

Here's how the winner of the 2024 US presidential election did it
Johnathan Freedland, The Guardian, Fri 1 Nov 2024

We don't yet know whether Donald Trump or Kamala Harris will prevail in Tuesday's contest – but when we do, it won't feel hard to explain

Here's one prediction about the US election you can take to the bank. When the result is finally known, there will be a stampede of experts rushing to insist that they knew it all along, that the eventual outcome was obvious. Even inevitable.

That will be truer still if, when the voters' will is finally known, it turns out not to have been so close after all, with one of the two main candidates sweeping most of the swing states to rack up a healthy majority in the electoral college if not the popular vote. The funny thing is, if that happens, – for either candidate – it would not entirely be a surprise. [...]

Start with the scenario of a victorious Trump. To understand it might require a single number: 28. That's the percentage of Americans who tell pollsters they believe the country is on the right track. A measly 28%. In that environment, incumbent parties lose. And, for all the buzz of her swift installation as candidate, her positioning as the face of change, Harris is a member of the incumbent party and a senior figure in the current US government. A nation that made clear long ago that it wanted to fire Joe Biden, largely over the cost of living and rising prices, was bound to seize the chance to do the next best thing – and reject his deputy.

If there was a way to avoid that fate, it would have required Harris to make a cleaner break from Biden than she was willing to. A key moment will prove to be her October appearance on The View, when she was asked if she would have done anything differently from her boss. "Not a thing that comes to mind," was her answer. At a stroke, she robbed herself of the mantle of change, and confirmed Trump's core message: vote Harris, get Biden 2. [...]

But it won't be the whole story. Other factors will have played their part, tied more to culture than politics. Trump's astonishing lead among men, especially those without a college degree – including an increased support among Black and Hispanic men, previously beyond the reach of the Republican party – points to an element of Trump's appeal that has endured for nearly a decade. Call it cultural defiance. It sees the wagging finger of all those who sit in judgment – whether that's the media, the universities, the "woke", foreign countries, especially European ones, or at its most loosely defined, women, especially educated women – and shows them a big, fat middle finger in response.

This is what Trump's critics took so long to understand. What, for years, they thought would hurt him – scandal, two impeachments, multiple criminal prosecutions and convictions – only made him stronger, confirming him as an outlaw, a transgressor. [...]

After all, Harris was his ideal opponent. A liberal, affluent woman from California, an avatar for the very cultural elite he and many millions of others despise. She reinforced it with a parade of A-list stars campaigning for her in the final stretch, repeating the same mistake Hillary Clinton made in 2016. Finally, given that the US has hardly cured itself of racism or misogyny, it should not be a shock if, in the coming days, we see that a Black woman could not get elected to the White House.

So much for a Trump win. How will we explain victory for Harris, if it comes? The answer may boil down to one word: women. Outraged by the supreme court's Dobbs ruling, overturning abortion rights in 2022, women confounded the pollsters in that year's midterm elections: there was no Republican red wave, because women came out in big numbers to prevent it. Success in 2024 would mean that, once again, and with an intensity missed by most surveys, women in the US had quietly resolved to do the exact same thing to the man who shaped the supreme court, Dobbs's ultimate author: Trump. [...]

If Trump loses, it will surely be because he'd become too toxic a figure to win: witness his place on the losing side of every election cycle after that first, narrow victory in 2016. What's more, the toxicity has only got worse recently, his authoritarian, fascistic tendencies laid barer than ever. [...] Who will win the US election? No one knows. But even if we don't yet know the result, we can already understand it.