4 SEPTEMBER 2024 / How Trump wins

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Donald John Trump isn’t the most disciplined politician in the world. For evidence, take a look at how he’s run against Kamala Harris for a month or so.

SCORING IN – Djangly bit

SEAN: He’s called her dumb.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: I don’t have a lot of respect for her intelligence..”*

SEAN: Beautiful.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: “she looked like the most beautiful actress..”*

SEAN: A communist.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: All we have to do is define our opponent as a communist, a socialist…”*

SEAN: He thinks she laughs weird.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: “Have you heard her laugh? That is the laugh of a crazy person!”*

SEAN: That she’ll cause the stock market to crash.

*<CLIP> MSNBC: In one post he said stock markets are crashing job numbers are terrible we are heading to WW3 and we have two of the most incompetent leaders in history—*

SEAN: And that she was mean to Mike Pence!

*<CLIP> TRUMP: “The way she treated Mike Pence was horrible…”*

SEAN: It’s unclear if any of these insults are getting Trump closer to a second term as president, so on *Today, Explained* we’re gonna ask what would. How Trump could win, coming up on the show.

[THEME]

SEAN: Jonathan, let me have you start by just saying your name and how you want us to identify you on our show.

JONATHAN MARTIN (stud): Jonathan Martin. Stud. No. I'm kidding.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>  
  
JONATHAN: Jonathan Martin, columnist for Politico.

SEAN: Jonathan, what was the world like before Biden dropped out?

JONATHAN: There's a great quote from Arthur Schlesinger that I cite in moments like this, which is ‘The future outwits all of our certitudes.’ When I think of the summer of 24, never has that quote been so applicable.

SCORING IN—WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

JONATHAN: It's the beauty of politics for those of us who love politics – the uncertainty. Look, if you would said at the start of the year that Joe Biden's campaign frustrated that there were not moving numbers against Donald Trump …

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: Come on!*

JONATHAN: … in part because the trial of Donald Trump's payoffs to a porn star would have no interest to the country, and that they scheduled a June debate to shake up the campaign

*<CLIP> VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: Joe Biden, in this debate, will make clear the contrasts …*

JONATHAN: And if that June debate would then be such a disaster for the incumbent president that he would pull an LBJ …

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT LBJ: I shall not seek…*

JONATHAN: … but even later in the campaign cycle and decide not to run for reelection …

*<CLOP> FORMER PRESIDENT LBJ: And I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your president.*

JONATHAN: … and that his VP would essentially be coronated overnight …

*<CLIP> VP HARRIS: “On behalf of Americans like the people I grew up with…”*

JONATHAN: … and be thrust into the campaign for 100 days. And we'd have effectively a snap election here in the States. I would have told you, like, I don't think the stuff you're smoking is licensed in most states because that's that's pretty intense product. And, um, so, yeah, it's been a remarkable summer. They've been turbulent. And look, I think now, given all that drama, we're kind of back to where we were at the outset of this campaign last year, which is effectively a toss up race, and Democrats have a real chance to win.

SCORING OUT

JONATHAN: That's not where we were for most of the summer. Democrats were not only going to lose the White House election, and they were going to take devastating hits down ballot. And I think what has happened here, at the very least, is Democrats have gotten to a point where the top of the ticket is not going to undermine the rest of the ticket. Kamala Harris may or may not win, but Democrats are not going to suffer a devastating election this time on the rest of the ticket, which, frankly, I think a lot of members of Congress were thinking about in the first place this summer.

SEAN: You know, I think so much attention was, was thrust upon Kamala Harris and her campaign when this transition happened, that, that the former president actually became something of an afterthought. But you were paying attention to how he reacted. Can you remind people who maybe forgot how exactly he initially responded?

JONATHAN: Well, it's September, and he still is responding in the same way that he did initially, which is he's in disbelief that Democrats would dump Biden and that Biden would agree to be dumped!

