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Final countdown

Harris inspires, Trump insults — but the presidential race is still wide open. Three reasons why the Democratic candidate has no clear lead

What in the world is going on in the United States? Just a few days before the election, the race for the highest political office – the presidency – is wide open. This is despite the fact that Republican candidate and convicted felon Donald Trump is running an election campaign that is completely detached from political issues. What's more, he is insulting his opponent in previously almost unimaginable ways. Most recently, he even used the size of a famous golf pro's genitals as a sign of masculinity and therefore his strength. Apart from that, Trump lies freely, loses track during his campaign appearances or simply has music played from a tape instead of having substantive discussions.

Meanwhile, Democratic candidate Kamala Harris is focussing on specific issues for the future of the US, particularly the economy and abortion rights. She is running her optimistic election campaign with a lot of energy and enthusiasm — at least that's the impression she gives. She is supported by stars such as Stevie Wonder, Bruce Springsteen and Beyoncé, as well as Democratic heavyweights such as Barack and Michelle Obama. The stadiums at her events are well filled, as are her campaign coffers.

So how is it that Harris is not far in the lead? How is it possible that the two major liberal newspapers, the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, are denying Harris their public support? Is it simply out of economic calculation on the part of the owners? While there are many reasons, here are the three most important ones:

The truth has lost its importance.

For a start, the truth hardly seems to play a role in this election campaign. Republican vice-presidential candidate J.D. Vance, for example, is defending Trump's claim that migrants eat dogs and cats, arguing that the truth is not crucial to exposing wrongdoing. Although the major national TV stations continue to

endeavour to provide fact-based reporting, social media and regional talk shows are breaking all the barriers. Strong opinions are in demand — and often lies even more so. The truth has lost its importance.

Secondly, unlike Harris, Trump has been a known figure in the US for decades. He was already making headlines back in the 1980s when he took on the popular Democratic mayor Ed Koch. The New York tabloid press appreciated the extroverted and combative businessman, who always got up again in the face of defeat. This mixture of resilience and openness is well received in the US. His TV show *The Apprentice*, which ran nationwide from 2004 to 2017, made him as famous as Mickey Mouse. What Harris stands for, on the other hand, is much less familiar to many Americans.

One reason for this is that Harris did not run her own primary campaign, but had to – and presumably wanted to – stand in as vice president for an ageing president. An intra-party election campaign was considered too risky for the Democrats in the summer, so close to the election. On the other hand, Harris has appeared rather pale to many in her current term as Vice President. In addition, she seems to have gone through three political phases: a progressive line, which she championed in the 2019 presidential election campaign, but which clearly failed; a second role as a loyal supporter of Biden; and now a third, in which she is trying to distance herself from Biden and (at the age of 60) embody a fresh start as a younger alternative to Trump (77).

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Harris has managed to close the previous lead of Trump over Biden — a remarkable achievement, especially as a non-white woman. Her success is anything but self-evident and has been met with criticism from some men, especially from both African-American men and Latinos. These reservations often seem to outweigh Trump's racist remarks against precisely these population groups. It is also likely that this is contributing to the fact that poll ratings are now stagnating.

Thirdly, important groups of voters who have traditionally supported the Democrats are increasingly doubting the party and are more open to voting for Trump. These include the tech billionaires from California – most notably Elon Musk – who are blatantly funding Trump's campaign. They were even able to place one of their own, J.D. Vance, as a vice

presidential candidate. Similarly, African-Americans, Latinos and workers, even those in trade unions, are increasingly showing sympathy for Trump. Many men from these groups are particularly attracted to the 'testosterone veteran' Trump. Despite the pro-labour and inclusive policies of the Biden administration and Biden's personal support for striking trade unionists in the auto industry, many increasingly expect less from the Democrats.

Many Trump voters have the impression that the Democrats primarily represent the interests of the urban elite, while paying little attention to the working middle and lower classes and ignoring their concerns. This feeling goes back to Bill Clinton's presidency, when the interests of shareholders took centre stage over those of employees. However, the growing gap between rising productivity and stagnating wages goes back even further, to the presidency of Republican Ronald Reagan. Progressive economists attribute this development to the growing power of companies and the declining influence of trade unions.

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In reality, the US is in an excellent economic position. It generates half of the total GDP of the G7 countries, attracts a large proportion of global direct investment and is far more committed to new technologies than the EU. Since 2020, the country has recorded economic growth of around 10 per cent — figures that are almost unimaginable in Germany and other EU countries. Nevertheless, younger people in particular are disappointed, as they increasingly feel that the 'American dream' is in jeopardy.

The young generation of 17 and 18-year-olds is particularly affected. According to a recent article in The Atlantic, only 27 per cent still believe that the American political system is world leading — in the early 1980s, this figure was still at around 70 per cent. Three out of four members of Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2012) believe that far-reaching reforms to the political system are urgently needed, and two thirds do not feel that the US is a fair society.

In the election campaign, however, there is no room for the two parties and their leading candidates to offer fundamental answers to these socio-political challenges, such as the loss of trust in democracy and social injustice. At the same time, not even the outlines of possible solutions are discernible. Trump is relying on a policy that glorifies the past but is hardly feasible for today's America. Harris at least makes an effort and promises to alleviate the symptoms of social injustice, but without

naming its causes. This leaves an impression of helplessness, especially among swing voters. For some of them, it seems completely irrelevant that the Heritage Foundation's 2025 programme, which is closely linked to Trump, is dangerous because it calls into question the democratic separation of powers in favour of a super-president. Most probably won't read it anyway, while others will argue that radical change is needed to get the US back on track.

Despite the apparent stalemate, which will probably only resolve itself into a victory for one side and a defeat for the other days after the election, a clear victory for both sides is possible. A few thousand votes in the seven contested states of Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin could lead to a clear result that does not reflect the country's divisiveness about its future.



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