Tuesday, November 5, 2024 / The most important “most important election”?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host, *Today, Explained*): Remember, remember, the 5th of November.

SCORING IN <Lordy I Hope There Are Drums>

SEAN: Because this is the most important election of our lifetime.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjT4Gg8H-vE)*> KAMALA HARRIS: Fellow Americans, this election is not only the most important of our lives; it is one of the most important in the life of our nation. <applause>*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/TKhDwGdbRN4)*> DONALD TRUMP: And this is the most important election. I think it’s going to be the most important election of them all. I mean, they had some pretty good ones, right? Long time ago they had some pretty good ones…*

SEAN: Stop me if you’ve heard this one before.

JEFFREY: Every single election, you're going to find somebody saying that.

JULIA: You can't go anywhere without it being the most important election of our lifetimes. And that was also true four years ago and eight years ago and 24 years ago.

SEAN: We’re gonna try and figure out if this really is the most important most important election of our lifetime on Election Day here at *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

*<BUMPER> Explained. 2024 explained.*

SEAN: Jeffrey Engel is the director of the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University. We reached out to him because we couldn’t help but notice everyone saying this is the most important election of our lifetime this year. We asked him if anyone’s ever said that before.

JEFFREY ENGEL (director of the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University): I think the better question is, has anyone not said it?

SEAN: <laughs>

SCORING IN <Beaming>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZC7KtOT64M)*> JOE BIDEN, 2020: This is the most important election of our lifetimes.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmHE1omaTvg)*> HILLARY CLINTON, 2016: There are just eight days left in what is the most important election of our lifetimes.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmHE1omaTvg)*> DONALD TRUMP, 2016: This will be maybe the most important election that our country's ever had.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSuMrWU15bI)*> MITT ROMNEY, 2012: Former First Lady Barbara Bush said this is the most important election of my lifetime.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSuMrWU15bI)*> BARACK OBAMA, 2008: And that's why this election could not be more important.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSuMrWU15bI)*> NEWT GINGRICH, 1996: This is the most important election, I believe, in 100 years.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSuMrWU15bI)*> RICHARD NIXON, 1960: …perhaps as Senator Kennedy has already indicated the most important election in our history…*

JEFFREY: People basically say it every single election cycle. Obviously, the candidates want you to get motivated and get to the polls, their people anyway. And more importantly, I think, to be honest, the advertisers want us to think that it's the most important. And, of course, we all know by definition that not every single election cannot be the most important of our lifetime. I think some are, in fact, more important than others. I think the best way to think about this is to think about the distance, the divergence, between what the two candidates are offering.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5t7EmrrGs4)*> KAMALA HARRIS: It is a choice about whether we have a country rooted in freedom for every American or ruled by chaos and division.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOf7fi5lFhA)*> DONALD TRUMP: They treat you like garbage, they treat our whole country like garbage, with open borders, with all of the horrible things they've done to hurt our country, inflation that should have never happened…*

JEFFREY: This is, in 2024, basically as wide as I can think of between the two candidates' positions and visions of America since perhaps 1932.

SEAN: Huh!

JEFFREY: And so this is probably why this one feels a little bit more important. I would say it's more important. I'm just not legally allowed as a historian by my training to say “most important.”

SCORING OUT

SEAN: You mentioned 1932. Can you take us through, perhaps, some historic occasions where it did actually feel like the stakes were really high? You mentioned that the ideological distance between the candidates can help dictate the import that at least is being sold to the American public.

