

Analysis

# US elections 2024: Fear triumphs over hope as Trump wins the presidency - how did it happen?

Wednesday 6 November 2024, by [SMITH David](#) (Date first published: 6 November 2024).

**To elect Donald Trump once may be regarded as a misfortune; to elect him twice looks like craziness**

Sometimes fear triumphs over hope.

[Donald Trump](#)'s shocking victory in the [2016 US presidential election](#) was described as a leap into the political unknown. This time there is no excuse. America knew that he was a convicted criminal, serial liar and racist demagogue who four years ago attempted to overthrow the government. It voted for him anyway.

The result is a catastrophe for the world. It saw [Kamala Harris](#)'s competence and expertise, her decency and grace, her potential to be the first female president in America's 248-year history. It also saw Trump's venality and vulgarity, his crass insults and crude populism, his dehumanisation of immigrants that echoed [Adolf Hitler](#). And the world asked: how is this race even close?

But elections hold up a mirror to a nation and the nation does not always like what it sees.

Future historians will marvel at how Trump rose from the political dead. When he lost the [2020 election to Joe Biden](#), people gathered outside the White House to celebrate, brandishing signs that said, "Bon Voyage", "Democracy wins!", "You're fired!", "Trump is over" and "Loser". There was a tone of finality, a sense that, after four gruelling years, this particular national nightmare was over.

*How the night of Trump's presidential comeback unfolded - video timeline*

For many, there was the comforting idea that moral order had been restored. It was Trump who was the aberration, not [Barack Obama](#), the first Black president who had preceded him. Hope, not fear, was the national default. Now America was back on course after its unfortunate zigzag of history.

Then came Trump's ultimate disgrace, the deadly insurrection at the US Capitol on [6 January 2021](#). He seemed at peace with the idea that his own vice-president, Mike Pence, might be hanged by the rampaging mob. He had finally gone too far. "Count me out," Senator [Lindsey Graham](#) of South Carolina, once a devout Trump loyalist, said in an impassioned speech on the Senate floor.

But the political obituary writers forgot that 78-year-old Trump is the luckiest man in the world. A series of opportunities to snuff out his political career, banishing him to golf courses in Florida for the rest of his days, were squandered.

Trump was impeached, for the second time, by the House of Representatives. At his Senate trial, Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who has called [Trump “stupid” and “despicable”](#), could have instructed his colleagues to convict, barring him from ever running for office again. But McConnell choked and Trump was acquitted.

Trump immediately began regathering political strength. Representative Kevin McCarthy, who had initially denounced him, made a pilgrimage to Mar-a-Lago and bowed the knee. From that moment on, it was clear that the Republican party was still the [Trump party](#). Not even electoral defeat and its violent aftermath could break the fever.

Trump failed again at the ballot box in the [2022 midterms](#), throwing his weight behind a parade of grotesques and misfits who lost winnable races. Again there was a shaft of light, a moment when Republicans could have course-corrected. But would-be challengers such as [Ron DeSantis](#) and [Nikki Haley](#) were steamrollered by the “Make America great again” movement.

Trump got lucky again on 13 July this year when a would-be assassin’s bullet struck him in the ear at a campaign rally in [Butler, Pennsylvania](#). A last-second tilt of the head to look at a chart showing immigration figures spared his life.

A photo of Trump standing with blood streaked across his face as he raised his fist and shouted “Fight!” became the indelible image of his campaign. Still, the man who lost his first popular vote by 3m, and his second by 7m, had to convince America that he was worth a second look.

His next stroke of good fortune was to be initially up against Biden, an incumbent even older than himself, who was given little reward by voters for his significant legislative and economic achievements.

*The key moments of the US election campaign in three minutes - video*

In panic, Democrats swapped [Biden out](#) for his vice-president, [Kamala Harris](#), with only about a hundred days to go. They claimed that her campaign was not a case of having to build the plane in midair but rather the same plane with a different pilot. Either way, she faced concerns over inflation and the daunting task of defining herself to the electorate as neither Biden-lite nor overly eager to throw her boss under the bus.

She was up against a man who drove wedges between men and women, Black and white, urban and rural, young and old. As a woman of colour, she was held to a different standard by a nation grown numb and indifferent to Trump’s excesses. “He gets to be lawless. She has to be flawless,” CNN senior political commentator [Van Jones](#) observed.

Many voters spoke of the Trump presidency with a [rosy glow of nostalgia](#), apparently overlooking its 400,000 coronavirus deaths, worst year for jobs since the second world war and systematic effort to divide, not unite, the American people. He could do no wrong in the eyes of his cult-like following, a freakishly resilient appeal that has three main components.

First, there is the celebrity and successful businessman persona, fashioned over years by his book *The Art of the Deal* and the reality TV show *The Apprentice*. Harris recruited numerous big-name endorsers such as [Taylor Swift](#) and [Beyoncé](#); Trump was star of his own show.

Second, Trump has understood that, whereas Ronald Reagan and Obama resonated in an era of aspiration, this is an age of anxiety. The upper-working class and lower-middle class fear loss of status and yearn for a safety blanket. Young people worry they will be worse off than their parents’ generation and unable to buy homes. Many, wrongly, perceive Trump as an economic populist

because he rails against elites and “says it like it is” or “speaks how they feel” or “doesn’t give a fuck”.

Third, there is Trump the culture warrior. For nearly a decade he has tapped into America’s id: a long and painful racial history of progress and backlash, stoked anew by the election of Obama and white Christians finding themselves in the minority. Xenophobia is at the heart of his political identity. In addition, his campaign spent millions on [ads](#) fuelling hysteria about transgender rights (“Kamala’s agenda is they/them, not you”).

Together, with a sinister assist from billionaire [Elon Musk](#), it was enough to eke out victory. Now brace for another Trump inauguration - [American carnage](#) redux - and another fantastical claim about his crowd size. Brace for norms to be trampled, institutions to be undermined, opponents to be targeted for retribution. Brace for an Oval Office occupied by a malignant narcissist without guardrails this time. Brace for unhinged all caps tweets that trigger news cycles and move markets. Brace for national anxiety off the charts and global tremors from China to Ukraine. Brace, also, for a new resistance and surge of anti-Trump energy.

How did it happen here? America had plenty of opportunities to stop [Donald Trump](#) but blew it each time. It will not become an autocracy overnight but there is now no doubt that this is a democracy in decay. As Oscar Wilde never said, to elect Trump once may be regarded as a misfortune; to elect him twice looks like craziness.

**David Smith**, in Washington

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