

Who will win the US elections?



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With just a week to go, predictions of “who will win” the knife-edge US presidential elections has become table talk of sorts. Among US nationals, there’s a strange aura of burn-out anxiety; a new report by the American Psychological Association (APA) showed that 7 out of 10 adult US citizens feel stressed about the upcoming elections. And with the past four years tainted with two wars, genocides, moral reckonings and increasing polarisation, the US election results will affect lives much beyond its borders.

Polls, as we know, are not always great at predicting results. Even if they were, most polls show that it’s a toss-up; Donald Trump and Kamala Harris are essentially at 50-50 if one takes the margin of error into account in the key swing states. Trump has never been this close to any of his previous Democratic rivals in polls in the past two election bids. Polls underrepresented the “hidden” Trump voters in both 2016 and 2020. The presumed lack of knowledge has now led some people to conclude that Trump will win. But it’s really just up in the air with many probable

outcomes. Trump may very well win, with a landslide even, but so could Harris.

Alternatively, it could be a tight election, with a marginal win for either Harris or Trump. It could be a tie, too, and go up to the House of Representatives, which is majority Republican, so that would mean that Trump will win. Yet, it could be a repeat of the debatable Bush vs Al Gore presidential race in 2000, where a close election result could

messages from unknown numbers paid by the “Republican Accountability Pact,” where former Trump supporters in Michigan say that they will not be voting for Trump because of the insurrection on January 6, 2021. These strategies, presumably by the Harris campaign, haven’t been under the media spotlight as much. The Trump campaign’s tendency to use AI and woo voters—such as the fake image of Trump surrounded

or not voting for Harris, who’s been complicit with Biden.

But it must be noted that Arab Americans are not a large enough population in the swing states to drastically affect the outcomes. It could also be that many Arab Americans will still vote for Harris over Trump on the issue of Palestine, as the latter is more favoured by right-wing extremists in Israel and incendiary in his rhetoric against Palestinians. The

It is not impossible for Donald Trump to win the popular vote, and it is not impossible for Harris to win the Electoral College but not the popular vote, which just reflects that this election is truly in uncharted waters. It could very well be that it’s the 2016 or 2020 movie all over again, but it could also be a different script altogether.

When predicting elections, political scientists historically considered incumbency as an advantage. Between 1986 and 2012, of 14 sitting US presidents seeking re-election, 11 did indeed win. But the US, like most other countries, is in a different era now where the conventional political wisdom does not apply anymore. It’s an era of profound political distrust and dissatisfaction. In 2020, anti-incumbency fervour against Donald Trump favoured Joe Biden, especially for the disaster that was Trump’s handling of the Covid pandemic.

But the incumbency theory cannot be applied in this election either; it’s an election between a notorious former president who lost re-election four years ago, and the current questionable vice-president after the incumbent president dropped out. Technically speaking, Kamala Harris is the incumbent as she did not distance herself from the Biden-Harris administration, and failed to address the shortcomings of the current policies to offer people with a new package deal. Biden’s track record could work against her. But one can also look at it differently: Harris is a woman of colour, the first female vice-president, and she is not in her 80s. The idea of Kamala Harris as the president of the US offers a fresh image. Yet, this could also work against her as racism and sexism prevail. One can pull out many scenarios, even bizarre ones, and the conversations can go in circles till November 5. The reality is that we will only know the predicted winner only after the maps of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin go red or blue.

The uncertainty surrounding a global phenomenon such as the US elections is amplified in the current times, as there’s an answer to everything on social media; the mainstream media too, is filled with predictions and probabilities like a game. But despite all these thorough political analyses of all different scenarios, we can still say we just don’t know. If one is sure that “Trump will win” or “Harris will win,” it is nothing but a guess.



Presidential Candidate Milk Chocolates sold in Hudson stores at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, US, taken on October 25, 2024.

PHOTO: RAMISA ROB

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lead to weeks of recounting and go up to the Supreme Court to be settled.

