



Political and
Geostrategic
OBSERVATORY
of the United States

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN THE 2024 ELECTION

Lincoln Mitchell / Political analyst, Writer,
Teacher, Columbia University

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lincoln Mitchell / Political analyst, Writer, Teacher,
Columbia University

Lincoln Mitchell, based in New York City and San Francisco, is a political analyst and a writer who teaches at Columbia University. He has contributed to CNN Opinion, NBC News, the San Francisco Examiner, and other outlets. Lincoln has authored eight books covering topics from democratic development to urban politics to baseball.

*For more of Lincoln's writing, please subscribe to his Substack:
["Kibitzing with Lincoln"](#).*

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I spent most of July 20th walking precincts in a neighborhood in the westernmost part of San Francisco with a friend I met as an undergraduate in the late 1980s. My friend and I were volunteering because another old friend from college¹ was running for mayor of my hometown and we wanted to help out. Additionally like many Democrats, by mid-July we were feeling very discouraged about national politics and believed the local level was where we could have the greatest impact of this year. Later, over lunch in one of San Francisco's many fantastic Chinese restaurants, my friend looked resignedly down at his noodles and, capturing the sentiment of many Democrats, said "I've resigned myself to another four years of Donald Trump."

Within 24 hours, American politics and our collective mood changed dramatically as Joe Biden not only announced he was leaving the race, but then endorsed his vice president Kamala Harris. Some in Democratic circles were hoping for some kind of a mini-primary or open convention, but Biden made the smart, and in fact the only realistic, decision by making it clear that he believed Harris should be the nominee.

I have long believed that Harris was an extraordinary political talent² that had been underutilized, perhaps deliberately, by the Biden administration, so agreed with Biden that a unified party behind Harris was the best chance the Democrats had. However, I was in no way prepared for the joy, celebration and the feeling of rejuvenation among Democrats that Harris's candidacy has unleashed.

The last six weeks beginning with the assassination attempt on Donald Trump, which is now all but forgotten, have been unlike any in American political history. It may seem hard to believe now, but on that morning of July 20th the Republicans had just completed a very successful convention, JD Vance had not quite revealed himself to be the strange and troubled man that he is, and the assassination attempt had humanized Trump a bit and made him seemingly less vulnerable to political attack. Trump seemed on a glide path to victory-and the future of American democracy looked very dark indeed.

It is tempting to see Biden's decision as turning American politics upside down, particularly as Harris then made a brilliant choice for vice president and had what by any measure was an extremely successful convention. However, the central paradox of American politics today is that despite the excitement and enthusiasm around Kamala Harris, who is doing better in the polls than Biden was, the election remains extremely close³, and very few voters have changed

¹ "Aaron, a Mayor Who Knows How", *Aaron2024.com*, consulted on August 8th 2024, URL: <https://www.aaron2024.com/>

² Lincoln Mitchell, "Let's At Least Think This Through First", *Kibitzing with Lincoln*, 1st July 2024. <https://lincolnmitchell.substack.com/p/lets-at-least-think-this-through>

³ "Latest Polls", Project 538, consulted on August 30th 2024: <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-general/2024/national/>

their minds despite the enormity of recent events. This is a reminder of the enduring popularity of Trump and the fascist movement he leads.

In recent weeks, there has been so much change and disruption in this election that it is tempting to overlook the continuity, but in many respects this election looks a lot like it did a year ago with Trump and the Democratic nominee virtually tied and the party coalitions largely unchanged. More significantly, despite how much has changed in American politics over the last decade as the Republican Party has transformed from a conservative party to a fascist adjacent cult, there is much that remains the same.

If an observer fell asleep around 2010, 2000 or even 1990 and woke up today they would see an election that would be very familiar than we might initially think. The Republican Party is running a rich white man who promised to cut taxes on the wealthiest, while using populist rhetoric and seeking to exploit cultural issues. This would surprise nobody who has paid attention to politics over the last half century. The major difference now is that the white nationalist subtext has now become overt.

Additionally, while Kamala Harris is clearly the first non-white woman to be a major party nominee, at any point in the last 30 years if you asked which party is more likely to nominate a woman of color for President, most people would have said the Democratic Party. Moreover, Harris's campaign messages, including a deep commitment to reproductive freedom, an issue that the Democrats have owned for at least a generation, an economic message meant to appeal to working class and lower income Americans, and a foreign policy that skews conservative as an attempt to shore up to shore herself up from attacks from the right, all would look very familiar. Even her choice of vice president, Tim Walz, would sound familiar because in 1964, 1976 and 1980 the Democratic nominee for Vice President was from, you guessed it, Minnesota.

Labor Day, which is in early September in the United States, is when the long American presidential election shifts into this highest gear. If I may use a baseball metaphor, it is now the ninth inning, and the score is tied. The race feels like it was turned upside down in the month or so beginning July 13th, but while so much has changed, it is also true that nothing has. The election is still way too close to call and the possibility of Trump returning to power, and of accelerated democratic rollback in the United States is still very real. Nonetheless, Kamala Harris has led the Democratic Party to a much better place than where it was two months ago.

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2 bis, rue Mercœur - 75011 PARIS / France

+ 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

contact@iris-france.org

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