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They Who Betrayed Ukraine

American Jews, Israel, and the Presidential Election

Uriya Shavit

There's a funny thing about the 2024 American presidential election. It serves as a perfect example of how a flow of reliable information is sometimes more confusing than meaningful. The more polling data showered on experts – I suspect that come November 6, many will need rehab from four hours of daily injections – the less a sound projection of the results is possible.

Harris leads in the national polls, but some of her margins are smaller than the gap between Biden's polling numbers and his actual result four years ago. The battleground states are all within the margin of error in all polls. Voters trust Trump more on the economy, which is what they care about most, but they also think Harris is more connected to people like them, and will do a better job on health care and housing affordability. Harris lost some black voters but gained some anti-Trump Republicans. Thousands of hours of analysis conclude with the bottom line that Harris is most likely to win. Or Trump.

Distrusting polls has become a conventional wisdom, but even in 2016, the majority did a good job, within their stated methodological limitations. Because election campaigns in America are often about telling people whatever they want to hear as long as it can ring credible, the advancement of the science of polling leads to more competitive campaigns, ironically making the job of pollsters more difficult.

There are five possible scenarios for how this election will end, some more disturbing than others, but none entirely reassuring about the future of democracy in America, or the endurance of the Union itself.

One likely scenario is that Harris wins the Electoral College, but does so narrowly enough for the sour losers from 2020 to try and hinder the peaceful transfer of power once again, only this time not just violently but also with greater legal sophistication and with the help of a politicized and partially corrupt Supreme Court. Whether they succeed or not, the United States will see restless times.

Another likely scenario is for Harris to win the popular vote but lose the Electoral College. Since 1992, Republicans have won the popular vote only once, but have won the Electoral College three times, so a repeat of this scenario will not be an abnormality.

There is a huge difference between a second Trump presidency and a first Harris presidency: He will have, in all likelihood, the Congress and the Supreme Court at his side; she will have to chart her way through negotiations and compromises. If they lose because of the distortion that is the Electoral College for the third time within 24 years, Democrats will grudgingly accept the twisted reality of having a national majority yet being powerless. But for how long?

Then there are the possibilities, well within the margins of error, that Trump will end up commanding a comfortable electoral and national win, or that Harris would. Neither will change a sad reality: Trump is a vulgar convicted felon who incited an insurrection and openly entertains racist tropes and displays despotic instincts, and he earned the solid support of at least 45% of the American public not despite of who he is, but because of who he is.

No matter who wins, the crisis in America will not just go away, no more than the social media that inflames it would. It is beyond me why students of history do not recognize that the very existence of the Union is at risk.

In understanding what got Americans to their current dangerous abyss, attention should be drawn to a blind spot called religion.

The majority of political scientists and media analysts are secular people, which possibly explains why they overlook the role of devotion in these (and other) elections. Religious affiliations are as significant a force in American politics as race, gender, and education. In fact, they are arguably the most significant force.

Trump's hopes to win are entirely dependent on the support of devout, white, evangelical Christians. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2020, 71% of non-Hispanic white Americans who attend Church at least once a month voted for Trump over Biden, compared to 46% who attend Church only a few times a year. Among white evangelical Christians who attend Church at least once a month, 85% voted for Trump in 2020. In 2024, Trump is expected to gain 82% of that crucial electorate.

The enthused support of the more socially conservative and religiously practicing Americans for a man who epitomizes sin seems puzzling. Yet, it is actually not hard to explain.

It thrives on the self-congratulatory concept of the mysterious ways through which God works and the satisfaction of being reassured that vice is the way of the world. It also thrives on the expanding chasm between how non-religious and religious Americans see the world and the pleasure the religious take in seeing how terrifying Trump is for the non-religious, who are usually very confident. It is encouraged by the political interests of religious communities, which are inseparable from their social and cultural needs. The evangelical Christian who attends Church every week lives in a different habitus than the one who goes there only on Christmas, even if they both define themselves as evangelical.

The same pattern applies to American Jews. The more religious they are, the more pro-Trump they are. The ultra-Orthodox share Trump's cultural instincts and some of the interests of his evangelical base, especially in securing autonomy and state funding for private religious education.

Yet most American Jews are not ultra-Orthodox. They have for over a century aligned with the Democratic Party – although to varying degrees.

According to data from the Jewish Virtual Library, Wilson received just 55% of their support in 1916, while Roosevelt received 90% in 1940. Johnson got 90% in 1964, while Carter got just 45% in 1980 (still a plurality of votes in that three-man race). Obama had 78% in his first run, and only 69% in his second.

Jews became overwhelmingly Democrats as part of the coalition of minorities created by Roosevelt in the 1930s. That historical link alone would not have guaranteed their continued allegiance – just look at the electoral map of the southern states in 1976 and you'll get the picture.

For American Jews who cherish being fully integrated Americans, the Republican Party and its evangelical base, which includes a fair share of Christian nationalists, risk the foundations of their identity. They fear ideologists who insist that Christianity should be given primacy over other religions, and who seek to impose their norms on the public at large. Those Jews are Democrats not because of Israel and not because of their parents, but because they are secular and because of their children.

Trump got 24% of the Jewish vote in 2016. In 2020, polling showed he got as much as 31%, although other polls suggested he got as little as 21%. There is no indication he will significantly outperform his previous achievements this time around.

I actually don't consider Trump's anger with Jewish voters for not supporting him in larger numbers despite his steadfast support for Israel as antisemitism. If we accept that Israel is important to most American Jews because they are Jewish, then criticizing them for not rewarding pro-Israel views makes sense.

