

KAMALA HARRIS' DEFEAT: A 248-YEAR BARRIER FOR AMERICAN WOMEN

By Bloomberg

For the second time in eight years, a woman has been unable to break the ultimate glass ceiling: the US presidency. In an election campaign characterised by a deep gender divide, where women's health was cast as a primary issue, Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris was unable to garner enough votes from women to overcome the support Donald Trump received from men, including Black, Latino and young voters.

For the Vice-President's supporters, it's a particularly bruising blow after a race where reproductive rights took centre stage and her opponent was a man who had been found liable for sexual abuse. Unlike Hillary Clinton, who was defeated by Trump in 2016, Harris shied away from highlighting the historic nature of her potential presidency during her campaign and instead focused on her experience and issues – only to also fall short. The result means that 248 years into its history as an independent nation, the US has only elected male heads of state, upholding a barrier that has been demolished from Mexico to Italy and Thailand.

Among United Nations member states, 31% have been run by a woman. That the US hasn't elected a female leader is all the more striking given the country was seen as a relatively early adopter of women's rights and universal suffrage, and women have played growing importance in the world's largest economy.

Trump represents "a reinstitutionalisation of a sort of violent hyper-masculinity", seeking to push women back into a

diminished role in society, said Carrie Baker, Chair of the Program for the Study of Women and Gender at Smith College.

Meanwhile, Republicans said the result proves voters cared the most about pocketbook issues affecting American families. "A Donald Trump victory means a more secure and affordable America for all women and their families," Julie Harris, President of the National Federation of Republican Women, said in a statement. It also means "policies that help our families by lowering taxes and inflation, expanding new job opportunities," said Representative Beth Van Duyne, a Republican who won re-election in her Dallas district.

Harris faced hurdles that could have stymied any candidate. Named to the top of the ticket just three months ago, the party had a historically short time to get her in front of voters. As the sitting Vice-President, she struggled to disentangle herself from an unpopular Biden presidency that saw the highest inflation rates in four decades, a surge in illegal immigration and erupting conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine. In the weeks to come, critics will dissect her campaign's failings to persuade voters to back the Harris-Walz ticket.

Trump had given women plenty of ammunition to turn against him. Crude rhetoric aimed at Harris – "dumb" or "low



Carrie Baker

Harris voters mourn loss after sobering concession speech

IQ" – enraged those who'd never forgotten his candid suggestion that fame gave him a pass to "grab 'em by the p****". He closed his campaign vowing to protect women "whether the women like it or not". His running mate, JD Vance, drew widespread scorn for a pot-shot that the Democratic party is dominated by "childless cat ladies".

Apparently, such fears didn't make enough difference. Forty-six percent of women voted for him, according to Fox News' voter analysis. The data suggested that higher proportions of Black and Latina women voted for Trump in 2024 than they had four years ago, while the share of white women who supported him was relatively unchanged. Big-picture data suggests women remain ascendant in US business and politics. There are 151 women in Congress – 28% of all seats – a record high.

Women routinely register to vote and cast a ballot at higher rates than men; in 2016 and 2020, the number of women who reported voting exceeded men by close to 10 million. The percentage of women in their prime working years participating in the US labour force hit a record high of 78.4% in August. More women have been earning bachelor's degrees than men for four decades and now they make up the majority of the college educated workforce.

The number of women in senior leadership roles at companies in the S&P Global Market Index nearly tripled between 2005 and 2023 to 22.3%, the data provider found. But that same study also hides a darker reality: Women's gains at the very top have been far slower and appear precarious. Over the same time period, the number of women in the C-suite rose to 11.8% from 6.5% – a much smaller jump. S&P said that a small decline in top executives last year marked an "alarming turning point" for women in top roles.



Debbie Walsh

In many ways, these same impediments are reflected in electoral politics. Debbie Walsh, Director for the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, pointed to systemic disparities in fund-raising and networking, as well as job responsibilities, that make especially lower levels of elected office more challenging for women who do the brunt of childcare. Women also see a higher incidence of physical and online harassment than men, she said.

Republicans haven't waged a concerted effort to mitigate these disparities as Democrats have, believing that the best candidates will simply rise to the top of their own accord, Walsh said. In 2024, women made up 46% of the Democrats' nominees for the House of Representatives and 47% of its nominees for Senate, according to CAWP data. They comprised just 16% and 18% of Republican nominees for

House and Senate, respectively.

"It's going to take the Republican party shifting its attitude about electing more women and seeing the value of doing that kind of intentional work for women to get to the point where they actually get to 50%," Walsh said. "It can't happen all on the back of one party." It's also clear that small but sizable minorities of men have felt their gains elsewhere slip away over the past two decades.

Pew Research found that 39% of men believe men are doing worse at getting a well-paying job and 28% say they're not doing as well at getting leadership positions in the workplace. While most men do not believe that women's gains come at their expense, this feeling is most pronounced among Republican or Republican-leaning men, where almost one in three feel slighted.

And then there's this simple fact: For some women, Trump's comments weren't offensive, or weren't a deciding factor in their support. The Pew poll also showed that Republican women were more skeptical of changing gender roles, with a third saying they've made it harder for marriages to be successful. Smith College's Baker said she worries that Trump will lean on advisers like those who worked on the conservative roadmap Project 2025.

Based on her analysis of those plans, which Trump has said he doesn't support, she's concerned about economic, healthcare and legal policies that will seek to "pressure women into traditional marriages and lots of pregnancies that they can't terminate and then remove the women's abilities to actually live and support their children without marrying men," she said. The weeks after Trump's election in 2016 witnessed a coalescing of female anger, culminating in women's marches across the country in the day after his inauguration.

Anita Hill, policy, law and women's studies professor who gained renown when she testified at Clarence Thomas' Supreme Court hearings that he'd subjected her to sexual harassment, said Trump's win could once again reinvigorate people who oppose him. "There will be people who become even more committed," she said in an interview earlier this month. "That always happens when we think people, women especially, are not treated fairly." ■

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Anita Hill