U.S. Election Analysis 2024: Media, Voters and the Campaign

Early reflections from leading academics

Edited by:
Daniel Jackson, Andrea Carson, Danielle Sarver Coombs, Stephanie Edgerly, Einar Thorsen, Filippo Trevisan, Scott Wright

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Contents

3 Voters

4 Candidates and the campaign

5

News and journalism

6

Digital campaign

7 Popular culture

2

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Policy and
political context

The politics of uncertainty: Mediated campaign narratives about Russia's war on Ukraine

Dr Tetyana Lokot

Associate Professor at the School of Communications, Dublin City University. She researches threats to digital rights, networked authoritarianism, networked citizenship, and the role of digital media in protests and warfare. She is the author of Beyond the Protest Square: Digital Media and Augmented Dissent *(2021, Rowman & Littlefield), an in-depth study of digital media use in Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity.*

Twitter: @tanyalokot

Email: tanya.lokot@dcu.ie

Since the start of the 2024 U.S. election campaign, Ukrainians at home and abroad have been anxiously watching for any mention of the candidates' stances on supporting Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. The anxiety of the election cycle was also felt strongly in Ukrainian official circles as the war has become a partisan issue in U.S. domestic politics.

The two candidates' pre-election positions on continuing military support for Ukraine stood in rather stark contrast, but were firmly within the overarching narratives pushed by both camps. The Democratic nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris, promised to stand by Kyiv "every step of the way" until "Ukraine prevails in this war." In line with her prior critiques of Trump's political inefficacy and his inclination to court favor with authoritarians, she speculated that if her opponent was in White House, Russian President Putin would already be "sitting in the Ukrainian capital."

Republican nominee (and now President-Elect) Donald Trump recently blamed President Zelenskyy for the war starting, but has also played up his diplomatic savvy, saying he could end the war by making "a deal" between Putin and Zelenskyy "in one day." He also boasted in a September TV debate with Harris that he would "get it done before even becoming president," though did not detail how he would do that.

Trump and his vice presidential pick J.D. Vance have also manipulated U.S. voters' economic fears: throughout the campaign, they falsely insisted that European powers had "underfunded this war" while "American taxpayers have been very generous" with their financial support for Ukraine. This has been refuted by factcheckers, as much smaller European economies had collectively spent considerably more than the U.S. Speaking at a Pennsylvania rally, Trump insisted he wouldn't spend taxpayers' money on wars "in countries you have never heard of".

Earlier in September, Vance floated a potential plan to end the war by negotiating a "heavily fortified demilitarized zone" in Ukrainian territory currently occupied by Russian forces, in essence freezing the conflict. In a podcast interview, Vance also suggested the peace plan would see Ukraine maintain its independence in exchange for a guarantee that it would not join NATO.

Speaking with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his visit to Washington, DC in late September 2024, Harris slammed such proposals to "give up large parts of [Ukraine's] sovereign territory" as "dangerous and unacceptable," and stressed that these were not "proposals for peace" but rather "for surrender."

For Ukraine, the only certain outcome of Trump's now evident election victory is the promise of further uncertainty. The change in leadership for the largest backer of Ukrainian resistance is guaranteed, but it remains unclear what new challenges Kyiv might face as the Trump cabinet and foreign policy priorities take shape. It is no surprise, then, that Ukrainian official rhetoric in response to Trump's leading the polls has been cautious and pragmatic, yet calculated.

The President-Elect has repeatedly claimed to have a good relationship with Putin and has criticized Zelenskyy as "the greatest salesman in history." But Trump did end up meeting with Zelenskyy during his September visit to DC and has said that he'd told Putin the U.S. would bomb Moscow if he dared to attack Ukraine. Much of Ukraine's reaction seems to be taking account of the former businessman's tendencies for self-aggrandizement.

In his November 6th victory speech, Trump vowed to "stop the wars," but made no explicit mention of Ukraine. Despite this, Zelenskyy was one of the first world leaders to congratulate Trump in a post on X, writing that he valued the U.S. politician's "commitment to the 'peace through strength' approach in global affairs" and forecasting "an era of a strong United States of America under President Trump's decisive leadership." He later held a phone call with Trump and explicitly outlined Ukraine's expectations, saying he relied "on continued strong bipartisan support for Ukraine" in the U.S.

Though the prospect of an unpredictable Trump administration and his penchant for deal-making worries many in Ukraine, the mood in Kyiv is one of grim resolve rather than panic. Ukrainians are well used to pushing back against the reticence of their Western allies, as their continued campaign to pressure the Biden administration into letting Ukraine hit military targets deep inside Russia shows. They also knew contingency planning would be needed whatever the outcome of the U.S. election, due to tensions among EU states with regard to continued support, with Hungary's Viktor Orbán continually impeding approval of key funding mechanisms.

The other reason Zelenskyy and Ukrainian officials have refused to consider any sort of ceasefire freezing Russia's battlefield gains or any compromise that would violate Ukraine's territorial integrity is because they know too well how Putin operates – and want Trump to know this too. As one Ukrainian lawmaker told the *Kyiv Independent*, Trump might be quickly disappointed once he realizes Putin "is not interested in negotiations and agreements" and still believes he can win. Trump, the lawmaker said, "doesn't want to be a failure; he wants to be a success, and if he wants success, he has to get Ukraine to agree, and Ukraine will never agree to territory concessions."