

# Correcting Progressive Errors About Why Trump Won

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Peter Berkowitz

## COMMENTARY

Tomorrow, in defiance of mighty odds, Donald Trump, the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, will take the oath of office to become the nation's 47<sup>th</sup> president.

Illiberalism of the left proved a major factor in Trump's close but clear victory over Vice President Kamala Harris and in progressive elites' far-fetched rationalizations of Harris' defeat.

Some Harris supporters, especially among the D.C. professional class, attribute Harris' loss to Trump voters' gullibility or malice. They say that America is thriving, crime is down, employment is low, and Biden passed major legislation to combat inflation and enhance America's ability to compete with China. Therefore, only a public that fell for right-wing misinformation or backs Trump's authoritarian dispositions could have elected him president. Among other things, this assessment overlooks that inflation, which surged during Biden's presidency, battered working-class voters who form the core of Trump's support, and that declining inflation does not mean that prices have returned to pre-inflation levels. It also underestimates the impact of lawless borders on middle-class and working-class voters. It avoids consideration of the consequences of mainstream-media gaslighting of Americans about Biden's declining cognitive capabilities. And it ignores the electoral significance of Harris' inability to distinguish herself from the Biden administration – known early on as the Biden-Harris administration – and to separate herself from the hard-left positions she took in 2019 in pursuit of her party's presidential nomination and as a senator from, and attorney general of, California.

Other Harris supporters blame her loss on racism and sexism. They maintain that the American people's bigotry foiled the election of an African-American woman to the highest office in the land. Well-known facts undercut this accusation. In 2008, then-Sen. Barack Obama defeated John McCain – a center-right, white war hero – to become the first black person elected president of the United States. Following his January 2009 inauguration, President Obama enjoyed sky-high approval ratings that cut across party lines. Obama coasted to reelection in 2012 against Mitt Romney – a center-right, white, former businessman and former Massachusetts governor. And former President Obama and his African-American wife, former first lady Michelle Obama, remain popular. Moreover, though losing to Trump in 2016 in the Electoral College, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, demonstrating that a majority of Americans can prefer a woman in the White House.

In early January in the New York Times, James Carville took a crack at explaining Harris' loss. He, too, offered an implausible, one-dimensional account.

In "[James Carville: I Was Wrong About the 2024 Election. Here's Why.](#)" the veteran Democratic campaign advisor and longtime TV political commentator reasonably emphasized that "the most important thing for us now is to face that we were wrong and take action on the prevailing 'why.'" But his "why" is a misleading cliché. A prominent figure in Bill Clinton's successful 1992 presidential bid, Carville faulted Democrats in 2024 for neglecting a crucial truth associated with victory 32 years before: "We lost for one very simple reason: It was, it is, and it always will be the economy, stupid."

Carville greatly oversimplifies. The economy is a major factor in elections. Yet other matters, including citizens' sense of personal security and overall well-being and candidates' positions on culture and foreign affairs, not only shape political preferences but also influence voters' interpretation of economic performance. For example, voters' assessment of higher taxes and painful tariffs during wartime differ from their view of these burdens in peacetime.

While Trump "decisively won by seizing a swath of middle-class and low-income voters focused on the economy," according to Carville, it was, he contends, the stories that Republicans told about the economy – and that Democrats did not tell – that determined the outcome. "Democrats have flat-out lost the economic narrative," writes Carville. "The only path to electoral salvation is to take it back. Perception is everything in politics, and a lot of Americans perceive us as out to lunch on the economy – not feeling their pain or caring too much about other things instead." Accordingly, Carville instructs Democrats to "focus on revving up a transformed messaging machine for the new political paradigm we now find ourselves living in." To better manage people's perceptions, Democrats must devise a simple message and execute a disciplined, back-to-basics campaign – "Repetitive. Memorable. And entirely focused on the issues that affect Americans' everyday lives."

Instead of directing ire toward Trump the man, Carville wants Democratic messaging to target the Trump administration's likely economic measures: tax cuts for the wealthy, tariffs, and major cuts to health care benefits. These, Carville is confident, will hurt ordinary voters.

