratégies électorales qui ont rendu ce cycle particulièrement turbulent et différent de ceux qui l'ont précédé.

Keywords: United States, election, president, 2024 presidential elections, politics, vote, political party, presidential candidate, partisan, presidential campaign, electoral campaign, Democratic, Republican, Donald Trump, Kamala Harris

Mot-clés : États-Unis, élection, président, élections présidentielles 2024, politique, vote, parti politique, candidat à la présidence, candidate à la présidence, partisan, campagne présidentielle, campagne électorale, Parti démocrate, Parti républicain, Donald Trump, Kamala Harris

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The Greatest Show on Earth

American presidential elections are, in equal measure, a spectator sport, chess tournament, and celebrity reality television show. Despite the intense and overwhelming media machine of the 21st century amplifying the fundamental absurdity of these electoral contests—American history has a consistent thread of profound strangeness surrounding the presidential election cycle. In 1872, the Equal Rights Party nominated the first woman for President, Victoria Woodhull. Woodhull, a part-time psychic healer, surreptitiously nominated famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass (without his knowledge) as her running mate… shortly before being arrested on obscenity charges. In 1968, Youth International brought forth their nominee for Democratic Party consideration at the National Convention. His name was Pigasus the Immortal—a 70-kilo hog—and he proved an unacceptable replacement for the recently-assassinated Robert F. Kennedy. And in 2024, with wide eyes and gaped mouths, we have watched yet another unprecedented presidential election unfold.

Story-telling spectacle aside, we are left with a litany of questions and concerns. What is so unusual about this election? How has that changed the way the candidates are running—and how people vote? And ultimately, given that this political circus will produce the most singularly powerful person on the planet, what does the aftermath of this year mean for the world?

Order and Chaos

Over the last forty years, the American political landscape has experienced a number of meaningful shifts. Changes in party strategy and media coverage have dramatically influenced the polarization and partisan attachment of the

broad voting population (Brewer 2005 ; Graham et Svolik 2020). While some scholars grow concerned that fewer Americans affiliate directly with political parties, ultimately the behavior and preferences of voters demonstrate a kind of profound predictability (Abramowitz et Webster 2018). In simple terms : while Americans may not register as party members, they behave and support parties *incredibly consistently*. In fact, despite claims of voter fatigue, turnout remains consistent. In presidential election years, there is some evidence it is *increasing*. At the same time, we have seen a dramatic increase in "affective polarization"—more or less, the degree to which someone hates or vilifies those of opposing beliefs or partisan affiliation (Druckman et Levendusky 2019). Collectively, this has produced a fairly straightforward electoral landscape : a system with large, stable, predictable voting blocs who possess little credible threat of defection.

Yet this does not mean that elections *themselves* are predictable. Rather, as the majority of voters may be deemed "decided"—*competitive* elections will be decided by an incredibly small set of voters without clear preferences, behaviors, or voting history. As many analysts would say : American elections are now decided on the margins. For presidential elections, this effect is magnified due to the Electoral College system—a process which provides "electoral votes" to individual states based on their population, who then award all of their electoral votes to the popular winner of their statewide election (with the exception of Maine and Nebraska). This system shifts victory away from *national* vote totals and advantages candidates who achieve marginal victories in individual states, as excess votes in any one state do not produce more electoral votes. More simply, the Presidency is dictated more by strategy than popularity. In 2024, current polling indicates statistically indecipherable outcomes in four states : Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Should either candidate claim all four states, it would produce a near certain victory. Is that likely ? No one can say. But a smart candidate would certainly focus their efforts on delivering more votes in these four states compared to, for example, California or Kentucky.

While there is substantial attention paid to the notion of the "swing state" in this context, less effort has been spent examining *who* these voters are, what they want, and how they behave differently compared to the majority of the voting population. To this end, we can think of two potential groups of voters that a candidate might try to capture. The first, "irregulars", are consistent in their beliefs but not in their voting habits. While it would make sense to go

after voters with ideologies consistent with the party first, evidence suggests that this group is diminishing. What remains are extreme fringe voters who historically are amongst the most unreliable voters. Winning their votes would be challenging, expensive, and most problematically, unrewarding. The second group, "persuadables", do not have strong or consistent beliefs—but are still often voters. These people represent the reality of political participation for many citizens, finding the process too confusing, boring, or individually unimportant to become deeply invested in it. Their undecided nature is not necessarily a product of ranking and evaluating each candidate identically—but rather that they are broadly unconcerned by macro-level politics as a whole. To that point, I think most readers can empathize with the idea of wanting to care *less* about politics.

