

November 2024: A Swing States Deja Vu Election?

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With the November 2024 election now just days away, the political marketing passing as political polling is intensifying. If one were to believe the in-house CNN or Bloomberg polls, Harris is leading. If Emerson and other polls, Trump is enjoying a late surge and leads. Most put national public opinion about even or at most one percentage point either way in favor of Trump or Harris. But all that's just political 'white noise'. National opinion polls mean nothing; swing states voting will determine the outcome of the national election next week just as they did in 2020 and 2016 before.

In between the national opinion 'white noise' there are some polls focusing on the seven swing states. But they are see-sawing as well, depending on their political leaning. The swing states come in two 'tiers'. The southern tier is Nevada (NV), Arizona (AZ), Georgia (GA) and North Carolina (NC). The northern tier is Wisconsin (WI), Michigan (MI) and Pennsylvania (PA). There are some early indications that Virginia (VA) and perhaps even New Hampshire (NH) may become swing states this election cycle, although that evidence is still perhaps too tenuous to conclude so.

It remains to be seen within another week in the swing states which concerns are most on voters minds: either economic and pocketbook issues, as the Trump-Vance team seems to be emphasizing; or on social issues like women's and reproductive rights as the Harris-Walz team emphasizes. Meanwhile, both sides are slinging mud at each other in the form of personality attacks, claiming the other is outright evil and, if elected, will mean the end of the USA and even civilization itself! It's perhaps more reminiscent of a high school cafeteria food fight than a normal national political campaign.

Both sides are also driving their respective versions of the threat to democracy, an issue that, after the economy and inflation, seems to be uppermost to voters as well. However, the supporters of the Democratic Party ticket and of the Republican ticket seem to be talking past each other on this topic. Democrats define the issue as the Supreme Court's various decisions circumscribing voters rights, opening up the role of money in elections even further, and Trump's behavior on January 6, 2021, and statements during the current campaign. For Republicans, the democracy issue boils down to Democrats' 'lawfare' against Trump, their ballot denialism of Republican and independent candidates alike, their internal manipulations of their own primaries selecting and then de-selecting their candidate, as well as alleged censorship initiatives of late.

Neither party bothers to mention their mutual support in recent decades in gerrymandering safe seats for themselves in the US House of Representatives. As the New York Times just this past Saturday, November 2, noted in its front page article by Catie Edmondson: Out of 435 seats contested in the US House of Representatives, only 22 are actually competitive.

Both parties in recent decades have thus safely engineered themselves near ensured majorities. The US Senate has also become virtually grid-locked at a 50-50 party split.

More important than even the issues of Democracy, immigration, and womens rights, the economic issue has polled in the top of voter concerns ever since the start of 2024. In September, the Gallup poll listed it as continuing to represent the voters' number one concern.

The 'economy' is also virtually congruent with inflation. Democrats point to success in the past year in bringing inflation rate down. But voters seem to be focusing on the LEVEL of prices, which, while they have plateaued over the past year, remain especially high. The estimates of how much range from 24% to 35%, depending on the source and what is contained in the survey or index. As another New York Times front page feature story admitted just days ago entitled '*Inflation Has Cooled, but Americans Are Still Seething Over Prices,*' the authors of the piece remarked, "Even though the growth in prices has eased significantly, prices themselves aren't getting lower".

Official US government data show that nominal hourly wages have risen during the recent inflation surge. But when adjusted for inflation, considered for all workers, not just full time employed, not estimated as an average but as a median, and considered as weekly earnings, not just hourly wage, then other government data show real pay has been declining the past two years. And that's even before higher costs of rising interest rates and taxes are factored in, which the price indexes don't include. It's not surprising that the Trump-Vance team talk about 'take home pay' and not unadjusted hourly wages as the Harris-Walz camp point out.

It is interesting that the September Gallup poll showed that the economy issue was not among the top five concerns for Democrat voters, while it ranked especially high for Republicans and most independents. This may prove the Harris-Walz team's ultimate political 'Achilles Heel', especially in the three northern swing states, WI-MI-PA, which for decades have struggled with the impact of de-industrialization, offshored jobs, free trade, small business decline, and related issues associated with economic decline.

