

What matters most about Trump's guilty verdict — according to 7 opinion writers

Welcome to Opinion's coverage of the guilty verdict in the Manhattan trial of Donald Trump. In this special feature, Times Opinion writers reflect on this extraordinary development in American political history, on the moments and the dynamics that mattered most in the trial — and tease out its potential impact on the presidential election.

What mattered

Jamelle Bouie » I am no lawyer and did not follow every in and out of the trial, but if there was a single thing that doomed Donald Trump — or at least, if there was a single thing that harmed his effort to escape a guilty verdict — it was his failure to confront the process and the proceedings. It is hard to imagine that he was helped, in any way, by his constant attacks on judge, jury and the trial itself. The jury, obviously, is asked only to evaluate the evidence before it, and yet, it is asking a lot of anyone to sit and ignore the fact that the defendant has, publicly, turned you into an enemy.

Matthew Continetti » What mattered was that this case was brought at all. When Alvin Bragg, the Manhattan district attorney, indicted Trump in April 2023, he not only established the dangerous precedent that local officials can bring criminal charges against former presidents, he annexed the 2024 presidential campaign to the legal system, with unknown and potentially hazardous consequences. Bragg's actions under-mined confidence in the rule of law and rallied GOP voters to Trump, helping him win a third consecutive Republican nomination. Bragg didn't defeat Trump, he empowered him.

David French » The prosecution had a compelling story to tell. Trump did not want Stormy Daniels to go public right after the "Access Hollywood" tape with her, because it would demonstrate that he does, in fact, believe that his celebrity entitled him to do what he wanted with women. And when Trump concealed the nature of the payments, the prosecution could easily make the case — at least to a jury — that he must have known that the payments were legally problematic. Trial outcomes are often dictated by the side that can create the most coherent narrative, and the prosecution's theory of the case was easy for the jury to grasp.

Michelle Goldberg » The mountain of evidence. Though the discourse around the trial was all about the wisdom of Bragg bringing charges in the first place, the question in court was more straightforward — did Trump do what he is accused of? The prosecution showed that he did. Trump's defense, meanwhile, made the ludicrous argument that he never had sex with Stormy Daniels, and that the \$120,000 paid to Trump's former flake Michael Cohen — which was part of the reason he went to prison — was a legitimate legal fee. It would have been shocking if the jury had bought it.



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Quinta Jurecic » There's no way to know what led the jurors to reach the verdict they did. But throughout the trial, I was struck by the insistence of Trump's lawyers on pursuing arguments or lines of questioning that seemed unhelpful to their case. Todd Blanche, for example, insisted repeatedly that Trump had never slept with Stormy Daniels, even though this denial boxed Trump into a weaker argument. These tactics by the defense seemed designed to placate Trump's own vanity and sense of grievance — but even if they made the client happy, it's hard to imagine they helped his case with the jury.

Daniel McCarthy » The dizzying number of the charges and the virtual absence of any dispute about the facts at the core of the case meant the prosecution only had to get the jury to doubt Trump's motives. Judge Juan Merchan's instructions were broad enough that the jury had many opportunities to find Trump guilty, and they did.

Kristen Soltis Anderson » Focusing on winning the political battle and the communications battle when facing legal trouble only gets you so far. The law doesn't usually give you a free pass on public opinion.

Will it have an impact on the 2024 election?

Bouie » I do not know if the guilty verdict will matter significantly for the 2024 presidential

election, although it is fair to say that no presidential candidate wants to be a felon.

If anything, I suspect that Trump's conviction will be part of a background radiation of scandal that could weaken him beyond repair. One thing I do know, however, is that the guilty verdict is yet another instance of a fundamental truth of the Trump era. It has not been the institutions or the guardrails that have restrained the former president; it's been ordinary American citizens who, when given the opportunity, have not hesitated to hold him accountable.

Continetti » By November, we will be talking about something else. If we know one thing about Trump, it is that he is an expert at changing the subject. More important, despite President Biden's efforts to shift the focus of the campaign to Trump's rhetoric and conduct, the 2024 election is not about the former president's performance in office. The electorate will decide Biden's fate based on its perceptions of the economy, the southern border and America's global standing. A guilty verdict won't lower prices, reduce border crossings or make the world a safer place.

French » Yes, it will have an impact. Biden's main weakness is with disconnected voters, and if there is one single news item that can break through with even the most apathetic citizens, it's the headline "Trump

Guilty on All Counts." MAGA will redouble its support for Trump, of course, and some disconnected voters may well believe that the prosecution was political, but Trump is now a felon, and that will matter. Don't expect anything like a dam break in public opinion that washes Trump away, but this will erode his support, and in a close election every bit of erosion matters.

Goldberg » I'd guess a small one. A recent New York Times Siena poll of swing state voters showed that a majority didn't expect a conviction, so some might be jarred by it. Trump loyalists will easily rationalize casting ballots for a felon, but if this election is as close as the last two, even small shifts among wavering voters could be significant.