One reason why it’s so difficult to predict the outcome or even form a remotely trustworthy gut instinct is because Trump has somewhat rusted and Kamala Harris has run an unexpectedly centrist campaign, bringing in old school Republicans like Liz Cheney and talking about owning guns more than student debt forgiveness, to win over Republican voters in swing states. By contrast, she has championed populist economic policies like reduced healthcare and housing costs for the middle class.

There’s also a black hole regarding strategies deployed by both candidates to mobilise voters. A registered Democrat in Michigan revealed they receive text

by Black voters—is more documented, but we still don’t know the extent of their disinformation campaign, which previously proved ridiculously successful in convincing many MAGA supporters that the Democratic election of 2020 was rigged.

For resident voters, domestic issues such as the economy and healthcare matter more than foreign policy. But foreign policy is an issue on voters’ minds. For example, 70 percent of Trump voters and 54 percent of Harris voters listed it as a major factor for their votes, according to a survey by Pew Research Center in September. Many who deeply care about the genocide perpetrated by Israel, especially Arab Americans who have lost family members in Gaza or Lebanon, also see it as a decisive factor for not voting at all

game changer for Harris would only occur if large numbers of Arab voters along with the youth and Black voters in the swing states decided to vote for Trump or pro-Palestinian independent candidate Jill Stein, or not vote at all.

The national sentiment as a whole is unclear; even the popular vote is up in the air. Trump lost both popular votes against Joe Biden and Clinton, who he defeated in the Electoral College, which historically favours Republicans. Trump has made substantial gains in non-competitive states like New York and California, where Harris, though leading, is underperforming as a Democrat. Republicans also won the House popular vote for the midterm elections in 2022, in less competitive states including California.

Venezuela’s experience with democracy

As Nicolas Maduro secured a third term in Venezuela in July 2024, despite claims and evidence that the opposition leader won, Freddy Guevara, former vice-president of the Venezuelan Parliament and a key opposition voice against Maduro’s dictatorship, speaks with Sarzah Yeasmin, contributor to Geopolitical Insights, in an exclusive interview sharing why the nation could not successfully transition to a democracy.

In 2019, Venezuela’s interim government was formed by the national assembly to restore democracy and challenge the government of Nicolas Maduro—the successor of Hugo Chavez—who was accused of committing election fraud by Juan Guaidó, who declared himself the interim leader. It was a “double state situation” as Maduro was still in power. The interim government’s main mandate was to bring down Maduro and restore democracy, but it was only a constitutional and political tool without the power to fully govern. The constitutional framework of Venezuela allows for the interim government to exist for transitional leadership, but its application can be contentious and politically charged. In 2022, the interim government was dissolved. Earlier in 2021, Freddy Guevara was arrested for crimes against the state and sent to solitary confinement. After his release, to this day, Guevara continues to be one of the most prominent voices against Venezuela’s dictatorship.



Freddy Guevara

PHOTO: COURTESY

By late 2022, the Maduro government of Venezuela became more popular than the interim government. What were the forces at play?

The Venezuelan interim government operated under a unique set of challenges. It gained popularity in Venezuela for several reasons: many Venezuelans were frustrated with Maduro’s government, which faced allegations of corruption, economic mismanagement, and human rights abuses. Guaidó represented a potential alternative. There was initial international support: the interim government received backing from the United States and many Latin American nations, which added legitimacy to Guaidó’s claim. But as it was formed while Maduro was still in power, the interim government never had full control of the country’s institutions.

Over time, two major issues led to the interim government’s downfall. First, every year that we failed to oust Maduro, the interim government had to extend its mandate. As the next presidential election approached, political leaders became concerned that Guaidó was using his position to prolong his stay in power, potentially to run for president himself. This fear was one of the key reasons for the dissolution. Second, there were accusations of corruption within the interim government, which created distrust and were amplified by the Maduro regime and

internal opposition forces.

It’s important to note that the forces at play included both authoritarian influences and internal opposition struggles. These dynamics ultimately caused the collapse of the interim government and underscored the importance of unity and transparency in fragile political transitions. The combination of unmet expectations, internal conflicts, and external pressures led to the loss of popular support for the interim government, even though most Venezuelans still wanted Maduro out.