It is perhaps a characteristic of human beings to selectively remember the good times and block out the bad. It's also a characteristic to recall more recent events more clearly than the more distant. If true, it means they as voters are apt to remember the more pleasant events of Trump's prior term than the more negative; and focus on the more negative of Biden's more recent term and the positive events less so.

If so, then the current 2024 election will be more or less a repeat of the 2016 when Trump flipped the seven swing states—and especially the northern tier—from the Democrats. If not, then the election in the swing states will appear more like the 2020 election when the opposite happened and Trump lost control of most of the swing states.

It's perhaps interesting on this even of the 2024 election to consider what happened in the critical swing states in both the 2016 and 2020 elections. What can be learned from those experiences, in particular in the critical swing states that will determine the 2024 election again, as they did in 2016 and 2024.

Swing States in the 2020 Election

In 2020, Trump narrowly lost the electoral college (EC) and thus the election. The EC tally was 306 for Biden and 232 for Trump. In 2020, Arizona and Georgia were lost to Biden and to the Democrats by the narrowest of margins. In the case of Georgia, it was by less than .01 of votes cast. Trump also lost Nevada narrowly by a 16,000 vote swing out of 1.7m votes but won North Carolina handily. In contrast to Trump's narrow losses in 2020 in three of the four southern swing states (Nevada, Arizona, and Georgia) in 2024 Trump now has comfortable margins in all four in the southern tier once again just weeks before November 5. However, even if he wins all four, it is not sufficient to get to 270 electoral votes. That means the election's final outcome will be determined in the northern tier states in 2024—just as it had in 2020 and 2016.

In 2016, Trump won all three northern tier swing states of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania (along with three of the four southern tier). Then in 2020 lost all the 'northern tier' swing states again.



The northern tier states have together 46 electoral college votes. 270 EC votes are required to win. In 2020, Biden won 306. Without all three northern states, Biden would have tallied only 260 EC votes and thus lost the election. Trump would have tallied 276 and won it. So it is clear whoever hopes to win the presidency must carry all three northern states—especially if they can't carry any of the four 'southern tier' states of Nevada, Arizona, Georgia, and North Carolina.

After Trump won the three northern states in 2016, Biden flipped the northern tier by having no standout negative track record of his own for Trump to attack. Moreover, Biden had Trump's 2020 vacillating Covid response record plus the deep economic contraction of 2020 to hang over Trump's head. Another positive for Biden in 2020 was direct campaign rallies, and physical appearances were not a factor in summer-fall 2020 as the Covid epidemic raged. Biden could and did run his 2020 campaign mostly via media, his appearances recorded from his home in Delaware.

In short, Trump's political stumbles addressing Covid, the deep recession in 2020 he got tagged with despite bipartisan Congressional support for the shutdown of the economy, and the interruption to normal campaigning gave Biden and the Democrats enough edge to take back the northern tier states again in 2020. However, none of those factors prevail today in 2024.

The Democrats no longer have today any of these advantages they had in 2020—Covid is not an issue, the 2020 bipartisan induced economic recession is in the past as far as voters

are concerned (as probably are the January 6, 2021 events as well), and Democrats themselves are now carrying significant economic baggage of their own in the form of an inflation surge the past four years between 24% to 35%, depending on the source cited. In addition, 4 to 5 million undocumented immigrations have entered the USA the past four years, according to US government statistics, lending credence to Trump's claims it's an issue (which a number of polls confirm is in the top 5 issues for voters).

The Swing States in the 2016 Election

The importance of the northern swing states was evident in 2016 as well as in 2020 and played a major part in Hillary Clinton's upset loss in 2016 to Trump. Most analysts agree she lost the 2016 election because she hardly campaigned at all in the northern tier states, thinking they were solidly Democrat as they had been under Obama and in decades past.

