

ISSUES AND TRENDS IN U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2024

Monish Tourangbam

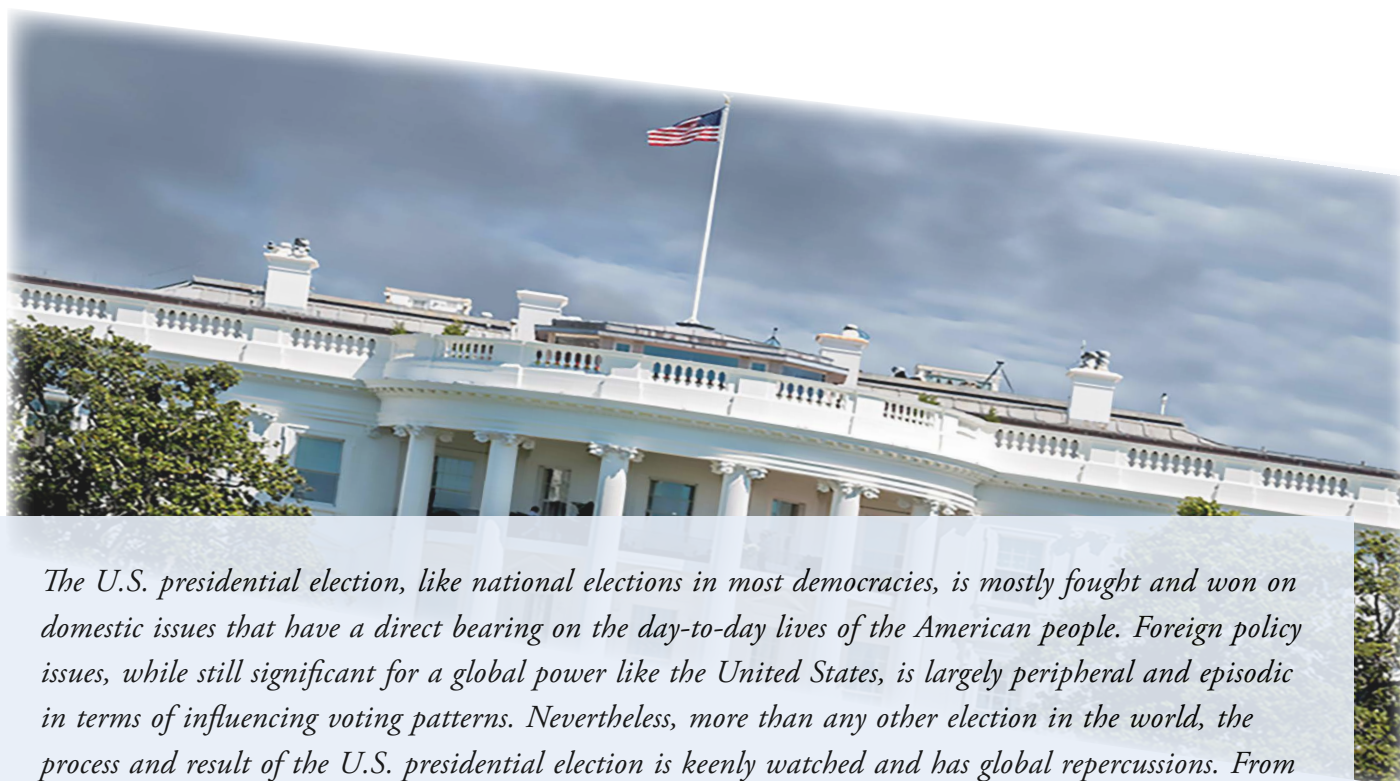


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The U.S. presidential election, like national elections in most democracies, is mostly fought and won on domestic issues that have a direct bearing on the day-to-day lives of the American people. Foreign policy issues, while still significant for a global power like the United States, is largely peripheral and episodic in terms of influencing voting patterns. Nevertheless, more than any other election in the world, the process and result of the U.S. presidential election is keenly watched and has global repercussions. From the intra-party primaries to the presidential nominations, and then to the final verdict in November, candidates will have to grapple with a host of issues, based on which American voters will elect the next U.S. president. As the election season heats up, candidates will become more hyperbolic in asserting their best plans to save American democracy at home, and American leadership abroad. An assessment of the major domestic and foreign policy issues dominating the hearts and minds of American voters is, therefore, imperative.

