

Opinion **Instant Insight**

America wants Trump — no ifs or buts

His probable re-election is an existential disaster for Democrats and a historic game-changer for allies of the US

EDWARD LUCE



Supporters of Donald Trump in Florida react as Fox News projects him as the winner of the 2024 presidential election © Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Edward Luce 2 HOURS AGO

So much for Kamala Harris's vibes, joy, optimism and Hollywood smile. America has rejected the sale. Four years ago, a victorious Joe Biden wrote off Donald Trump as an "aberrant moment". Given that Trump has a fair chance of winning the popular vote, in addition to America's electoral college, history will surely now award that designation to Biden. Trump, after all, is among the most-known and highly investigated nominees in US history. To elect him once may have been an accident; to do so twice came with eyes wide open. Trump is legitimately the next president of the United States.

The question is why? A large part of the story is that a sufficient number of Americans want what [Trump](#) is selling: mass deportation of illegal immigrants, an end to globalisation and a middle finger to the liberal elite's often self-parodying approach to identity, better known as wokeness. All of this outweighed whatever doubts voters had about Trump's character. That the US seems likely to elect a convicted felon, who is also indicted for attempting to overthrow the last election and is an overt admirer of autocrats, can be interpreted in one of two ways. Either voters do not take the risk that Trump poses seriously, or they know exactly what they are letting the country in for but still prefer it to business as usual.

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Either way, Trump's re-election is an existential disaster for Democrats. It is also a historic game-changer for America's allies. Democratic recriminations will come thick and fast. Any postmortem will surely highlight the fact that a visibly ailing Biden waited far too long to relinquish his party's nomination. Had Biden bowed out six months earlier, Democrats would have had time to find a better prospect than Harris. Perhaps having a real primary contest would have made no difference. To be fair to Harris, she ran a well-oiled campaign, beat Trump in their sole debate and united Democrats behind her. But she was at best mediocre whenever the conversation veered on to the economy — a topic she did her best to avoid. Lacking a compelling economic narrative would be a big flaw in any US election. Competitive primaries would have found that out.

Having so seamlessly inherited the crown, Harris had little time and incentive to correct her deficiencies. Yet she could still have confected a “Sister Souljah moment” to prove she was no Berkeley radical. Bill Clinton's critique of the eponymous Black author in 1992 showcased that he was not an old-fashioned liberal, which helped make him electable. Harris was careful to avoid association with the more outlandish progressive causes during her brief 16-week campaign. But she did not convincingly repudiate her earlier support for open borders and defunding the police, for example.

Biden can also be blamed for over-interpreting his 2020 victory. This was a result of Trump's mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, not worries about the health of US democracy. Biden won by promising to end the pandemic and restore normality to US politics. Somewhere between his nomination and his inauguration, however, Biden started to believe he had a licence for sweeping change. His superfluous \$1.9tn stimulus poured fuel on inflation that was already rising because of supply-side disruptions. To be sure, Trump posed a profound threat to US constitutional order — as he now does on steroids. Yet in Merrick Garland, Biden chose an attorney-general who was in no hurry to hold Trump to account. Historians will puzzle about that.

Much as with Hillary Clinton's 2016 loss, there are many fingerprints on Harris's defeat. But it will be far harder this time to blame foreign bad actors. Russia's Vladimir Putin will doubtless see huge advantages to Trump's re-election, notably in Ukraine. Yet it was Americans who put Trump back in office without obvious help. Either way, the Democratic blame game will be secondary to understanding what is coming next. Trump has vowed retribution and he means it.

It is entirely possible that Republicans will win a trifecta: the presidency, the Senate, which is now a certainty, and the House of Representatives, which remains in the

balance. Should Republicans take full control of Capitol Hill, there will be scant check on Trump's executive authority. The US Supreme Court already wrote Trump the equivalent of a judicial blank cheque when it ruled in July that he had sweeping immunity for his actions as president.

America has turned a decisive corner. It would be foolhardy to suppose that Trump did not mean what he said when he vowed to come after his enemies. It would also be delusional to think that he will in any way feel constrained by his country's 50-50 split. Trump has a mandate to overhaul the US in unimaginably disruptive ways. There will be no going back from the seismic outcome of America's 2024 election.

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