This bloc of voters becoming more strategically desirable presents a number of challenges for presidential hopefuls. First, they are an "invisible" population—often obscured or entirely missed by the national polling machine. Simply put, we do not have great data on how many persuadable voters exist or what they think. Secondly, these individuals are fundamentally unpredictable. While past political wisdom dictated that undecided voters break for incumbents, real data demonstrates little predictive value to that claim (Bon, Ballard, et Baffour 2018). In 2016, Hillary Clinton's much-maligned political strategy was actually proving incredibly successful at motivating turnout in key demographics. It was a well-structured approach, and her campaigning looked effective through early fall. However, on October 28, FBI Director James Comey released a letter to the House Judiciary Committee detailing new inquiries into Hillary Clinton's alleged mishandling of classified information. The FBI would announce on November 6 that their inquiries had absolved Clinton of any wrongdoing—but, by this point, a narrative was set in motion. For these persuadable voters, they were influenced by *the last thing that they heard before voting*. In 2016, this was the critical media coverage surrounding the Clinton email scandal—and, as a result, undecided voters broke strongly for Trump, regardless of campaign strategy by either candidate.

Collectively, this situation is a problem for presidential campaigns. Stable electoral politics abhors chaos and uncertainty, which makes these voters both decisive and frustrating in equal measure. Without good data or strategies to target them, many candidates prefer to ignore them. But 2024 has been a year of particularly unique politics—and with two profoundly different candidates

competing, their strategies may be reflecting a desire to win the attention and affection of the persuadable voters more than ever before.

The Road to 47

The early months of this presidential election cycle were, frankly, holistically uninteresting. The candidate nomination and primary processes had a slate of mainstream, fringe, and outsider candidates. On the Democratic side, votes for "No One" were higher than any of the non-Biden candidates—and ultimately Joe Biden received nearly 90% of primary votes. For the Republican Party, a stiffer competition emerged, with over twenty potential contenders. However, to quote *Succession*'s Logan Roy : they "are not serious people". Trump abjectly refused to participate in the process—or even acknowledge the legitimacy of the competition—and still delivered 76% of the vote. The part of the electoral process that is ostensibly designed to test different platforms, messages, and options had failed to produce any meaningful pushback for either candidate.

By late June, the political world had been inverted. The summer before an election is oftentimes the most boring phase of the electoral process, consisting of party negotiations and politicking kept hidden from the public's eyes. Yet 2024 offered up so much more. One candidate facing serious criminal charges, pending trial, and federal investigations. The other, in poor health on an unprecedentedly early debate stage, was raising questions about suitability for office. Public opinion of the candidates and political process was spiraling. Weeks later, Trump was targeted by an assassin, and Biden resigned his candidacy for office. Remember how politics abhors uncertainty ? Well, July effectively erased all meaningful precedent for presidential campaigning. Since party realignment, a sitting president eligible for re-election has stepped down precisely twice : LBJ in 1968 and Truman in 1952—and neither is comparable in timing, motivation, or response to Biden's resignation. Barely two weeks to the Democratic National Convention and the party no longer had a candidate. No time to run a primary, no time to test candidates, no time to gather public opinion. They had to develop a strategy and implement it. Maximum uncertainty.

To the Republicans' chagrin, that strategy *worked*. Kamala Harris had not been a popular candidate in 2020, yet post-announcement in 2024, her favorability amongst the American electorate surged. Whatever Americans had been

growing disenchanted with under the candidacy of the previous options, Harris was offering something different. A new face, a new voice, a new strategy. By the DNC, both parties had selected Vice Presidents as well—and Harris's newfound popularity rose further upon the nomination of Minnesota Governor Tim Walz. Walz himself is emblematic of a campaign strategy designed to defy traditional political practices and establish something unprecedented. A nationally unknown politician from the most consistently Democratic-voting state in the US seemed an unlikely and unconventional selection. Yet his everyman charm and ability to resonate with *apolitical* people would prove to be the first step towards a new approach to winning the presidency.

By September, the new campaign strategy had delivered the Harris-Walz campaign a positive net favorability—something that she had not had since **July of 2021**. Strong debate performances by both halves of the campaign further magnified these effects. But, ultimately, the shift in public opinion was attributable to more than new candidates and primetime television appearances. Instead, persuadable Americans were being won over by a new campaigning strategy targeted towards their interests and attention. In other words, the Harris-Walz campaign was finally speaking to the invisible, unpredictable population of voters that they so desperately need to win. And those potential voters were responding.

