

To: All interested parties

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RE: Presidential Election Strategy Memo

Takeaways from the 2024 Presidential Election and Messaging Suggestions for 2028

2024 Campaign and Communications Assessment:

The 2024 Presidential election has certainly made history and will be remembered for its unique political climate. Leading up to the 2024 election, the United States has become increasingly polarized, intensifying debates around issues like immigration, inflation, the war in the Middle East, and abortion access. This election came as the political climate was shifting following a variety of recent changes; the COVID-19 pandemic, the January 6th insurrection, and the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*. Not to mention, there were multiple unprecedented events of the campaign season: Donald Trump's legal battles and 34 felony convictions; President Biden stepping out of the race, and Vice-President Harris replacing him as the democratic nominee; two assassination attempts on Donald Trump; and a historic Supreme Court ruling on Presidential immunity. Given the tense political climate and the incredibly close margins of the last election, both candidates knew they had to focus on appealing to the small number of undecided voters in key swing states, as any small shifts could be what ultimately determine the election in a seemingly tied race.

While audience-specific messaging is a staple of political communications and presidential campaigns throughout American history, there was a clear emphasis in both campaigns to adapt their messages to appeal to swing state audiences. With this strategy both candidates implemented a key principle of rhetorical public speaking: relate the topic to your audience (*Rhetorical Public Speaking* by Nathan Crick, p. 72). For example, Trump emphasized his support for fracking and attacked Harris' position while campaigning in Pennsylvania, a state with stake in the natural gas industry ([The Hill](#)). While Pennsylvanians certainly have varying and diverse opinions on the issue, Trump's messaging targeted the crucial working-class, a demographic with shifting voting patterns that would be key in

winning swing states like Pennsylvania. Understanding this political shift, Harris spent time with these same voters in rural and suburban Pennsylvania by appealing to their community values. She targeted her message to old-school conservatives, appearing with Liz Cheney (a longtime conservative), to call out Trump’s lack of understanding for the working-class, emphasize his unconventional nature and the threats he posed to the country and the economy ([NPR](#)). Although both candidates may have used similar strategies, they clearly applied this focus in vastly different ways:

Harris on Harris	Trump on Trump
- We are the only democratic choice in this election - We support personal freedom and protecting your rights - We have experience with politics to get things done - We want to unite the country and help all Americans: “country over party” - We come from working-class backgrounds and want to help support the working class and tax the wealthy	- We don’t support the status quo and ineffective career politicians - We support the real American values and issues that impact people/they care about - We are the ones who understand the economy and will fix inflation and bring back jobs/prosperity - We will stop attacks from the liberal elite on our lives and values - We understand your troubles - We will save the country and protect America
Harris on Trump	Trump on Harris
- Trump is a criminal and abuser, while I am a former prosecutor who knows how to fight against harmful people like him - He does not know what he is doing and is not fit for office - Trump is a fascist who will end democracy as we know it and become a dictator - Trump and MAGA are “weird” and want to be responsible for your personal decisions	- She does not understand you and your real problems, she is too focused on supporting woke issues - She is part of the “failed” Biden administration and wants to support the elitist status quo - She is going to enact radical socialist policies - She is going to let the country get taken over

Historic and Scholarly Context:

Since Donald Trump became a serious presidential candidate in the 2016 election, he has continued to shock and confuse many with his lack of reverence for norms of political communication. While it is true that Trump has broken convention around Presidential communications, historically

successful political communication strategies were still employed by both candidates during the 2024 campaign.

Harris clearly looked back at successful campaigns to model her political communication strategies off their successes. The emotional “feel” of a candidate can often be a crucial factor in the outcome of an election (*The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*, Westen, p. 3). This emotional feel is a part the “networks of association” that people connect between different “thoughts, feelings, images, and ideas” throughout their life (Westen 3). Voters develop their view of a candidate and their persona through these “networks of connection,” and use these conclusions in their decision-making process. Westen notes how famously Bill Clinton cultivated a sense of “hope” around his candidacy. Clinton’s famous “Hope” ad laid out the framework for a positive, hopeful campaign association that allowed him to draw voter support, ultimately to successfully of beat an incumbent, something that has rarely happened throughout American history (Westen 7). This ad included a hopeful campaign song, and featured Clinton meeting President Kennedy as a boy, building on another successful Presidential persona that appealed to the American people. But Clinton’s campaign of hope went beyond this ad, using the media to connect with the American people, famously participating in personable interviews, and playing saxophone on MTV. His personality allowed him to connect with the American people in a memorable way, and therefore gave voters the opportunity to develop positive psychological “scripts” regarding his campaign (*The Reasoning Voter*, Popkin, Ch. 1 p. 7). While Westen’s analysis in *The Political Brain* was published prior to the election of President Obama, his campaign used many of the same strategies highlighted in Clinton’s campaign – also famously building a campaign of “Hope,” as seen in his iconic campaign posters.

The Harris campaign clearly took inspiration from these successful campaigns by adapting this technique for the social media age. Shortly after replacing Biden as the nominee, she used social media to create a fun and loveable persona, something people were eager for as she was replacing a candidate who lacked this element. It was dubbed the ‘vibes’ campaign ([TIME](#)), creating a sense of joy that was quite

impressive for her short and unexpected campaign. Her campaign kicked-off with a DNC debut featuring celebrity appearances, a concert-like feel, and a Beyonce campaign song. This exciting and celebratory start to her campaign was not only working to create a positive campaign association but demonstrated support for Harris among various opinion-leaders who provided voters with a shortcut to establishing a sense of trust with Harris' campaign (*The Dynamics of Political Communication*, Perloff, p. 108). Both techniques were important because they appealed to low-propensity and low-information who may not make decisions after policy analysis but would instead rely other cues of a politician and their campaign to make their political decisions (*The Reasoning Voter*, Popkin, Ch.1 p.1).