He also calls on Democrats to develop their own policies. Implicitly recognizing that Trump tapped into genuine discontents, Carville counsels his party to go "on the offensive with a wildly popular and populist economic agenda" that Republicans cannot but oppose. That agenda should include raising the minimum wage, portraying the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade* as an economic issue, and dividing the GOP by supporting immigration reform that encourages high-skilled and well-educated workers to come to America. And, Carville stresses, Democrats must aggressively employ "the new media paradigm" – podcasts, social media, and prominent influencers – to sell their policies.

Musa al-Gharbi sees matters very differently and accounts for Harris' defeat far more convincingly. In "[A Graveyard of Bad Election Narratives](#)," he criticizes progressive scholars' and journalists' propensity to find the source of Trump's victory in red-state voters' moral and intellectual failings. An assistant professor of communication, journalism and, by courtesy, sociology at Stony Brook University, the young scholar – no fan of Trump's – corrects the record through careful consideration of publicly available data.

Al-Gharbi concentrates on "what *wasn't* the problem" (emphasis in original) for Democrats. It wasn't racism: Trump did worse with white voters this cycle than in 2020 and 2016; Harris did better with white voters – especially white men – than did Biden in 2020 and Clinton in 2016; and Trump improved his numbers significantly among non-white voters. It wasn't sexism: While Trump received a share of the male vote similar to that of Nixon, Reagan, and both Bushes, he significantly increased his portion of the women's vote. It wasn't billionaires' influence: Although Trump had Elon Musk and more than 50 other billionaires on his side, Harris had more than 80 billionaires on hers, raised much more money than Trump, and was preferred by the affluent. It wasn't third parties: In the two states – Michigan and Wisconsin – where third parties received enough votes to make a difference, a majority of their votes had the third-party candidates not run probably would have gone to Trump. And the problem wasn't voter turnout: Although down overall from 2020, most of the 2024 decrease came from sure-win states for one of the candidates while four swing states that together were decisive – Pennsylvania, Georgia, Wisconsin, and Michigan – enjoyed record voter turnout.

What then was Harris' problem in election 2024? It starts, according to al-Gharbi, with her deficiencies as a candidate. Harris entered the race extremely late (Biden's fault) and failed to communicate a compelling agenda (her fault). In addition, maintains al-Gharbi, by courting Liz Cheney and Dick Cheney she alienated her base without attracting swing voters. She neglected Democrats' "blue wall" Rust Belt states. Speaking on her behalf, Obama antagonized black voters by scolding them for insufficiently supporting a black woman. And Harris declined an invitation from "The Joe Rogan Experience," a podcast that typically reaches an audience of 11 million and on occasion as many as 50 million.

The deeper reasons for Trump's victory involve long-term trends also at work in other Western liberal democracies. The [data](#) indicate, argues al-Gharbi, that voters' top three reasons for rejecting Harris were inflation, immigration, and progressive views on cultural issues. However, if it weren't for inflation and immigration, argues al-Gharbi, Democrats in 2024 would have continued to shed votes among "non-whites, religious minorities, less affluent people" because of cultural issues' persistent salience.

For several election cycles, highly educated, prestigiously credentialed elites have alienated middle-class and working-class voters and driven them to the Republican Party, observes al-Gharbi. Over the last 15 years or so, the "Great Awakening," he argues, intensified progressive elites' promulgation of hard-left cultural stances. They championed assaults on free speech – by universities, the prestige press, social media, government, and sometimes

all in tandem. They promoted a transgender ideology that encouraged adolescents to change their sex through drug therapy and surgery, and that endorsed the participation in women's athletic competitions of biological men who declared themselves women. And they avidly advanced Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs that denounced merit as an artifact of white supremacy and sought to place in positions of power and prestige people of favored skin color, ethnicity, sex, and sexual orientation.

Progressives' embrace of illiberal doctrines had the strange consequence of transforming Donald Trump into the preferred candidate for president of many who cherish free speech, respect sexual difference while insisting on equal rights, and wish people to be judged based on competence and character. This goes a long way toward explaining Trump's odds-defying return to the White House.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](https://peterberkowitz.com) and he can be followed on X @BerkowitzPeter.*