JEFFREY: Yeah, I actually think 1932 is a really helpful one for us today, not least of which because the term ‘fascist’ was thrown around quite a bit during that time as well. So let me just set the background for everybody. The Great Depression has already been going on for three and a half years.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khFwYWWF6Tc)*> FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT: Farmers find no markets for their produce and the savings of many years in thousands of families are gone.*

JEFFREY: This is the worst economic crisis in American history that we've ever had, much worse than anything anybody in our lifetimes basically has, has seen. And consequently, it was a very impactful election because Franklin Roosevelt, the challenger, the Democrat, he basically made the following campaign slogan, which is ‘Vote for me, I'm not him.’ And the him was Herbert Hoover.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-E0nEezDvGs)*> HERBERT HOOVER: The past three years have been a time of unparalleled economic calamity. They have been years of greater suffering and hardship than any which have come to the American people since the aftermath of the Civil War.*

JEFFREY: And Herbert Hoover, who, of course, was given blame, if you will, by the American people, because the American people, as we see today, always blame the president for good or bad economic times, especially bad economic times.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2342510962523907)*> JOE BIDEN: C’mon, man!*

JEFFREY: And also Herbert Hoover, who frankly didn't think there needed to be that much government intervention in helping people suffering through the Depression. So Franklin Roosevelt, who actually campaigned on a remarkably ambiguous platform, basically said two things: “I will do more” and “I'm not him.” And ultimately, what's really interesting about this election is that Franklin Roosevelt, when he gets inaugurated in 1933, we all remember his inauguration address where he said:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khFwYWWF6Tc)*> FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT: …that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.*

JEFFREY: That's the most memorable line. But it's not the most important line. The most important line is when Roosevelt said, I intend to work with Congress - keep in mind, by the way, it's a Democratic Congress - I intend to work with Congress to solve the present crisis.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khFwYWWF6Tc)*> FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT: But in the event that the Congress shall fail to take one of these two courses…*

JEFFREY: If Congress doesn't do what I want, I'm going to assume…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khFwYWWF6Tc)*> FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT: …broad executive power…*

JEFFREY: given to me by the Constitution as though…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khFwYWWF6Tc)*> FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT: …we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe…*

JEFFREY: …to wage war against the current crisis. You can imagine, his detractors said, that sounds pretty fascist to me…

SEAN: Mmmmm.

JEFFREY: …especially this era of Mussolini and, literally the era of Mussolini and Hitler. You know, the story is – and this is one of those stories that's mostly probably true, at least it's true-ish in the sense that it gives a flavor of what happened – is that Franklin Roosevelt was sitting in his office that night, the Oval Office, first time behind the Resolute Desk, and his chief aide Harry Hopkins comes in and says, you know, Mr. President, if you solve this, you're going to go down as the greatest president in American history. To which Roosevelt replied, If we don't solve it, I'll go down as the last.

SEAN: Mm.

JEFFREY: And that wasn't hyperbole. That was the depth of which people were really questioning whether, this’ll sound familiar to us today, whether the world had gotten too fast for democracy, whether the new communications of radio and aircraft had sped things up so much that democracy, with its slow, deliberate conversation, was just not up to the task of the 20th century. You can hear that argument today, obviously, given the new changes in technology that we have. So it's a very resonant election, I think.

SEAN: Let's take it back to a time that was a bit slower. Let's go back to the 19th century for a minute here, because talking about the Great Depression, an inflection point for this republic, it reminds me that we once went to war with ourselves. Was there an election around the Civil War or even Reconstruction that felt pivotal, existential, that felt like the most important we had ever seen?

JEFFREY: No doubt. And in fact, I'm glad you used the word existential, because I think that's exactly the right word, that there are certain moments in American history that involve elections, but I think broader crises, where we say, boy, if, you know, if we don't get this right, then we're not going to have a republic anymore. In fact, I think actually there were three in our past, specifically the Great Depression, the Civil War, which I'll talk about in a moment, and the beginning. You know, if you don't get the…

SEAN: Mm.

