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## **The US Election: Expectations vs. Outcomes**

*By Adam Garfinkle*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Donald Trump's unexpected electoral victory and the gains by the Republican Party at all levels of American politics have shocked elites both domestic and international. As those with varying interests and equities try to anticipate what the election outcome means for them, one question stands out above all others: What kind of American demos would choose a man to be President of the world's most powerful democracy who has shown consistent disrespect for both its democratic rules and its classical liberal principles?*

### **COMMENTARY**

#### **Expectations**

As the polls closed all across the United States on Tuesday, November 5, trusted and experienced observers of American politics were sure of six things that would or could happen in the following days and weeks.

First, nearly all serious analysts believed that while the presidential election was too close to call, Kamala Harris would win the popular vote once all votes were counted – a process that could take several days given legal variations in the states. Those days, many feared, could be pocked with telegenic extrusions of violence, the anticipation of which led many Governors to pre-activate their National Guard units. This did not mean that analysts necessarily trusted the polls since most polls were for-profit-to-media operations that lacked social science methodological rigour – the same conditions that led the polls to get it wrong in 2016 and 2020 – but no other more reliable means for sorting opinion was available.

Second, nearly all serious analysts anticipated that the Republicans were likely to take the Senate by a close margin but that the Democrats were likely to take the House of Representatives – a flip from the situation since the November 2022 midterms.

Third, down-ballot results in state and local government elections were likely to slightly favor Republicans overall, due to the increased disadvantages of incumbency – what dyed-in-the-wool political scientists sometimes call the thermostatic dynamic that courses through American politics like a sine wave almost regardless of which issues are most prominent at any given time.

Fourth, were Trump to win the election and especially if the Republicans were also to take the Senate, most analysts expected an administration that would quickly commence, shock-and-awe style, the use of every means available, legal and not, to: take revenge against political opponents, not to exclude the use of arrest warrants, mafia-style coercion, and even direct violence; that would seek to stifle critical press opinion not already intimidated by threatening media corporation owners with economic punishment; that would with assured Senate approval staff Schedule C personnel slots with largely incompetent loyalists whose main job would be to neutralise and intimidate Civil Service, Foreign Service, and intelligence community professionals; and that would exonerate and pardon all indicted January 6, 2021, Capitol rioters, signaling that far less risk attached to vigilante political intimidation at local as well as national levels.

Fifth, were Harris to win an Electoral College majority, the Republicans under MAGA control would launch in earnest its long-prepared “Stop the Steal” 2.0 attempt to prevent her from being inaugurated as President; but no one could confidently predict whether this effort, accompanied probably by rising reports of violence, would succeed, since success would depend on the actions of a dozen or so judges in the swing states (Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, Nevada, Wisconsin, and Michigan) whose names hardly anyone in Washington knew. If because of legal artifice and harassment directed at local officials some states proved unable to certify election results and thus send Electors to Washington for the legally mandatory January 6 counting ritual, according to the Electoral Law of 1887, a small but widely discussed possibility existed that the election would be thrown into the House according to the 12th Amendment, and hence Trump would be elected.

Sixth, were Harris to win *and* manage to be sworn in on January 20, analysts assumed that, as in 2020, Trump would not concede the election, that few if any senior Republicans would defy him and attend the Inauguration. They assumed further that more expansive violence, both organised and wildcat, would proliferate in the run-up to January 20 and likely persist beyond it. The United States would thus again fail the basic test of a stable electoral democracy in not being able to manage a peaceful transfer of power, something that did not happen even after the election of 1860, which turned out to be a prelude to civil war.

In other words, analysts expected no good outcome in alignment with most American presidential elections since the first one in 1789, only greater or lesser bad outcomes.

## Outcomes

In light of those very widely shared expectations, what can we say of them on the morning of November 6?

First, the presidential election was not close. Trump won a clear Electoral College victory and, for the first time in three tries, the popular vote as well. He also won all seven swing states by clear margins.

Second, Republicans won control of not only the Senate but also retained and expanded their majority in the House of Representatives. Final tallies are not yet available, but they are not important. What is important is that as of January 20, Republicans will control all three Branches of the US Government.

Third, down-ballot results shifted to Republicans more strongly than anticipated, both in already mostly “red” states but also in “blue” ones.

The accuracy of the fourth pre-election assumption remains to be seen, but this one, at least, appears from words already spoken since the polls closed to have been accurate.

The fifth and sixth expectations have been rendered moot by the results; Kamala Harris will not be the first female President; she will preside instead over a mere footnote in American history in the months and years to come.

## Preliminary Implications

Democrats will not contest the election results and would not have done so had the results been much closer. Vice-President Harris will preside as *president pro tempore* of the Senate in certifying Trump’s election victory on January 6. President Biden will likely attend Trump’s Inauguration on January 20. In short, the Democrats will not do what the Republicans were clearly planning to do had the circumstances been reversed.

This tells us, if it were not already obvious, that the two major political forces in American politics today do not share compatible premises of governance. Democrats respect the rules, both formal constitutional ones and accompanying liberal traditions that hold dear the twin principles of tolerance for disagreement and the concept of a loyal opposition. Republicans, at least of the now-dominant MAGA variety, do not: They hew to a zero-sum, conflict-only model in which the rule of law is useful only as an instrument of the powerful deployed against the weak. This is why the stunning quality of the unanticipated election result has heightened existential fears for the future of the US political order writ large and generated intense anxiety as to what its possible collapse could mean for the world at large.

The single pivotal question that looms over the election outcome the morning after is a stark one: How could *We the People* elect a man to the presidency who clearly lied about the result of the November 2020 election, bitterly divided the nation over it, tried to foment a coup on January 6, 2021, and told an audience on July 27, 2024, in urging them to vote: “You won’t have to do it anymore. Four more years, you know what? It’ll

be fixed, it'll be fine. You won't have to vote anymore, my beautiful Christians"? In other words, what kind of *demos* has *We the People* become?

Trump won a double victory: He and the Republican Party not only soundly defeated the Democrats, but also shamed the broader strata of elites represented by the mainstream domestic media commentariat, the universities, and the pro-US elites of major American allies. All these elites and others are now rocked back on their heels, wondering what it all portends.

Meanwhile, the scale and scope of Trump's victory will likely embolden him, especially now that he has also achieved through electoral victory a lifelong "stay out of jail free" card that renders all extant indictments against him dead letters. Further confident predictions at this point about what the future holds are a mug's game; the Lord of the Flies now hovers over the land.

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