Reaching into the Unknown

Media appearances and narrative control are traditional components of every successful political campaign—particularly those interested in winning over the voters who make last-minute decisions. If you want to sway persuadables, you need to have the last word and say the right thing. The Harris-Walz campaign, however, has distinguished itself from the past by putting increased effort and resources into a new style of public engagement. Rather than relying on traditional speaking appearances (which largely draw crowds of existing supporters)—or going on legacy media television (which now has strongly partisan associations)—the Harris campaign has produced a media strategy targeting popular forms and channels of new media. Ranging from the "Call Her Daddy" podcast to the daytime television program "The View" to the perennial radio show of seminal shock-jock Howard Stern—Harris has been putting herself in front of millions of media consumers who might otherwise *never* hear or see a major politician. Despite a less prestigious platform or

provocative premise, one would be foolish to underestimate the impact of media like "Call Her Daddy"—given its position as the *second most popular podcast on Spotify*.

While the Trump campaign has conducted more appearances than Harris, it is failing to match the success of her media strategy. Instead, as Harris-Walz favorability has increased, the Trump campaign has done little to emulate their relatability. Rather, over the last two months, the campaign has increasingly withdrawn from public appearances and instead dominates headlines for its gaffes and political setbacks. Where the Trump campaign has targeted new media, it has largely picked the wrong outlets, typically speaking to audiences with already high approval of Trump. For example, there was little demonstrable improvement in favorability following his appearances on "Impaulsive" (with Logan Paul) or "This Past Weekend with Theo Von". While Trump is posed to make an appearance on "The Joe Rogan Experience" shortly, it remains to be seen whether this will deliver the results they want. The differences between these two approaches have had broader impacts as well—with Democratic Party approval rising and Republican Party falling over the same period of time. At best, Trump-Vance demonstrates stagnating approval—with net unfavorability. This is not a recipe for success.

Ultimately, the explanation for the changing favorability of these candidates and their strategies comes down to the underlying preferences of the voters. The mass public this year has an incredibly broad set of priorities. While the economy and national security top the list of most important issues (as they historically tend to do)—at least a dozen other policy dimensions are cited as important by a majority of polled voters. Therein lies the core problem, though—the voters they need to reach are not *responding* to polls consistently. So not only are the policy interests of the persuadables unknown—but the preferences of the mass public are so diffuse that there is little meaningful information that campaigns could use to guess at those interests. Furthermore, due to intense partisan divides on the salience of particular issue dimensions, the risk of guessing and being wrong is unacceptably high. Consider the budget deficit—while 45% of Republicans rank it as a pressing issue, only 16% of Democrats share that sentiment. Do undecided voters fall closer to one than the other? Do they care at all? There is too much variance and uncertainty for politicians to make well-informed strategies. As a result, campaigning for these critical persuadables has pivoted towards emphasizing the "valence characteristics" of candidates—charisma, strength, trustworthiness, empathy.

In simple terms, if policy is too hard to figure out, campaigns can run on their character traits and relatability (Stone et Simas 2010). Something we have now seen both candidates attempting to do, with varying levels of success.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of this strategy is that it is seemingly defeating feelings of election and political fatigue. In May 2024, 62% of Americans said that they are "worn out" by coverage of political campaigns and candidates. For Americans with *lower* media consumptions habits (i.e., less partisan, less informed, more persuadable), this rose to an eye-watering 77%. Yet this population is successfully being targeted by this new media blitz. While this may seem like a paradox at first glance, it actually grants insight into the nature of persuadable voters. They are not fatigued by the *idea* of politics. They are fatigued by the way politics is being *presented*. When candidates are able to connect to these voters on different platforms and with less policy-heavy messages, it resonates.

But take care not to treat this analysis as a prediction. While the Harris campaign has demonstrated some sophistication and success over the last two months, this remains an election decided by the smallest, most fundamentally unpredictable margins. When outcomes are shifted by mere thousands of votes, victory may require more than just an unprecedented media strategy.

What Comes Next

Knowing now that the outcome of the 2024 election may well come down to this underexplained group of voters, we must turn our attention to the future of American policy. While the campaigns have been targeting persuadable voters in recent weeks, there are concerns in public discourse about the threat of policy-focused voters defecting or withholding votes. In short, these fears are that, should the candidates not acquiesce to policy demands of specific sub-constituencies, those voters will abstain from the general election. The argument then follows that low margins of victory mean these abstentions could be election-defining.

However, those concerns are likely overstated, and the overall risk of voter abstention is no higher in this election than in the past. Arguably, given the recent uptick in turnout and higher levels of polarization, it is far more likely that actual rates of abstention will *decrease* in 2024 (Harder et Krosnick 2008). The public's perception of the electoral stakes is higher, and the two

competitive options are further apart. Strategic voting expectations dictate that rational voters will select the least punishing option available and, with such polarized candidates, there is little room to argue that these options are interchangeable (Cox 1997 ; Plane et Gershtenson 2004). While single-issue voters may demonstrate a clear enough message for politicians to notice—and credibly threaten to abstain—their effect on policy is only observable when 1) elections are proximate, and 2) their message is uncontested by another constituency (Bouton et al. 2018). While the former condition is met, the latter is undeniably not. The defining single-issue policies of this election cycle are deeply contentious (LGBT rights, reproductive care, firearms, etc.) As a result, it is unlikely that major single-issue voters this election will have a significant impact on policy outcomes.