JEFFREY: …country started off right, it's not going to work out well. And the 1860 election also has some resonance for us today, though I'm always hesitant to say there's resonance for the Civil War, but this is something I think people should pay attention to…

SCORING IN <New Tension 07 All Thumbs>

JEFFREY: Before the election, Democrats primarily in the South, Confederate supporters, people who from from southern states, shall we say, pro-slavery supporters, made it very clear, very plain, that if they lost the election, they were going to secede. And I think the way most Americans think about the logic and sequence of this is that the election occurred, Lincoln won, and then the states said, we're going to secede because we don't like the outcome. Oh no, that's exactly the opposite. They had said very plainly, we only like democracy if our side wins.

SEAN: Mm.

JEFFREY: If the other side wins, we're out of here. So basically, you had a referendum on whether the country was going to stay together or not. And, you know, to be fair, the reason that the Southern, Democrats primarily, but Southerners, felt that they needed to leave the union was because they could read an actuarial table as well as anyone else and realized that if Abraham Lincoln or any Republican or any northerner is able to capture the White House without getting a single Electoral College vote from the South, they're never going to get any again.

SEAN: Mm.

JEFFREY: Any presidents again. So it was all laid out before the election.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And you said, going back even further to George Washington, we have an election that fairly qualifies as the most important of a lifetime – not our lifetime, but a lifetime.

JEFFREY: Yeah. I mean, people, certainly in the election of 1800, that was the sentiment. That's, of course, the election when Thomas Jefferson, who had been vice president, defeated the incumbent president, John Adams. That was a real election that was, I think, really critical at the time, but more importantly, critical in hindsight, because this is actually the election that gives us the precedent and the practice for a peaceful transfer of power. Because when George Washington handed things off to John Adams, they were of the same party. So it wasn't that radical a move for the president and the vice president to just sort of hand things off. When Thomas Jefferson took over, this was a hostile takeover. This was new people coming into town and taking the jobs of old people who were kicked out. And one of the things that's been noticed in the last four years as President Trump broke with the tradition of attending the inauguration of his successor, people point out that John Adams did not attend the inauguration of his successor. And in our modern sense, I think some people have chosen to criticize Adams for that. I actually think that that's a moment where we should praise Adams because he's setting a precedent. He is making the point by leaving town before the inauguration…

SEAN: Mm.

JEFFREY: ...that the town is yours, like, the government is yours. My job is done, literally. Not even ceremonial for me to be here anymore.

SEAN: I missed the video where Trump said that about Biden, though.

JEFFREY: I'm looking still.

SEAN: <laughs>

JEFFREY: I'm looking still.

SEAN: A lot of people feel anxious today. A lot of people have felt anxious for weeks, for months, around this election. Does your historical vantage – does remembering every day that this country went to war with itself, that this country's leaders used to solve their problems by literally shooting each other – does that bring some cold comfort on a day like today?

JEFFREY: You know, it gives me confidence, but it doesn't give me a guarantee. And I'll tell you why. We in the United States, especially in the 20th century, the way that we've decided to design our educational system (which parenthetically doesn't pay nearly enough attention to history), what people usually do learn about history is that things get better. And that we have a crisis, we had a civil war, that was terrible, obviously, but look, we got better and we resolved some of the issues. We got rid of slavery. And then, you know, we had a civil rights movement. It was difficult. It was terrifying for people. But look, it got better. We had the Great Depression. It was bad, but we solved it. Look, it got better. The truth of the matter is, that progressive idea that things always get better, is true up until the moment that it's not.

SCORING IN <These Boops Remain Neutral>

JEFFREY: Which is to say, I take great comfort in the fact, as an American, that we have bounded together and the better angels of our nature, as Abraham Lincoln would say, spoke to enough people that they were able to pull the country through the crisis. However, that only happens because people at the time put their nose to the grindstone and worked really hard through a terrifying time. So I take comfort in the fact that we have a tradition of doing things that make the country better and getting through our crises. I sleep a little bit better at night, right up until the moment where I wake up in the middle of the night screaming, remembering that, wait, that means I have a responsibility to work as hard as people in previous generations.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: History professor Jeffrey Engel – Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas.

