



The illustration shows Republican presidential candidate former US president Donald Trump in front of a map that forecasts his win in 2024 election. NEWSWEEK

How Trump wins

And Harris and Democrats blow it



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OPINION

It's November 6, 2024, the morning after Election Day. The people in the Trump campaign should be counting their lucky stars for Donald Trump's close victory, given the political incompetence they showed in July and August. In the six weeks between July 21, when Joe Biden dropped out, and Labor Day they had one job: to define Kamala Harris as an elite San Francisco liberal before she could define herself as a middle-class moderate. The Trump campaign did next to nothing. All they needed was to play the 2019 clips of Harris sounding like a wokester cliché, but they couldn't even come up with an argument, let alone act upon it. Harris brilliantly defined herself in that vacuum. This mistake could have been fatal for the Republicans because Trump is the 46 percent man. That's roughly the share of the popular vote he won in 2016 and 2020. He was never going to ride a majority wave to victory in 2024, so it would have been helpful to take his opponent down a few points.

Elections are driven by a few core realities. Trump had several fundamental issues that drove support to him, no matter how jerkish he could be. Trump being victorious in 2024 comes down to these five turbines of Trumpism:

People like the red model more than the blue model. The fastest-growing states by population are mostly governed by Republicans, including Florida, Texas, Idaho, and Montana. The fastest-shrinking or-stagnating states are mostly governed by Democrats, including New York, Illinois, California, Pennsylvania, and Hawaii. The red model gives you low housing costs, lower taxes, and business vitality. The blue model gives you high housing costs, high taxes, and high inequality.

Many American voters might envy the long European vacations, but they want economic dynamism more. For years, voters in swing states had been telling pollsters that the economy and inflation were their top issues. They looked around the country and concluded that the Republican approach seemed better at generating dynamism and growth, or at least better than Harris's pitch for and defense of Bidenomics.

Democrats are the party of the ruling class. The most important divide in American life is the diploma divide. College-educated folks tend to vote for Democrats, and high-school-educated folks tend to vote for Republicans. Thus, the richest places tend to be Democratic. The Democrats dominate the media, the universities, the cultural institutions, and the government. Even the big corporations, headquartered in places like New York and San Francisco, are trending blue.

Ruling-class Democrats live in very different worlds than high-school-educated Republicans. The average high school grad dies nine years sooner than a college graduate, is more likely to be obese, is much less likely to marry, and is much more likely to divorce. The overdose death rate for high school grads is about six times as high as the rate for college grads. Of course, working-class voters resent these inequalities.

Worse, educated-class folks have rigged the game. Children from affluent families tend to attend public and private schools flush with cash, while working-class kids don't. By the eighth grade, children from affluent families are performing at four grade levels higher than children from poor families. According to Daniel Markovits of Yale, on the SAT, "Students from families earning over \$200,000 per year (roughly the top 5 percent) score 388 points higher than students from families earning less than \$20,000 per year (roughly the bottom 20 percent)." According to a 2017 study led by Raj Chetty of Harvard, students from families in the top 1 percent of earners were 77 times as likely to get into the Ivy League as students from families making less than \$30,000 a year. In that year, students from the top income quintile were about 16 times as numerous at the University

of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as students from the bottom quintile.

Global populism is a revolt against these kinds of inequities — driven by the sense that the educated class has too much cultural, academic, political, and economic power. The revolt is fueled when highly educated professionals condescend to or don't even see the masses they are sitting on and when students at elite universities spending upward of \$100,000 a year on them pretend to be the marginalized victims of oppression.



Supporters cheer for Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump during a campaign rally at the Freedom Hill Amphitheater in Sterling Heights, Michigan, on November 6, 2016. CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

Highly educated Democrats like Harris see themselves as increasing the size of government to help the downtrodden. But many Americans look at those efforts and they just see affluent people amassing more power for themselves in Washington. They conclude: This is what the educated elites always do. They promise to do stuff for us, but they end up serving only themselves.

Social and moral cohesion. Republicans can be rugged individualists when it comes to economics, but Democrats can be rugged individualists when it comes to morality. They are more likely to hew to a code of moral freedom that holds that individuals should be free to live by their own values. Individuals get to choose their own definition of when human life begins. Any form of family and social life is OK so long as the individuals within it give their consent. This is the privatization of morality.

