

**The Big Read** US presidential election 2024

## **The dark last days of Donald Trump's election campaign**



If the Republican loses, it will reflect his reluctance to appeal to the centre. But if he wins, he will feel emboldened to implement a radical agenda

**James Politi** in Allentown, Pennsylvania 8 HOURS AGO

At a campaign rally in Green Bay, Wisconsin, on Wednesday, Donald Trump vowed to “protect” women, “whether they like it or not”. At his landmark Madison Square Garden speech in New York City, he promised to “kick” undocumented immigrants “the hell out of our country as fast as possible”.

And at a large indoor event in the heart of Allentown, a city in Pennsylvania’s politically crucial Lehigh Valley, he launched his latest personal attack on Kamala Harris, the vice-president and his rival for the White House.

“No one respects her, no one trusts her, no one takes her seriously,” Trump told the crowd. “Everyone knows she’s a low-IQ individual.”

In the pre-Trump era of American politics, each of these bullying, aggressive comments might have been disqualifying for a presidential candidate, but in the final days of this campaign they have seemingly become standard.

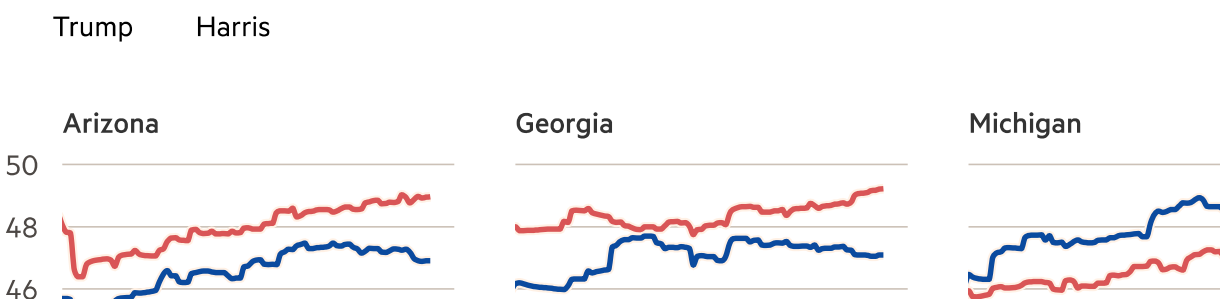
At 78, the former president has cast this year’s race for the White House as his last big political battle, to secure “Liberation Day” for America after four years of a Democratic president.

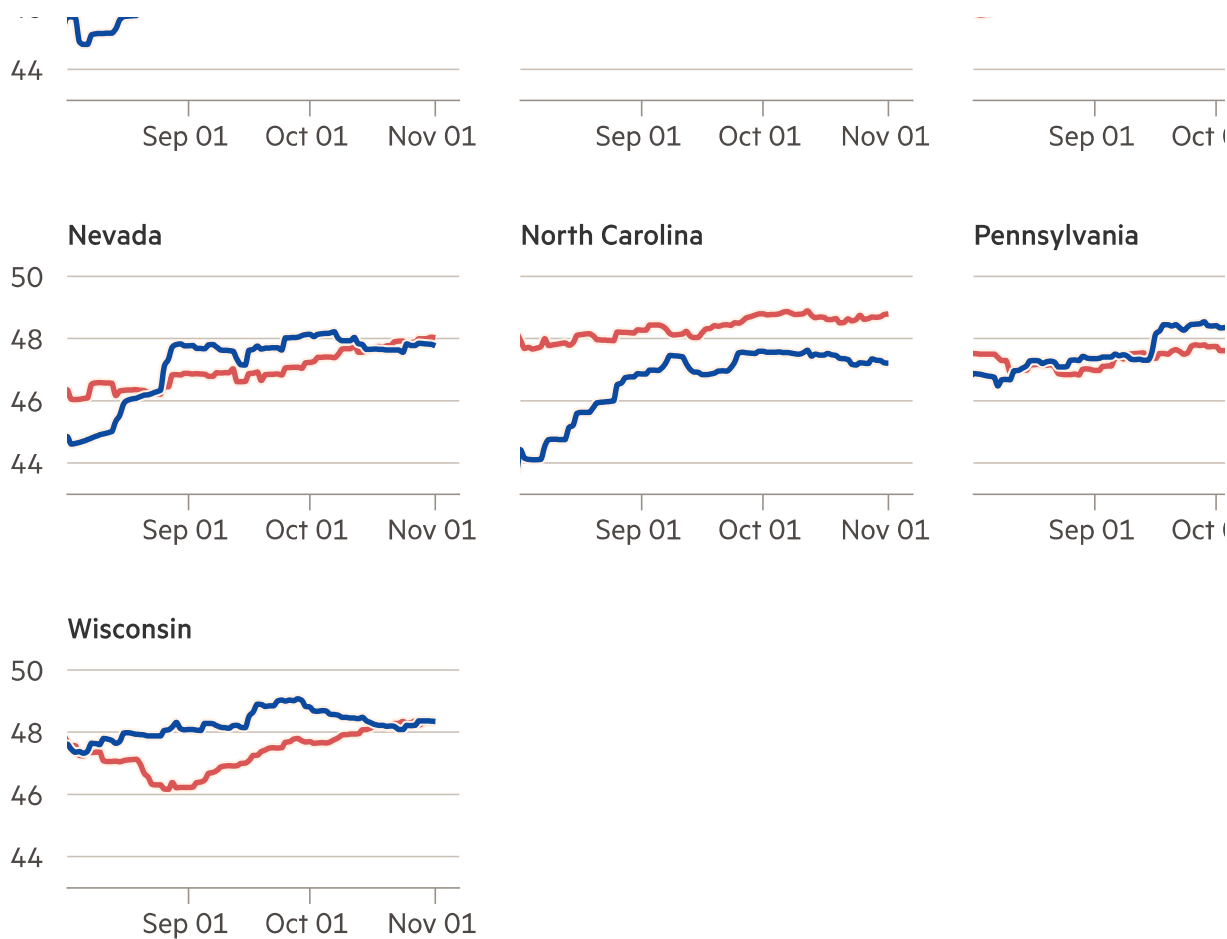
On Tuesday night, millions of Americans will deliver their verdict. Trump will either be restored to the White House, or cast aside in a second consecutive defeat that would lead Harris to become the first female president in US history.

