



THE US IN 2024: AN ELECTION THAT WORKED AND A DEMOCRACY THAT DOESN'T

Heidi and Guy Burgess

About the Authors



GUY AND HEIDI BURGESS

Guy and Heidi Burgess have been working as a team at the intersection of research, teaching, and practice in conflict resolution and peacebuilding since the early 1980s. They taught at the University of Colorado, the University of Denver, and the Carter School at George Mason University, have co-edited one and co-authored a second book, as well as numerous articles.



But most of their work since 2000 has involved the development, direction, editing and growth of a massive online knowledge base on intractable conflict called Beyond Intractability (BI). BI has 1000s of articles, videos, and audios, contributed by over 500 authors. Since retiring from teaching in 2020, the Burgesses have contributed a lot of their own writing to BI, and have expanded its focus to democracy as a conflict system.

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Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5F,
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku
Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Tel. +81-3-3356-5481
Fax. +81-3-3356-5482
Email: contact@toda.org

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Abstract

One test of a democracy is whether or not the voters get to choose their leaders. At this most basic level, the 2024 US presidential election was a success. The problem with U.S. democracy is not its inability to hold reasonably free and fair elections. The problem is the divisive, hyper-polarized, us-or-them way in which we think about politics. It's easy to understand why both sides view contemporary politics as a battle that they absolutely, positively, must win. However, the only way out of this highly destructive confrontation is some kind of compromise that, more than elections, is the cornerstone of the democratic ideal. This policy brief concludes with three principles upon which such a compromise could be built.

Democracy at work

President Trump's re-election has obviously set the United States off on a very different, highly uncertain, and extremely dangerous political trajectory, one that will have profound impacts on the lives of U.S. citizens, as well as the many people around the world who are affected by the way in which the US acts (or fails to act).

Still, at the most basic level, the election was a success. It proved, especially to skeptical Republicans, that the voters really do still have the power to "throw the rascals out," if they don't like the direction toward which the incumbents are taking the country. In this case, the general public, with full awareness of President Trump's many faults, concluded that giving him a second term was still preferable to four more years of Biden era policies – a fact that tells you a lot about just how unpopular the Democrats' policies have become among Trump voters (and a substantial number of reluctant Harris supporters). Some of this unpopularity is doubtless attributable to the many misunderstandings that result from biased media coverage and misleading "disinformation" campaigns. Still, much more of it is likely attributable to the fact that Democratic policies really do tend to favor Democratic constituencies at the expense of Republican constituencies (a bias that President Trump is expected to reverse).

Not surprisingly, those on the left tend to see the voters' rejection as totally unjustified and their decision to re-elect Trump as one of the United States' most gigantic mistakes – a view that history may ultimately prove to be correct. Still, the test of a democracy is whether or not the voters get to choose their leaders, not whether or not those leaders support some particular partisan agenda. The people have a right to choose, and the people have a right to be wrong. After all, they are the people who have to live with the consequences.

Much of the Democratic Party's unpopularity is undoubtedly attributable to the general, anti-incumbent mood that seems to have characterized elections in many countries this year. Much of this movement can be traced to the enormous difficulties associated with keeping voters happy in today's complex and turbulent world – a world in which presidents have remarkably little ability to deliver on the kind of future that they promise. Within each partisan coalition, there are so many competing groups, with so many competing interests, and so many competing images of objective reality, that it is extraordinarily difficult to keep everyone happy.

Challenges for the Trump administration

If past experience is any guide, President Trump is going to have great difficulty keeping his disparate coalition, with its all-important swing voters, together over the next two to four years. Like those who preceded him, he's going to discover that it is much easier to amplify and campaign against the other side's faults than it is to defend one's own record – a record tainted with the inevitably tough and unpopular choices that he is going to have to make. It's easy to make extravagant promises. It's much harder to explain why one failed to deliver on those promises. What this probably means is that future U.S. elections are likely to repeat the wild swings of the political pendulum that we have seen in recent decades.

While President Trump, his supporters, and would be successors might really like to find some way to avoid having to periodically face hostile voters, we are doubtful that they will be able to escape the voters' judgment. Elections are deeply ingrained in U.S. culture. Unlike parliamentary systems that, from the U.S. perspective, hold elections on extremely short notice, the U.S. electoral calendar follows fixed cycles (two-years for Congress and four years for the Presidency). Manoeuvring and pre-campaigning for the next election starts almost immediately after the votes from the last election are counted. Politics in the U.S. is, in many important respects, a perpetual campaign.

This campaign is closely followed by a nation of "political hobbyists" who obsess over every turn of the ongoing drama. Media companies, in turn, make enormous amounts of money satisfying the insatiable demand for political news and gossip. Despite the ongoing doomsaying, it's hard to imagine the public giving up their cherished hobby and turning political decision-making over to a president-for-life (Donald Trump or anyone else).

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Still, the party that happens to be in power at any particular moment is likely to have the ability to harass political opponents with various types of threats including "lawfare" tactics that unfairly use prosecutions and other forms of legal harassment to weaken political opponents to the point where they are unable to mount effective campaigns. But if the Democrats couldn't stop Trump from running and winning, with all of their civil and criminal litigation (which most Republicans considered "lawfare" and even some Democrats believed were extremely weak and far-fetched,) it is hard to believe any other such lawfare could be successful. Yes, the incumbents may be able to tweak the election rules enough to tip virtually tied elections in their favor. Still, it is hard to see how they could get away with doing the many patently illegal things that would be required to overturn a decisive election.

Having said all this, it is important to remember that the November U.S. election, while superficially successful, was also an extremely close call. Given the level of distrust going into the election, it's quite possible that, if Harris had won (and, especially, if she had won by a narrow margin), the outcome would have been bitterly (and perhaps violently) contested. Especially worrying are the many dirty tricks that Trump and his supporters were planning for such an eventuality. While we are hopeful that the system would have been strong enough to resist such efforts, it's quite possible that we would have discovered that our optimism was misplaced.