When we return on *Today, Explained*, how this year’s most important election of our lifetime stacks up against the rest.

[BREAK]

*<*[*BUMPER*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1atbVu662s)*> SEN. TIM KAINE (D-VA): Hi. I was Hillary Clinton's vice presidential running mate. At the time, you said it was the most important election in American history and that democracy was on the line. It's been less than eight years. What's my name?*

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram, joined by Julia Azari, a professor of political science at Marquette University.

We asked her to help us assess the argument that today’s election really is the Most. Important. Election. Everrrr.

JULIA AZARI (professor of political science at Marquette University): I think that this is a lot clearer on the Harris side, the kind of argument about democracy being on the ballot and the ways that Harris has tried to frame the election around democracy considerations, around Project 2025, around January 6th, and the speech that she gave last week in Washington, D.C., to try to allude to that.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5t7EmrrGs4)*> VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: We know who Donald Trump is. He is the person who stood at this very spot nearly four years ago and sent an armed mob…*

*[FADE UNDER: to the United States Capitol in a free and fair election…]*

JULIA: So I think for the Harris campaign, it’s very much about democracy. For the Trump campaign, I think it's maybe a little bit blurrier, but his message is always about national identity being at stake. You know, he had this phrase he said on January 6th, 2021, about how…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lBH7ql34Ex0)*> FORMER PRESIDENT TRUMP: If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore.*

JULIA: It's very similar to some language that Andrew Johnson used in the years after the Civil War. So it's this sort of recurring thing in American politics to talk about the stakes of what's going on and to kind of have a racial element to that.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://x.com/atrupar/status/1840128169468186693)*> FORMER PRESIDENT TRUMP: You gotta get these people back where they came from. You have no choice. You’re going to lose your culture. You’re going to lose your country.*

JULIA: And I do think that that's some of what gets lost in the way that the Democrats frame the stakes of this election is to talk about Trump as being unprecedented. And there are some elements of that that are unprecedented. But there are also some elements that have a lot of deep continuity in history.

SEAN: Do we know if it's working for either Harris or Trump – the message that it's do or die, this one is the big one?

JULIA: In a very general sense, voter turnout does go up when people care about the difference between the two candidates and perceive that difference to be meaningful. There's a sort of misconception that elections that are kind of hard fought turn off voters. And actually what we've seen is compared with, like the late 90s and early 2000s. I remember when I was kind of aging into the electorate, voter turnout was quite low. And I always tell my students, I was in college in 2000, I couldn't get my roommates to vote. They were just uninterested in the difference between Bush v. Gore.

SEAN: Mm.

JULIA: <laughs> You know, they could not see these two candidates as having compelling differences.

SEAN: Neither did Rage Against the Machine. They made a whole music video about it.

JULIA: Exactly.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3dvbM6Pias)*> RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE - TESTIFY:*

*AL GORE: I support the death penalty.*

*GEORGE W. BUSH: I support the death penalty.*

*GEORGE W. BUSH: We will be prosperous if we embrace free trade.*

*AL GORE: Prosperity from free and fair trade.*

JULIA: We think of that as being now like a simpler time and a time when people were using this “most important election of our lives” much less. As we got more into these more existential elections – so, like, really, the Bush era, 2004, 2008, 2012 even, and then, of course, this whole Trump era – voter turnout has gone up. I mean, it hasn't climbed steadily or in a super clear pattern. But for sure, like, people are way more engaged. And that's what happens when people care about the difference between the two candidates.

SEAN: Harris is selling this argument that this is the most important election in our lifetimes based on the idea that Donald Trump wants to fundamentally alter our democracy. He was president once. And yes, that whole era ended in an insurrection. But did he fundamentally alter our democracy that go-around?

JULIA: I actually think so.