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I spent $100 million on fighting him. We weren't fighting anyone else. We weren't fighting a vice president. We didn't even know who the hell she was. And then all of a sudden they say, ‘Joe, you're losing badly. You got to get out.’*

JONATHAN: In part because Trump doesn't give a damn about his own party and would never, voluntarily leave a ticket when his party tried to push him out. And I know that because we have evidence! It happened!

*<CLIP> SENATOR MIKE LEE [R-UT]: Hi, I'm Senator Mike Lee. I'm speaking to you tonight from my home in Utah.*

JONATHAN: In the fall of 2016, Republican party leadership class turned on Trump after the *Access Hollywood* tape came out, and tried to get him off the ticket.

*<CLIP> SEN. LEE: I respectfully ask you, with all due respect, to step aside. Step down.*

JONATHAN: And he said, ‘Pound sand.’  
  
SEAN: Mmmm.  
  
JONATHAN: So we know how Trump would have responded to party pressure and it’s very different. And I think Trump cannot comprehend that Biden did this, and he can't comprehend that this race has now changed and he is now facing Kamala Harris instead of Joe Biden. Don't take my word for it. Just look at his comments every day. He keeps talking about it and we’re in September.

<CLIP> MSNBC HOST MIKA BRZEZINSKI *READING TRUMP TRUTH SOCIAL QUOTE: Quote I hear there is a big movement to bring back Crooked Joe.*

*<CLIP> FORMER PRES. TRUMP: This was a coup of the president of the United States. He didn’t wanna leave and they said we can do it the nice way or the hard way…*

SEAN: He seems to not be a huge fan of the sitting president, and the sitting president doesn't seem to be much of a fan of the former president.

JONATHAN: Yeah, I noticed that, too.

SEAN: It really feels sometimes, like, like, Trump just really misses Biden.

JONATHAN: I mean, I don't think it seems like I think it's a fact. I mean, he says it himself.

*<CLIP> FORMER PRES. TRUMP: Remember when Biden—I used to love this guy.*

JONATHAN: Look, I think the bargain was that Donald Trump was going to run against a soon to be 82 year old incumbent, and the effective platform was four words ‘Joe Biden is old,’ right? Like, that was the campaign against Joe Biden. It wasn't more complicated than that. And like Donald Trump says, ‘I thought we had a deal, America. You've gone back on the bargain here, and I don't have that same agreement.’ And I think he feels, like, cosmically wronged because of it. And if he does lose, that will effectively be, unless something changes his case. This was wrong. I was cheated. He said a couple of weeks ago. It was unconstitutional. What Democrats did. Of course, it’s not unconstitutional. There's nothing about the parties in the Constitution, let alone nominees are parties. In any event, he feels cheated.

SEAN: So as a guy who feels cheated, who feels wronged, who feels like he was forced to dump a bunch of money on the wrong person, how exactly is he responding? You said it hasn't changed much in the, in the two months. But, but what exactly is the tactic? If there is one?

JONATHAN: They're still grappling with how to run against Kamala Harris. I think they want to basically tie her to the administration and say it's four years of more of the status quo, which is not a bad message at all. I mean, Americans are pretty unhappy with inflation, with immigration, and obviously, you know, put the blame for that on the current administration. If Trump could drive that message, I think it's still pretty effective. He doesn't have the ‘Joe Biden is old’ message any longer, but he can still run against the sitting president and the administration because Kamala Harris is Joe Biden's vice president. It's just that Trump has not been disciplined enough to prosecute that case.

SEAN: Is any of the undisciplined stuff working?

JONATHAN: I mean, it works in the sense that Trump's base likes it, but Trump is a 47% candidate, right? He got 46 in 2016 He got just shy of 47 in 2020. Yes, that's the popular vote. No, we don't have a popular vote election. But the point is, is that he, he's a minority candidate nationally. He's got to grow his support, especially in the half dozen battleground states, saying and doing things that his base likes aren't adding new voters to his column. This is a straight math question. Is he going to get voters in the political center who right now, don't love him but obviously have concerns about Kamala Harris and Democrats? He's not doing anything to get them right now.

SEAN: What do you think his campaign would rather have him talking about out there?