The polarization problem

Still, the most important point that we want to make is that the problem with U.S. democracy is not its inability to hold reasonably free and fair elections. The problem is the divisive, hyper-polarized, us-or-them way in which we think about politics. President Trump isn't the problem; he is a symptom of the problem. Likewise, President Biden isn't the problem, he's a symptom of the underlying problem – the collapse of political norms that, in healthy democracies, require us to treat our political opponents in the same way that we would like to be treated.

On the left, there is a palpable fear that the tactics Donald Trump plans to use against his Democratic enemies and in defense of his efforts to reverse Democratic policies will cross the line into true authoritarianism. On the right, there is comparable anger over what the right sees as Democratic abuses of power including, most notably, its use of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) programs and cancel culture-related mechanisms to force everyone to embrace and comply with progressive views on the full range of issues.

Concerns about these hardball tactics are especially acute given that Democrats, like Republicans, have been quick to decide that narrow electoral victories give them a mandate for making massive societal changes – changes that, quite often, the public later rebels against. These changes, which tend to be driven by the activist, "true believers" who constitute the "base" of each political party, tend to neglect and disenfranchise the views of those on the other side and the many more moderate voters caught in the middle.

As we see it, our biggest problem stems from the zero-sum, win-lose way in which the activist base of both parties now frames their politics. Democrats see us as living at a time of "reckoning" when the oppressed (as defined primarily in terms of race and gender) rise up against the oppressors (primarily white male Republicans and those with traditional views on sex and family). To make this reckoning a reality, the Biden administration implemented a vast "whole of government" (or, more accurately, whole of society) campaign to use the broad array of DEI-related programs to re-educate the public and ensure its compliance with their worldview. Governmental and institutional policies have been restructured in ways that are more favourable to members of the Democratic Party's oppressed "protected classes," and less favourable to those seen as belonging to the primarily Republican "oppressor classes". (This is something that Republicans see as especially "anti-democratic.")

Also contributing to DEI-related tensions is the Democratic Party's support for largely unrestricted immigration (primarily from non-white racial groups and often from those whose cultural beliefs differ substantially from the traditional Christian beliefs that used to be dominant in the US). Adding further to the tension is the fact that the Democratic view of "social justice" emerged from, and is being most strenuously championed, by the United States' wealthiest, most educated, most powerful (and most resented) elites. These are people who often fail to acknowledge that they are on the winning side of society's great class divide, and who often look down on the relatively uneducated and disadvantaged, while still casting them as "oppressors."

By contrast, Republicans can be fairly described as a reactionary party that opposes and wants to roll back as much of the Democratic party's DEI-based reckoning as possible. They want to "Make America Great Again" by reverting to the way things were when the working classes were both more prosperous, more respected, and, of course, more white. They also want to return to a time before the culture wars, when Christian moral beliefs dominated. Not surprisingly, President Trump seems thoroughly committed to doing whatever it takes to make this dream a reality.

Viewed in this way, it's easy to understand why both sides view contemporary politics as a battle that they absolutely, positively, must win – a battle in which they will do whatever it takes to prevail, even if that means jettisoning previously cherished democratic norms and institutions. As we see it, the only way out of this highly destructive confrontation is some kind of compromise – the kind of compromise that, more than elections, is the cornerstone of the democratic ideal.

Unfortunately, the activists driving the political agenda on both sides of the divide seem unwilling to consider pursuing this kind of sensible middle ground – one that seeks to combat unfair discrimination without crossing the line into unfair reverse discrimination. As long as the most militant activists continue to dominate the two political parties and frame issues in this zero-sum, win-lose way, we think we are doomed to a continuing series of radical pendulum swings that will leave U.S. society increasingly dysfunctional and vulnerable to a wide range of dystopian possibilities.

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Coexistence, tolerance and collaborative action

The alternative is to articulate and cultivate some sort of a sensible middle ground that large numbers of people on the left, the right, and the centre could embrace as a workable, though imperfect, basis for living together in a spirit of coexistence, mutual tolerance, and, when the situation requires it, collaborative action. Such a compromise could be built around three key principles:

- Efforts to "level the playing field" should focus on providing those who have been unfairly treated with assistance based on the extent of that mistreatment, and not some arbitrary trait like skin color;
- The government should treat the cultural practices and moral beliefs of different groups equally, regardless of whether those beliefs originate from secular or religious teachings; and
- There should be a strong effort to reduce social inequities by promoting a flatter, more "value-added" social hierarchy that focuses on providing more status and compensation to those (at all levels of society) who add genuine value, and less status and compensation to those who merely claim value produced by others. (Examples include providing more respect and better pay for people in a broad range of working-class roles (e.g. teachers, construction workers, farmers, truck drivers, health aides, etc.) and less compensation and prestige for those who make lots of money using legal but unscrupulous tactics such as the complex leveraged buyouts that profit by buying and then looting and destroying companies.)

However, in 2024, voters were forced to choose between two candidates who were seen as representing the extremes of each party, and all efforts to mount a third-party, more moderate and compromise-oriented candidate (such as the one that [No Labels](#) tried to recruit) were ruthlessly squashed by the two major parties. This tells us a lot about what is wrong with U.S. democracy and the power held by the activists that dominate our two-party system. Bottom line, the U.S. needs to find some much more effective way of moving away from its us-or-them politics and replacing it with a broadly based movement that focuses on building a democracy that genuinely tries to equitably serve everyone's interests and needs.



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CONTACT US

Toda Peace Institute

Samon Eleven Bldg. 5 th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan

Email

contact@toda.org

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