Despite several criminal charges hanging like Damocles' sword on his neck, former White House incumbent, Donald J. Trump's winning streak in the Republican primaries has remained quite unchallenged, with the only contender, Nikki Haley, the former Governor of South Carolina and former U.S. representative to the United Nations, also exiting the nomination race. In the democratic camp, President Joe Biden despite criticism relating to his advancing age, is poised to become the nominee, leading to the much-touted

Biden vs Trump rematch in November this year. The last election in 2020 did not transpire well, for the health of American democracy at home or its image abroad, with hardline Trump supporters, refusing to accept the verdict and storming the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. The U.S. presidential election is mostly fought and won on domestic issues with foreign policy issues being largely peripheral and episodic in terms of impact. Nevertheless, more than any other national election across the world, the U.S. presidential

election is keenly watched, and carries geopolitical and geo-economic impacts. For instance, Eurasia Group, a New York-based political risk-consulting firm, in its annual forecast ranked this election as one of the foremost global risks, with repercussions anticipated in the global security and economic environment.¹

With the presidential race inching towards the Republican and Democratic Party's national conventions in July and August, respectively, the campaign rallies will become more vicious and hyperbolic in attacks and counter-attacks. While Biden called out Trump's language against political rivals and immigrants as similar to that of the "Nazis", Trump continued to berate that America was "dying under crooked Joe Biden."² As strategists and policymakers across the world follow the process and result of the U.S. presidential election, it is imperative to assess the issues and trends dominating the electoral landscape in America.

Domestic Issues and Election 2024: The Vibe and Reality

As in previous elections, a number of issues will hog the spotlight this year as well. They will range from income inequalities to the contentious abortion rights, from questions of racial justice to that of immigration from the southern borders, from the fate of American democracy to health security and socio-political rifts in the United States. Undoubtedly, one of the most significant factors driving American elections in

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modern times is the health of the economy, or at least the vibe for the economy among American voters. Irrespective of what the more complicated numbers of the American economy tell, perceptions matter in elections. Many opinion polls have been projecting an American public pessimistic of the economic future, with many feeling dissatisfied with inflation and expressing fear that AI will replace their jobs.³

At the same time, current reportage on the American economy is showing a sunny side, with the stock market surging, rising consumer confidence on the back of easing inflation and robust growth in the job market. Many believe this might eventually be good news for Biden heading to the November polls.⁴ Every election season, especially the one where the incumbent is seeking a second term, produces polar opposite views on almost all issues. The Biden team will highlight economic trends and numbers that are broadly optimistic. Meanwhile, the Trump campaign will emphasize how well the economy functioned during the Trump presidency and in comparison, how people are wholly pessimistic about the Biden era. "Our economy has created 14.8 million jobs since I took office, unemployment has been under 4% for two full years now, and inflation has been at the pre-pandemic level of 2% over the last half year," President Biden said in an official statement after the release of the January jobs report.⁵ Writing in his *Truth Social* platform, Trump took credit for the economic upturn, saying, "This is the Trump stock market because my polls against Biden are so good that investors are projecting that I will win, and that will drive the market up."⁶

Immigration and security of the southern borders is another battleground issue in the U.S. election campaign. Given the nature of America's demography and relations with countries to its south, immigration has remained one of the most potent issues in both congressional and presidential elections. The appeal of Trump is clearly reflective of the anger and frustration among the white working-class population with the present economic and political system there, and their belief that they have so far been handed a raw

deal. They argue that the elitist system takes care of new migrants and businesses overseas at the expense of American workers.⁷ The Trump campaign has a no-holds barred rhetoric, saying, “Illegal immigration is poisoning the blood of our nation. They’re coming from prisons, from mental institutions—from all over the world.”⁸

