



## U.S. Election Analysis 2024: Media, Voters and the Campaign

Early reflections from leading academics

Edited by:  
Daniel Jackson, Andrea Carson, Danielle Sarver Coombs, Stephanie Edgerly, Einar Thorsen, Filippo Trevisan, Scott Wright



## Black and independent voters: Which way forward?



Prof Omar Ali

Dean of Lloyd International Honors College at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His books include *The Independent Voter* (2023, Routledge), *In the Balance of Power: Independent Black Politics and Third-Party Movements in the United States* (2020, Ohio University Press) and *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South* (2010, University Press of Mississippi).

Email: oahali@uncg.edu

A plurality of American voters identify themselves as politically independent—neither strictly Democrat nor Republican. They do so despite having to practically vote for one or the other major U.S. political party if they want their candidate to win office, given the restrictions faced by third-party and independent candidates—from getting their names on the ballot to participating in public debates. In some states, such as North Carolina, the largest group of voters not only state that they are independent but are registered as such (technically, as ‘unaffiliated’ in North Carolina).

The pattern towards greater political independence is consistent and national: in Gallup polling from 1988 to 2023, the share of Americans who self-identified as politically independent (neither Democrat nor Republican) rose to 43%. Meanwhile, the share who said they were Democrats fell to an all-time low of 27%, the same percentage as those who identified themselves as Republican.

Also, for the first time since Edison Research began exit polling in 2004, independents’ share of overall turnout has exceeded that of one of the two major U.S. political parties: the independent share was 34%, compared with 34% for Republicans and 32% for Democrats.

So how did independents vote in 2024? Upwards of 50% of independents said they voted for Democratic candidate Kamala Harris and 45% for Republican candidate Donald Trump, amounting to a 4-percentage point increase for the Republican from 2020. But while more independent voters supported Harris over Trump, more ‘traditional’ Democratic voters turned away from their party by either not showing up to vote, voting for third party candidates, or voting Republican.

In total, *ten million fewer voters* supported Harris than Joe Biden in 2020. Trump won. Game over, at least this *second* time around.

Since 2016, Trump has served as a blunt tool for U.S. voters who have tired of, or actively oppose, the Democratic Party. To some, what appears to be emerging is a class division that increasingly favours Republicans, as seen in the disaffection from the Democratic Party among segments of its longstanding base giving their support to Trump in 2024.

Independent U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders stated on November 6<sup>th</sup> “It should come as no great surprise that a Democratic Party which has abandoned working class people would find that the working class has abandoned them” (see *Politico*). That same day, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks opined that there was “a loss of faith, a loss of trust, a sense of betrayal” among the working class regarding the Democratic Party. The next day, Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren added to the mix in

her *Time100 Voices* commentary: “On paper, the U.S. economy is the strongest in the world. But working families are struggling with big expenses like the cost of housing, health care, and childcare. Giant corporations get tax breaks and favorable rules while workers are gouged by higher prices.”

Exit polling supports these assertions: Biden carried 55% of voters who earned less than \$50,000; Harris carried 48% of those working-class voters. According to Edison Research, Harris won 85% of Black voters nationwide; Trump won 13%, up 1 percentage point from a 2020 exit poll. Even more dramatic is Trump winning 46% of Latinx/Hispanic voters nationwide, up 14 percentage points from a 2020 exit poll.

But long before Trump took over the Republican Party and long before Barack Obama became the first Black person to become U.S. President, Dr Lenora Fulani, a champion of independent voters, became the first woman and first African American to get on the ballot in all fifty states running for U.S. President. That was 1988. And when she was later asked what was more difficult in running for president, being Black or being a woman, she responded “neither, it was being independent.”

Perhaps what we are seeing is the dissolution of the Democratic Party. Probably not. It’s the longest lasting of political parties in the nation—a two-hundred-year history. But maybe, just maybe, there’s an opening to create something new among the disaffected, disrespected, and disconcerted.

So, now, what? Really? Which way forward?

Fulani might say “keep building.” But here, like so many others writing or talking about the election and what happens next, I speculate. Ultimately, it’s up to the American people to decide.