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The Morning: The horse race. (Yes, the horse race.)

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The New York Times **The Morning**

September 17, 2024



By David Leonhardt

Good morning. We're covering the presidential horse race, and we admit it. We also have the latest on the apparent Trump assassination attempt, the war in Ukraine and personalized drinks.



At a presidential debate watch party. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Respecting voters

The term “horse race” tends to have a negative meaning in politics. People use it to describe an obsession with polls rather than what really matters — issues, policies, an election’s stakes.

Here at The Morning, we believe in focusing on issues. We have written dozens of such newsletters this year, often tied to other Times coverage. We recently started a series called [The Stakes](#), highlighting the huge differences between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. We’re policy nerds, and we are proud of it.

Today, though, I want to explain why the horse race also matters. Politicians and voters who dismiss poll results as superficial risk ignoring political reality — and taking polls seriously can bring enormous benefits. The past few years have been a case study, mostly involving the Democratic Party. Today’s newsletter focuses on three examples.

1. Trump’s 2020 defeat

When the race for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination began, the party’s left flank was ascendant. Trump’s extremism had radicalized many Democrats in the opposite direction. Progressives, especially the college

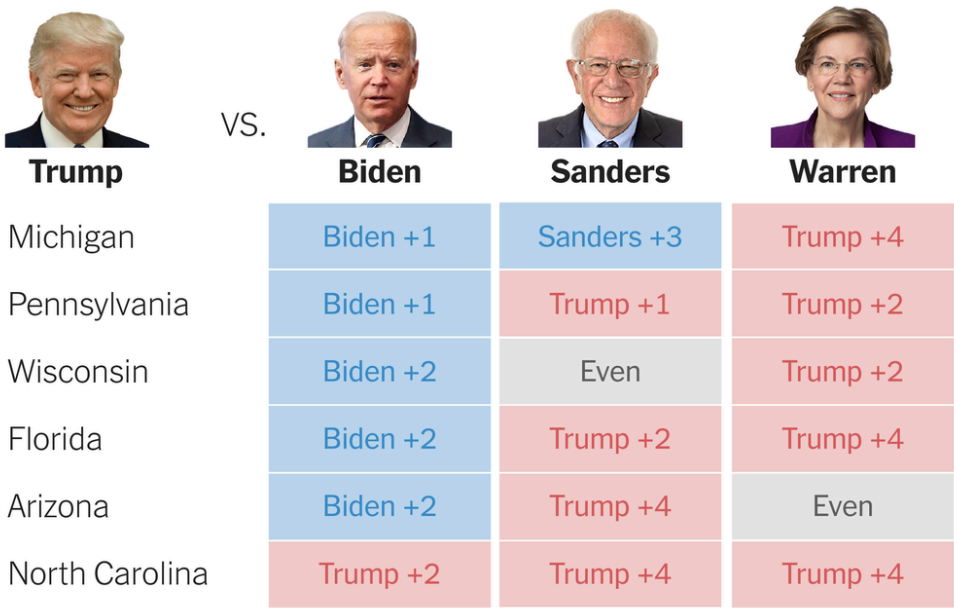
graduates who staff campaigns and think tanks, wanted to decriminalize border crossings, ban fracking, abolish private health insurance and defund the police.

The party’s presidential candidates embraced at least some of these positions, even though they were never broadly popular. And they never became popular, despite the passionate arguments that advocates made. Instead, Democrats seemed to be on the verge of nominating a candidate with unpopular views and helping Trump win re-election.

One major candidate, however, adopted fewer of these positions and still had a moderate image: Joe Biden. Polls showed that he would be a stronger opponent against Trump than other Democrats. Here’s one example, from a Times chart [published in late 2019](#):

Swing State Polling in 2019, a Year Before the Election

How Trump fared among likely voters



Source: Based on a New York Times/Siena College poll of 3,766 registered voters from Oct. 13 to Oct. 26 in 2019. | By The New York Times

Democratic voters took note. They backed Biden’s campaign, with many citing his electability, and he won the nomination. Primary voters in South Carolina, disproportionately Black and working class, played a vital role.

Had Democratic voters disregarded the horse race, Trump might now be in the eighth year of his presidency.

2. The 2024 campaign

Four years later, Biden had become a much weaker candidate. At 81, he walked stiffly and couldn't always communicate clearly. The White House minimized his public appearances.

Many Americans found it unsettling. Polls repeatedly showed that most voters considered him too old to serve a second term and that Trump was likely to win in November. Nonetheless, Democratic leaders insisted that Biden was doing just fine — energetic and vigorous behind the scenes, they claimed — and urged people to ignore the horse-race polls.