JONATHAN: Oh, well that's easy. They want him to run against Kamala Harris as a partner of Joe Biden administration. That's presided over a spike of folks coming to the border without documentation and, you know, double digit growth and inflation. And pin that on Kamala Harris and say she's four more years of the same. And do you want that or change? That's what they want to run on. But he just isn't doing it.

SEAN: It seems clear that if you really wanted to win, all he really would need to do is stick to, you know, a few talking points immigration, inflation. You know, Kamala, is Biden done? And that would be a resonant message for, for a lot of these voters that he needs to win. Do you think, in the remaining, two months he can do that? Do you think he's got it in him?

JONATHAN: The short answer is, I don't know.

SCORING IN—TRUTH BRUSHING DRONE

JONATHAN: We’ll, I think, have a better sense next week, at that debate. If you can stay on message. Look, the reason Kamala Harris's campaign wants the mics to be hot at the debate, which is a shift from what Biden wanted, is they want to expose Trump. The dirty secret is that Democrats want the election to be about Trump. They don't want to run Kamala Harris's vision or Joe Biden's record. They want to make this about Donald Trump. ‘America, do you want him back in your living room for four more years?’ And if the election's about Trump, Democrats probably are going to win.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Jonathan Martin is Politico’s politics stud. Politico dot com. And he did have one last thought on the Trump campaign’s strategy here:

JONATHAN: Trump is trying to go deeper, not wider. And what I mean by that is he's trying to find more people who are simpatico already to him or his worldview, who might not vote at all but would never vote for a Democrat. Right?

SEAN: Jonathan’s buddy David Weigel is gonna join us when we’re back on *Today, Explained* to talk about leaning into the weird.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: Donald Trump’s been doing lots of podcasts lately. He talked to Russian computer scientist Lex Friedman about Kamala’s resume.

*TRUMP ON LEX FRIEDMAN PODCAST: But she never worked at McDonald’s. It was just sort of a cool thing to say, “Hey, I worked at McDonald’s you know?”*

SEAN: He talked to the comedian Theo Vonn about the podcaster’s prior drug use.

*TRUMP ON THEO VONN’S PODCAST  
VONN: Cocaine will turn you into a damn owl, homie. You know what I’m saying?*

*TRUMP: Yeah.*

*It’ll … You’ll be out on your own porch.*

*TRUMP: Yeah…*  
SEAN: If you’re wondering why Trump’s all of a sudden taking interest in influencers with mullets and pseudo-intellectuals, David Weigel thinks he’s figured it out. It’s …

DAVID WEIGEL (political reporter, Semafor): … the anti-establishment coalition strategy. Anti-establishment. You can raise your eyebrow because this is the game that he's been playing for years. He he's he was the anti-establishment candidate in 2015. Absolutely. He is now the leader of Republican Party who the whole party's built around, says he's anti-establishment, but he has a meta narrative about his campaign, which is that last time, 2017 to 2021, I had too many old guard idiots around me.And this time I'm unleashed. It's going to be me versus the deep state.

*<CLIP> TRUMP: We will clean out all of the corrupt actors in our national security and intelligence apparatus and there are plenty of them.*

DAVID: If I can generalize the kind of the kind of voter to, the sort of person who does not pay a lot of attention to politics, is not in a super high tax bracket not, not a ton of money. So not, doesn’t belong to a country club, doesn't trust the mainstream media, listens to podcasts on commute.

*<CLIP> THEO VON: Yeah what else dude? Uh…we went to interview Donald Trump. That was crazy bro, I’m like …*

DAVID: In the new X, the new Elon X probably might be active,

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: Inflation was caused by oil!   
 MUSK: Yeah.*

DAVID: but does not like the Republican party. The kind of people if they booed Mitch McConnell, but they cheer Donald Trump. That's the sort of person he's he's reaching out to

SEAN: At Semafor, David wrote that Donald Trump is going all in on the weird vote. But he reminded us that this isn’t necessarily a new strategy.

DAVID: Oh no. Again, this this is really from 2015. The idea with, with Trump was always that there are people who hated the mainstream Republican party, the Bush era Republican Party and wanted to blow it up and they could blow it up from the inside, the tent, not outside.