Compared to the unavoidable uncertainty surrounding the campaigning process, the policy platforms of the two candidates have been largely settled for months. Given the reasonable expectations about the predictability of their core constituencies—the presidential candidates have little reason to be systematically responsive to changes in public opinion at this point. Changing policies now will not deliver more votes from the people and places they need them. As a result, we can largely anticipate that past candidate statements on grand policy will be carried forward.

Holistically, this means that there are two extremely distinct policy paths in front of us—as these candidates promise *very* different administrations. With individual approaches to managing bureaucratic personnel, standards for cabinet-level officials, and preferred styles of negotiation—there has rarely been a greater difference between major competitors.

The question of policy outcomes is more pressing in the realm of foreign policymaking. While Senator Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI) famously quipped in 1948, "We must stop politics at the water's edge," real politics have ceased to follow his maxim. Vandenberg was making a simple statement : all of the domestic politics that trouble American government must cease when it comes to foreign policy matters, so that the United States acts as a unified whole in global affairs. For decades, Vandenberg's principle was largely upheld : the American public and domestic politics rarely interfered substantially with executive direction on foreign policy (Vietnam being a key exception to prove the rule). In the modern era, this behavior has eroded substantially. The public now has the technological tools to pay attention to global affairs—

even if they don't exercise that ability. Additionally, the traditional lines between foreign and domestic policy have been blurred by the expansion of bureaucratic and executive authority beginning in the post-Soviet era. Simply put, the President remains a foreign policy tyrant—but one that must adapt their policies to domestic political demands (Kertzer et Zeitzoff 2017).

Taken together with the previous discussion, we must now wonder what the campaigning process and strategy adaptation of 2024 means for the future of American foreign policy. The answer, to put it lightly, is not straightforward. Data indicates that the American public regularly cites multiple dimensions of foreign policy amongst their most pressing issues. Furthermore, major foreign policy events and decisions have dominated mass media coverage and public debate throughout the Biden administration, remaining incredibly salient long past the point of actual internal policy debate. Why then are actual foreign policy stances not a direct product of public opinion ? Despite the pressure applied to Presidents on foreign policy, the *message* is rarely clear. The root of this problem begins with the "Almond-Lippman consensus", which largely argues that the public is too uninformed and unpredictable to be an important influence on foreign policy (Holsti 1992).

The former allegation is undoubtedly accurate—the American public is incredibly poorly informed on foreign policy matters despite their access to information (Bennett et al. 1996). While Americans are not *uniquely* uninformed about global affairs, it is a consistent finding with nearly a century of data to back the claim. The unpredictability of public opinion, however, is a less conclusive allegation. Whereas issues vary dramatically in salience over time (see ; Ukraine, Gaza, Iran, etc.)—positions vary much less. For the most part, American beliefs about foreign policy fall under two dimensions : their preferences for multilateralism and usage of force (Heffington 2018). Traditionally, foreign policy analysts have framed this categorization as "doves" and "hawks". When an American voter is "hawkish" on one issue (e.g., Israel), they are likely to be "hawkish" on others (e.g., Iran). The difficulty that politicians then face is not in determining what voters *want*—but what they care about *in that moment*. Given the increasingly short attention spans of the modern era, this is a fundamentally difficult task. For a political candidate, it is a compounding challenge to face : how does one make an electorally rewarding decision on a policy if the public may not care about that policy the next time you are up for election ?

For these candidates, the answer will likely come in the form of limited responsiveness to public opinion. Instead, we are likely to see policy platforms that are the products of internal decision-making processes and the influence of elite, personal advisors within these administrations. Consider, for example, the impact of Stephen Miller on Donald Trump's immigration policy. Despite declining public support for his policies, the Trump administration remained steadfast on its commitment to exclusionary immigration reform—largely at the personal direction and advisement of Miller. Ultimately, this means that the diverging paths ahead for foreign policy are unlikely to be significantly dictated by the campaigning process, either. While major current events may dictate the topics that get discussed, the policies that will be implemented will be the products of forces beyond the demands of voters.

This is not to say that the upcoming election will be irrelevant for foreign policy outcomes. The truth could not be further from that assertion. Doubtlessly, this election will shape the future of American engagement in the world. NATO participation, UN legitimacy, global climate initiatives, pandemic prevention policies, support for democracy, and more hang in the balance. But despite the importance of both stable core constituencies and unpredictable, persuadable voters to the election outcome—their voices are not as likely to significantly determine the immediate future of American policy.

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