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‘Not all change is good’

Democratic polling strategist Celinda Lake on the upcoming US elections, contested voter blocs, and different voting patterns of men and women

In the final run-up to the presidential election, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump are neck and neck in the polls. What will decide the race?

This race will come down to the economic well-being of your family, your freedoms and who can make Americans feel more secure. Voters do not hold Harris accountable for Biden’s unpopular economic agenda, but polls show Harris is fighting the narrative of being a socialist because she’s less well-known. Trump, on the other hand, embodies ‘change’ for many undecided voters in this election. We must remind people of how chaotic, unstable and dangerous he would be. The Democratic Party needs to try to emphasise Harris’ record as an experienced vice president more than her career as a prosecutor. They also need to underscore more that not all change is good, especially not Trump.

What messages resonate best with undecided voters?

Immigration and abortion are obviously very important issues for voters in this election. Abortion is a mobilising issue across all swing states. Above all, messages about the economy and the economic well-being of the family need to be front and centre in the weeks leading up to the election, especially for undecided blue-collar voters.

Is there a particular focus on certain population groups?

The economy as an issue is, of course, important to everyone, but it is especially important to score points with two key demographic groups that Harris has had problems winning over in this election cycle: younger white male voters and Latino men.

What makes these two groups different?

For undecided young white male voters, there is a sense of political resentment and of being left behind by the system. For women with a Latin American background, messages related to the care economy are particularly important. According to our data, Latinas are assumed to begin care work at the age of 28 — regardless of whether they have children and much earlier than one might expect. Messages that focus on the well-being of the family are therefore of great importance to this group of voters. Latino men, on the other hand, want to hear about good-paying jobs that they can raise a family on. They want to hear about opportunities in small business and entrepreneurship.

Harris, a black woman running for office, does not sit well with many male Latino voters. And there is a risk that Latina voters could wind up simply voting in alignment with their husbands' votes.

Where do 'blue-collar' workers stand in this election?

Harris and Trump have both been campaigning a lot in key battleground states, many of which are home to major US industries and therefore to millions of working-class families. Populist economic messages would be very effective in persuading blue-collar workers who to vote for. Blue-collar voters are not monolithic, and blue-collar women vote more Democratic than blue-collar men. We need to make further gains with them to keep blue-collar women from voting the same way as their husbands, who they assume have more information than they do.

Have you noticed any changes in messaging in this election?

Definitely! In a more recent development, Harris has on several occasions emphasised her strong support for capitalism in order to put an end to narratives calling her a socialist. The vice president has also been vocal about the fact that she and her running mate Walz are gun owners.

Something else we observed is that while emphasising individual issues is effective with men, women tend to vote for their families. Messages regarding the economic well-being of their families, and in particular their children, make all the difference here.

And what about Trump?

Trump is moving from targeting working-class men to reaching out to older, blue-collar women. He is trying to reach them on immigration, crime and transgender health care for people in prisons. In doing so, he's trying to appeal to the fears and emotions of female voters who may not like his character and style, but do like his strength.



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