[*<CLIP> TRUMP, early 2016*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whX35NKthQw)*: The war in Iraq was a big fat mistake, alright?*

DAVID: So I was encountering people throughout that campaign who I met because they were Ron Paul advocates, or because they never voted Republican. They thought the party was a bunch of losers. This is, he's been doing this for nine years.

SEAN: But he’s been ramping it up lately. And he’s had some help! From people on the right, obvi. But also people who used to call themselves Democrats. Namely, RFK J.R. and Tulsi Gabbard.[[1]](#footnote-0)

DAVID: Kennedy is a mercurial character. I only interviewed him for any length at one point in the campaign, and he is somebody who had, I think, a big structural theory of change, which is that there are ways in which American life has gotten worse under both parties.

*<CLIP> RFK: We have the highest burden of chronic diseases in the world. Why is that? Why can’t we eliminate it?*

DAVID: Obesity is increased. Military budgets increased.

*<CLIP> RFK: We have wasted 8 trillion dollars on useless wars over 20 years …*

DAVID: He was a Democrat who wanted his party to fix that stuff, and it didn't to his liking. So he he ran for president. He ran a bad campaign for the Democratic nomination. Then he ran a bad independent campaign. And he found in Trump somebody who willing to believe if you lose, it doesn't matter. It's not your fault because of the campaign. It's the Democratic establishment stole it from you.

SEAN: Mm.

*<CLIP> TRUMP: And I mean this sincerely: had been allowed to enter the Democratic party primary he would have easily beaten Joe Biden, but they wouldn’t let him in…”*

DAVID: And there is a population of people, very online too, who are willing to believe that.

SEAN: Okay, but is this going to work because RFK cares about the environment. He's anti-vax. He he seemingly historically pro-abortion. And Trump holds basically the opposite views. He's he doesn't care about the environment. He got rid of Roe v Wade and he vaccinated a ton of Americans, it turns out. So are there RFK supporters who are going to see him join up with the Trump campaign and actually vote for Trump?

DAVID: That's a very good question, because again, we're talking about a fairly small group of people. Now in the conversations that you've that I, I've not had too many. I had a couple with people who had been with Kennedy in the first place. You're seeing some people who already like Trump, but I have their issues with him come back on board. You're seeing a lot of people just just bail out. You're seeing a lot of former Kennedy voters bail out because it's the argument Trump is making. And it's it's very easy to make fun of. But Kennedy was saying, I want to break up the two party system. Trump is saying, I basically can do that through the Republican Party. And there's a slogan that Charlie Kirk of Turning Point USA, Turning Point Action, mentioned on his show, which was:

*<CLIP> CHARLIE KIRK: Donald Trump and RFK on stage together. It is the uniparty against the uniparty.*

DAVID: Unity Party being … are Republicans and frustrated independents and Democrats versus, the uniparty of neocons and neoliberals. So that is the argument they're making. Kennedy would use the term neocons to describe lots of people who were not neocons. He was pretty loose with his language. And that's the argument.

*<CLIP> RFK JR: President Trump has told me he wants this to be his legacy. I’m choosing to believe that this time he will follow through.*

DAVID: So how many people is this? The polling suggests that the goal of this was to step on any benefit Harris got from the convention. And the way I read the polling over the last week is it improved her favorables. It ended Trump's advantage on a lot of policy issues. Right now, I've seen a number, a number of polls that say she's tied with Trump on, on crime. She's tied with, Trump on, on the economy. That's insane, because that was not the case twenty days ago.

*<CLIP> CNN: Harris supporters are now even more excited to vote for her than Trump supporters to vote for him: 75 to 68…*

DAVID: But she didn't leap very far ahead of Trump. She's ahead, but not very far ahead. Some of that was Kennedy. Some of that was these anti-establishment voters saying, I, Trump can pull this off.

SEAN: Hm. So there's a chance RFK is going to do something for Trump. What about Tulsi Gabbard, another fallen Democrat who's, who's on the Trump train?

