

Understanding Trump's Reelection

written by Samuel Farber | January 5, 2025



Why did Trump win? What did Harris and the Democrats do wrong?

Ignoring the advice of luminaries ranging from Sun Tzu, the Chinese general and philosopher to Star Trek's Captain Kirk who recommended going on the offensive as the best defense, Kamala Harris ran a presidential campaign that was overwhelmingly defensive if not altogether in flight from the enemy. But it was not only Kamala. Democratic candidates for high office throughout the United States as in the cases of Montana, Ohio and Maine were more than defensive running away and openly disassociated themselves from Kamala's and Walz's presidential campaign.

These are just symptoms of the decline of the Democratic party as the supposed party representing the working class and social progress. In part this has been due to the party looking to the upper middle class, college educated section of the population as their new electoral audience. This strategy was put forward by Charles Schumer, the current Democratic leader of the Senate when he proclaimed in 2016 that "for every blue-collar Democrat we lose in western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two moderate Republicans in the suburbs in Philadelphia, and you can repeat that in Ohio, and Illinois and Wisconsin." Rather than attempt to win over the large number of Trump sympathizers who are not hard right-wingers, Hillary Clinton dismissed them all as "deplorables." Since then, major states like Ohio and Florida that were considered competitive have become unambiguously Republican, while Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan are becoming harder to maintain in the Democratic column. Finally Democratic advances in states like Virginia and Georgia are far from being fully consolidated.

One sector of the population that the Democrats are very active and anxious to recruit are the richest capitalists. Bernie Sanders, who seems to be reexamining his support for the Democratic Party responded to *The Nation's* John Nichols as to whether the Democratic leadership will learn the lessons of their defeat and stand with the working class against the powerful interests that dominate our society, that such a change was "highly unlikely. They are much too wedded to the billionaires and corporate interests that fund their campaigns." (*The Nation*, November 26, 2024) In this context, not much has been said about Tony West, Kamala's brother-in-law and a major campaign adviser who is a senior vice president and chief legal counsel of Uber from which company he took a leave of absence to work for his sister-in-law's presidential campaign. As we know, Uber has been involved in an extensive international campaign to make sure that its employees are considered contractors and not workers entitled to all the rights and protections of labor law.

The issue was placed on the California ballot in 2020 as Proposition 22 that if approved would have denied labor rights to all Uber workers. At the head of the campaign in favor of the proposition as Uber's paid organizer was Laphonza Butler, a Black and LGBTQ former union organizer as well as

former head of the California Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Proposition 22 won and Ms. Butler, aside from her victory in favor of the proposition got a big tribute when the Democratic governor of California Gavin Newsom appointed her as Dianne Feinstein's replacement in the U.S. Senate in October of 2023. She will have served for well over a year as an unelected office holder, until Adam Schiff, the newly elected Democratic Senator, takes office in January of 2025. Besides being an insult to the California and U.S. labor movements, actions such as these put into great question the supposed Democratic loyalty to unions, let alone the capacity of the Democratic Party, who enthusiastically joined the neoliberal bandwagon decades ago, to recover the support of American workers.

The only important policy issue in which Kamala unambiguously held a progressive stand in her presidential campaign was to support women's right to abortion. Otherwise, she ditched the traditional liberal (and left) opposition to fracking, leading inevitably to the greater production and consumption of oil and gas with their detrimental effect on the environment. On gun control, she made a big point of declaring that she owned a gun and was willing to use it against any intruders while in a much less prominent note restated her support for a ban on assault weapons and for a more thorough background checks on gun purchasers. *The Economist*, a journal critical of Trump but not known for its leftism predicted in its October 10, 2024, article "The Trumpification of American Policy" that "whoever gets to 270 electoral college votes on November 5th, Mr. Trump's ideas will win. He, not Mrs. Harris, has set the terms of this contest, American policy has become thoroughly Trumpified." As the journal further explained, on trade policy, Harris would have kept most of the tariffs Trump imposed in his first term. On taxes, she moved to the right of President Biden with her support of most of the cuts benefitting well off Americans signed by Trump in 2017 while promising to raise rates only for those earning over \$400,000 a year. *The Economist* also pointed out that her immigration policy was to endorse the most conservative bipartisan reform proposal this century including shutting down asylum applications when the flow of irregular immigrants is high.

