

Election 2024: The Breakthrough of the Trump Message

By Don Sutherland

In the wake of Donald Trump's victory, Democrats are scrambling for answers that explain their defeat in the Presidential race. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders issued a statement that declared, "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." On an appearance on "The Interview" former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi implied that President Biden left the race too late to allow for a stronger candidate to emerge. "Had the president gotten out sooner, there may have been other candidates in the race," she explained. Those overly simple explanations miss the deeper structural dynamics in place during the 2024 campaign: the political environment was fertile ground for Trump's authoritarian populist message.

The 2024 election took place in the long shadow of the receding COVID-19 pandemic that had resulted in significant economic turmoil and the worst bout of inflation since the early 1980s. In 2022, the annual inflation rate peaked at 8.0%, the highest since 1981 when it stood at 10.3%. The Pandemic and resulting turmoil were a searing experience. The pain was still sufficiently fresh in the minds of many voters to be tapped by a candidate like Trump. Democratic institutions such as the legal system and news media had weakened since the prior election, making it more difficult for the public to sift fact from fiction, much less to fend off a tsunami of disinformation. The nation remained deeply polarized.

These dynamics created fertile ground for an authoritarian populist message to break through. The overly simple nature of such a message spares voters of the need to wade through complexity and makes such messages easy to understand and disseminate. That the actual explanations for the events addressed by authoritarian populists are complex and remedies to those challenges require comprehensive policy solutions are irrelevant.

Below are examples of how authoritarian populists address issues identified in news articles and reader comments to those articles.

Fertile Ground for an Authoritarian Populist Message:

Issue	Authoritarian Populists' Response
Economic concerns:	
Economic Anxiety	Authoritarian populists exploit existing economic anxiety and fuel it further by promoting narratives of decline, victimhood, and resentment. They often scapegoat specific groups, such as immigrants, minorities, or "globalist elites", blaming them for economic woes. Additionally, they promise simple solutions to complex problems, such as bringing back manufacturing jobs or renegotiating trade deals, which may resonate with people feeling powerless and frustrated.
Inflation	Authoritarian populists use inflation to amplify existing economic anxieties and further their agenda. They blame inflation on government mismanagement, external forces, or targeted groups, further fueling resentment and solidifying their image as strong leaders with solutions.
Working-Class Voters	Authoritarian populists often target working-class voters, particularly in rural areas, who have been negatively impacted by economic changes like deindustrialization and globalization. They position themselves as champions of the "forgotten man" or the "silent majority" and rail against the "elites" who they claim have ignored the working class. They often use emotionally charged rhetoric and appeals to patriotism and traditional values to connect with these voters.
Global Economic Trends	Authoritarian populists often target working-class voters, particularly in rural areas, who have been negatively impacted by economic changes like deindustrialization and globalization. They position themselves as champions of the "forgotten man" or the "silent majority" and rail against the "elites" who they claim have ignored the working class. They often use emotionally charged rhetoric and appeals to patriotism and traditional values to connect with these voters.
The Economy as a Driving Force	Authoritarian populists recognize the power of the economy as a driver of political change. They capitalize on periods of economic hardship, uncertainty, or inequality to advance their agenda, presenting themselves as the only ones capable of fixing a broken system. They use economic grievances to mobilize support, build resentment against existing institutions, and justify their calls for radical change.
The Disconnect Between Economic Indicators and Lived Experience	Authoritarian populists exploit the disconnect between positive economic indicators and the lived experiences of many individuals who haven't seen improvement in their lives. They point to stagnant wages, rising costs of living, and job insecurity as evidence that the system is rigged against ordinary people, even if overall economic data suggests growth. This reinforces their narrative that traditional institutions are out of touch and unresponsive to the needs of the people.
The Influence of Corporate Greed, Elites, and the System	Authoritarian populists frequently tap into public anger and resentment towards corporate greed and the perceived outsized influence of wealthy elites and oligarchs. They portray themselves as fighting against a corrupt system that favors the rich and powerful, promising to restore fairness and level the playing field.