## Harris and Trump are battling neck-and-neck in swing state polls

Voting intention (%)

Lines represent weighted moving averages





Source: [FT poll tracker](#), FiveThirtyEight • Latest poll Oct 28

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“It’s sort of sad,” Trump told the crowd of several thousand that was jammed into the arena in Allentown, lamenting the seeming end of his presidential runs, one way or the other. “We’ve been on this journey together, and we’ve been doing it for nine years. This is the final week,” he said.

That Trump is even on the cusp of the American presidency again is remarkable: despite his advanced age, his role in fuelling a riot at the US Capitol nearly four years ago and his multitude of criminal charges, he crushed his Republican rivals in the primary contests early in the year, and is virtually tied in the polls with Harris.

But it is especially striking that a new term in the Oval Office is within reach for Trump because of the way he has conducted his campaign — which has been an even darker version of his 2016 and 2020 races.

From calling for revenge against his political opponents, to setting the stage for the mass detention and expulsion of undocumented workers, Trump has promised a radical right-wing remake of US government and society that appeals far more to his staunchly populist base than to middle America.

His message has been laden with misogyny, xenophobia and vulgarity — including a bizarre diversion to discuss former golfer Arnold Palmer's genitals last month. He has received support from once-fringe politicians including Tulsi Gabbard and Robert F Kennedy Jr, both former Democrats who endorsed him during the campaign and may even get spots in his administration.

If Trump loses, his inability to stick to a typical campaign playbook that tries to attract a broader electorate in a general election will probably be blamed for the defeat — by political analysts and perhaps even some Republicans.



Comedian Tony Hinchcliffe last week at a Trump rally in Madison Square Garden, in which the president promised to 'kick' undocumented immigrants 'the hell out of our country' © Andrew Kelly/Reuters

But if Trump wins, he will be even more emboldened, with a mandate to implement his plans swiftly and with fewer checks, balances and restraints than he had during his first term in office. He will also have a loyal group of aides and staffers ready to execute his agenda.

“Voters know exactly what they’re getting,” says Julian Zelizer, a professor of political history at Princeton University. “It’s all in broad daylight, and if he wins — without having to cover this up, and with this being the promise — he will certainly interpret it as the country being on board. And a lot of Republicans will feel the same.”

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**On the eve of the election**, inside the campaign Trump's advisers insist they are optimistic about the outcome, citing a surge in Republicans who have already voted early, rather than waiting until election day as they have in previous cycles.

“I just think the atmosphere is pointing to probably a more substantial Trump advantage than the polling reflects,” says one person close to the campaign. “We’re running hard, we’re running on all cylinders. All our states are operating the way they should,” adds a senior Trump adviser.