Jurecic » Trump has a firm base of supporters who may be galvanized by his conviction. But they are not enough to win him the election on their own. His fate, instead, will rest with the voters whose support for him is less passionately held — people who might otherwise vote Republican but are put off by Trump's boorishness. This verdict emphasizes all the aspects of Trump that voters might find off-putting: Trump's erratic behavior, his constant scandals. If this conviction harms Trump, it will likely be because a small but significant number of people in swing states simply couldn't bring themselves to pull the lever for a felon.

McCarthy » By outraging Trump's supporters, the verdict will strengthen him, and voters

who harbor doubts about the justice system may see him as more sympathetic as a result of this. He's all the more an outsider and rebel now. The penalties may hamper Trump's campaigning, but I expect the race will remain competitive, and become even more intense.

Soltis Anderson » It may only matter at the margins. Voters who strongly dislike Trump will be thrilled with the verdict, but it won't change things; they were never going to vote for him anyway. Voters who like him will not be surprised by a guilty verdict, because they have generally viewed the trial as political from the start. I believe the sentencing will play a bigger role in influencing the small group of persuadable voters, as Americans are forced to choose whether to vote for someone who could be facing prison time.

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What if this is our last real election?

Some of the Americans protesting the war in the Gaza Strip have turned on President Joe Biden. They assert that the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is killing huge numbers of civilians, which is true, and that Biden can stop it, which is more doubtful. But how do they deal with the reality that in a second term Donald Trump would be far more pro-Netanyahu and anti-Palestinian than our current president?

The answer I've been hearing is that the goal is to send a message: If Gaza costs Biden the election, Democrats will understand that in the next election they will need to rethink their seemingly reflexive support for Israel's government and commit as a party to the protection of Palestinian rights.

There are many questions one could ask about this argument, but from a certain perspective, the most important one for American voters may well be: What next election?

There's a very real possibility that if a Trump wins in November, it'll be the last real national election America holds for a very

long time. And while there's room for disagreement here, if you consider that statement to be outrageous hyperbole, you have been paying attention.

Yes, we can and should examine the candidates' policy platitudes and their potential effects, just as if this were a normal presidential election. But this isn't a normal election; democracy itself is on the ballot. And it would be incredibly unwise not to take that into account.

Start here: Trump refused to accept the results of the 2020 presidential election, making evidence-free claims of fraud in his effort to overturn it. In the past couple of years, various polls have shown that somewhere around two-thirds of the Republican Party has resigned his election denials. And several leading party members have refused to say that they'll accept the election results this year. Why imagine that they'll become any more respectful toward future elections?

You might say that American institutions would constrain the ability of Trump and whoever follows him to impose permanent one-party rule, which they did

— barely — after the 2020 election. But institutions ultimately consist of people, and at this point, many Republicans, up to and including Supreme Court justices, are showing about as much strength in supporting democracy and the rule of law as a wet paper towel.

So, a Trump victory might well bring down the curtain on politics as we know it — he has already floated the idea of a third term, something that's barred, of course, by the 22nd Amendment. But in any case, among his followers, at least, he has mainstreamed the idea that any presidential election won by Democrats is illegitimate.

I began this column with the leftists who appear willing to help facilitate a Trump victory despite being aware that he would be far worse, even on the issues they claim to care about, than Biden. But don't forget about those we might call throwback Republicans, those who haven't completely bought into the MAGA agenda but dislike Biden and believe that Trump would do a better job. They presumably believe that a second Trump term would be like his first term, when

he talked populism but mostly followed a standard GOP agenda of tax cuts and attempts to slash the social safety net.

Yet why imagine that a second term would be similar? Trump advisers are talking about radical policies, including mass deportations and stripping the Federal Reserve of independence, that would be highly disruptive even in purely economic terms.

But, you may say, the backlash against such policies would surely tone them down in fear that radicalism would hurt them badly in the next election.

To which I say: If Trump isn't penalized in this election for his antics after the last election, why would he worry about a backlash in a future election? Assuming there is one in any real sense.

And then there are the Trump-supporting or Trump-leaning photots, who may be fooling themselves completely.

Some of them may understand that they're supporting a radical, anti-democratic movement, and all in favor. Elon Musk, most famously, increasingly appears to have gone full Great Replacement

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The New York Times

MAGA, but he's far from alone. So, in that sense, they may be less deceived than many.

But their narrative runs deeper, because they imagine that their wealth and prominence will allow them to flourish, even in a post-democracy America — that they'll be immune to the purges and persecutions that are such an obvious possibility in the near future. They should at least ponder the experience of the oligarchs who helped Russian President Vladimir Putin gain power and then found themselves at his mercy.

To be clear, I'm not saying that people should muzzle themselves and refrain from criticizing Biden on the merits; he's a grown-up and can handle it. Part of his job as a democratically elected leader is taking it. But ignoring the possibility that this could be our last real election for a while is shortsighted and self-indulgent.

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