

EconoFact Chats: Analyzing the 2024 Presidential Election
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I'm Michael Klein, executive editor of EconoFact, a non-partisan, web-based publication of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein

Did the outcome of the November election just reflect kitchen table issues, and a dissatisfaction with higher prices that occurred during the Biden administration? Or was there more to it than that? Does it, in fact, represent a realignment of traditional voting patterns across categories of income and racial and ethnic groups? If the latter, are these shifts likely to be persistent, and show up in the 2026 midterms, and perhaps even in the next presidential election? To address these questions, I'm pleased to have as my guest today, Professor David Lazer of Northeastern University. David is a University Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Computer Sciences. He's the director of the Internet and Democracy Initiative at Northeastern and a co-director of the Civic Healthy Institutions Project, a regular survey of all 50 states and which is viewable at chip50.org. He has written extensively on how people get, and share, information on the internet and the potential of the internet to enhance the quality of our democracy. David is recognized as a leading scholar on misinformation and computational social science. David, welcome to EconoFact Chats.

David Lazer

Thank you for having me, Michael.

Michael Klein

So, to begin, how big was President-elect Trump's victory in terms of the popular vote, and how does this compare to past presidential elections?

David Lazer

Well, two things to note there. First, it was a very close victory. It was the closest popular vote margin since the 2004 election, and the second closest since 1968. But the second thing to note is that American elections aren't just about popular vote. They're actually not about popular vote at all. They're really about the electoral college...the particular adding up of the number of electoral votes each state gets. And it really did come down to around seven swing states, all of which actually Trump won, but he won them quite narrowly. And in fact, it just would have taken a couple hundred thousand votes to switch the winner from Trump to Harris.

Michael Klein

One of the determinants of an election is turnout. What was turnout like in this election? In particular, was there a big falloff in turnout among people who in the past had voted Democratic as compared to those who had voted Republican?

David Lazer

Well, we won't know that definitively for a little while. People will be going over the voting records as they're certified, and we'll be able to see if Democrats turned out at lower rates than Republicans and so on. The turnout rates were somewhat lower overall than in 2020. And it does, if one were to guess, one would strongly guess that Democrats were less likely to turn out because in the most Democratic areas, many of the most Democratic areas, turnout was down substantially. So for example, Cambridge, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where it's very Democratic, turnout was down around 15%. And that was true across the country in places like Cambridge.

Michael Klein

So there really wasn't much of a chance that Massachusetts would go Republican. Was there a turnout effect in some of the swing states that might have been instrumental in Trump's victory in those?

David Lazer

Again, the data will be clearer in a month or two. That said, if you look at the swing states, they actually had a smaller swing towards Trump than other states. And there are some reasons to believe that the turnout effect may have been smaller in swing states, and that the reason why it may have been that the drop in turnout by Democrats was smaller in states like Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and the like. Again, there'll be more definitive evidence on that in a month or two. But that would be the best guess, is that the drop of turnout for Democrats, if there was one, which it probably was, was smaller in the swing states.

Michael Klein

David, do you think that's because people in Cambridge were thinking, well, it doesn't matter if I vote or not. I'm a little dissatisfied with some of Biden's policies, so I'm a little dissatisfied with Harris, so I might as well not vote. But in other states that are known to be swing states, people are more motivated.

David Lazer

Well, certainly there was a lot more energy being put into turning people out. So whether people were more motivated or whether they just had a lot more knocks on the door, which I'm sure they did, that could well have been a factor, right? And so I suspect that something along those lines affected differential turnout in swing states and non-swing. And of course, that would have affected other races, whether, you know, because there were a lot of competitive races for Congress around the country. And so it could well be that turnout, let's say, in New York among Democrats was much lower. There were a lot of close races in New York state for the House of Representatives and may have adversely affected Democrats in some of those races.

Michael Klein

We hear a lot about a realignment of voting patterns in this election. First of all, with only the second time that a woman was running for president, what were the voting patterns of men versus women? And was this different in 2024 than in recent past elections? In particular, was the gender gap this time similar to what happened when Hillary Clinton was running against Donald Trump in 2016?

David Lazer

The gender gap was about what it's been for 30 years. It wasn't historically that much larger in 2016 or in 2024. It's been around 10 points. But what that statistic hides is that the gender gap changed for different subgroups. So if we look at a more educated strata of the population, we see that the gender gap actually dropped substantially, whereas if we look at less educated, let's say high school or less educated parts of the public, we see that the gender gap actually increased. And so when we say the gender gap stayed the same, what we're actually saying is it increased substantially among some groups, and decreased in other groups.

Michael Klein

So I guess the interpretation of what you just said is that among the more educated, more men were voting for Harris than for Trump than what we saw perhaps in past elections with the Republicans versus Democrats. Is that right?