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: “She’s a special person, she’s got great common sense, great spirit, and she loves our country and she loves the people in this room. Tulsi, please.   
TULSI: Thank you, Mr. President. Aloha!*

DAVID: Gabbard is a more complicated story, and she’s written a memoir but she didn’t explain the whole story in it. So she was in Hawaii, an ambitious Democrat with conservative views on particularly gender, gay rights. You go back 15 years, you can find Gabbard being very critical of gay marriage, which Hawaii legalizing before other states seat opens up 2012. She wins it. And she is very exciting to Democrats who don't know a lot about her because she is young. She served in the National Guard, attractive, charismatic, and instantly Democrats give her a lot of power inside the party. You know, she's a DNC vice chair right away in her early 30s, and she's just never taken very seriously by the ideological left of the party. They always think there's something off about her. But she has a cohort of frustrated people who believe that she is an talented political figure who can get us past partisanship and save the country. And that's where she converges with RFK, RFK Jr. Kennedy and Gabbard both appeal to people who say that ‘Nothing actually changes!’ That, the both parties are corrupt. Both parties are pro-war. The military industrial complex runs everything. The pharmaceutical industry runs everything. And even if you introduce different facts or the Democrats answer that, that critique in some way, it's not enough. You want, you want to blow up the system.

*<CLIP> TULSI GABBARD: President Trump is showing he can bring people together who may not agree on every issue. But who value what is most important, which is protecting and defending our fundamental rights and freedoms that are enshrined in the constitution, and making it possible for us to live in a peaceful and prosperous society.*

SEAN: Is this the best strategy he can come up with, or is there a better one out there? You know, there was a moment during the RNC when, after a week of hearing, you know, God saved our candidate…

*<CLIP> TRUMP: Over the last few days, many people say it was a providential moment: probably was.”*

SEAN: It felt like Trump really had the whole country and out of his hand, and he could have just gone up there and stayed on message and really transformed. And instead he just did the greatest hits. He did Hannibal Lecter, he did Crazy Nancy Pelosi, and he just leaned into his old self like, has he ever been able to harness an actual strategy here. And is this it?

DAVID: It's all of a piece because again, Trump has run three times for president. The media environment he was running in in 2015 was much more dominated by old legacy institutions. To, to be credible – and it happened very quickly because he was good copy, good ratings – Trump need to do interviews with the cable networks. He needed to, do sit downs of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, etc. He did a lot of take me seriously media coverage, and over time – and he, he encouraged this. I mean, one goal of his administration, which I think was pretty successful, was when he was in trouble, and the media was investigating allegations against him turning it back on the media. And when something didn't, something fell apart saying that, well, this is the media has been out to get me, and you can't trust the mainstream media. Lots of things are converging at a great time for him. People are typically canceling their cable packages or canceling the newspaper subscriptions. And he's also, engendering this anger at the mainstream media. And there's a lot more money flowing into alternative conservative media, Joe Rogan show in 2016, going on Joe Rogan's show is not a big deal. It is by 2020 and definitely is by 2024. And so he's in a much friendlier media environment, and one that is very friendly to Kennedy, one that's very friendly to Gabbard. And there is a thesis for all of this stuff,

SCORING IN toothbrush drone

DAVID: which is that the time of the mainstream media, legacy liberalism that is just you can blow it up.The second Trump administration, like the theoretical Kennedy ministration that'll never happen. Doesn't need to care what the media thinks it can. It can govern. It will make the media angry. The fact that they're getting angry means that you're right. And who cares because they're collapsing anyway.Will it work? I'm not sure. It's close to working. I mean, this is not a campaign that's down ten points of campaign that's down a couple points. And it worked pretty well in 2016 before this was built. And so it's compelling.

SEAN: David Weigel! Read him at Semafor dot com. Miles Bryan! Phind him in Philadelphia. He produced the program today. Amina Al-Sadi edited. Laura Bullard checked facts. Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir mixed and mastered.   
  
I’m Sean Rameswaram. This is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]

1. <https://apnews.com/article/rfk-jr-trump-speech-arizona-a2638f89ddcb5de03edbe4574ca17d45> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)