Harris campaign officials dispute that assessment, saying they are “on track to win a very close race”. They believe the last remaining undecided voters are breaking their way and add that Trump is only reaching “the same voters who have voted for Donald Trump on election day in the past”.

A Trump victory would be secured if he is able to chip away at traditional parts of the Democratic coalition, such as Black, Latino and young voters — especially men — while also shoring up his support in rural conservative areas and limiting losses among college-educated suburban voters.



Trump speaks from the cab of a garbage truck in Wisconsin. After he nearly tripped trying to get into the truck, Democratic vice-presidential candidate Tim Walz mocked him: ‘This dude’s nearly 80 years old, he damned near killed himself getting into a garbage truck’ © Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

The effort could fall flat, however. Harris has been trying to consolidate key parts of her own coalition, while seeking to broaden her appeal to include centrists and even moderate Republicans, which might just get her enough votes to prevail.

“Unlike Donald Trump, I don’t believe people who disagree with me are the enemy. He wants to put them in jail. I’ll give them a seat at the table,” she said during her speech at the Ellipse on the National Mall in Washington last week.

Adapting to Harris as his Democratic rival did not come easily for the former president. People close to Trump concede that he was shaken by Harris’s late entry into the race to replace Joe Biden on July 21. The quick Democratic unity around the vice-president, including big rallies in the battleground states, erased the clear advantage Trump had built up in polling throughout the spring.

**I think his closing argument is the most inexplicable thing I’ve ever seen. His inability to stick to the message . . . is hurting him in the home stretch**

But they also say that the assassination attempt against Trump at an outdoor rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, little more than a week earlier made the former president even more determined than he was previously to win back the White House.

“[The assassination attempt] put the chip on the shoulder, that let him know the stakes, and that reminded him of the opposition and the lengths they will go to, which means he just had to double his efforts,” the senior

Trump adviser says.

In the weeks after Harris entered the race, there was speculation that he might engineer a shake-up of his top campaign staff, as he had done at times of difficulty in previous races. But Trump decided to stick with Susie Wiles and Chris LaCivita, his duo of political strategists managing the campaign, to ride out what they described as the Harris “honeymoon”.

Trump’s earliest attacks on Harris tried to portray her as a far-left socialist, but as Harris moved towards more centrist positions and messages, he settled on a strategy to demean her qualifications, intelligence and personality in the eyes of voters, on top of criticising her record and policies.

The first sign of that came at a conference of Black journalists in Chicago in late July, when he mocked Harris — the daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants — about her racial identity, saying: “She happened to turn Black, and now she wants to be known as Black. So I don’t know, is she Indian or is she Black?”

Personal denigration has become a permanent feature of his rallies in the final stretch of the race, even though Harris was viewed by observers to have decisively won their only presidential debate on September 10 in Philadelphia.



Trump is whisked offstage in Pennsylvania after being shot at a rally in July. '[The assassination attempt] put the chip on the shoulder,' says one senior Trump adviser © Rebecca Droke/AFP/Getty Images

“She’s just not a capable athlete,” says the person close to the campaign. “There’s nothing redeemable about her at all.”

If Trump wins, that scathing assessment may be judged prescient, but if he loses, it will be seen as hubristic and arrogant, a sign of perhaps excessive confidence at his campaign headquarters in Florida heading into the final days of the race.

Trump’s proposition to America this year involves broad promises to resolve big issues facing the country, including improving the economy with lower inflation, lowering crime rates and brokering settlements to conflicts around the world, including Gaza and Ukraine.

But Trump often cannot stop himself from launching a new incendiary remark that undercuts those key messages and in some cases raises new alarm bells over authoritarian tendencies. “We have some very bad people. We have some sick people, radical left lunatics,” Trump said in an interview on Fox News. “It should be very easily handled by, if necessary, by National Guard, or if really necessary, by the military, because they can’t let that happen,” he added.

On Thursday night in Arizona, Trump lashed out at Liz Cheney, a prominent Republican critic, for being a “radical war hawk”. “Let’s put her with a rifle standing there with nine barrels shooting at her, OK?” Trump said. “Let’s see how she feels about it, you know, when the guns are trained on her face.”

Elaine Kamarck, a senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution and a former Clinton administration official, believes Trump’s rhetoric in recent weeks has damaged his chances.



