

Election Day in US: Here's what to know



Some results will be known soon after polls close in the eastern states (early on Wednesday in India). The national call will take longer — it took four days in 2020. Watch for the seven swing states — these will determine the paths to the 270 electoral votes that a candidate needs to win the presidency

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TUESDAY IS Election Day in the United States in what some commentators have described as the most consequential presidential election ever. And the race to the White House is as close as it gets.

Democratic nominee Kamala Harris has a slight edge over Republican Donald Trump in the national polling average as of Sunday (in the US). But the winner-takes-all Electoral College system means the presidency will be decided by the way the seven so-called 'swing states' fall — and the race is much closer there.

Election mechanics

Americans do not directly vote for their President. Instead, they vote to determine the composition of the Electoral College, which elects the President.

There are 538 electors in the Electoral College, and 270 is the majority mark. Each state is allocated a specific number of electors, which is somewhat based on population.

A vote cast in favour of a certain candidate is, in effect, meant to elect the candidate's state of electors in a state, who are chosen by the parties prior to the election. To win the presidency, a candidate needs to cobble together victories in enough states to reach the 270 mark in the Electoral College.

Most states (with the exception of Maine and Nebraska) have a winner-takes-all system, which means whoever wins the popular mandate in the state secures its entire allocation in the Electoral College. This makes the result in most states — which are either firmly Democratic or Republican — a foregone conclusion before the first ballot is cast. It also means that certain states where the race is particularly close have outsized importance in the election.

State of the race

Seven swing states — Pennsylvania (19 Electoral College votes), Georgia and North Carolina (16 each), Michigan (15), Arizona (11), Wisconsin (10), and Nevada (6) — hold the key to the White House this time. Both the Harris and Trump campaigns have targeted these states.

In 2020, Florida, the largest swing state (30 electoral votes) in that election, voted decisively Republican — and will likely go to Trump again.

The Final *New York Times*/Siena College opinion poll published on Sunday showed Harris and Trump locked in tight races in all seven states, well within the poll's

margin of error. The Vice President held marginal leads in Nevada, North Carolina, and Wisconsin; the former President was just ahead in Arizona. The races in Michigan, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, together accounting for 50 electoral votes, were tied.

In 2020, President Joe Biden won six of these seven states (with the exception of North Carolina). The party is not expected to do as well this time.

What's at stake?

The stakes for the US — and the rest of the world — are extremely high. Since Trump's surprise win in 2016, American politics has continued to become steadily more polarised. This political division is reflected both in the candidates' policy positions on major issues, and in the issues they have prioritised in the campaign.

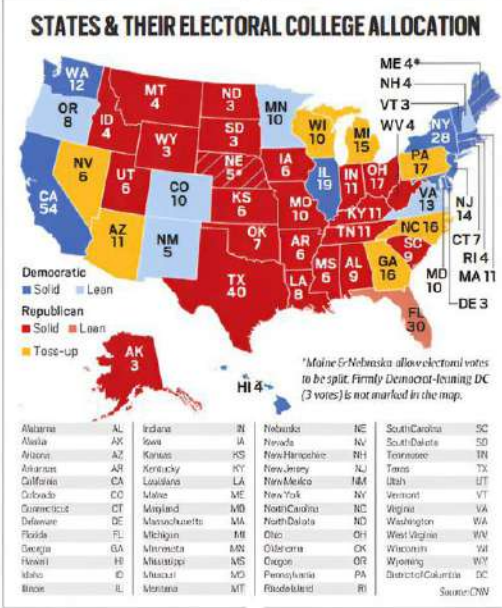
ECONOMY: According to most polls, this is the top issue for voters. Biden inherited an economy battered by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the rate of inflation has since gone from a peak of 9.1% in June 2022 to 2.4% in September 2024. The unemployment rate has fallen from 6.4% in January 2021 to 4.1% in October 2024. These positives have not, however, improved sentiment among common voters, many of whom believe the economy is doing badly, according to polls.

One reason for this perception is that grocery bills have remained high. Food is 22% costlier since Biden's inauguration, and for many Americans, the cost of living is higher than four years ago. Trump has promised to "make America affordable again". He has said he will increase oil-drilling to reduce energy costs, deliver lower interest rates (something that the President does not control), provide tax cuts to the tune of trillions of dollars, and introduce a new 10-20% tax on imports to incentivise domestic manufacturing.

Harris, on the other hand, has promised to ban price-gouging on groceries, help first-time home buyers, increase housing supply, raise the minimum wage, and tax big businesses and rich individuals more to fund welfare measures. She has been critical of Trump's blanket import tariffs policy.