Then came Biden's miserable debate performance. Even afterward, Biden initially refused to leave the race, but other Democrats began to accept reality. They pushed him out partly by confronting him with poll results. As Nate Cohn, The Times's chief political analyst, wrote, "Democrats are extraordinarily fortunate that the early debate gave them an unprecedented second chance to act on what the voters had already been telling them for a year."

Had Democrats continued to dismiss this year's horse race as a distraction, they would probably be on course to lose it badly.

3. 2024, redux

Once Harris replaced Biden as the nominee, the polls shifted. She was in fact an energetic, vigorous candidate. Still, she had a problem. She was one of those 2020 candidates who had adopted unpopular positions on immigration, fracking and more. Her 2020 campaign fared so badly that she dropped out before the first caucus.

This year, by contrast, Harris has been more respectful of public opinion. She has reversed several stances, and she portrays herself as a tough patriot who will fight for the American middle class. These positions have helped her shrink Biden's deficit with swing voters, and she is running virtually even with Trump.

She may yet lose the election. Trump's campaign can read the polls too, and its ads emphasize both Harris's past statements and the Biden administration's record on inflation and immigration. Many swing voters say they don't yet know enough about Harris and are worried she is too liberal, [Nate has explained](#).

The next big question is whether Harris will take a clear lead following her strong debate last week. I am comfortable making one prediction: To understand the strategies that the campaigns adopt over the final two months, you will need to keep an eye on the polls.

The bottom line

It's obviously possible for politicians (as well as journalists and voters) to pay too much attention to the horse race. Any politician who adopted an agenda based only on poll results would not be demonstrating leadership. And polls are obviously imperfect guides to public opinion; Hillary Clinton lost to Trump in 2016 partly because her campaign put too much faith in polls that wrongly showed her to be ahead.

But it is also possible to make the opposite mistake — to pay so little attention to the horse race as to be disdainful of public opinion. Polls, after all, are not describing an actual horse race. They are describing something much more important: public opinion in a democratic system that is supposed to be responsive to that opinion.

Related: [There are early signs of a post-debate bounce for Harris](#), Nate Cohn explains.

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THE LATEST NEWS

Trump Gunman



Outside the Trump International Golf Club. Saul Martinez for The New York Times

- The police said the suspect in this weekend's apparent assassination attempt arrived at Trump's golf course [around 2 a.m. Sunday](#), about 12 hours before the Secret Service spotted him.
- The acting Secret Service director said that agents [hadn't fully swept the golf course](#) and that the outing wasn't on his schedule. The agency is facing renewed scrutiny.
- The suspect, Ryan Routh, appeared in court and faces two gun-related federal charges. Prosecutors could add more serious charges later.
- Routh appears to have acted alone. He did not fire his rifle and never had Trump in his sightline, the authorities said.
- Routh, 58, described himself online as a former Trump supporter. But in a rambling, self-published book last year, he accused Trump of threatening American democracy and wrote ["you are free to assassinate Trump."](#)
- Trump [blamed the attempted shooting](#) on inflammatory language from Biden and Harris. [JD Vance said](#), "The left needs to tone down the rhetoric or somebody is going to get hurt."

- Violence increasingly shapes American politics. Trump [has both inspired and been a target of it](#), Peter Baker writes.

2024 Elections

- Harris discussed the Biden administration’s labor policies in a [meeting with leaders of the Teamsters union](#). The union may endorse a candidate this week.
- Only three Black women have ever served in the Senate. After November, [the number could reach five](#).
- Biden promoted [a \\$1.3 billion federal investment](#) in historically Black colleges and universities, crediting Harris — a Howard graduate — with helping to secure it.

International



Gisèle Pelicot arrives at court. Guillaume Horcajuelo/EPA, via Shutterstock

- A man who is accused of drugging his wife for over a decade and inviting dozens of men to join him in raping her testified in French court. “Today

I maintain that I am a rapist, like those in this room,” he said on the stand. [Read more about his testimony](#).

- Flooding in Central Europe [killed at least 17 people](#), breached dams and destroyed bridges.
- Russia is [escalating its bombing campaign](#) against Kyiv and other big Ukrainian cities. Vladimir Putin has also demanded [more troops](#), The A.P. reports.
- A senior Hamas official, in an interview with The Times, maintained that the group was winning the war in Gaza and [would be part of the enclave’s future](#). “Hamas has the upper hand,” he said.
- A candidate for mayor of São Paulo, Brazil, [hit an opponent with a chair](#) during a TV debate.

Business

- Amazon told its office workers that they will have to [come in five days a week](#) next year.
- Days after thousands of Boeing employees went on strike, the company said it would [freeze hiring and cut costs](#), halting production of its most popular commercial jet.
- Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, plans to [bar Russian media outlets](#) from posting.