SCORING IN <A Peaceful Plummet>

JULIA: The most obvious one is that the peaceful transfer of power, this sort of really critical element of democracy, that simply did not happen. There's just no way to spin it in 2021, not just January 6th, but all of the legal stuff that went into it, all the legal jockeying that went into it.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hA3FVB2w5Q)*> CBS, TRUMP: The election was totally rigged. It's a disgrace to our country. It's like a third world country [FADE UNDER: and I think the case has been made…]*

JULIA: Looking for loopholes in the law that allow you to do what you want, even if it doesn't necessarily serve public purposes. I think that Trump decisively lost the popular vote and governed very much as if he had decisively won the popular vote. I think there was a lot of evidence of using the office for private purposes.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ktu1jKb7OQ0)*> SCOTT MCFARLAND, CBS: Records shared by the House Oversight Committee showed Trump hotels and properties charge Secret Service agents five times the normal government rate for accommodations while protecting him. Expenses covered by the taxpayer.*

JULIA: So I think that there was a real change to American democracy in, I think, really key and important ways.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kmmx1zQCQds)*> TRUMP: We have some very bad people, we have some sick people, radical left lunatics, and I think they're the, and, and it should be very easily handled by, if necessary, by National Guard, or if really necessary by the military, because they can't let that happen.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: The argument from the right as to why this is the most important election in the history of the republic is that ‘If you don't vote for Donald Trump, Kamala Harris is going to fundamentally change this country.’ Is there any credence to that argument?

JULIA: It's very unlikely that Kamala Harris as president would fundamentally change this country. I would mostly look to Obama and Biden for guidance as to what kind of politician Harris will be. And I think that if Harris wins, we will think of this as a historic election. We'll think of this as the first woman president. And then very similar to Obama as the first African-American president, we’ll then see governance that doesn't really match the level of revolutionariness of the election result.

SEAN: Mmmm.

JULIA: We’ll see governance that very much reflects, you know, a complicated Democratic coalition. We'll see governance that I think will reflect a changed Democratic Party that has shifted to the left and consolidated on abortion, has shifted to the left on economics in some ways, but also a party where there are a lot of Democrats in swing districts who are very, very cautious in their rhetoric about the police. I think we'll see somebody like Liz Cheney or another Republican in her cabinet playing a role, probably not setting key policy, but playing a role.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfIIRqSzExQ)*> HARRIS: And I think it would be to the benefit of the American public to have a member of my cabinet who was a Republican.*

JULIA: I cannot imagine that it will fundamentally change American democracy as far as the, the policies that she would pursue and the coalition that she would lead.

SEAN: You're kind of saying that Harris is pretty much promises more of the same, which might be the fundamental reason that people vote against her.

JULIA: It might. It might.

SEAN: You know, we spoke to the history professor early in the show. We're speaking to the political scientist now. Both of you seem exhausted by this pitch from candidates…

JULIA: <laughs>

SEAN: …that, “ah, the most important election ever.” Yeah. Yeah. Give me a break. When it actually comes, will we know it? Will there be a “most important election ever”? And, and how will we know it's for real?

JULIA: I have to be honest. I think I might just be exhausted in general.

SEAN: <laughs> Join the club.

SCORING IN <Neutral Susan>

JULIA: It might just feel like it's been one long campaign since June 2015. You know, I was sort of looking through some of the news articles about how common it is to say it's the most important election. And I came away with the conclusion that maybe it’s just because elections are real important. You know, I don't want to be cynical about that claim. I actually want to give credence to the idea that every election maybe is the most important.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Julia Azari leads the Civic Dialogues Program at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She’s also written for Vox dot com.

We here at Vox will try to answer all your questions about the results on tomorrow’s edition of *Today, Explained*. But if we don’t get to any there’s always the new *Explain It to Me* podcast. Give them a call with any election-related questions you may have at 1-800-618-8545. Or you can email a voice memo to ‘ask vox at vox dot com’.

Vox’s Avishay Artsy produced our show today. He was edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

Have a great vote!

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]