Yet in most places, people are formed within morally cohesive communities. They derive a sense of belonging and solidarity from shared moral values. Their lives have meaning and purpose because they see themselves living in a universal moral order with permanent standards of right and wrong, within family structures that have stood the test of time, with shared understandings of, say, male and female.

Privatized morality leaves even many progres-

sives with existential insecurity. Forty-one percent of very liberal men and 60 percent of very liberal women report that they are in poor mental health more than half the time.

But the lack of social and moral order is a practical calamity for less-educated folks. For them, economic policy is not separate from social issues and moral values. The things that derail their lives are broken relationships, infidelity, out-of-wedlock births, addictions, family conflict, and crime. When Republicans talk about immigration, crime, faith, family,

and the flag, they are talking about ways to preserve the social and moral order. Democrats are great at talking about economic solidarity but not moral and cultural solidarity. General dissatisfaction. Kamala Harris practiced the politics of joy in this election, running a hope-filled and sunny campaign, as any incumbent party tries to do. But many Americans are not feeling it. As the fall general election campaign got unofficially underway after Labor Day, only 25 percent of Americans were satisfied with the direction of the country, according to Gallup, while 73 percent were dissatisfied. According to Ipsos, 59 percent of Americans said the country was in decline, 60 percent agreed with a series of statements conveying that "the system is broken," 69 percent agreed that the "political and economic elite don't care about hard-working people," and 63 percent agreed that "experts in this country don't understand the lives of people like me."

In other words, many Americans feel betrayed, distrustful, angry. They feel that the American dream has been destroyed. Trump, like all global populists, tells this betrayal story well. The Blue Bubble problem. Bill Clinton and Barack Obama lived in the shadow of Ronald Reagan's and George W. Bush's victories. Clinton and Obama both understood the Blue Bubble problem: If you spend

your life listening to what Democrats in the big cities say to one another, then you will misunderstand America. Both Clinton and Obama took tough stances to show that they were not Blue Bubble natives: the crime bill, welfare reform, Obama's stances on illegal immigration, and fossil fuels. Clinton triangulated and Obama talked about transcending left and right. Clinton and Obama are still popular across the country, but they are disdained by many of the cadres who work in Democratic campaigns and administrations. During the 2010s, right-wing populists took over the Republican Party from the outside — MAGA. Left-wing populists like Bernie Sanders tried to do that but failed. They had more success in winning the hearts of minds of the progressive intellectual and apparatchik class, from the top down. In progressive circles, Clinton and Obama are often dismissed as neoliberals who were complicit in preserving the corporate order.

This shift to the left produced the defund the police/decriminalize the border frenzy of 2020. It's also had dubious economic effects. The new cadres were convinced (rightly) that Obama did not stimulate the economy enough after the financial crisis. In response, they decided to stimulate the hell out of the economy after the pandemic. They ended up exacerbating inflation and effectively destroyed Biden's re-election prospects even before the age issue became so dominant.

Clinton and Obama essentially followed the median-voter theory: Run to the center where independent voters are. By contrast, the new cadres are more likely to believe in the mobilize-the-base theory: Run a really progressive campaign so that young lefties turn out. Harris tried to run a campaign that gave something to each wing of the party. It resulted in the everything bagel — a campaign that offered gestures and a hodgepodge of policies for everybody but lacked a clear vision. Pennsylvania was the most important state in this election, the hinge around which all sorts of election scenarios pivoted. But as Nate Silver noted in August, there weren't many polls showing Harris ahead there. Clinton and Biden led in polls there, and Clinton lost and Biden barely won. In hindsight, Harris's decision not to select Gov. Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania as her running mate looked like a terrible act of overconfidence. But Shapiro was perceived as a moderate. The progressive wing lobbied against him. So, Harris went with a guy who helped her win a state she was always going to win anyway. I know who I fervently wanted to win — Harris. But many Democrats were always a little over-ebullient about her. A Trump victory has never come down to running a brilliant campaign. It comes down to those five turbines driving enough support in enough key places in his direction.

The full article first appeared on the New York Times.