However, while *The Economist* was correct in its brief description of Harris immigration policy, it did not grasp the enormity of Harris and the Democratic Party's betrayal of undocumented immigrants. We only need to consider Trump's singling out of undocumented immigrants as one of the principal targets of his campaign, farcically accusing them of eating pets in Springfield, Ohio, and as being criminals and rapists, very much in line with his long-standing rhetoric degrading and dehumanizing immigrant populations. Despite her obvious distaste of Trump's comments about immigrants during their only debate, neither Harris, her vice-presidential candidate Walz, nor any other prominent Democrat defended undocumented immigrants or challenged the veracity of Trump's entirely false charges about the supposed criminality or economic parasitism of undocumented immigrants. These charges expressed Trump's willingness to propagate big lies in the tradition of Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister.

Thus, for example, it has been known for quite some time that in fact the offending rate for undocumented immigrants is lower than the rate for U.S. born citizens. The reputable National Institute of Justice whose motto is "advancing justice through science" published a study on September 12, 2024 analyzing arrest records in the state of Texas, not a state likely to overlook suspected law-breaking on the part of documented or undocumented immigrants, that showed that during the period of 2012 to 2018 undocumented immigrants in that state were arrested at less than half the rate of native-born U.S. citizens for violent and drug crimes and a quarter of the rate for native born citizens for property crimes, according to the National Institute of Justice.

Moreover, the notion that immigrants, whether documented or not, constitute an economic burden on the country ignores that wide sectors of the economy such as agriculture (where more than half of its workers are estimated to be undocumented), construction and a whole series of services

provided by hotels, restaurants, cleaning, care services and the delivery of all kinds of documents and objects depend to a considerable degree on immigrant labor, much of it undocumented. Nevertheless, the consensus among professional economists is that immigration has a small impact on the state of the economy as a whole although some economists have actually maintained that immigration may increase the GDP of the nation thereby helping to create employment for others besides themselves. Even the more “reasonable” expectation that immigration may have a negative effect on specific industries and localities even if it has little effect on the total nation’s labor force has been challenged by economists such as the Canadian American David Card. Card took advantage of the “natural experiment” provided by the large-scale entry of Cubans into the South Florida labor market during and shortly after the “Mariel” exodus in the spring of 1980 to find that it had no measurable effect on wage levels in the area.

The Rise of inflation as the Number 1 Issue

Throughout the 2024 presidential campaign the number 1 issue in the minds of a substantial section of the electorate was the high inflation that characterized the economic crisis affecting the country. It is worth noting that, at the national level, 39 percent of voters mentioned the economy and jobs as their most important issue, almost double the rate for voter concern with immigration, the second most important issue affecting 20 percent of the electorate.

The economic historian Adam Tooze has explained that the substantial increase in food and energy prices in 2021 and 2022 was worse than the inflation caused by the oil embargo caused by the 1973 Arab Israeli war and was only surpassed in recent decades by the effect of the Iran crisis of 1979. As Arun Gupta summed it up (*Jacobin*, November 19, 2024) from 2021 to 2023, auto-loan delinquencies surged 50 percent for households in the bottom half of income distribution, and credit card delinquencies rose 34 percent from the eve of invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 to October 2024 for the total population. In addition, gasoline prices rose from \$3.41 in January 2022 to \$5.03 a gallon by June of the same year. Many fast-food items have risen by 50 to 100 percent from 2021 to 2024, and grocery bills rose by 22 percent. Considering this truly disastrous situation, liberal commentators such as Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman greatly emphasized in his *New York Times* columns the decline of inflation’s *rate of growth* without taking at least equal notice of the stubborn consolidation, and its terrible effects, of the recently established high degree of inflation. It is hardly surprising that Krugman followed this analytical road because of his defense of the Biden/Harris presidential campaigns and at a deeper level, because of his unwillingness to advocate radical measures to *reduce* the class impact of the existing level of inflation such as indexing all wages and salaries and taxing the super profits feeding inflation.

The Mirage of Trump’s Capitalist Success

As consistently as inflation remained the top issue in the 2024 presidential campaign, so did Trump maintain a clear advantage over both Biden and Harris in public opinion polls as the candidate most likely to succeed in handling economic affairs presumably because as a multimillionaire investor he was most qualified to succeed in this area. Thus, for example, a working-class citizen of Latin American origin interviewed on television, expressed many reservations and objections about Trump but quickly concluded that he would nevertheless vote for him by uttering two words, namely “the economy.”

