



2024: the year of the groundhog election

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In the classic 1993 comedy *Groundhog Day*, cynical TV weatherman Phil Connors, played by Bill Murray, is sent to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania to cover the early February Groundhog Day festivities. Phil wishes to spend as little time in Punxsutawney as possible and makes no effort to hide his disdain for the small town, its inhabitants or the yearly festival revolving around whether a rodent sees its shadow, which determines how much more winter to expect.

In a form of cosmic justice, Phil is blocked from leaving town by a blizzard and forced to stay an extra night. The next morning, however, he finds that everything is exactly as it was 24 hours earlier; his interactions with people all unfold in exactly the same manner, the festivities are still in full swing and the blizzard has yet to hit the town. He eventually realises what is happening to him and settles into a new life where an incalculable number of days (director Harold Ramis put the figure at around 30 to 40 years) all start the same way: the radio alarm clock going off at 6 a.m. to Sonny and Cher's 'I Got You Babe'. How very retro.

Fast forward to 2024, and American voters find themselves in a not dissimilar situation. Joe Biden and Donald Trump have both secured the nominations for their respective parties, ensuring a repeat of the 2020 election. Together, the two men have now run for president eight times. Suffice to say, voters are familiar with the pair. If Biden wins, he will be 82 years old upon inauguration, by far the oldest president in US history. If Trump wins, he will become the first president to serve two non-consecutive terms since Grover Cleveland, who was first elected in 1885. How very retro.

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If we dig a bit deeper than the presidential race, the unchanging nature of American politics becomes even more obvious. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has been the boss of Senate Republicans since 2007. Until she retired in 2023, Nancy Pelosi had been leading House Democrats since 2003. Political leaders are not the only ones with stellar job security: in the 2022 mid-term elections, the re-election rate in the House of Representatives was 94.5%. In the Senate, it was a clean 100%. An unaware observer might deduce that Washington politicians are re-elected simply because they are excellent at their jobs. But at the time of writing, Gallup reports that only 12% of Americans approve of the job Congress is doing (GALLUP 2024).

This striking statistical dichotomy is a manifestation of America's poorly constructed election and primary system. Of the House seats, 83% are considered safe for one party or the other (Unite America 2024), meaning that candidates only need to win their party primary to virtually secure the seat. Primaries are massively to the advantage of incumbents, with 98% of House members running for re-election being renominated by their own parties since 1945 (Kondik et al. 2020). Why would politicians bother adapting their political offer to specific needs and concerns when toeing the party line is all that is expected?

At the presidential level, the dynamics of 'same old, same old' are a similar manifestation of the safe seat, but expanded to the 'safe state'; in the four presidential elections since 2008, 40 of the 50 states have always gone to the same party. Seven have tended to favour one party over the other, and only 3 states (Iowa, Ohio and Florida) have been split 50–50. And here enters every political analyst's favourite term come election season: the swing voter. As long as a candidate satisfies the party's base, as Trump and Biden do, they can run. Securing the presidency thus becomes an exercise of convincing a small percentage of voters in states such as Georgia or Pennsylvania.

Trump will run on the same Make America Great Again platform as in his past two campaigns, with the added message that Biden is solely responsible for runaway inflation (never mind the Federal Reserve's massive quantitative easing due to Covid when Trump was president). It's the economy, stupid. Biden will deliver the same message of appeal to the Democratic base about his progressive politics, with the added mention of his vast infrastructure and manufacturing programmes, aimed at wooing Rust Belt voters. Both candidates will label the other an existential threat to democracy and the American way. On this last point, one has a slightly more credible case to make than the other.

Perhaps the most striking parallel between *Groundhog Day* and today's American voters comes from a scene about 30 minutes into the film. Phil is sitting at a bar with two local men, feeling helpless, and rhetorically asks, 'What would you do if you were stuck in one place, and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?' To which one of his working-class drinking buddies dejectedly replies in a stereotypical redneck accent, 'That about sums it up for me' (Ramis 1993).

I suspect a good number of American voters are beginning to feel like the man in the bar. No matter how many times they go out to vote, hoping for change and a brighter tomorrow, the people getting sworn into office never seem to change much. Anyone hoping for change the day after an election will always be disappointed: Biden's ambition for an American manufacturing boom may take years to fully materialise. But unless American voters start seeing some dynamism at the top, they risk becoming as disinterested in their democracy as Phil becomes in his own life after one too many days in Punxsutawney.

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Author biography



Theo Larue grew up in Paris, holding dual French and American citizenship. He is a graduate of Royal Holloway, University of London, from which he holds a BA in History and International Relations, and an M.Sc. in Political Science. His political research interests revolve around domestic French and American politics, EU economic policy and all aspects of international relations. In addition to his native English and French, Theo speaks Spanish.