Other Big Stories



Kendric Cromer Kenny Holston/The New York Times

- Kendric Cromer, 12, is among the first patients to be treated with newly approved — and still rare — gene therapy for Sickle Cell. “[I can’t wait to start my new life](#),” he told his mother.
- A powerful storm [flooded businesses and collapsed roads](#) in southeastern North Carolina, where a tropical storm hit just last month.

Opinions

The through line in the Trump assassination attempts isn’t security failures or heated rhetoric; it’s [easy access to guns](#), **Gabrielle Giffords**, the former congresswoman who survived a shooting in 2011, argues.

Here’s a column by **Paul Krugman** on the [cost of demonizing immigrants](#).

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MORNING READS



In Jinan, China. Gilles Sabrie for The New York Times

“Silver economy”: In China — where the birthrate is plunging — businesses that catered to children are [changing course to serve seniors](#).

Dark sky: There’s a partial lunar eclipse tonight. [Here’s what you need to know](#).

White-nose syndrome: A fungus decimated American bats. [Now scientists are fighting back](#).

Ask Vanessa: [Why do so many people wear all black?](#)

Education: The idea of incorporating the Bible into classrooms is gaining traction. Some conservative Christians [aren’t on board](#).

Lives Lived: Dr. George Berci, a Holocaust survivor, conceived surgical techniques and tools that have revolutionized minimally invasive operations and procedures. He [died at 103](#).

SPORTS



A Falcons interception in the last seconds. NFL

Monday Night Football: The Atlanta Falcons and their quarterback Kirk Cousins stunned the Philadelphia Eagles, taking a 22-21 lead with under a minute left. [Read a recap.](#)


Gymnastics: The American gymnast Jordan Chiles appealed the ruling that stripped her of her Olympic bronze medal. [Here's where the case stands.](#)

N.F.L.: After two blowout losses, the Carolina Panthers are [benching their starting quarterback Bryce Young](#), the No. 1 pick in last year's draft, in favor of the veteran Andy Dalton.

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A TIMES BIRTHDAY



The New York Times

NYT Cooking debuted 10 years ago today, and David Leonhardt reflects on the anniversary:

I'm a heavy user of the NYT Cooking app, and not just because I work here. There is no easier way to turn a vague craving — or a potpourri of refrigerator ingredients — into a tasty meal. On Sunday, a full slate of September football left me wanting chili and, just like that, Julia Moskin was teaching me how to make a rich, smoky Texas-style version.

To celebrate the 10th birthday, [I recommend this beautiful package of recipes](#) — including readers' 50 favorites.



Custom drinks from a McDonald's beverage chain. Photo Illustration by Jonathan Zizzo for The New York Times

At cafes and fast-food chains, Americans are obsessed with customizing drinks — filling them with tapioca pearls, dried fruit and cookies and cream crumbs. At Starbucks, a quarter of all custom drinks in the U.S. have more than three modifications. “A very American need for instant energy, coupled with a very American desire for self-expression, has inspired an ever-mutating ecosystem of tricked-out drinks,” [Priya Krishna writes](#).

More on culture

- Sean “Diddy” Combs [was arrested after a grand jury indicted him](#). The charges were not announced but a lawyer for Combs said he believed he was being charged with racketeering and sex trafficking.
- The '90s alternative rock band Jane's Addiction canceled their reunion tour after [two members fought onstage](#).
- This year's [Booker Prize shortlist](#) includes Rachel Kushner's “Creation Lake” and Percival Everett's “James.”

- Jimmy Kimmel [commented on the suspected Trump gunman](#): “He tweeted earlier this year that his dream ticket would be Nikki Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy, which is how you know he’s nuts.”

THE MORNING RECOMMENDS ...



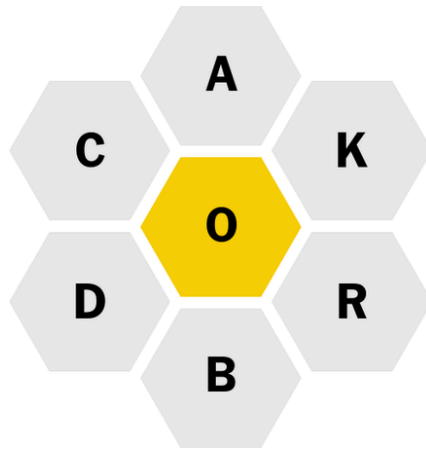
Aspen trees on Kebler Pass, near Crested Butte, Colo. Getty

Enjoy [fall foliage](#) in places that aren't New England.

Conquer [pests in your home](#).

Upgrade [your iPhone](#).

GAMES



Here is [today's Spelling Bee](#). Yesterday's pangram was *chiefly*.

And here are [today's Mini Crossword](#), [Wordle](#), [Sudoku](#), [Connections](#) and [Strands](#).

Thanks for spending part of your morning with The Times. See you tomorrow. —David

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