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of the United States

THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: THE STAKES COULD NOT BE GREATER

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The presidential primaries and caucuses that are beginning this month in Iowa and New Hampshire mark the start of the selection of delegates to the Republican and Democratic Parties' National Conventions. In each convention that candidate who receives the majority of votes from the delegates will be that Party's nominee for president. It is expected that the incumbent President Joseph Biden will win the Democratic nomination, easily beating some minor candidates. The pre-primary election polls among Republicans have former president Donald Trump with a commanding lead over his main opponents, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former South Carolina Governor and UN Ambassador Nikki Haley.

But it's the actual votes that will matter and we will know more as the primaries and caucuses occur. The unexpected could still possibly happen for the Republicans, leading to a nominee other than Trump. And if Trump is not the nominee, will Biden possibly surprise everyone and step aside, since he has said that one reason he is running for reelection is that he is the Democratic candidate best able to defeat Trump? And to win in what is likely to be another extraordinarily close election like in 2016, in which Trump won the Electoral College vote by fewer than 80,000 votes in three states, and in 2020 when Biden achieved an electoral vote majority by fewer than 50,000 votes also in three states.

But looming over this entire process and these speculations are greater concerns: the stakes in the 2024 election could not be greater for the United States and possibly the world. What is at stake is not only the direction of government policies in the U.S. but also the state of American democracy itself. National policies can change strikingly because of partisan polarization and the increasing competitiveness of the Democratic and Republican parties since the mid-1970s – which a longer story than can be described here. With this polarization and competitiveness, unified party control of the presidency and both houses of Congress (and thereby control over federal judicial appointments) has occurred more frequently over the last 30 years than in the past. With this has come major changes in national policies such as health care reform under President Barack Obama, major tax cuts under Trump, and major spending programs by the Biden administration. Trump was also able to make new appointments to the Supreme Court, leading to a supermajority of conservative Supreme Court justices. He had the help of Republican control of the Senate to end the practice of the "filibuster" for Supreme Court appointments, which ended the power of the minority party in the Senate to block such appointments. (The Democrats had ended this for other government appointment when they controlled the Senate under Obama.)

It is possible once again for either party to gain unified control of the presidency and Congress with a major victory in the 2024 election, led by the winner of the presidential election.

Whether Trump, Haley, or DeSantis is elected president, the Republicans are also likely to take control of the Senate, since the Democrats have a number of vulnerable Senate seats in their current Senate majority. And despite the current disarray among the current Republican majority in the House of Representatives, Republicans could still maintain control on the “coattails” of the Republican victor for the presidency. With this unified control, the Republicans can enact spending cuts and all manner of other conservative budget and tax policies, including those related to the Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid entitlement programs. And they could even end the filibuster for other conservative legislation concerning other controversial partisan and ideological issues. Further, a Trump victory might also mean a dramatic change in American foreign and national security policy – changing relations with allies and international alliances and organization, and altering the course of the war in Ukraine and policies toward Russia. A comparable Democratic victory for the presidency, with Democrats taking control of the House and maintaining control of the Senate, could move national policies in a liberal direction and prevent any drastic changes in foreign policy. These competing possibilities should surely motivate and mobilize politicians and voters alike of both parties in the 2024 election, making it a highly emotional one, one of anxiety, threat, and even fear of what might happen next.

What should add to this threat and level of fear is what Donald Trump poses. He has challenged and violated democratic norms and values in the United States regarding the acceptance and conducting of free and fair elections, and going beyond the bounds of decency in his demeanor and bullying behavior. He felt he could simply claim without evidence that the 2020 election results were not valid – that they were “rigged.” He was a “sore loser” who was in a position to wreak havoc on the country. His encouraging of an assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, and his supporting efforts to foist on Congress alternative slates of electors of the president, completely crossed the legal line. As a result, he is running for president now while facing possible conviction on criminal charges. One of his motivations for running for president is to order an end to his prosecution and that of his supporters once he enters the White House once again. And at the same time using all levers of government that he can seize to prosecute or otherwise extract revenge on Democratic leaders and officials in the federal bureaucracy or “deep state”, who opposed him and his actions while president, and especially those who have been involved in prosecuting him since he left office.

This is the threat that Trump poses if he is elected president for a second term. There is also a threat if he loses the presidential election or perhaps even the primary election process within his own party. Trump and his supporters might claim that there was fraud, just like he attempted after the 2020 election, except he and his minions may have learned how to follow

through more forcefully – and possibly successfully. The only way to thwart Trump is through a decisive victory by his opponents in the Republican primary elections process, or by the Democrats in the general election – victories that would be supported by the courts in any legal challenges.

Thus, the stakes in the 2024 election are enormous. A Trump and Republican win in the 2024 elections would threaten American democracy. A Republican win without Trump would pose less of a threat, which has made Haley an appealing candidate for anti-Trump Republicans and others. But any Republican victory that led to unified party government would transform national policymaking until at least the next midterm election. Likewise for a unified Democratic victory.

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