David Lazer

Yeah. So like, for example, if we look at people with a graduate degree, women moved a bit towards Harris relative to 2020 levels, and men moved quite a bit. So as a result, the gender gap decreased. If we look at high school or less, we can see that women moved a little bit towards Trump, and men moved a lot toward Trump. So the gender gap increased for high school or less parts of the population.

Michael Klein

So more broadly about the level of education and voting patterns, it's the case, I guess, that those with more education tilted heavily towards Harris, and those with less education tilted heavily towards Trump. Is that correct?

David Lazer

Yes. The more highly educated were much more supportive of Harris and those who were, say, high school or less were much more supportive of Trump. Interestingly, that gap between the more and less educated increased substantially from 2020, and it's been increasing steadily for the last 20, 25 years. It's been one of the really tectonic shifts in American politics. And it definitely increased in the 2024 election.

Michael Klein

So we're seeing sort of a polarization along that dimension?

David Lazer

Yes. What's interesting is that we're seeing both a polarization with respect to education—so more highly educated, more likely to support Democrats, less educated, supporting Republicans – and we're seeing a depolarization with respect to race, in part because many non-white groups have lower average education than whites do.

Michael Klein

So non-whites, Blacks, Latinos, Asians had been a reliably democratic constituency decades ago, but that's changing, right?

David Lazer

Yes, it's evolving and it's evolving a little differently for each one of them. But actually there were similar patterns in terms of movement for all three of those racial groups in '24, that all of them moved significantly towards Trump relative to 2020 levels. And they all moved, I'd say, roughly seven, eight points more supportive of Trump than they were in 2020. So a very substantial move by the standards of American politics.

Michael Klein

So, David, let's turn from different ethnic and gender groups and so on to the issues that seem to animate voters. And since this is a podcast that typically focuses on economic issues, how important were economic issues for people's decisions as far as we can tell?

David Lazer

Well, the economy, when we asked people what the most important issues that they were voting on, the economy was pretty much always number one. If we put inflation on that list – of course, it overlaps with the economy – people would check inflation as being, you know, at the very top level of importance for them. And so the economic issues were clearly the most important issues that people were, most people were, voting on.

Michael Klein

A striking fact is that the American economy is, as declared on a recent cover of The Economist Magazine, “the envy of the world”. So why was there so much discontent when inflation has come down without a recession, and unemployment is at historic lows?

David Lazer

Well, you know most people aren't reading The Financial Times and The Economist, so it's hard for them, you know, necessarily put it in that kind of perspective of like, well, how is Germany doing? How's the UK doing? And it's even just hard even for economists to evaluate what reasonable counterfactuals are, although I think most economists would say this was better than we might have expected. I think, though, that there are also many economies that people are experiencing and that, for example, inflation is something that affects people very differently. It's one of those things that in some ways can amplify the gaps between the haves and the have-nots. You know, if you own a house and it becomes 10 percent more expensive, that's actually not a terrible thing. Right. Suddenly, you have more assets. If you have a mortgage and there's been 10 percent inflation and you have a fixed rate mortgage, that actually is a big windfall. And what we really saw was the have-nots were the ones who really shifted from 2020 to 2024, especially young people. And those are the people who have the fewest assets. And so we saw young people who have been tilted—very heavily tilted—towards Democrats for quite a few election cycles now, they had young people, meaning people 30 or under, had a plus 30 margin for Biden in 2020. And that margin dropped from plus 30 to less than plus 10 in the '24 election. So there was a tremendous drop in margin for young people. And then if we were looking for young people of color, there were even more dramatic drops. And so, for example, I calculated this just before, shortly before, we started talking. We were looking at, for example, young men of color with a high school or less education. They had a plus 60 margin in support of Biden in 2020. And that shifted from plus 60, that is roughly 80 to 20 percent, to minus three. That is, they went from being four to one for Biden to being marginally in favor of Trump. And so, you know,

again, we're dealing...the economy affects different people in different ways. And we can see particularly dramatic effects among very specific strata that were likely adversely affected by inflation.

Michael Klein

So you're pointing to the fact that the aggregate economic statistics failed to capture the experiences of many people. In this case, then, an incumbent or somebody riding on the incumbent's coattails could fail in an election during what are, in the aggregate, good economic times. Or do you think this is just a case of the counterfactual...what would have happened if the economic situation were poorly handled? That just isn't a compelling way to make a case. You can't say that, well, Biden did a good job, and the alternative would have been really, really bad.

