PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

Webinar Highlights from the "Post-Election Reflection: An Experts Roundtable"

JACK WIPPELL | OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

In the wake of the 2024 US elections, a panel of political scientists convened to reflect on the outcome, alongside its subsequent implications for American politics. Moderated by Julia Azari (Marquette University), the webinar included Kelly Dittmar (Rutgers University-New Brunswick), Seth Masket (University of Denver), Melanye Price (Prairie View A&M University), and Anna Sampaio (Santa Clara University). Their discussion covered several core themes ranging from race and gender dynamics to voter turnout and electoral strategies, all while grappling with the broader challenges facing American democracy.

GENDER AND RACE IN THE ELECTION

To begin with, Kelly Dittmar emphasized the ongoing struggles women and people of color face in American politics. Despite Kamala Harris's historic candidacy, women's representation in Congress and state legislatures remains stagnant. Dittmar linked the earlier post-2016 surge in women's political engagement to a sense of urgency among voters, driven by perceived threats to progress. Yet, sustaining that momentum has proved challenging. The hostility of political spaces, compounded by violence against women in politics, and partisan differences in attitudes towards diversification, continues to deter women's participation.

The conversation also highlighted the weaponization of race and gender by Donald Trump's campaign and other Republican leadership, including women. His rhetoric leveraged toxic masculinity and racialized narratives, normalizing sexism and racism to mobilize specific voter blocs. This strategy, Anna Sampaio noted, targeted Latinos, Haitian immigrants, and other marginalized groups, effectively creating a cycle of fear and demonization while presenting Trump as a protector of traditional values.

ELECTORAL DYNAMICS AND TURNOUT

Seth Masket presented a broader view of electoral trends, arguing that anti-incumbent sentiment has driven elections globally since the pandemic. Rising inflation and economic instability have created discontent among voters and resulted in major swings against ruling parties. This anti-incumbent environment, Masket argued, was pivotal in Trump's victory—and indeed the last three presidential elections—despite Kamala Harris running a disciplined campaign with substantial financial backing. We now sit in a volatile and vitriolic political environment that will likely continue.

Sampaio expanded on voter turnout dynamics, noting a significant drop in Democratic support compared to 2020, particularly among young, Black, Latino, and Asian voters. This "enthusiasm gap" underscored a growing dissatisfaction with both major parties. Latinos, the largest non-white voting bloc, displayed notable fluidity, with increasing dissatisfaction among Latino men driving a gradual shift toward the Republican Party. However, this trend, as both Sampaio and Masket emphasized, remains fluid rather than indicative of a durable realignment.

COMPLEXITIES OF LATINO VOTING

Latino voting patterns emerged as a focal point, with panelists cautioning against oversimplification. While some exit polls suggested a 14% decline in Latino support for Democrats, others reported more modest shifts. This ambiguity, Sampaio argued, reflects the diverse concerns within the Latino community, spanning immigration, economic policy, and race. Cubans in Florida, for example, vote differently from Central American immigrants in California. However, Sampaio made clear that there is no single explanation, especially not a demographic one, for the election results. The panel emphasized that understanding these nuances is crucial for crafting effective outreach strategies.

THE ROLE OF CAMPAIGNS

While in-campaign dynamics often play a secondary role in shaping outcomes relative to broader structural factors, the panel noted some exceptions. Kamala Harris's ascendancy to the Democratic nomination briefly revitalized enthusiasm among key demographics, suggesting that candidate identity and messaging can influence engagement. However, the campaign's efforts, including endorsements from prominent Republicans, ultimately failed to overcome the structural advantages favoring the Republican Party in this cycle.

Sampaio and Melanye Price both criticized the Democratic Party's rigidity in handling internal debates, such as those surrounding Gaza. These missteps, they argued, risk alienating key constituencies, including young and progressive voters. The party's failure to effectively address these intra-party divisions could have broader implications for future elections.

THE FUTURE OF PARTISAN DYNAMICS

The discussion also touched on whether the 2024 election signals a realignment in American politics. Price observed that white voters, across all income levels and age groups, continue to vote distinctly from people of color. This racial polarization, she argued, has become one of the most consistent features of recent elections, shaping partisan dynamics in states like Texas, where gerrymandering entrenches minority rule.

Dittmar added that voter suppression and structural barriers

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to participation remain pressing concerns. While the narrative often focuses on shifts among minority groups, the consistent divergence in white voting behavior underscores deeper systemic issues that must be addressed.

NAVIGATING GOVERNANCE AND ADVOCACY

Looking ahead, the panelists explored the challenges and opportunities for governance and activism under the new administration. They warned of an impending crackdown on marginalized communities—particularly immigrants and transgender individuals, given Trump's history and rhetoric—and called for proactive measures, including legal support for vulnerable populations, sanctuary policies, and public commitments from institutions to protect their communities.

Masket also highlighted the role of academia in resisting authoritarianism. Universities and faculty, he argued, must refuse to comply with efforts to target undocumented students or restrict academic freedom. Building coalitions across institutions and disciplines will be essential for defending democratic values. Price urged academics to continue teaching and researching issues related to race, gender, and inequality, even in hostile environments. Team-taught courses and collaborative efforts can provide support for scholars in embattled states, ensuring that critical knowledge is not lost.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2024 election reaffirmed the deep polarization and volatility of the American electorate. As the panelists made clear, navigating this fraught landscape requires both vigilance and action. From addressing systemic inequities to safeguarding vulnerable communities, the work ahead demands a collective commitment to a more equitable future. ■

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