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Political Strategy and Messaging:	
Messaging Challenges	Authoritarian populists often tap into pre-existing prejudices and anxieties, making them difficult to debunk with complex explanations.
The Power of Perception and Messaging	Authoritarian populists understand the power of perception and tailor their messaging accordingly. They exploit existing social divisions and anxieties, framing themselves as champions of "the people" against a corrupt elite or an external threat. This often involves manipulating information and using emotionally charged rhetoric to appeal to fear, resentment, and prejudice. The sources imply that these tactics are particularly effective in times of economic hardship or uncertainty, when people are more susceptible to simplistic explanations and promises of quick solutions.
The Role of Misinformation and Propaganda	Authoritarian populists deliberately incite antagonism and manipulate public opinion through "cyber-baiting news manipulation." Authoritarian populists often benefit from the spread of false or misleading information, which can reinforce their narratives and sow distrust in traditional sources of information.
The Failure of Traditional Media	The traditional media has, in many ways, failed to adequately address the rise of authoritarian populism and may even contribute to its spread affording authoritarian populists an advantage in the information space. A more critical and nuanced approach to media coverage is needed to effectively challenge authoritarian populist narratives and inform the public about the complexities of political and economic issues.
Populism and Identity:	
The Appeal of Populism	Authoritarian populists successfully exploit the genuine frustration and despair brewing in rural communities due to the failures of neoliberalism. They capitalize on these sentiments by presenting themselves as champions of "the people" against a corrupt and out-of-touch elite. This message resonates with those who feel left behind by economic changes, ignored by traditional political institutions, and resentful of those perceived as benefiting from the system. This populist appeal allows them to gain political power while simultaneously enriching corporations and the mega-rich, often contradicting their rhetoric.
Culture Wars and Identity Politics	Authoritarian populists strategically fuel culture wars and exploit identity politics to their advantage. They often tap into pre-existing social and cultural anxieties, using divisive rhetoric and scapegoating tactics to pit different groups against each other. This strategy consolidates their power by appealing to a base driven by fear, resentment, and a desire for a return to a perceived "better" past.
Race and Gender as Factors	Race and "toxic masculinity" are enabling to authoritarian populists.

Reference Source: Antonio Roman-Alcalá, Garrett Graddy-Lovelace, Marc Edelman, "Authoritarian populism and emancipatory politics in the rural United States," *Journal of Rural Studies*, Volume 82, 2021, Pages 500-504.

Trump used the authoritarian populist playbook to devastating advantage. He wielded an “us vs. them” narrative, tapped into the social and economic anxieties of the nation, simplified complex issues, portrayed himself as a larger-than-life figure who would ‘fix things’ and ‘fast,’ and positioned his opponent, Vice President Kamala Harris, as far out-of-the-mainstream. Post-election polling data reveal that his messaging was wildly effective.

Results released by [Blueprint](#), a public research initiative aimed at examining what Democrats needed to do to win in 2024, revealed:

The top reasons voters gave for not supporting Harris were that inflation was too high (+24), too many immigrants crossed the border (+23), and that Harris was too focused on cultural issues rather than helping the middle class (+17)... The results paint a clear picture: Democrats were punished for inflation, misalignment on immigration and cultural issues, and Biden... This suggests that Harris was weighed down heavily by the Biden administration, particularly by inflation and their track record on immigration. Harris was also weighed down by voters' belief that she focused on liberal cultural issues. In fact, this was the most frequent criticism among swing voters who broke for Trump (+28).

Even worse, the Trump authoritarian populist message shattered the Democratic Party brand. The Blueprint analysis added, “The numbers tell an unforgiving truth: voters didn’t just want Harris to distance herself from Biden’s policies; they wanted Harris to distance herself from what they believe the Democratic Party has become.”

A strong brand can be a source of sustainable competitive advantage in business or politics alike. Consider, for example, how Black voters have persistently backed the Democratic Party for its championing the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. That brand, particularly with working class voters, non-college-educated voters, and the growing Latino population has been damaged from the breakthrough of the Trump message.

Once back in office, President-elect will seek to consolidate power. He will also seek to use the levers of power and continued authoritarian populist messaging to further undermine the Democratic Party brand.

The Democratic Party is not helpless nor in a hopeless position. It can rebuild a strong alternative brand around inclusion, empowerment, and truth.

To succeed, it will need to take a strategic approach with its messaging. Clear and relatable messaging is essential for strengthening democracy. Concise narratives empower voters to understand complex issues, fostering trust in democratic processes. Storytelling through personal examples makes policies relatable, boosting engagement and participation. Emphasizing shared values unites diverse groups, enhancing social cohesion and collective action. Providing fact-checking resources ensures access to reliable information, helping voters discern truth from falsehoods.