Attendees listen to Trump at a conference in late July of Black journalists in Chicago, where he mocked Kamala Harris by saying: ‘She happened to turn Black, and now she wants to be known as Black. So I don’t know, is she Indian or is she Black?’ © Kamil Krzaczynski/AFP/Getty Images

“I think his closing [argument] is the most inexplicable thing I’ve ever seen. His inability to stick to the message — for instance, ‘are you better off today than you were four years ago?’ — tells you worlds about his inability to focus and that is very scary in a would-be president,” she says. “I think it is hurting him in the home stretch.”

But Kamarck does not believe the US will slip into authoritarian rule if Trump wins. “We are a system of checks and balances. We will, however, have gridlock and chaos,” she says.

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**Trump’s entourage in the final days** of the 2024 election has largely cut out traditional establishment Republican politicians and business leaders, relying instead



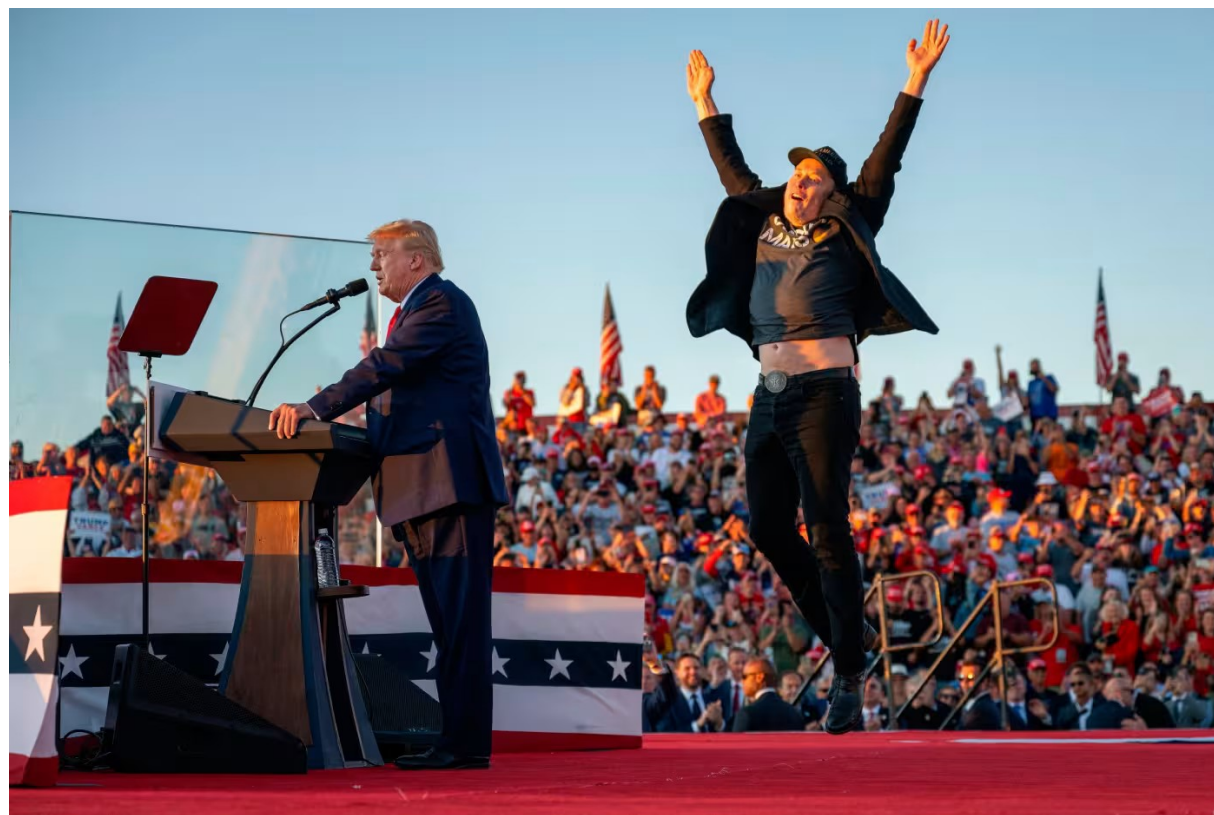
on loyal followers who embrace his agenda and fiercely defend him from any critics.

The most notable addition to his circle has been [Elon Musk](#), the billionaire entrepreneur behind Tesla and SpaceX, who has given at least \$119mn to support the campaign and other Republican candidates and launched his own mission to support Trump's ground game, especially in Pennsylvania.

Trump and Musk have a direct line to one another, one adviser to the former president said, and Trump frequently praises him. Most recently, he has been delighted that black Maga hats being worn by Musk are catching on with supporters. "I called him and I said, 'Thank you very much,'" Trump said of a conversation with Musk during a campaign rally last month. "I didn't even know we made that hat and now I find out that it's the hottest thing going. Dark Maga," he exclaimed.

