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Opinion – In a Knife-edge Election, Two Different Portrayals of America

<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/11/26/opinion-in-a-knife-edge-election-two-different-portrayals-of-america/>

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As Donald Trump was elected as the new US President for the second time, it's natural to reflect on how each campaign pitched itself to voters. Trump was able to speak to middle America, building a coalition of voters who were willing to focus on the economic vision he set out and ignore the more unpalatable elements of the Trump phenomenon: election denialism, racist and sexist comments, and his far-right flirtations. In contrast, Harris appears to have struggled to articulate her overall vision in contrast to her boss, Joe Biden, and her opponent, Trump.

This race had been on a knife-edge for months. Ever since Biden withdrew from the race, Harris and Trump have been neck-and-neck. As such, every move in the campaign has been crucial to securing as many votes in a series of battleground states. International crises, conflicts, and challenges have been far more significant in this election than in either of the two previous presidential elections that Donald Trump has fought.

For both campaigns, any foreign policies or security announcements are made in the context of the war in Ukraine, the Israel-Gaza crisis, and the continuing tension between the West and China. Not only have both campaigns acknowledged the increased importance of international politics in this election, voters have too. According to a poll in September, significant numbers of Democrats and Republicans ranked foreign policy as "very important" to their vote this November. This election we have also seen an increase in the divergence between the two candidates in their understanding of international security. Whilst both Trump and Harris acknowledge the same crises in international politics, they both have significantly different responses to them.

Election and Opportunity

The Harris campaign framed this election as an opportunity to solidify the gains of the Biden administration. Her campaign stressed preventing Trump from further damaging the US standing in the world and maintaining the US position as a leading democracy. Harris has stressed the importance of US allies and the damage that Trump's habit of cosying up to dictators has caused.

For Trump, the standing of the US in the world is equally important. However, he sees the cause of the damage to this standing very differently. The "MAGA" or "Make America Great Again" slogan is virtually impossible to disassociate from the Trump campaign. Trump has repeatedly made the claim that the world is "laughing at us", ever since his inaugural address in 2017. His pitch to the American public is to prevent the world from taking advantage of the US. Trump's familiar refrain that the US is being taken for a fool by the rest of the world and that US officials are unable or unwilling to negotiate forcefully enough in the US interest, is amongst the most memorable of his statements.

For this election cycle, Trump has updated this message for Harris. Tying these accusations of incompetence in advocating for the US with his attacks on Harris and her IQ, Trump sought to make the case that electing Harris would mean a continuation of this embarrassment of the US. These comments played well with his core voters, the MAGA faithful, but appeared to be born rather than accepted or welcomed by the voters he wooed for this election.

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Responding to Crises

Harris did not just accept these attacks from Trump. She also sought to school her opponent in international negotiations. In the one and only election debate, Harris told Trump that Russian leader Vladimir Putin is “a dictator who would eat you for lunch”, with Trump responding that he “wanted to stop the war”. With a strong isolationist vein in US politics and a strong aversion to military deployment after the Global War on Terror and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, this message likely found a receptive audience. Equally, the American public has not been presented with an end goal for the conflict in Ukraine or an explanation of how to reach an end goal. As such, Trump’s clear intent, whilst still not fully developed, presented a stronger vision for US involvement in Ukraine.

Ukraine has been a key battleground issue between the two candidates when it comes to foreign policy. Harris’ message focused on the idea that in “these unsettled times, it is clear America cannot retreat”. In contrast, Trump’s assertions led some to conclude that he would seek to negotiate a deal with Moscow over Kyiv’s heads. This contrast in positions is likely to increase the pressure on Ukraine to seek as favourable a deal as possible before pressure from Trump or Republicans in Congress pushes potential negotiations out of their grasp.

In a bizarre episode in the aftermath of the election result, Trump’s team reported an initial call between their victorious candidate and President Putin of Russia, a call that the Kremlin denied happened. As bewildering as these denials may be, they could indicate the Kremlin’s wish to deny not just the phone call but also the content of the discussions on the call. Whilst this is pure speculation, it’s unlikely that we will hear any more details on this until the Trump team has had more time to coordinate. There are several different perspectives on the Ukraine conflict in the Trump cabinet, and how these will interact with each other remains to be seen.

This division can also be seen in the candidate’s approach to the Israel-Gaza (and Israel-Lebanon, Israel-Iran) crisis. Unsurprisingly, both candidates are staunch supporters of Israel. However, Harris is maintaining the Biden administration’s efforts to seek a negotiated ceasefire, despite this limited success in influencing Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu.

In a continuation of the policy in his first term, Trump has approached this crisis by challenging the norms of US relations with Israel. In his first term, he recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved the US embassy there, and set his son-in-law Jared Kushner to try to organise a peace settlement for the Middle East Peace Process. In response to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, Trump has continued his norm-breaking behaviour, saying that he had told Netanyahu to “do what you have to do”.

US Global Standing

Foreign policy debate in this election has focused on the position of the US in the world. Trump’s case that the world has been taking advantage of the US is familiar to anyone observing US politics. Yet given the increased prominence of international crises in this election cycle, his “disrupter-in-chief” approach is likely to have an even greater impact than has been the case in his previous administration.

By contrast, Harris’ attempts to make a case for a continued return to normalcy in US diplomatic conduct may be more sensible but is far less evocative. As with many of her policy proposals, Harris is restricted by the Biden administration’s track record. The “America’s Back” message from Biden has lacked reinforcement or backing through action. Biden may say America’s back, but it remains unclear which America has returned. Similarly, many voters didn’t see a return to normalcy as an advantage, especially when world politics is seen to be so different and dangerous.

Foreign policy has not been an area of success for Biden. Notable failures such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan have stood out, but the more general conduct of US foreign policy has been competent but unremarkable, and definitely not successful. As such, Harris has had a difficult tightrope to walk, making a similar case to the one Biden made in 2020 whilst also trying to show a difference between her foreign policy and that of the Biden White House.

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The international context, and US foreign policy, became a far more significant issue in the 2024 Presidential election than has been the case in recent elections. For voters and both candidates, the standing of the US in world politics became far more salient than in past elections. The prominence of huge international crises in daily news, and a perception of a reduced US influence on these crises likely contributed to this. Harris' call for continued efforts to reestablish US leadership and engagement with the world did not convince the American voters. Yet Trump's isolationist reaction seeking redress for the perceived disrespect shown to the US has been far more successful. The 2024 election period and the campaigns of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris presented two very different images of American foreign policy, yet Trump's eventual win showcased what the American electorate was looking for.

About the author:

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