What marked the tipping point of a democratic and thriving Venezuela into a dictatorship?

We can look at examples from various countries: Venezuela, Tunisia, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Egypt. These nations experienced a democratic transition but later reverted to authoritarian rule. While the specifics differ, there are common trends. First, the role of security forces is critical. In many countries, if the armed forces are not committed to the rule of law and democratic governance, they become accomplices to authoritarianism. So it’s essential to cultivate a democratic culture within security institutions.

Second, the independence of key institutions like the judiciary and electoral bodies is vital. These institutions provide checks and balances and hold leaders

accountable. When they are compromised, it becomes easier for authoritarian regimes to hijack the system. Third, transitional governments need to focus on delivering tangible results. It’s not just about the institutional framework but also about addressing the population’s immediate needs. Finally, all major political actors and societal stakeholders—such as unions, students, and the media—need to be included in the democratic process. When there’s a shared commitment, it’s harder for one party to dominate.

In Venezuela, take the case of 1998, when failure to update our political agreements and economic inequality, combined with the media’s detachment from democratic norms, led to the election of Hugo Chavez, who quickly dismantled democratic institutions, leading us down the path to dictatorship. Initially, the *El Pacto de Punto Fijo* pact provided stability and ensured that political actors agreed to share power, but the system stopped adapting to the changing economic realities, particularly when our oil-dependent economy collapsed. Instead of evolving, the political landscape became rigid, preventing innovation. As economic inequality and corruption increased, many people grew frustrated with the system. The media, which should have played a neutral role, began promoting anti-system leaders. All of this created a perfect storm

that allowed Chavez, an authoritarian leader, to rise to power.

What arenas of public policy should an interim government address, and what would democratic reform look like in its initial stages and in the long term?

The role of an interim government isn’t to create long-term development because they won’t have the time and resources to achieve that. The first goal should always be to improve people’s perception of democracy and show them that this shift can benefit their lives. For social and economic rights, interim governments should be focusing on a segment of the population where the government can have the most impact. This could involve just two or three key measures in sectors that are politically and socially significant. It might sound pragmatic, even Machiavellian, but I believe that for an interim government, it’s about survival and transitioning towards democratic stability. If a country is in a war,

takes patience, and often people aren’t willing to wait. They become frustrated and seek faster, more authoritarian solutions.

What role can international actors and allies play to help create democratic institutions in countries like Venezuela, which are prone to one-party rule?

We’re now dealing with global powers and economic alliances that have far-reaching impacts. For example, in Venezuela’s case, sanctions from the US have affected citizens more than the regime, which still manages to amass resources. When it comes to authoritarian governments, international support—whether active or passive—can be critical. The biggest issue arises when international actors view a country as a battleground for their own geopolitical interests. If any other country for that matter, finds itself in the middle of a power struggle between giants, the focus shifts away from the country’s development or democratic processes. Instead, it becomes

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the economy and policies are all centred around winning that war. The same logic applies here.

It’s important to remember that democracy isn’t just about the mechanics of voting—it requires a society that’s willing to compromise. And that’s the hard part. It demands patience, time, and a willingness to acknowledge that sometimes you won’t get everything you want. Authoritarian systems, by contrast, impose decisions from the top down, so they often seem more efficient or decisive.

There’s more to it: democracy requires people to be willing to make trade-offs. Every political system involves trade-offs, but in a democracy, those trade-offs are often more visible and painful because they involve giving up things that may feel existentially important to you. People have to be willing to accept that their goals may take time to achieve, and they have to pursue them within the system’s rules. This

about serving the interests of foreign powers.

I hope that democratic nations will recognise their responsibility to support legitimate democratic movements. Take Tunisia, for example. During one of our conversations, Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki mentioned that while the international community was providing institutional and technical support for democracy, what Tunisia really needed was financial help to support its people. If people don’t see immediate improvements in their quality of life, they lose faith in the democratic process. Democratic transitions need both moral and financial support. It’s not enough to simply back the idea of democracy; the international community has to understand that interim governments or new democratic regimes need financial aid to address immediate needs and stabilise their populations.