This political phenomenon calls for analysis on several levels. At the simplest, most obvious level, it is not the case that Trump was an unqualified success as a capitalist, let alone an American model of capitalist achievement. As I pointed out six years ago in my article “Donald Trump. Lumpen Capitalist” (*Jacobin*, October 19, 2018) Trump had declared bankruptcy no less than six times, five times for his casino investments and once for his stake in the New York Plaza Hotel. In the same

article, I cited business historian Gwenda Blair in her account of the numerous difficulties that Trump faced in the nineties in negotiating his huge bank debts, so much so that as John Feffer noted in his article "Trump's Dirty Money" there was only one bank left, the Deutsche Bank, then noted for its highly questionable legal and ethical behavior, willing to give him credit.

It was precisely Trump's serious difficulties functioning as a relatively "normal" big capitalist in addition to his strong Lumpen inclinations going back to his close relationship with McCarthyite attorney Roy Cohn, a model specimen of amorality and cynicism, that led Trump straight to his shyster ways of making money such as his fraudulent Trump University and Trump Foundation, and more recently to promote and make money on trading cards, self-promotional materials, very expensive Bibles and \$100,000 watches as well as becoming involved in crypto currency enterprises. We only need to imagine the reaction of many U.S. media organs if such activities had been undertaken by a woman candidate, or a politician with a Black or Latin American background. Finally, even as President of the United States, Trump engaged in corrupt practices to benefit himself and his family. As the *Washington Post* columnist John Rogin tells us in his book *Chaos Under Heaven*, Trump's son in law Jared Kushner often sided with the Wall Street wing of the administration represented by Steven Mnuchin and Gary Cohn who were generally opposed to tariffs. At Trump's first summit meeting with Chinese leader Xi in April of 2017, the threat of tariffs was put off and Trump desisted from his campaign promise to formally brand China as a currency manipulator. Xi had not yet left the summit meeting when the Chinese government approved three provisional trademarks for Ivanka Trump's (Jared Kushner's wife) company, allowing her to sell jewelry, handbags, and spa services in China. (Cited in Robert Kuttner, "The Import of Exports," *The New York Review of Books*, December 19, 2024, 72)

Class Optics and Class Action

On a more complex, and less than obvious level, what if Trump had been something hard to imagine, an exemplary, flawless and clean big capitalist? Would it have then been appropriate to see such an ideal person elected as President on the grounds that it would be good for the economy? No, that notion would be equally groundless. Even the "best and nicest" big individual capitalist will tend to look at social reality through a capitalist ideological and political lens which will exclude some possible solutions to problems and include those "solutions" that are compatible with their capitalist ideological and political outlook. Thus, for example, raising interest rates to combat inflation is not merely the "neutral and technical" government measure often portrayed by the press. Although certainly complicated in its causes and effects, there is a class kernel, invisible to many, in that this apparently "neutral" measure can cool the economy in a way which is much more likely to increase unemployment and more generally depress working class living standards.

Thus, economic "solutions" must be compatible with capitalist class interests, and the outlook of big capitalists are generally rooted in the social circles (social clubs, trade associations, etc.) to which the individual capitalist belongs and from which he or she draws not only ideas and ways of life but also personal loyalties and even emotional support. In other words, the capitalist in question inhabits a different material (and psychological) world from that occupied by, for example, an industrial or white-collar worker.

It would be a mistake to think that the issue we are presently discussing resides in that Americans who think that Trump would be good for the economy may be ignorant or naïve. That may be so, but it misses the crucial issue of the hegemonic political culture in the country at large. Outside of the right wing and especially the extreme right of the political spectrum there is no oppositional culture in the U.S. except perhaps among the Black and other racial and ethnic communities and for a left that has grown since the end of the Cold War but is not yet a major, important force by itself. In the meantime, however, those who think that Trump "will fix the economy" are not significantly

influenced by any progressive oppositional culture, which would almost “instinctively” reject the notion that multimillionaires could have the people’s interests at heart. In many other capitalist countries that lack the individualist background of U.S. political culture, the prevalence of an oppositional culture would lead most people to the opposite conclusion; namely, precisely because the candidate is a capitalist, he or she would *not* be good for the economy.

Of course, this is not a rigid and static situation but subject to change especially when crisis occurs, and movements develop that leave an ideological and political legacy behind them such as was the case, for example, with the millions of Americans who came of age during the Depression. This generation of Americans tended to be strongly guided by economic issues, especially economic security against uncontrolled greed and to “instinctively” reject and distrust those that even FDR himself referred to as “economic royalists.” In contrast, the sixties generation was more concerned with anti-imperialism, peace and rebellion against domestic authoritarianism than with the excesses of great economic power.

