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POLITICAL SHIFTS AND POLICY IMPACTS:
AN ANALYSIS OF
THE 2024 U.S. ELECTIONS

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Christopher Warsaw is a Professor of Political Science at George Washington University. Previously, he taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has a B.A. in Economics and Political Science from Williams College and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Stanford University. During graduate school, he was a research fellow at Stanford's Program on Energy and Sustainable Development (PESD). He also worked in politics and as an environmental economics analyst for two years prior to graduate school.

His areas of research are American Politics, Representation, Public Opinion, State and Local Politics, Environmental Politics and Policy, and Statistical Methodology. In his research, he evaluates the links between public opinion, elections, and political outcomes in city and state governments, as well as the U.S. Congress. He also examines how political institutions, such as term limits or direct democracy, influence political representation. To do this, he has developed new techniques to accurately measure the policy preferences of the American public at a variety of geographic levels. He has published his work in the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Science Advances*, the *Annual Review of Political Science*, *Political Analysis*, *Political Science Research and Methods*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Political Behavior*, *Public Choice*, the *Election Law Journal*, *Nature Energy*, and edited volumes from Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press.



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November 2024

The United States held elections for President, Congress, and an array of other offices on Tuesday, November 5th. The election saw high turnout as over [150 million Americans](#) cast their ballots. After a closely fought campaign, the Republican party won control of the federal government. Former President Donald J. Trump won a decisive victory over current Vice President Kamala Harris. Trump's Republican Party also won a narrow majority in the United States Senate and House of Representatives.

Factors Contributing to Trump's Victory

Trump's victory was driven by [dissatisfaction with inflation](#) and [unhappiness](#) with President Biden's leadership over the past four years. In the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, America saw its highest inflation in decades. While inflation has declined in recent years, prices for most goods and services are still far higher than prior to when Biden took office. Meanwhile, real median personal income has [stagnated](#). After significantly increasing during Trump's presidency, the median American now makes less money than in 2019.

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[Immigration surged](#) under President Biden. Perhaps in response, public opinion on [immigration](#) shifted in a conservative direction during the Biden presidency. This led to [broad support](#) for Trump's more restrictive immigration policies in exit polls, which further fueled Trump's victory.

Abortion has long been a [major cleavage](#) in American politics. Democrats tend to support Americans' right to get an abortion, while Republicans oppose access to abortions. Prior to the election, many political analysts thought the

saliency of reproductive rights would increase due to the Supreme Court's 2022 [Dobbs decision](#) overturning a national right to an abortion. They believed this might lead voters that favored reproductive rights to support Kamala Harris and other Democrats. But after playing a [major role](#) in the 2022 midterm elections, abortion appears to have receded as a major issue in this election. [Exit polls](#) indicated many Americans supported abortion rights, but still voted for Republican candidates.

The Democrats' defeat in the United States also [parallels elections across the industrialized world](#) that have led incumbent governments to go down in defeat since COVID due to concerns about the [cost of living](#) and [immigration](#). In fact,

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the [ideological orientation](#) of the incumbent governments doesn't seem to matter very much. In America, the liberal Democratic party was punished in this election. But in Japan and the United Kingdom, the conservative parties recently lost their elections due to similar unhappiness about inflation and the economy.

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Furthermore, the U.S. election saw continued shifts in the coalitions of the Democratic and Republican parties. Latino voters appear to have dramatically increased their support of Trump and other Republican candidates. [Exit polls](#) indicate that 46% of self-identified Hispanic voters picked Trump, up from 32% in the 2020 election when

Trump lost to Joe Biden. [Young, male voters](#) also shifted dramatically toward Trump.

[Polarization of voters by education](#) also [continued to increase](#). Lower education voters trended toward Trump, while higher education voters trended toward Harris and the Democratic party as they have in other recent elections.

Democracy

Many Americans [worried](#) that democracy itself was on the ballot in this election. Former President Trump made a number of autocratic statements during the campaign, even [threatening](#) to unleash the criminal justice system on his political enemies. It remains to be seen whether he will follow through on these threats.

Beyond this election, America faces a number of long-term threats to its democracy. Over the past several decades, the United States has seen growing partisan polarization at both the mass and elite levels. As in South Korea, members of both U.S. parties now fear major policy changes if the other party gains unified control of the government. This has led to greater voter turnout and political engagement. But it has also led [some to question the results of elections](#)

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Political scientists have found that the willingness of losing parties to concede elections and the peaceful transfer of power that follows are crucial to democratic survival.

Unlike other democracies, United States elects its president through the “[electoral college](#)” rather than via a popular vote of its people. In [both 2000 and 2016](#), the loser of the popular vote became president due to narrow victories in the electoral college. As a result, the country elected a president that was not supported by a majority of Americans. Americans averted this outcome in 2024 due to Trump’s decisive victory in both the popular vote and the electoral college, but there is no guarantee that the electoral college will line-up with the popular vote in the future.

[that their party loses](#). This is concerning because [political scientists](#) have found that the willingness of losing parties to concede elections and the peaceful transfer of power that follows are crucial to democratic survival.

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The United States Senate is also not majoritarian. Each state gets two Senators regardless of the state’s population. As a result, the Senate [over-represents small, rural states](#). California and Wyoming receive the same number of senators even though California has over 50 times more people than Wyoming. In 2024, the Republican party won control of the Senate. But

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[Republican senators represent far fewer Americans than Democratic senators](#). This pro-Republican bias in the Senate due to the [over-representation of rural states](#) is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Finally, the United States continues to see [debates](#) about access to the ballot box. Some want to continue making it easier for people to vote, by making it simpler to register to vote and enabling citizens to cast their ballots via mail. Others worry about the security of the election system. They believe that voters should be required to prove their identity and citizenship, and voters should only be allowed to cast their ballots in-person. These debates led to an [explosion of litigation](#) in courts over mail-in ballots, voter identification laws, and other voting rules in the 2024 election. Voting rights are likely to remain hotly contested in the years ahead.

Policy Consequences of the Election

The election has major consequences for American foreign policy. Former President Trump’s victory means that the United States is likely to [re-assess its international commitments](#). It may reduce its commitments to NATO. It is also unlikely to send significantly more military assistance to Ukraine.

The election also has major consequences for America's trade policy. Former President Trump has [proposed large increases in tariffs](#) on most imports. If he enacts these tariffs, they could shift some manufacturing jobs from overseas back to the United States, at the cost of [higher prices](#) for American consumers. Politically, one of the lessons of this election is that American voters blame elected officials for [inflation](#). So if Trump's tariffs lead to higher inflation, he and his Republican allies could be penalized at the ballot box in the 2026 and 2028 elections.

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From a domestic perspective, Trump's victory could lead to major policy changes. He and his allies in the Republican Party are likely to [extend tax cuts](#) for wealthy Americans. Trump is also likely to crack down on [immigration](#). He could restart plans to build a wall at American's border with Mexico. He has promised to deport many undocumented immigrants from the United States.

Republicans won unified control of the federal government in this election. But there continues to be substantial polarization between Democrats and Republicans about the right path for America. A major question for Trump's administration will be whether he can bring Americans together and facilitate bipartisan compromises on important policies. If not, partisan divides are likely to continue over the next four years.

The US-ROK Policy Brief is a joint publication between The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) and the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) dedicated to exploring current Korea-related policy matters within regional and global contexts.

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