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NEWSLETTER
On Politics

The Second Pandemic Election

Covid cost Trump the presidency in 2020, and it may have cleared the path for his return.



President-elect Donald J. Trump at his election night party. Credit...Haiyun Jiang for The New York Times

Jess Bidgood, *The New York Times* Online Edition, November 7, 2024.

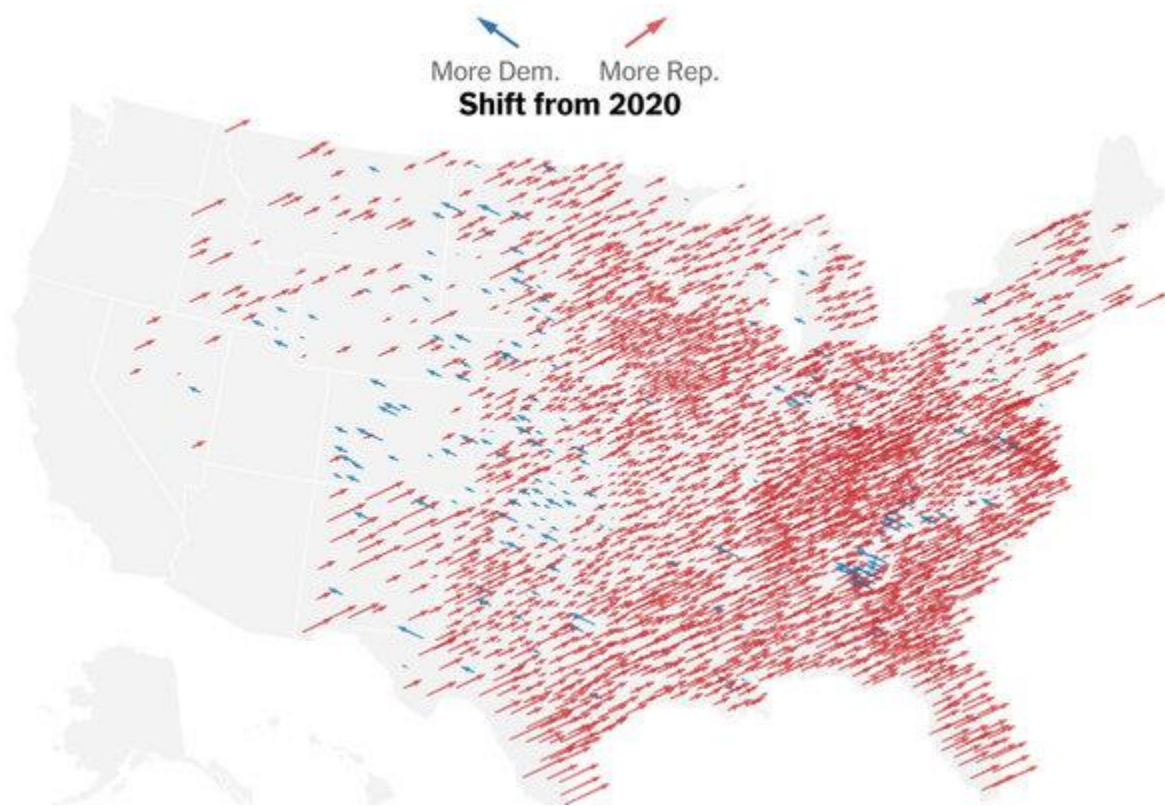
The day after an election can bring an uncanny quiet.

After months — even years — of frenzied campaign activity, nonstop ads and raucous campaign rallies, comes a day when the nation looks into the mirror and into its future.

My colleagues on the Politics desk and across The Times worked through the night and on into the morning to bring you coverage of President-elect Donald Trump's decisive victory, a return to power that [has already plunged this country into a new era of uncertainty](#). In picking Trump, voters have elevated a once-banished political figure who has [promised to govern as a strongman](#) and upend the nation's handling of the [economy](#), [public health](#) and foreign affairs — and they probably helped to [keep him out of prison](#).

There is a lot to process, no matter which outcome you wanted.

If there is one image that sticks in my mind as I sift through all of it — one image that is most important to understanding how and why Trump is returning to power — it's not a picture of the president-elect. [Rather, it's this graphic, which shows how much better he did](#) across much of the country last night, compared with his failed presidential bid in 2020.



Early Results Show a Red Shift Across the U.S.

Of the counties with nearly complete results, more than 90 percent shifted in favor of former President Donald J. Trump in the 2024 presidential election.

This is a country going through a big change.

It will be a long time before we can say exactly why a country that decisively rejected Trump four years ago welcomed him back last night — and the answer is going to be

complicated. But it is possible, I think, that the same thing that cost Trump the presidency in 2020 played at least some role in clearing a path for his return in 2024: the pandemic.

In 2020, Covid-19 upended American life, killing 385,000 people in a year and sending the American economy into a recession. Trump's chaotic and dismissive handling of a public health crisis that had made life almost unrecognizable is part of why voters rejected him that year.