Zelizer says that Musk's emergence as a "surrogate at a minimum but almost like another VP" has been both "stunning" and "relevant".

"It's not only who Musk is as a cultural figure for many Americans who do like him and revere him, but he owns a huge communications platform and is using it. It's not just a new alliance but a new foundation of Trump's influence," he says.



Elon Musk jumps on stage with Trump at a rally in Pennsylvania early last month. Musk has given at least \$119mn to support the presidential campaign and other Republican candidates © Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

Howard Lutnick, the chief executive of Cantor Fitzgerald, the financial services firm, has emerged as Trump's closest ally on Wall Street and the co-chair of his transition

team.

At the Madison Square Garden rally, which was otherwise marred by offensive comments targeting Latinos and other minorities by a comedian opening the event, Lutnick defended Trump's populist economics, which aim to replace traditional free-market conservatism with a model not seen since the start of the 20th century.

"We had no income tax, and all we had was tariffs," Lutnick said of that period. "And we had so much money that we had the greatest businessmen of America get together to try to figure out how to spend it!"

## FT Edit

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But Lutnick has also stepped on to other terrain, saying Trump needed to be elected to "crush jihad", and trumpeting Lutnick's conversations with RFK Jr about curbing the use of vaccines, which could be on the table if Trump wins a second term. People close to the campaign insist that Trump is superstitious and not promising cabinet appointments at this stage, but potential

candidates are often at his events.

At a farm in Pennsylvania last month, Ric Grenell, the former US ambassador to Germany and a potential secretary of state, popped up to talk about Chinese purchases of American agricultural land. In Allentown last week, Marco Rubio, the Florida senator, was campaigning for Trump to prop up his standing with Latinos. Billionaire hedge fund managers Scott Bessent and John Paulson are seen as the most likely financiers to be tapped for Treasury secretary, and are brimming with anticipation. "We are very excited. Trump will be great for the economy and for hard-working Americans," Paulson wrote in an email to the FT.

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**One of Trump's most bizarre campaign** trail performances came in the middle of October, when a medical emergency in the audience prompted the former president to interrupt his remarks and play some of his favourite music instead.

For more than 30 minutes, a seemingly dazed Trump [bobbled back and forth](#) to the tunes, raising questions about his mental focus that Democrats rapidly seized on. "Hope he's OK," Harris wrote on X that day. To some, his campaign events, which often last more than an hour and include long rambling, meandering streams of

consciousness, have been another sign of declining acuity.



Trump and Harris debate in Philadelphia in September. Trump's proposition to America involves broad promises to improve the economy with lower inflation, lower crime rates, and broker settlements to global conflicts © Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

When Trump nearly tripped as he tried to open the door of the garbage truck he was climbing into for a political stunt in Wisconsin last week, Tim Walz, Harris's running mate, openly mocked him. "This dude's nearly 80 years old, he damned near killed himself getting into a garbage truck," Walz said in Pennsylvania on Thursday. "You'd think, over 80 years, you'd understand how a tariff works," he added.

Among Trump's allies, the devotion and confidence in him lives on. Palantir adviser Jacob Helberg, who attended the MSG rally and has donated over \$2mn to boost Trump and the Republican party, said he's "feeling incredibly bullish" despite the latest attacks against Trump.

**People want solutions on inflation. They want solutions on national security. They want solutions on crime — and Trump is offering the better solutions**

"I think the reason that Trump is so Teflon is because this isn't about him — it's about the issues," says Helberg. "People want solutions on inflation. They want solutions on national security. They want solutions on crime — and Trump is offering the better solutions."

"He's a genius", adds Kandiss Taylor, a Christian conservative podcast host who attended a Trump rally in Savannah, Georgia

attended a Trump rally in Savannah, Georgia, last month. She says that she would never vote for Harris or any female president — a belief that still persists among some of Trump's most ardent fans.

“We're wonderful in a lot of ways. But the man is the head of the house for a reason, and I just don't think that the world is ready for a female president in America,” she said.

Inside the Trump campaign, no one doubts that he would press ahead with all of the proposals he has laid out to Americans over the past few months, in plain view.

“We know President Trump, whether he wins by one point or by a dozen points, he's full steam ahead,” says one senior aide. “That's the only gear that exists.”

*Additional reporting by Alex Rogers in Washington*

*Data visualisation by [Jonathan Vincent](#)*

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