Experts say that both candidates' platforms will add to the ballooning deficit.

IMMIGRATION: This was Trump's pet issue in 2016 and 2020, and it has been a highlight of his 2024 campaign. He has vowed to seal the border with Mexico, and increase funding for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the agency that polices immigration into the US. He has also promised the biggest mass deportations of



undocumented migrants in US history.

Harris, too, has promised tough action against illegal migration. She has repeatedly invoked her actions as a public prosecutor in dealing with human traffickers, and promised to revive a border control law that failed in Congress (in part due to Trump's objection), which would close loopholes in the asylum process, and give the President greater authority to shut down the border.

This has, however, invited criticism from some people who would traditionally vote

Democrat. Harris has been buffeted from both sides on this issue — the Republicans are saying she is not tough enough, while left-wing or progressive Democrats are criticising her for being too hawkish.

ABORTION: The Harris campaign hopes this will be her trump card. The Vice President has positioned herself as a champion of reproductive rights, and has promised to bring national legislation on abortion rights.

Abortion has been a huge concern for women voters after the Conservative-majority Supreme Court overturned the landmark *Roe v Wade* verdict in 2022. According to *The New York Times*, 21 states have banned or restricted abortions earlier in pregnancy than what was set by *Roe v Wade* over five decades ago.

Trump has been shaky on this issue — he has taken credit for appointing the three judges that cemented the Supreme Court's conservative majority, but has avoided talking much about abortion. *The New York Times*/Siena poll has found that "the gender gap remains wide across all seven states, with Harris the favorite of women and Trump preferred by men", according to *The New York Times*.

FOREIGN POLICY: The US is indirectly involved in the ongoing conflicts in West Asia and Ukraine. Harris represents the *status quo* of the US foreign policy, while Trump's isolationism is seen as a major departure.

So, Harris has promised to keep up support for Ukraine "for as long as it takes", while Trump has long advocated disentangling the US from conflicts worldwide — including in Ukraine. He has claimed that he will negotiate an end to the war with Russia's President Vladimir Putin "within 24 hours".

On the Israel-Palestine issue, his positions are broadly similar. Harris has made some outward gestures towards Palestinians and called for an end to the war in Gaza, but she has been careful not to be overly critical of Israel. This has angered American Muslims and young, college-going voters — both traditionally Democrat-voting groups.

CLIMATE: Trump has been open about not caring much for climate change. During a campaign rally last week, he said: "So they talk all the time about the ocean will rise in 500 years, one-eighth of an inch, who the hell cares?"

During his time in the White House, he rolled back hundreds of environmental protections, pulled out of the Paris Agreement

(which Biden re-entered), attacked electric cars, and expanded the US carbon footprint. Climate scientists fear if elected Trump will dismantle the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which does crucial work to document and research global warming and its impact.

As Vice President, Harris has helped pass legislation that has sent hundreds of billions of dollars to renewable energy, and provided for electric vehicle tax credit and rebate programs. However, during her campaign she has dropped her opposition to fracking, much to the chagrin of environmentalists.

On paper at least, a Harris presidency appears to hold out more hope for the planet than Trump 2.0.



Election Day, after

Although Tuesday is Election Day, voting began as early as September. And as of Sunday, more than 74 million votes had been cast nationwide — almost half of the total number of votes cast in 2020 — in the form of mail-in ballots or early in-person voting.

On Tuesday, most states will open the doors to voting centres between 6 am and 8 am local time (6 am Eastern Time is 4:30 pm Indian Standard Time; 6 am Pacific Time is 7:30 pm in India). Polls will close at 8 pm local time.

Some results will be known soon after polls close in the eastern states. In 2020, the Associated Press called the first states as early as 7 pm ET on Election Day (November 3), while voting was still on in most states. However, the national race takes much longer to call — this is because states have their own rules on when counting can begin.

In the seven swing states this year, polls will close between 7 pm and 10 pm ET (5:30 am-8:30 am IST on November 6). The earliest call is likely to be about Georgia, which requires that all early votes be counted by 8 pm ET. North Carolina, Michigan, and Arizona, which allow processing of early ballots before Election Day, are likely to follow.

Counting, however, could take days in Nevada, which allows late-arriving mail ballots, and Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, which do not allow pre-Election Day ballot processing. In 2020, it had taken the AP four days to call Pennsylvania, which held up the national call in favour of Biden till 11:20 am ET (just before 10 pm IST) on November 7.

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