

The background of the entire page is a close-up of an American flag, showing the stars and stripes. A prominent vertical crack runs down the center of the image, starting from the top and extending towards the bottom. The flag's colors are slightly faded and textured, giving it a weathered appearance.

HARRIS

VS

Who Wins and What Does the 2024
US Election Mean for Australia and
Our Place in the Indo-Pacific?

Mandy Ross

TRUMP

THE TUCSIN

FLAGSHIP PUBLICATION OF THE

**JOHN CURTIN
RESEARCH CENTRE**

Labor ideas for a better Australia

Special Edition – October 2024

What Does the 2024 US Election Mean for Australia and Our Place in the Indo-Pacific?

Mandy Ross

As the United States approaches its presidential election on 5 November, the stakes for global stability have rarely been higher. The contest between the new Democratic nominee, Vice President Kamala Harris, and her opponent, convicted felon and former President Donald Trump, surpasses the usual spectacle of US politics. The election's outcome may radically shape not only America's future but the very contours of the global order. For Australia, a country geographically distant yet intertwined with American power, the election's consequences are significant, potentially shifting the trajectory of the Indo-Pacific region for coming decades.

The Contenders

Kamala Harris's "Freedom" Campaign

The US presidential race was upended when Joe Biden made way for Harris in mid-July. It moved from the familiar image of two aging white men contending for the White House to a more dynamic contest. A race once defined by age and unrelatable establishment politics is now a clash of generational change and new political divides. Harris has energised the base of both parties and is quickly syphoning more funds from supporters than a flashy Trump casino. Within 24 hours of her candidacy being announced, Harris had raised an impressive \$80 million.

As the first woman, the first Black person, and the first South Asian to serve as Vice President, Harris's rise to the top is historic. But her ascent is more than symbolic—it reflects a changing America, one grappling with its identity amid growing social inequality, environmental crises, and the fragility of its democratic institutions.

Harris's "Freedom" Campaign is about taking back a word Republicans have had a stranglehold on for years. Reworking the illustrious New Deal Democrat President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's famous 'Four Freedoms', Harris has flipped the script – freedom is no longer about gun ownership and free speech; it's about rights that matter to everyday Americans. For her, it's about giving women control over their own bodies, protecting voting rights and standing up for economic equity. In a country where democracy feels like its wobbling, Harris is reminding everyone that freedom belongs to all Americans. In her acceptance speech at the Democratic convention, Harris used the word a dozen times: "The freedom to live safe from gun violence in our schools, communities and places of worship. The freedom

to love who you love openly and with pride. The freedom to breathe clean air, and drink clean water, and live free from the pollution that fuels the climate crisis. And the freedom that unlocks all the others: the freedom to vote."

But this isn't just campaign chatter or a nod to Beyoncé's hit anthem *Freedom* – though the song does blast at every rally, with lines like, "I'ma keep running 'cause a winner don't quite on themselves." It's not background music or her unofficial slogan. Harris's vision of freedom is woven directly into her policy platform:

- She advocates for a significant expansion of healthcare, building on the foundations laid by Biden's administration, which saw a record 40 million Americans covered under the Affordable Care Act by 2024.
- Harris has been traveling across the country, championing 'Freedom of Choice' in response to the Supreme Court's 2022 decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, which had guaranteed American women and girls the right to abortion for over 50 years. If elected, she has pledged to restore reproductive freedom, though achieving this may prove more difficult than anticipated.

In addition, Harris's environmental policies remain vague, but she supports achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, building on Biden's Paris Accord commitment. As the former Attorney General of California and a US Senator, Harris is as staunch advocate of criminal justice reforms and policies to reduce income inequality. She prides herself on having only one client, 'the people.'

Harris's record on the US-Mexico southern border is a significant vulnerability, one that Trump's campaign is eager to exploit. Trump frequently claims that Harris and Biden have allowed more than 8 million illegal immigrants into the US in just three years—an assertion that resonates with many Americans living in Southern states or struggling with cost-of-living pressures. This rhetoric is effective in its simplicity, particularly in a tight race. Regardless of the actual number of undocumented individuals, it's clear Americans want the issue addressed more effectively. That said, Harris' retort, that Trump derailed the recent bipartisan border security bill, is beginning to cut through. She's making the case Trump needs a border problem to help him get elected – there's certainly no willingness from Trump or the Republican party to help solve this issue before the November election.

The Vice Presidents – Smart Picks or Missed Opportunities?

Regarding defence and global security, Harris 'freedom' vision is of America leading through the maintenance of strong alliances and multilateralism. Her approach reflects a belief in a predictable, rules-based international order where partnerships with NATO, the Quad, and other alliances are strengthened. This philosophy has been demonstrated in the Biden administration's continuing support for Ukraine in its defensive war against Russian aggression—a policy Harris endorses. "As president, I will stand strong with Ukraine and our NATO allies," Harris has stated.