It is, however, far from obvious that Trump is indeed the better candidate for Israel – even if we put aside the concerns for the future of American democracy and of the Union under a second Trump presidency.

Trump's Middle Eastern policies got right a few crucial basics, which the Democrats have failed – and continue to fail – to grasp. He understood that the Arab side would never see the United States as an impartial arbiter, so standing firmly with Israel helps, rather than injures, diplomatic efforts. He understood how despotic regimes and anti-Western terrorist groups cynically take advantage of human rights discourses. He also understood that there is little point in advancing for the 137th time the exact same kind of two-state-solution negotiations and hoping for different results.

These premises facilitated the morally just decision to move the American embassy to Jerusalem, which, contrary to what many pundits predicted, did not drive the region to catastrophe. They also facilitated the Abraham Accords, which broke the Palestinian monopoly over normalization and signaled to them that the passing of time does not work in their favor.

What the Trump strategy – actually, the Jared Kushner strategy – lacked was some kind of plan as to what to do if things go wrong; in case a full-scale war with Hamas or Hizballah erupts, or in case the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank collapses, or all of the above. He had no idea back then, and his confused statements indicate that he and his advisors do not have a clear strategy now, just as the Democrats don't have one.

It is far from guaranteed that Trump will be willing to pay the price that supporting Israel will require in the next few years, and – unlike in the case of a Harris victory – there will be no one to stand in his way if he chooses to impose on Israel whatever unfavorable conditions he would want to impose.

The Abraham Accords were a lucrative business for all involved, including the United States. The current situation is very different. To do the right thing for Israel and for the region is going to be tremendously costly for the United States. Financially, militarily, diplomatically. It will, at some point, involve angering not just Arab allies but also some Jewish supporters.

Czechoslovakia – sorry, Ukraine – is a warning light.

At this very moment, there are hundreds of thousands of young Europeans and Americans who owe the civilian clothes they are wearing to the sheer courage and sacrifice of the Ukrainian people.

Putin's aggression against Ukraine was never about NATO membership.

The Russian dictator has cultivated three fascist tropes – of a Russian *volk*, Russian exceptionalism, and Russian destiny of greatness. Ukraine stood in his way, injured his petty pride and lunatic dreams, and seemed like easy prey. He assaulted it twice: When it terminated its subordination to Moscow (in 2014) and in 2022, as a consequence of its election of a President who was everything he was not: popular, young, liberal, and passionate about serving his people.

If we read what Putin and his fellow war criminals actually said before the war began, rather than what we'd like to believe they said, we'll recognize what the true Hitlerian ambitions of the Russian regime were: a swift conquest of Ukraine, leading to the breakdown of NATO, de-facto subordination of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states to Russian interests and whims, the reunification of the Russian *volk*, and the reemergence of a bipolar world order, divided between declining liberals and megalomaniac fascists.

Putin and Hamas are birds of a feather: cruel, malicious, and keep punching above their weight. No wonder they flock together.

Ukraine shocked Russia, and the liberal world, by frustrating Putin's plan. A three-day victory march turned into a three-year grueling war.

Yet the West was quick to show how undutiful it can be. We have had the dormant Marxists who were just waiting for the right moment. The closeted fascists who secretly or openly admire Putin. The lazy, uninspiring mainstreams who did not rise to the gravity of the hour.

And then there was Trump.

Instead of demanding Biden's administration give Ukraine more, much more, as a true American patriot and committed democrat would, Trump consistently bolstered Russia's ambitions. First, by leading the efforts to block aid for Ukraine in Congress, which gravely impeded the situation of the Ukrainian troops. Then, by publicly implying that if elected, he would impose on Ukraine Putin's terms for so-called peace.

This is like reliving the 1930s, only with Roosevelt replaced by Charles Lindbergh.

The financial burden of helping Ukraine survive against a superior force has been heavy, especially (and, unjustly so) on the United States. Yet the alternative is so apocalyptic that the burden is the lesser evil by far. Western military and financial aid cannot deliver for Ukraine the absolute victory it desires – but it can stop Russia from winning a war that will end all peace.

Trump's approach to Ukraine has been so insane and bizarre that it almost begs some Manchurian-candidate-like conspiracy theories. Still, I have two more probable explanations.

One is that people tend to dislike most those who remind them of their own personal flaws. Zelenskyy is, like Trump, a television celebrity who became a national leader – only, his leadership style ascended with the role, whereas Trump remained a rating-thirsty celeb in new clothes.

Another is that Trump owes his popularity in part to the strong isolationist impulse that developed in the United States following the disaster in Iraq (he and Obama have only two things in common: their election was highly improbable, and they opposed the war).

The isolationist instinct has existed in America throughout the 20th century, and during the Second World War, it was frighteningly strong. But it has always been defeated a moment before it was too late. Its triumph at this historical juncture could lead humanity to a very dark hour, Israel included.

Yes – the case of Israel and Trump is different than that of Ukraine and Trump. Out there will be the affectionate family circles and friends, the influential donors, the evangelicals. All of them may wish to see less American involvement in world affairs, but their commitment to Israel is passionate and firm.

Yet all also proved, again and again, that they don't have the guts to oppose Trump when he stands his ground. Lindsay Graham, for example, is a real hawk when it comes to Russia as much as he is a sincere lover of Zion. Did that do Ukraine any good on the Senate floor?

The only meaningful guarantee against the temptation of isolationism is an inner moral compass that allows a president to distinguish right from wrong and recognize that some rights are worthy of a selfless fight. I trust Trump and his anti-Ukraine surrogates with securing the future of Israel and the Jewish people as much as I would trust Joseph Kennedy.

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