

TWO ELECTIONS: “THE RULES WERE THAT YOU GUYS WEREN’T GOING TO FACT-CHECK”

I want to elaborate on something I said on Nicole Sandler’s show on Friday. There were really two elections last Tuesday.

In one, politics worked.

In the other, propaganda worked far better. Trump didn’t even hide that he was running on propaganda. JD Vance said it plainly during his debate: their campaign wasn’t willing to participate in any venue that would fact check. They did not contest this election on true claims about policy. Indeed, hours after Trump’s win became clear, one after another influencer announced that, yes, Donald Trump really does plan on implementing Project 2025, even though he falsely disavowed it as a core tenet of his campaign over and over.

~~Trump won with about the same number of votes he got in 2020.~~ Trump will get millions more votes than he did in 2020 (though possibly not more than Biden did in 2020.) [Thanks to Nate Silver for the correction.] But they were different votes: more Hispanics, fewer white people. He will win the popular vote, too, but it’s not yet clear by how much.

Harris lost. But she lost differently in contested states and uncontested states. In uncontested states, the country moved upwards of 6% towards Trump. In contested states, Harris halved that movement by 3%. That is, where she followed the old rules of campaigning, persuasion, and GOTV, it worked, some, to counter the larger propaganda wave.

Meanwhile, a lot of people only voted for Trump. That’s why Democratic Senators are on pace to win four swing states that Trump won.

And Democrats had resilience down ballot in other places, too. A number of democrats in districts Trump won by double digits kept their seats. In several states, less conservative judges were kept. In Montana, the legislature moved left. In addition to most of the abortion referenda, right wingers lost referenda on school vouchers in ruby red states.

There is no getting around the devastation of Trump's win. But the down ballot resilience will end up being very important – and also suggests some areas of vulnerability for Republicans.

Democrats are already at each others' throat over whether politics could have worked better – who is to blame. Some idiots are arguing that Democrats lost because they're too "woke," as if they don't know that "wokeness" was a propaganda creation the entire time, propaganda created by men waging cultural war on behalf of aggrieved men. We can come back to the two issues – Harris' silence on Gaza and her cultivation of Republicans – that might plausibly have led Democrats to stay home.

But given the larger dynamic of the race – that politics worked where it was done, but propaganda worked far better – Democrats would be far better to use the two months they've got to inventory their tools (one of which is that down ballot resilience), breathe, and think about how to counter the propaganda, because Trump will be in a position to keep doing what he just did unless Democrats find a way to counter the propaganda.

I'm not the only one making that observation. Michael Tomasky noted that Trump won on inaccurate perceptions about the economy. Amanda Marcotte wrote about this dissonance at Salon, pointing to a bunch of studies showing that people who get information from non-news sites prefer Harris' policies but nevertheless voted for Trump.

The problem wasn't Democratic policy or messaging. It's ignorance. As Heather

"Digby" Parton wrote at Salon Wednesday, people backed Trump's "aesthetics and attitudes" but knew nothing about his policies. Before the election, Catherine Rampell and Youyou Zhou at the Washington Post polled voters about policies without revealing which candidate proposed them. Harris' were far more popular – even Trump voters generally liked her ideas more, as long as they knew they weren't hers.

When voters have factual information about the candidates, they prefer Democrats. Polls from earlier this year show that people who consume news from journalistic outlets – newspapers, network news programs, and news websites – overwhelmingly planned to vote for the Democratic candidate. Newspaper readers clocked in at 70% Democratic support, and network news viewers were 55% Democratic. News website readers were only less so because the survey didn't distinguish between legitimate sites like Salon and bunk outlets like Breitbart, but still: merely being a person who reads stuff makes you more liberal. In states where heavy ad spending helped educate voters a little more on Harris' plans, she lost less ground than in places where that money wasn't spent.

The problem is most people simply do not absorb quality information. Instead, increasing numbers of Americans have a media diet that is mostly a bunch of lies, conspiracy theories, irrelevant diatribes and other such bunkum that right-wing propagandists use to deceive people. A study released by Pew Research in September showed people were exponentially more likely to get "news" from social media detritus than legitimate news outlets. And those results almost certainly downplay the

ratio of nonsense-to-real news, since most people taking the poll won't want to admit that they mostly scroll TikTok all day and haven't read an actual article in eons. Looking at newspaper sales and news site traffic, we can see that the consumption of reality-based news is plummeting.

WSJ has a piece describing the collapse of both legacy media and cable news. Of particular note: the referrals to legacy media started collapsing in 2023; but we know that was an intentional choice made by some of the richest men in the world to change their algorithms.

There's one other aspect of this dynamic for which I'd like to offer a hypothesis.

Propaganda didn't just win the election. It created the malaise that Trump promised he would solve.

A number of people are blaming this exclusively on an anti-incumbent wave that has taken out ruling parties since COVID (there are exceptions to this, likely to include Ireland when we vote later this month). But that anti-incumbent wave includes legislative elections. And in 2022, Democrats did far *better* than expected, even though Biden's approval ratings were as bad as they currently are during the summer of 2022 (his approvals narrowed somewhat by the election).

There are three differences.

First, Trump was on the ballot. A great many people – often disaffected and less educated – are buying the con that Trump is selling, and they're buying it because Trump and his allies first made them more disaffected and then offered to provide an antidote. He plans to do more of the same in his second term.

Second, as the WSJ points out, legacy media has cratered in the last two years. But importantly, as I'll show, Republicans have already started

putting a lot of the fascist crackdown we fear in place, both in individual states like Florida, but also in the way the GOP used their majority in the House starting in 2023. Republicans took out social media moderation in advance, and that played a significant part in the success of GOP propaganda efforts. They started laying the foundation to win on propaganda when they got a majority in the House.

Finally, a word about Biden's unpopularity, which is what the wave was against. We're looking at the election and no doubt the propaganda made the difference there. It didn't help that legacy media misrepresented Biden's economic successes.

But one reason Biden is so unpopular is the same reason Hillary was in 2016: Republicans had led a sustained garbage investigation designed to do nothing but raise her negatives. Republicans tried to impeach Biden for, literally, nothing, and it captured the attention of both real and fake media for two years. And the effort to smear Biden was, as these campaigns always are, about projection. Republicans in Congress spent taxpayer dollars to create the illusion that Biden was the corrupt one, not Trump. (Trump's unprecedented corruption, which will be one of several organizing principles of his Administration, got almost no attention during the campaign.)

Which is to say, it's not just the election. It's broader than that. It's that a permanent propaganda campaign has been supercharged in the last two years, in ways that weren't even true when Fox News relentlessly tried to take down Hillary and her spouse in the 1990s. And that propaganda campaign has played a key role in leading people to distrust and eschew "reality," including the reality that Joe Biden was better for the economy and Trump is unashamedly corrupt.

Update: Another piece on the correlation between media use and Trump vote.

And Timothy Snyder ends a piece on Trump and fascism this way:

He bears responsibility for what comes next, as do his allies and supporters.

Yet some, and probably more, of the blame rests with our actions and analysis. Again and again, our major institutions, from the media to the judiciary, have amplified Trump's presence; again and again, we have failed to name the consequences. Fascism can be defeated, but not when we are on its side.