Border security and immigration was a centerpiece of Trump’s successful campaign in 2016, and many reports and opinion polls suggest that it has yet again become a focal point in 2024.⁹ Joe Biden fought the 2020 election taking the opposite spectrum of Trump’s harsh immigration policy, vouching for a humane approach to dealing with immigrants while securing the borders. However, reports showing a record upsurge in undocumented immigrants’ entry into the United States have made matters more complex. This year, Biden enters the electoral grind neither wanting to toe Trump’s path nor in the position to look soft on the issue.¹⁰

Abortion rights is emerging to be another big-ticket issue, with deep divisions between the two parties. For instance, President Biden has gone for the jugular, reminding voters that the Trump-era judicial appointments at the Supreme Court led to the overturning of the decades-old *Roe vs Wade* decision that provided the constitutional right to an abortion.¹¹ The Democrats believe that the restrictions and bans on abortions in different states, and the apprehensions it has caused, would push for more voter turnouts to oppose a Trump sequel, and instead vote Biden back to the White House for a second term. Many see a reversal of such a landmark decision on women’s rights and civil rights in general, as a worrying sign for the future of American democracy.¹² The Biden campaign, facing low popular ratings, seems to be betting big on the abortion issue to attract base voters. Trump is ambiguous on social issues, such as this one, and might like to sit on the fence, or cherry-pick his position depending on the audience rather than being seen as ultra-conservative.¹³

The threat to democracy, not in some faraway foreign land but inside the United States, from Trump and his hardline supporters occupies the pivot point of Biden’s

“Current reportage on the American economy is showing a sunny side, with the stock market surging, rising consumer confidence on the back of easing inflation and robust growth in the job market. Many believe this might eventually be good news for Biden heading to the November polls.”

campaign for a second innings. While Trump continues to rally his supporters behind the ‘Make America Great Again (MAGA)’ slogan, the same has been accused of deepening the socio-political divide in the country. Most alarmingly, Trump’s refusal to accept defeat in 2020, and the violent incidents that rocked the Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, are seen as unprecedented threats to a peaceful transition of political power in a democratic country. “Democrats, independents, mainstream Republicans: We must be stronger, more determined, and more committed to saving American democracy than MAGA Republicans are to — to destroying American democracy,” said Biden speaking at the Independence Hall in Philadelphia in September last year.¹⁴

Trump, on the other hand, has hurled attacks on Biden’s democratic credentials, blaming the incumbent President for using political power to launch criminal charges against him. Trump has accused Biden of “weaponizing government against his political opponents like a Third World political tyrant” and said, “Joe Biden is not the defender of American democracy, Joe Biden is the destroyer of American democracy.”¹⁵ The highly polarized state of politics and society in America and tug of war between the federal and state government will also animate the campaign

on critical issues such as law enforcement and racial justice, healthcare and social security benefits.

Foreign Policy and Election 2024: Home and the World

Joe Biden entered the White House in 2021, promising a foreign policy for the American people, one that recognized an undeniable linkage between foreign policy and domestic politics.¹⁶ If foreign policy does matter in any national election, it does so most prominently in the case of the United States with its global footprints, and the presence of ethnic lobbies within the country, that try to influence policy responses to foreign wars and crises. Biden's foreign policy promises and tenure are associated mostly with his call for restoring America's global leadership and as the champion of multilateralism. A restoration of normalcy of relationships with close allies of the U.S., mostly among the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners markedly differentiates his administration from that of Trump's. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the raging conflict in the Middle East have certainly rocked the boat, and they will form the focus of much political bickering between the Democrats and the Republicans during the election campaign.