But the US political and election landscape began changing dramatically in the 21st century and especially after 2008, which Hillary failed to consider in her 2016 campaign strategy and her ignoring of the northern tier:

Many traditional union and blue collar voters had left the northern swing states in the previous two decades before 2016, largely due to the prior deindustrialization and trade policies of the Democrats since 1992. Nor did the economic policies of the Democrats following the 2008 economic crash and election benefit workers in the northern tier states very much (or workers in general, for that matter). Obama's \$787 billion rescue plan response to the 2008-09 economic crash that he introduced in February 2009 did not filter down to working and middle class families, composed as it was largely of business tax cuts and grants to the states. As result, it took seven years, until 2015, for jobs lost during the 2008-09 recession to return to the level of 2007. Moreover, economic growth rates in GDP terms post-2008 were barely half normal under Obama from 2009 to 2015 compared to what they averaged after the ten prior US recessions since 1948. Free trade policies under Obama in the post-2008 period continued to offshore good paying manufacturing jobs. And his Affordable HealthCare Act passed in 2010 did not get implemented until 2015; in the interim health care costs surged.



By the 2016 election, Democrat policies since 1992 thus undermined Democrats' own traditional blue collar base in the northern tier swing states—just as Hillary erroneously assumed the so-called 'blue wall' of Democrat support was still solid in the region and didn't bother campaigning there much. Hillary's excuse after the election was to ignore her strategic error in the campaign and instead blame the Russians for interfering with the election on behalf of Trump—without explaining exactly how that cause and effect occurred.

That campaign theme of ‘Putin’s the reason’ continued into the 2020 campaign and still reverberates to this day in 2024.

As the French saying goes, ‘everything changes but nothing changes’ (plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose). That saying applies to US the last three national election cycles since 2016. Midterm Congressional elections as well, where Congressional control has shifted between the two parties by single digit seats in both the US House and the US Senate. It is highly likely therefore that the 2024 election will reveal a swing back of more of the seven (or eight) key swing states from the Democrats, just as those states wobbled back and forth between Republicans and Democrats since 2016 (and one might loosely argue since 2012 as well perhaps).

Is November 2024 a Déjà vu Election?

In the pending November 5 election, the Democrats can write off the swing states of Arizona and Georgia for Harris, where additionally this time around Trump forces have also re-established an iron tight grip over Georgia’s and Arizona’s election commissions. There will be no close vote tally in either state this time.

Trump’s aggressive stand on Immigration also may help him in Arizona, and perhaps to some lesser extent in Nevada and Georgia perhaps. So too will his various tax proposals targeting working class voters, employed and retired: i.e. to end taxing social security monthly benefit payments (imposed in the 1980s by Reagan)—which plays especially well among the retiree population in Arizona; and ending taxes on tip wages and overtime pay that is popular among the large population of leisure & hospitality service workers in Las Vegas and Reno, Nevada.

As for North Carolina, it hasn’t voted Democrat in national elections for some time and most likely won’t in 2024. The recent Hurricane Helene and slow response by the Biden administration providing federal government aid, just as the voting cycle begins, is not a positive for Democrat votes in that state. As for Georgia, as noted, Democrats barely won in 2020 by the narrowest margin and due no doubt to the special circumstances of the 2020 election and the economy. Georgia voters almost certainly won’t vote Democrat again in 2024 either.

In short, it appears Trump has a strong advantage in all the four ‘southern tier’ swing states going into the final weeks of the 2024 election. That means the election will come down to which candidate prevails in the three ‘northern tier’ swing states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—just as the three proved critical in the 2020 and 2016 elections.

And here’s an important arithmetic fact: Should Trump take the four southern tier states—which is more likely than not—that means Trump only has to win one of the three northern tier states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania in order to win 270 Electoral College votes and the election. In contrast, should Harris lose all the four southern tier states, she has to win all three of the northern tier to get to the required 270 Electoral College votes.

Since the history of both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections shows that outcomes are largely determined by what happens in the northern tier states (and to the southern tier to some extent as well), it’s not coincidental therefore that both candidates, Trump and Harris, are now in 2024 spending most of their funds and time campaigning in person up and down

the three northern states, with occasional forays into the four southern states. Or their brief appearances raising money in the rich donor states of California or New York.

Meanwhile, voters in the rest of the country remain mostly spectators as the two candidates rarely visit the remaining 43 states that are solidly in the candidates' respective camps.

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Featured image: Voting signs in Spanish, English, and Chinese show the way to the polling station. Photo by Tim Brown / [Flickr](#).

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