The Harris campaign also worked to frame Harris' policy in ways that would appeal to the cues of these potential voters. One successful (but potentially personally harmful) way her campaign did this around their framing of abortion rights. Harris shifted the abortion debate in post-Roe America away from being a feminist issue, but instead framed it as a matter of healthcare and personal freedom. She was able to appeal to a wider audience and garner bipartisan support framing it as an issue of freedom, using language that was centered around the values of these more conservative or moderate voters ([Willer and Feinberg](#)). This messaging could have contributed to the success of abortion access on various statewide ballot measures. However, this successful rhetoric may have harmed the Harris campaign, as people voted in favor of abortion access directly on ballot measures, but then ultimately voted for Trump in the presidential election ([The Daily](#)). Regardless of whether her bipartisan framing caused this phenomenon, her rhetoric successfully garnered support for abortion access.

Although Trump's campaign clearly contrasts Harris' savy use of traditional political communication strategy, he has clearly followed the "hang a lantern on your problem" framework. American presidents across the political spectrum from Kennedy to Carter to Reagan have used this tactic, proving it is best when candidates to embrace their potential flaws or setbacks and personally address any issues that arise (Matthews 156). Trump mastered this technique by embracing his otherwise unappealing traits and turning them into arguably his campaign's biggest asset: his personality. Trump's

ability to “hang a lantern” on his problem during this campaign was clear in the way he capitalized off his legal battles, selling memorabilia with his own mugshot, which turned the photo and therefore Trump into a martyr for the MAGA movement’s supporters ([*The New York Times*](#)).

Suggestions for the 2028 Election:

Although the 2028 election will be its own unique political moment, both parties can use the 2024 election to reflect on the areas where they succeeded and failed to adapt their messaging during the next election.

The main difference Republicans will face when adapting their strategies for the 2028 campaign is that they will be the incumbent party rather than the challenging party. This can either be their biggest asset or challenge depending on the party’s success during the next four years. Recently, there has been a global trend of incumbents losing to challenging parties, but if Republicans are well-liked by the end of these four years the biggest focus of their messaging should be to capitalize on that. Since the Republicans would need to maintain their current voting coalition the next four years, and potentially build on it to win again in 2028.

In comparison, as the Democratic party clearly needs to change strategy if they want to win in 2028, as they voters across the country in the 2024 presidential election. I personally think the biggest issue for the Democrats this past election was the cultural capital that Donald Trump holds across rural, and sometimes suburban communities. He has developed a cult of personality around his campaign, and the Democratic party struggles to fight this in these rural and suburban areas the Trump campaign culture is popular. One main reason I think these voters have moved away from the Democratic party towards Trump’s new Republican party is because they see this as a contrast to the Democrats who they view as the intellectual, liberal elite. I this association is the biggest thing Democrats need to fight to find success moving forward.

As we have seen in the past decade, Americans are becoming more polarized in their views, calcifying how they vote (*The Bitter End*, Ch. 8, p. 4). For the Democratic party win future elections, they need to through to win-over voters in demographics that lean conservative, ideally voters in rural areas or with less education ([*The Washington Post*](#)) I think that the Democratic party's main messaging issue is with these communities, who view the party as elitist, even though they would overwhelmingly benefit from their policies. Therefore, Democrats need to work avoiding their current intellectual approach to discussing politics. Frequent use of academic and political language will only reinforce voters' assumptions that the party is out of touch. Democratic politicians remember to assess their audience and choose the "appropriate jargon," when communicating with voters (*Championing Ideas and Influencing Others*, Daly, p. 40). While it is can be beneficial for politicians to seem trustworthy and well-educated, the voting patterns in rural and working-class communities demonstrate that this messaging hindering the Democratic party in these communities, where voters see this academic language as out of touch. In an atmosphere where most are on low-information voters, it is important for the party to remember that people will not delve into policy proposals but will rely on cues from their own experiences and schemas to make their decisions (Popkin Ch. 1 p.7). In my opinion, distancing themselves from academic messaging is the best way for Democrats to appeal to a wider voting block without alienating anyone in their current coalition. For example, Trump has appealed to these white working class and rural communities by turning minorities into scapegoats for their problems, however this is not a strategy that the Democratic party should embrace. Not only is it problematic, but it will cause them to alienate the diverse voters who they currently supported by. Democrats should focus on messaging that will fight the 'costal elite' stereotype and appeal to working-class, rural voters without completely changing their party ideology and identity. I think it is clear the Democratic party's failure in 2024 was due to their messaging, as in spite of losing the election, polling they have policies that are more popular ([*The Washington Post/YouGov*](#)). Additionally, the post-election blame game within about the party being "too liberal" but also "too conservative," should demonstrate that this is an issue of messaging, not policy. I think Democrats should focus on creating more accessible party culture and build on the increased working-

class focus of the Biden and Harris campaigns. The Republican party has found success with a focus on party culture, and the Democrats need to work to dilute this appeal by creating their own cultural appeal. Ultimately, I think this is the messaging that will draw in low-information and low-propensity voters to the Democratic party.