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Signs of Change Among Democratic Supporters in a Close Race?

- 2024 US Presidential Elections Study Series (2) -

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Voting day for the US presidential election is fast approaching. Amid a close race in the final days of the election, we would like to take note of the changes we are seeing in the US and consider the future of US politics and the implications thereof for the international community.

Close presidential election, slight Trump advantage in battleground states

The US presidential election is finally approaching and, with sharply divided domestic politics characterizing US politics of late, there remains a clear-cut split by political party. The support for the Democratic Harris-Walz team and the Republican Trump-Vance team also continues to be closely matched in a back-and-forth fight: 48% for Harris and 47% for Trump in nationwide approval ratings as of October 25, giving Harris a slight advantage; 49% for both as of October 26; 50% for Harris and 49% for Trump as of October 27, putting Harris slightly ahead; and Trump retaking the lead on October 28 at 48% while Harris had 47%¹.

Since the final winner of the presidential election will be determined by a majority of the 270 electoral votes allocated by state, it is crucial to look at support trends in battleground states where Democratic and Republican support is competing rather than at national approval ratings. Of particular importance is whether the majority of 93 electors in seven battleground states (10 in Wisconsin, 15 in Michigan, 19 in Pennsylvania, 16 in North Carolina, 16 in Georgia, 6 in Nevada, and

11 in Arizona) will be won by the Democratic Harris-Walz team or the Republican Trump-Vance team.

The latest approval ratings in close battleground states show Trump prevailing (Wisconsin averages from October 8 to October 23: Harris 47.8%, Trump 48.1²; Michigan averages from October 2 to October 27: Harris 47.8%, Trump 47.9%³; Pennsylvania averages from October 2 to October 27: Harris 47.6%, Trump 48.1%⁴; North Carolina averages from October 9 to October 22: Harris 47.8%, Trump 48.6⁵; Georgia averages from October 5 to October 26: Harris 46.9%, Trump 49.2%⁶; Nevada averages from September 23 to October 21: Harris 47.1%, Trump 47.8%⁷; and Arizona averages from September 28 to October 26: Harris 47.7%, Trump 49.2%⁸). However, as the numbers clearly show, Trump's advantage in these seven battleground states is also very close, and the approval ratings in these states are not definitive. In other words, there is no doubt that this year's presidential election will be a close race – perhaps closer than ever – following the trend of recent years.

Traditional Democratic supporters turning away from the Democratic Party?

The reason for such a close race is the fragmentation of domestic politics. The overwhelming majority of partisan supporters (those who identify themselves as Democrats or Republicans) have a favorable view of their own party, with about 90% favoring their own party and 10% favoring the other party, and about 60% of Republicans and 50% of Democrats having a very negative view of the other party, up from about 40% a decade ago⁹. This trend of clearly divided support by party has taken hold and continued directly into this year's presidential election, with both the Democratic Harris-Walz team and the Republican Trump-Vance team forced to prioritize the domestic agenda items that voters care about. Rather than gaining support across the divide, both parties are realistic about pursuing their policies through appeals to their own party's supporters, forcing them to devote their political resources to the economy, immigration, abortion, and other domestic concerns of voters.

One possible reason for Trump's dominance in the latest approval polls, conducted only a few days before election day, is that these domestic policy agenda items may be shading traditional Democratic supporters' support for the Harris-Walz team. While the economy is the most important issue for the electorate, voter dissatisfaction with the sluggish economy, especially with high prices, is high, and disappointment with the current administration's economic policies, including its measures to combat inflation, has directly lowered expectations for the economic policies of the same Democratic Harris-Walz team.

Similarly, Harris has failed to present an effective immigration policy that appeals to voters in contrast to Trump's promotion of a hard-line immigration policy, which is also important to voters. For example, she has been limited to criticizing Trump for his efforts to repeal the Senate immigration bill that Democrats and Republicans agreed to in a bipartisan manner and that Trump lobbied Republican Speaker of the House Mike Johnson to repeal. While immigration policy continues to be a symbolic area of division in the US, the most pressing issue is addressing the frequent illegal immigration from Latin America across the border with Mexico. For this reason, immigration policy

has been seen as a battle between the two parties for the Latino vote in the presidential election, and some have suggested that Latinos may no longer fit into the conventional view that ethnic minorities support the Democratic Party. Increasingly, Latinos say that they are questioning the fairness between Latino immigrants who entered the country legally and illegal immigrants and that they are not in favor of Democratic immigration policies that make it easier for illegal immigrants to become legal residents. It has also been pointed out that the large number of Catholics among Latinos, many of whom feel uncomfortable with the Democratic Party's pro-abortion rights policies, is another factor turning them away from the Democratic Party.

Furthermore, the United States has a demographic profile that is rare among developed countries in that the population continues to grow, and the political behavior of young people, who have high voter turnout, is attracting attention¹⁰. However, a careful look at trends among young people traditionally considered to support the Democratic Party reveals that, among "Generation Z" born after 1996, there is a clear split between men and women in political party support, with Gen-Z males supporting Trump and Gen-Z females favoring Harris¹¹. This trend is also true among blacks, who are traditionally seen as more supportive of the Democratic Party, and it has been noted that support for the Democratic Party among black men has been rapidly declining in recent years, with black men tending to back Trump and black women championing Harris¹². This gender-based gap in party support among Generation Z and blacks has also contributed to the division in the United States.

Winners and losers and the future of democracy

The term "October Surprise" refers to an event during the month immediately prior to the vote that has a major impact on the election campaign. In this year's presidential election, such surprises were not limited to October; major events amounting to an October Surprise occurred as early as July 2024, when Trump escaped an assassination attempt, Biden suddenly withdrew from the presidential race, and Vice President Harris was named the Democratic nominee without having gone through the primary process. If Harris wins, she will have the impact of being the first female president in US history. However, none of these events have been influential enough to decide the election race. Other international developments, such as the protracted war in Ukraine and instability in the Middle East, have also not proven decisive factors in the outcome of the presidential election. In other words, any small event could tip the scales in this year's presidential election, so we will have to wait until the very end to see who wins and who loses.

Then there is the question of whether the presidential election system itself, including the complex system for obtaining Electoral College votes in presidential elections, reflects the consensus of the fiercely divided American people. The 2021 attack on Congress raised questions about the peaceful transition of power in the United States, which considers itself a democratic leader, and the fear that something similar may happen after the 2024 presidential election poses a challenge to American politics itself. This year's US presidential election not only raises questions about the future of US domestic and foreign policy but also highlights the question of trust in the democratic system. The

outcome of the election is being watched with bated breath not only in the United States but also throughout the international community.

(This is an English translation of a Japanese paper originally published on October 29, 2024)

¹ <https://www.realclearpolling.com/latest-polls/election>

² <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/general/2024/wisconsin/trump-vs-harris>

³ <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/general/2024/michigan/trump-vs-harris>

⁴ <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/general/2024/pennsylvania/trump-vs-harris>

⁵ <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/general/2024/north-carolina/trump-vs-harris>

⁶ <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/general/2024/georgia/trump-vs-harris>

⁷ <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/general/2024/nevada/trump-vs-harris>

⁸ <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/general/2024/arizona/trump-vs-harris>

(Last access date to RealClear Polling's approval ratings survey is October 29, 2024.)

⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/rising-partisan-antipathy-widening-party-gap-in-presidential-job-approval/>

¹⁰ https://www.jia.or.jp/en/strategic_comment/2023/08/2023-06.html#014749

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/27/insider/the-gender-gap-among-gen-z-voters-explained.html>

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/10/13/us/elections/times-siena-poll-black-likely-electorate.html>