The impact of the war in Ukraine extends beyond Europe. Harris understands that the support the US and its allies, including Australia, provide to Ukraine sends a powerful message to other autocratic countries, particularly China, about the West's resolve. A robust response to Russian aggression bolsters Europe but also serves as a deterrent to China revanchism in the Indo-Pacific, especially Taiwan.

Trump's 'Back-to-the-Future' Vision

Donald Trump, by contrast, offers a vision rooted in the desire to see America dominate the world stage once more, but on his arguably nostalgic terms:

- America asserts its strength unilaterally rather than building alliances or engaging in global cooperation. "Make America Great Again" harks back to a time—real or imagined—when the US was all-powerful and unburdened by international commitments and taps into a deep strain of isolationist thought.
- Trump's first term was marked by policies that attempted to realise this vision, with mixed results. He withdrew the US from the Paris Agreement, disrupting global climate efforts, and renegotiated NAFTA into the USMCA, which he claimed as a victory for American workers. He also waged tariff wars that unsettled both allies and adversaries. The impact of his "America First" strategy on Americans and international relationships remains a moot point.

Since the 2016 election, Donald Trump, faces a changing electoral landscape that could pose significant challenges to his 2024 campaign. Demographically, a large portion of his traditional voter base – older baby boomers - has dwindled. It is estimated 22 million baby boomers have passed away since 2016, and this age group historically leans Republican. Meanwhile, over 40 million voters from Gen Z, a cohort more aligned with Democratic party values, have joined the electorate.

In addition, Trump's ongoing legal battles are further eroding his support among women. His numerous court cases, including the civil suit where he was found liable for sexual abuse and defamation, have only deepened his already significant gender gap. Trump's path to winning over key voting blocs has grown narrower, making it more important for him to ignite his base and turn out the Republican vote.

The 2024 election has given unusual prominence to the vice-presidential picks, with both Democratic nominee Tim Walz, and Republican J.D. Vance gaining national attention. However, the strategic value of each choice is up for debate. Walz, brings the kind of no-nonsense, Midwestern sensibility that grounds the ticket. Minnesota Governor, former Congressman, National Guard veteran, high-school teacher and football coach, Walz screams 'practicality'. He's the kind of guy who knows how to fix a tractor and negotiate education reform in the same afternoon. His appeal to blue-collar and moderate voters helps soften Harris's more progressive edge. Walz is the sensible sidekick Harris needs and he will help her win over swing states.

J.D. Vance is Trump's pick and it's clear why – he's a populist firebrand with the Rust Belt. The Ohio Senator, known for his bestselling book, *Hillbilly Elegy* and so-called rags-to-riches story, is a megaphone for MAGA and Trump's "America First" agenda. Vance plays well to rural, working class voters who pine for 2016 but does he bring new voters into Trump's campaign, or help him reach women? Definitely not. Many pundits speculate Trump should have chosen Florida Senator Marco Rubio, who would have provided a bridge to independent voters and more establishment-orientated Republicans, or an unexpected pick in his former UN Ambassador Niki Haley. Vance has poured fuel on Trump's gender gap fires, criticising prominent Democrats as "childless cat ladies", insinuating they have no place in running the country. It's the sort of distraction Trump can ill afford less than two months out.

The Elephant in the Room is China

Forget Putin's Russia and its predictable efforts at election interference – China is the real game. While the world focuses on the Ukraine-Russia and Middle East conflicts, Beijing is playing the long game. Australia, whether it likes it or not, is in the thick of it. America's wavering support for Ukraine would be a boon to China. This issue isn't just about who occupies the Oval Office but who controls the Pentagon and intelligence apparatus. If the US significantly retreats from the Indo-Pacific, China won't just step in; but become predominant. The Belt and Road Initiative isn't merely outreach; it's China's \$1 trillion global power play, inching closer to Australia.

Harris and Trump have different approaches to China. Harris, embracing Biden and Obama's pivot legacy, is fully committed to AUKUS and the Quad, as well as Taiwan and the Philippines (Harris' first step on the international stage was the ASEAN Regional Forum), focused on keeping the Indo-Pacific out of Beijing's grasp. Under her watch, there has been investment and cooperation on missile defence, radar systems, cyber and space capabilities, fuel and ammunition storage, and upgrades to northern bases. This is the kind of American partner you want—one that's ready to act, not just talk. Trump's China strategy, however, is a

mix of bluster and unpredictability. He imposed tariffs on \$360 billion of Chinese goods, which made headlines but hinted at a step back from global conflicts. A warning sign for Australia.

Hugh White, the noted Australian foreign policy expert, has suggested that a second Trump administration would likely weaken America's role in Asia, leaving Australia more exposed to Chinese hard power. "There are many reasons to believe that AUKUS is not Trump's kind of deal," says White. "Trump will likely scrap anything Biden has put his name on and will ask, 'What's in this for America, and what is Australia giving us?' This is not exactly the security blanket we were hoping for.