Moreover, broader structural circumstances have pushed the United States and China towards a more

***“The appeal of Trump is clearly reflective of the anger and frustration among the white working-class population with the present economic and political system there, and their belief that they have so far been handed a raw deal.*”**

confrontational rivalry, and the case of who corresponds with Beijing more aggressively on many issues of contention, including trade, Taiwan, and technology, will see presidential candidates from both parties going for a showdown as the electoral race heats up. Otherwise, there is a more or less bipartisan consensus on China as the pre-eminent threat to America's global primacy, and more particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Biden's presidency has even called the U.S.-China rivalry as one between democracies and autocracies.¹⁷ The case of new leadership in Taiwan, and China's growing aggression and assertion of its control, and the future of U.S. support for Taiwan, in case Trump returns to power, remains a moot point. Will it be easier to deal with a transactional Trump or a Biden calling for a battle of democracies vs autocracies? That is a question best answered in Beijing.¹⁸

A second term for Biden in the White House could mean more predictability in America's foreign policy orientations while a return of Trump would throw up more uncertainties, particularly among America's allies who experienced four years of disruptive behavior during Trump's presidency. President Trump was prone to exuding America's greatness at the cost of camaraderie with allies, and could often be seen calling out partners as free riders on America's commitments. Responding to speculations and concerns of a Trump comeback, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg commented, “I believe that the United States will continue to be a staunch NATO ally, regardless of the outcome of the U.S. election, because it is in the U.S. interest.”¹⁹ Four years of Trump have also taught the folly of ignoring the continuities in U.S. foreign policy despite Trump's unusual verbal bravado and out-of-script speeches.²⁰

Even as the Biden administration, in December 2023, managed to pull together a package of weapons and equipment for Ukraine, the going has been getting tough with the Republicans in the U.S. Congress, who would like to limit America's largesse. In fact, the Biden government's statement on the release of the aid package, emphasized, “It is imperative that Congress act swiftly, as soon as possible, to advance our national security interests by helping Ukraine defend itself and

secure its future.”²¹ The party divisions on the Ukraine issue are becoming more glaring, with some opinion polls showing decreasing support for Ukraine among Democrats, and more drastically among Republicans.²² Quizzed on his stand on the issue, Trump commented, “We’re giving away so much equipment, we don’t have ammunition for ourselves right now.”²³

Moreover, the U.S. has been conducting military strikes against armed groups in the Middle East, responsible for targeting American forces stationed in the region. Maritime routes in the Red Sea have also seen American forces in action against Houthi rebels. Such military responses coming in the wake of the election season put the Biden administration in a difficult place. The incumbent needs to appear strong and unrelenting in the face of threats to America’s national interest, but at the same time is bound to stay cognizant of anti-war voices among the American voters.²⁴ Moreover, support for Israel’s counter-terrorism response plus the raging concerns about the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in Gaza is already creating political minefields for the presidential candidates this year, and it remains to be seen how this issue affects voting patterns, particularly in swing states.²⁵ Further, with a probable Biden vs Trump rematch on the cards, climate change and the transition to a greener economy will take center-stage, given Trump’s earlier record of withdrawing from the Paris Agreement.²⁶

Conclusion

Election campaigns are a curious mix of optimism and pessimism, a mirror of past follies, a vision of a better future and a furious duel between “us” and “them” first within parties, then between parties. As the intra-party primaries lead to the presidential nominations, and then to the final verdict in November, candidates will have to grapple with the outcomes of a number of unknowns, which among others, include independent voters as well as the rise of artificial intelligence and deepfakes in democratic elections. As the campaign progresses, candidates will become more hyperbolic in asserting their best plans to save American democracy

at home, and American leadership abroad. Regardless of who emerges victorious, this election does not seem to offer much hope and enthusiasm for American voters. While Donald Trump’s candidature might still excite the Republican base, his disruptive four years of presidency and current criminal indictments do not make him an aspirational figure. On the other hand, Biden’s four-year record, his advancing age and reports of ill health are not a cause of bright national mood either. As always, America’s election is going to be fought on deeply domestic issues, but the result of this election has always had consequences far beyond its borders. Irrespective of what 2024 brings forth, Donald Trump, the impact of his presidential campaigns and the four years of his White House occupancy has undoubtedly left an indelible impact on the Republican Party, the broader American political landscape and on America’s engagement with the wider world.

Author –

Monish Tourangbam is a New Delhi-based strategic analyst and the Honorary Director of the Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies. He is a regular commentator on international affairs and Indian foreign policy.

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