Finally, the very notion that presidential administrations are the principal or primary reason for a good or a bad economy is highly questionable. Under capitalism, profit making and capitalist accumulation are the primary objectives of the capitalist class and the great majority of its members, both at the national and, especially at the international level. It is true that the federal government has several tools at its disposal to have some effect on economic behavior such as monetary, fiscal and the economically relevant activity of the government itself such as arms spending, and public works among others. However, the power of those tools does not rise to the level of matching the national and international forces unleashed by the dynamic of business cycles and capitalist crises emerging from international capitalist accumulation and competition as witness depressions and recessions such as the great recession of 2007 to 2009.

Nevertheless, the capitalists and their media allies have a vested interest in greatly exaggerating the importance of government intervention particularly in regard to business regulation and taxation, where their immediate self-interest is most evident. Interestingly, a plain-spoken investor such as Warren Buffett, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway has declared that investors should not make investment decisions based on taxes and that holding an investment just to avoid paying taxes does not make a lot of sense. This sentiment is probably *privately* shared by many capitalists, although fewer would have agreed with Buffett that rich people are under taxed compared to the general population. Of course, Buffett’s frankness on these questions does not mean that he would be similarly unorthodox when it comes to other matters such as the undemocratic power conferred by business concentration exemplified in Berkshire Hathaway, jU.S.t to mention one obvious example.

In addition, the powers of government are politically and constitutionally limited in addressing serious economic crises. Thus, in a private economy that is still fundamentally separated from the public realm, the federal government, despite the wishes of the president, is unable to intervene in the actual investment and economic decision-making processes of capitalist businesses. This has been put to the legal test in many instances. One such critical instance involved President Harry Truman’s decision to nationalize the steel industry shortly before the steel workers’ union began a strike scheduled to start on April 9, 1952. In response, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Sawyer* that the President lacked the authority to seize the steel mills. It must be noted that Truman was not interested in seizing the steel industry per se, except as a clearly temporary means to prevent the announced strike.

The Attack on Democracy and How to Defend It

As many observers have maintained, there is no doubt that Trump’s program is substantially oriented to attacking democratic practices and institutions as expressed in its repeated threats to

avenge media organs that have dared to criticize him. The declarations made by his key appointees such as Kash Patel as the new head of the FBI are even more shocking in their crude threats against political freedoms such as press freedom. Missing in Mr. Patel's pronouncements are even a hypocritical promise to enforce the rule of law, something J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI for fifty years, had no qualms to verbally articulate even as he proceeded to persecute Martin Luther King Jr., the Black Panther Party and thousands of American radicals and fighters for equality and justice. Even so, in light of the existing political climate, that unfavorably compares to the situation in January 2017 when Trump first took office, Patel constitutes a bigger threat than Hoover ever did.

If so, how can most people defend democracy in this country? Educating ourselves in what democracy is and is not – and to study the imperiled institution and the social and political gains facilitated by it, can certainly help. But it is the political struggle to defend and extend democracy that will mobilize people to actually do something about it. It is here again, that the best defense is to take the offensive. And as it happens, there is plenty that needs to be changed to make this a more democratic country.

We can start by examining the United States' claim to be the oldest democracy in the world. In fact, one can argue that while the American system is indeed old, it is arguably the least democratic (as well as having the least generous "welfare state") among the democratic economically developed countries whether in Western Europe or elsewhere. Thus, the way the Electoral College is structured ensures that a successful presidential candidate can be elected with a minority of the popular vote as has occurred several times in recent history. This in turn is closely related to the fact that Wyoming, the least populated state in the country, has as much power in the U.S. Senate as California, the most populated state. For its part, the Senate has more power than the more popularly based House of Representatives with, for example, its exclusive right to approve the nomination of members of the Supreme Court and all other federal judges, a power the House lacks. In addition, the Senate allows a minority of senators, using the filibuster, to stop legislation they oppose.

Even the relatively more democratic House of Representatives must confront the phenomenon of redistricting, i.e., eliminating representatives, especially those representing Blacks and other racial minority groups, by changing the racial, social and political composition of their districts. The U.S. Supreme Court has declared that racial discrimination is not a legally valid reason for redistricting, but at the same time, it has considerably weakened the ability to remove racial bias in declaring unconstitutional important sections of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In addition to gerrymandering districts, there are frequent efforts to limit the minority vote through eliminating people from the voting rolls using the flimsiest excuses, preventing former felons who have completed their sentences from voting, making it difficult to register to vote, and diminishing the number of voting locations forcing people to stay in line for hours thus encouraging them to give up and leave.