This isolationist concern isn't limited to defence. Trade and climate security are also at stake. China is Australia's largest trading partner, absorbing up to 40% of our exports. However, this dependency is a double-edged sword. When China imposed tariffs on our barley and wine, and other barriers on beef, timber, coal, cotton and lobster it cost our economy billions, and forced Australian industry to find new markets. Let's not forget climate—if the US isn't invested in the health of the planet, China will set the rules. China's annual CO2 emissions are now double that of the US and rising fast.

With So Much at Stake, Who's Likely to Win?

The 2024 presidential race is highly unpredictable, and the polls reflect that. The race has tightened to the point where seasoned analysts are hesitant to make firm predictions. What do the numbers indicate? Harris has generated significant enthusiasm among younger voters, associated with Charli XCX's 'Brat Summer' cultural phenomenon." This movement is real—voter registration among 18-24-year-olds has surged since Harris was named the nominee, according to the latest Pew Research data. In addition, Taylor Swift's recent endorsement helped register around 500,000 new Democratic voters. The youth vote, often elusive, may be the decisive factor Harris needs to secure a victory, similar to Obama's success with younger voters.

Trump remains a formidable opponent, after all he heads the Republican ticket - and should not be underestimated. He has leveraged recent events to his advantage. The appalling assassination attempts on Trump sent shockwaves through the political landscape, briefly halting the campaign, and giving Trump an unexpected boost. Polls taken shortly after the first incident showed Trump's approval rating rose by several points. Its long-term effects are debatable especially with Harris in the race. Republican strategists are questioning Trump's ruthlessly negative strategy.

Indeed, Harris presently holds a slim 1-point lead in national polls—48% to Trump's 47%, with key battleground states like Pennsylvania and Florida in constant flux. In Arizona, the candidates are tied at 47% each, suggesting that this could be one of the closest elections in modern US history. Beyond the raw numbers, what makes this race particularly unpredictable is the sheer number of variables at play:

- The electorate is more polarised than ever, with voter sentiment swinging wildly depending on the latest headlines.
- Economic indicators, foreign policy crises, or significant legal rulings could tip the balance.
- The youth vote, invigorated by Harris's candidacy, could be countered by a surge in turnout among Trump's older base, which remains strong despite controversies surrounding his previous term.
- Voting methods – whether through mail-in ballots, early voting, or traditional election day turnout – add another layer of complexity. The lessons of 2020, where the timing and counting of ballots became contentious means both campaigns are preparing for legal battles over results in swing states.

As we approach election day, it's clear that the only certainty is uncertainty.

Australia's Role in a Post-Election Indo-Pacific

Regardless of the outcome, Australia should chart its own course in the Indo-Pacific. As a middle power, we've achieved some important outcomes in recent years but remain more reactive than proactive. Our largest defence investment is AUKUS, with a forecast price tag of \$368 billion—an investment that won't see our nuclear-powered submarines in the water until the 2040s. Australia spent a decade negotiating and renegotiating an effective subs deal, so there is no time to waste in fulfilling this commitment. China's increased aggression in the region through gray-zone tactics and soft power is putting pressure on Canberra to step up quickly.

Trade is another area where Australia cannot afford to be complacent. Sixty percent of our seaborne trade passes through the South China Sea, a region increasingly contested and dominated by China. This isn't just a distant concern; a disruption could lead to immediate economic consequences. To secure our economic future, Australia needs to diversify our trade relationships while continuing to stand up for shared values and international maritime laws.

Our key alliances, including the Quad (Australia, the US, Japan, and India), are strong but insufficient on their own. Australia's relationship with Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, has been a missed opportunity in 21st-century diplomacy. Indonesia is the world's third-largest democracy and a regional heavyweight. If Australia is serious about its future security and influence, we must invest in this relationship. Our focus should be on the long game rather than quick wins.

Finally, there's climate change. Our Pacific neighbours, many of whom already see Australia as a regional leader, expect us to take strong action, given that they are disproportionately affected. Will we still be arguing over the perfect energy-mix in the future while practically facing regional conflicts or forced mass migrations?

Similarly, as important as the 2024 election is, what really matters to Australia's national interest, is not who occupies the White House for four years, but whether we have the resolve to steer our own course in the Indo-Pacific for the next hundred years. Relying on American voters to cast their ballots in a way that 'protects us' isn't a policy I'd be bet on. No matter who takes the White House America's divisions will persist, weakening its capacity for global leadership, leaving us more vulnerable. As VP candidate Tim Walz says, "while he named his daughter Hope, hope isn't a strategy". Hope certainly won't keep us afloat in the Indo-Pacific.

Mandy is the Managing Director of House of Caravel, a public affairs and strategic communications consultancy predominantly working with the Defence sector. Mandy has a Masters in Security and Strategic Studies from Macquarie University, a Post Graduate Diploma in Intelligence, Cyber-Security and Counter-Terrorism from Macquarie University, and a Bachelor of Journalism from the University of Queensland. Mandy is a member of the Australian and American Leadership Dialogue and is a graduate of the US Department of State's International Visitors Leadership Program.