When President Biden came into office and vaccines made Covid less lethal, much of the public was eager to forget what had happened. But whether people talked about it, the pandemic had already set into motion some of the forces that would make President Biden's term in office rocky. It spurred global supply chain shocks that sent inflation soaring. In the years that followed, the public's faith in institutions eroded, and Trump and his allies sought to weaponize that distrust.

Communities had fierce battles over school closures and curriculums. People worried about political violence and their economic future. There was also a political backlash against the racial justice protests that had unfolded during the pandemic's first year.

"Covid, in many ways, walked into this country's tribal politics, and really put it on steroids," said Doug Sosnik, a longtime Democratic strategist who believes the election results portend the country's biggest shift to the right since Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980.

When I called Sosnik, he reminded me of the period in 2021 when Biden's approval ratings tanked and never quite recovered. On July 4, once vaccines had been widely distributed, he declared ["independence" from the virus](#), even though cases would continue to surge and disrupt American life. That August, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan became the first foreign policy calamity of his presidency. And in September, the [Consumer Price Index climbed 5.4 percent](#) from the prior year.

That moment created political problems for Biden. But it was a sign of a bigger and more fundamental reshaping of American life, as people chafed at rising prices, a sharp rise in housing costs put a [basic element of the American dream out of reach](#), and people's distrust of the government and one another only hardened. Voters on both sides began to ask big questions about whether the government — and democracy itself — [was really working for them](#).

This is not the only country where the long tail of the pandemic [has hurt incumbent parties](#). Slow growth and rising prices have dealt political blows to leaders in Britain, France, Germany and Japan. The American recovery was stronger than those nations' — but, my colleague Jim Tankersley wrote today, [it still wasn't enough](#).

In 2020, as voters put on masks and cast ballots by mail, the effects of the pandemic were obvious, and Biden promised to offer change.

But maybe 2024 unfolded in a country just as upended by the pandemic, even if it was less obvious to the naked eye. This time, though, Biden — and then Harris — represented the status quo, offering little in the way of transformative ideas that would fix what four years of malaise had wrought.

This time, Trump was able to run as the candidate of change.



“Republicans are poised to have unified government,” Speaker Mike Johnson predicted on Wednesday.
Credit...Haiyun Jiang for The New York Times

Meanwhile, in House races ...

Republicans won the White House. They won the Senate. The only remaining question is whether they'll have unified government — and [that depends on what's happening in House races that could take days or weeks to call](#). I asked my colleague Catie Edmondson, who covers Congress for The Times, to explain where things stand.

JB: If Democrats take back the House, they would be able to stymie President-elect Trump's legislative priorities right out of the gate. How likely is that to happen?

CE: There are a number of districts where the Democratic incumbents have held on despite the red wave sweeping the country in general, and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said this afternoon that he believes his party has a path to reclaim the House.

But to do that, they would need to sweep a number of close races — and that has left Democrats I have been talking to increasingly pessimistic about their ability to ward off a Republican trifecta.

How far are we from a call?

It's really hard to tell, because there are at least a couple of races that strategists have indicated will go to a recount. I think it's also an open question as to how long it takes officials in California to count races that Democrats are hoping to win.

Tell us about a district that sums up the Democrats' problems.

In Pennsylvania, Democratic incumbents like Representative Susan Wild and Representative Matt Cartwright have conceded to Republican opponents, although The Associated Press hasn't yet called those races. Those contests, in the Allentown and Scranton areas, are emblematic of the party's struggles with working-class voters.

Democrat Eugene Vindman won Virginia's Seventh District — but it was a close race. That's a district that shows how Democrats just didn't excel with suburban voters as much as they needed to offset losses elsewhere.

Are there any districts that have surprised you?

In Maine's largely rural Second District, Representative Jared Golden, a Democrat, has declared victory. His race hasn't been called, but a win would mean he found a way to outperform Vice President Kamala Harris, who lost in his district.

Another bright spot for Democrats came in New York. The party was set back on its heels in 2022, when they took a lot of blame nationally for losing races that effectively cost Democrats the House. Last night, they flipped at least two seats, even though Trump improved his performance in the state overall since 2020.

[Jess Bidgood](#) is a managing correspondent for The Times and writes the [On Politics](#) newsletter, a guide to the 2024 election and beyond. [More about Jess Bidgood](#)

Our Coverage of the 2024 Election

The Presidential Race

- **'Trump's America':** Donald Trump's comeback victory has established him as a [transformational force reshaping the United States](#) in his own image.
 - **How Trump Won:** Trump [gambled that his grievances](#) would become the grievances of the MAGA movement, and then the G.O.P., [and then more than half the country](#).
 - **Will a Woman Ever Be President?:** After Kamala Harris lost the election to Trump, some women wondered [if the glass ceiling would ever break](#).
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Other Results

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 - **House:** Republicans [made early gains](#) in their drive to maintain control of the House, though the fate of the majority [remains unclear](#).
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More Coverage and Analysis

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- **China:** With Trump's return, Beijing is expecting more volatility and competition with the United States, though a lackluster economy may [limit China's options for pushing back](#).
- **Biden's Legacy:** In the wake of Trump's victory, many Democrats are casting President Biden as a one-term president who [set his party on a path to failure](#).

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