Finally, it is extraordinarily difficult to amend the U.S. Constitution. Since the first ten amendments (the Bill of Rights) were approved in 1791, only 17 additional amendments have been approved in the next 233 years, and some of these had become almost non-controversial, as in the case of the 26th amendment approved in 1971 that reduced to 18 years the age for exercising the right to vote.

It was precisely these long-established features of the U.S. political system that prevented the extension of democracy especially to Black people during the long struggle for civil rights that rose to a qualitatively new level in the decades of the fifties and sixties. Going as far back as Franklin D. Roosevelt refusal to support an anti-lynching bill in Congress during his presidency, many pro civil rights bills were introduced in Congress where they were sure to perish at the hands of the block of Southern Democratic Senators that were always eager to filibuster against such legislative proposals. Contrary to a widely disseminated mythology, it was not the efforts of John and Robert

Kennedy that brought about the momentous Civil Rights Act of 1964, but the disruptions provoked by militant Civil Rights activism that accomplished that goal. In fact, Robert Kennedy tried to pacify the Civil Rights Movement by promising Foundation money to civil rights activists if they stayed off the streets and concentrated on voter registration. Civil rights groups like the militant Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) rejected Bobby Kennedy's offer outright.

Instead, it was the movement that greatly increased its political strength and activity starting with the southern sit-in movement in 1960 and culminating in the bombings and riots in Birmingham in May and June of 1963, that brought the contemporary civil rights struggle – which in the meantime had spread from the South to the U.S. as a whole – to a new pitch and intensity raising the specter of chaos and ungovernability in the then current imaginary of a highly stable United States of America. As a matter of fact, it was this concern, and the possibility of making inroads into the Black vote, that influenced the Republican Party whose Senate leader Everett Dirksen agreed to join Democratic liberals to break the Southern Democratic filibuster. It is important to note that when Martin Luther King Jr. led the Montgomery Movement for integration in December of 1955 marking the beginning of the contemporary Civil Rights Movement nobody would anticipate that in just 10 years dramatic victories would be achieved against racial segregation and for the right to vote. Unfortunately, civil rights groups did not develop long lasting organizations that would provide the continuity and strength to the development of successful long-term strategies of protest and change. Such was the case of SNCC – that was in reality an *organizing committee* – as well as of the very impressive Black Lives Matter movement of 2020. Unfortunately, neither movement left behind stable and enduring membership organizations to continue the struggle on an ongoing and regular basis.

The great breach opened by Civil Rights militancy in turn facilitated the surge of other movements to defend and extend democracy in this country such as the movement for women's rights and somewhat later for ecological and gay rights that established the foundation for today's LGBTQ movement. I should underline the fact that the very large movement against the Vietnam War was part of this historical process although it was not a democratic "rights" movement as such.

Moreover, the conservative reaction against the victories achieved by these movements was one of the principal factors bringing about the rebirth of the Right in the United States. Somewhat later neoliberalism became predominant as a response to increased competition from European and Asian capitalism. These developments, including a decline in the rate of profit in the late sixties, placed huge new pressures on U.S. corporations which translated themselves into new anti-labor offensives through increased productivity schemes, often at the cost of deteriorating working conditions, and the export of jobs abroad. These developments led in turn to a major decline in union strength.

Trump's New Course

Trump begins his second term with a new approach. He has gotten rid of the conservative but respectable politicians such as Mike Pence and of respected high-up career military officers such as Jim Mattis, John Kelly and H.R. McMaster to install in their place cabinet members who will not stand in his way and create obstacles to the exercise of his executive powers. For that purpose, he has assembled a coalition of hard right wingers such as the richest man in the world Elon Musk, who recently expressed his support for the AFD, Germany's neo Nazis, and big capitalists such as Howard Lutnick, the head of the Wall Street firm Cantor Fitzgerald, with a more visible number of lumpen politicians such as Kash Patel, Putin's friend Tulsi Gabbard and Matt Gaetz, whose scandalous life as a sexual abuser, forced him to quit even before there was a congressional hearing to confirm him. If there is anything that seems to unite these various individuals and gangs is the cult of Bitcoin, a typically adventurist investment that major respectable banks and investment house refuse to touch. Whether Trump will succeed remains to be seen, although the recent clash among his leading supporters about allowing highly skilled foreigners to immigrate to the United

States is not a good omen for Trump. Nevertheless, he does not have much to worry about as long as his liberal and left opposition remains as quiet as it has been since the November elections. Fortunately, Trump's excesses will surely bring an end to that lamentable passivity.

