Trump Wins a Return to the White House

By Don Sutherland

On November 5th, former President Donald Trump won the 2024 Presidential election. He won both the popular vote and electoral vote. He became the first Republican candidate to win the popular vote since President George W. Bush was re-elected in 2004.

In advance of the election, repeated opinion polling showed a nearly deadlocked race. All of the "battleground states" had poll numbers that fell within the margin of error. During the election, Trump won all of those states, making his victory possible. In addition, he improved his standing over the 2020 election in virtually all of the nation and with most demographic groups.

How did he win?

Historians will be studying the data for years to come. But early insights are already emerging. News stories, reader comments on those stories and Social Media commentary provide some early insight into what voters were thinking that goes beyond the structured constraints of exit polling questions. Three early insights follow.

First, Trump relied heavily on a populist playbook to define his messaging. He wielded an "us vs. them" narrative, tapped into the social and economic anxieties of a nation still emerging from the long, dark shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic turmoil that followed, he simplified complex issues and 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.

To position Harris as being out-of-the-mainstream, Trump targeted issues that could be weaponized against Harris, for example, running ads on Harris' position concerning transgender inmates' access to gender reassignment surgery. He deployed advertising taglines such as, "Kamala is for they/them. I am for you." He described the U.S. under the Biden-Harris Administration as a nation that had become "hostile to liberty, freedom, and faith." In short, Harris could not relate to the concerns and needs of ordinary Americans and those shortcomings were already having a damaging impact.

Second, Trump tapped into grievance politics to exploit the social and economic anxieties of an already deeply polarized nation. He painted a dark picture of contemporary America, declaring, "We are a failing nation. We are a nation with the highest inflation rate in 50 years, where banks are collapsing and interest rates are far too high." In other words, the nation was in the midst of a crisis. That the financial system was not disintegrating and the economic data showed that inflation had receded was irrelevant. His ability to remind people of the inflation that they had experienced and the higher prices left in its wake proved more powerful than the monthly economic data.

He fired up his base by blaming "elites," the "Deep State," undocumented immigrants, and others for creating a "rigged system" that was fundamentally unfair and responsible for the pain working class Americans were feeling. He portrayed himself as a persecuted "political dissident"

who stood in the way of "thugs and tyrants" who were leading the United States into "servitude and ruin." In doing so, he transformed his indictments, criminal conviction, and civil judgments from a damaging liability into a valuable asset. He crafted a narrative of his being a candidate who suffered simply for daring to fight on the behalf of Americans against the people and forces responsible for their pain and anxiety. He made his January 6th self-coup attempt disappear from political relevance.

Third, Trump kept his messaging simple. He avoided detailed policy and position papers. He distanced himself from the Heritage Foundation's detailed "Project 2025" playbook written by many of his past appointees and, likely, a number of his post-election appointees. He evaded questions that would pin him down on policy detail. Instead, he repeated his narrative of an America in decline, along with his promise to "make America great again," often on friendly conservative media outlets or with influential podcasters.

He connected with voters on an emotional basis, precisely because he framed problems and causes in a simple fashion most could understand (identifying the problem and assigning blame to a villain) and pledged to fix them. He was not burdened by the kind of complexity or nuance that impede easy communication, sap voter attention, or drain emotional connection. Indeed, he wanted voters to react emotionally and viscerally when casting ballots. He was not interested in voters making choices based on policy.

Trump's tactics were effective. His myth-making allowed him to reach beyond his core base. As a result, he diversified his coalition during the election.

He may also have been able to suppress voter turnout, possibly from his casting the nation in such dark terms that a significant number of prospective voters disengaged from the electoral process altogether. As of the last count, more than 15 million fewer voters cast ballots in 2024 than than during the 2020 election. This large drop in voters potentially deprived Harris of votes she might otherwise have received. Perhaps those "lost votes" tipped the election to Trump. Research into the vanishing voters and their reasons for standing aside would provide more insight into their choice and their potential impact on the election's outcome.

In the end, Trump deployed a populist strategy, grievance politics, and simple messaging to advance his campaign. In doing so, he successfully mobilized his base and added a sufficient number of voters from beyond his 2020 coalition to secure victory in the 2024 election.