David Lazer

It's really hard to figure out counterfactuals, right? I mean, even if we were trying to, when we compare ourselves to Europe, you know, Europe has particular additional stresses on it that the U.S. does not have. They're dealing with a major land war that has disrupted energy supplies in a way that has not affected the U.S. And so it's most people, I think...political scientists generally view people as doing retrospective voting, saying, how were things? How have things gone? And, you know, if things haven't been going well and if they haven't been going well in your corners of society, you're not going to vote for the incumbent.

Michael Klein

So you talk about retrospective voting, but that's sort of presupposing that people are accurately informed. And there are two reasons this might not be the case. Either people are not well informed because they aren't paying attention, or they're misinformed because there's a lot of misinformation. What was the role of misinformation in the 2024 election? How important do you think that might have been for people's decisions?

David Lazer

Well, I mean, the first thing to note here before I even talk about misinformation, is that in some ways this election was both abnormal and normal. Right. It was abnormal in the sense that Donald Trump is, you know, a very unusual candidate, to put it mildly. But it was normal in the sense that if you look at the approval level of the incumbent president, Harris got almost exactly what you would have anticipated many months ago. So there is an interesting question of how well-informed and how misinformed people were about the state of the economy. I think, you know, I study how people get information, when they get low-quality information, high-quality information. It's not clear to me how determinative that was in '24. It's hard, again, to evaluate the causal effects of things. It's not clear to me that people were worse informed about the state of the economy than, say, the past generations. It's clear there is a lot of misinformation floating around. And it's also clear that so many people are likely at times misinformed about the state of the economy. It's hard to be properly informed. But it's actually not clear to me that, you know, misinformation was a driving force here, even though there's a lot of misinformation swirling around and, you know, certainly affected some people some ways in different directions.

Michael Klein

Well, how do you think people got information about the candidates in 2024? Did social media play a big role? And then how different was this from what we saw in the past?

David Lazer

Well, social media is likely an important force. And we had a report out on this just before the election, actually, on where people were getting political information from. And we can see, you know, social media are an important source of information, but especially for younger people. And so if I were to really try to understand the potential entry points for misinformation, it would be to look especially at younger people looking especially at social media. We did a survey right after the first assassination attempt of Donald Trump, and there was a lot of conspiracy theorizing floating around on both the left and the right. On the left, it was that this was somehow a conspiracy by the Trump campaign put on to make him look heroic. On the right, it was that somehow Biden operatives had orchestrated this attempt on Trump's life. And a remarkable fraction of the population not only heard of those conspiracy theories, but believed them. It's just that the people on the left believed different conspiracy theories than those who had heard about it on the right. And that the disproportionate place that people heard about these conspiracy theories was on social media. And that was true, actually, in both the left and the right. And so we definitely see that potential for misinformation seeping in through social media. And certainly that in the aftermath of what we saw in the assassination attempt, we saw both the misinformation where people had heard it from, as well as people believing it. Now, the people who believed it were talking to their friends and family about it. It wasn't that they had heard about it from social media, but it's that they had heard about it from friends and family directly. And that is what was ultimately persuasive.

Michael Klein

So I'd like to conclude, David, with a broader question than just about the election. Social media has become a real force in the economy and in the way people perceive things. And what you're suggesting is that there are a lot of echo chambers out there. Do you think that this is a problem that's getting worse, or are people sort of becoming a little bit more sophisticated in recognizing that social media isn't always to be trusted?

David Lazer

Well, certainly social media create a lot of potential to end up in content that matches your predisposition, both when we choose accounts to follow on social media, what algorithms are looking for, which is what you engage in. It's to provide you content that you find interesting and compatible. And so there's been a lot of debate in the literature on just how much of an echo chamber social media are creating. But to me, there's, you know, as I've sifted through the literature, as I've done my own research, I do think that, you know, social media do to some extent end up putting people in...matching them up with content that aligns with their interests. And some of that is just because that's what people want. Right. It's giving people what they want. And like we had a study looking at Google and people doing searches on Google. Do Democrats and Republicans get different content on Google, more partisan content? And the answer is Google doesn't...there's not a big difference in the content that Google provides Democrats and Republicans. Google gives people, everyone, very diverse choices. But Democrats and Republicans click on different things. And so interestingly, even if you provide

diverse choices, you may well end up with very homogeneous consumption patterns. And so, you know, I don't know if people are getting more sophisticated. It doesn't necessarily mean that they're they're leaving those echo chambers. It may mean they're getting better at finding those echo chambers, and finding those pockets of content that is engaging and compatible.

Michael Klein

Well, we're going to promote this podcast on Blue Sky and X and Facebook and lots of others. And I hope that people from both sides of the political spectrum look at what we're doing and listen to this podcast because you have a lot of really important things to say, David. And it was a pleasure to have you on EconoFact Chats today. Thanks for joining me.

David Lazer

It's been an honor, Michael.

Michael Klein

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