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Election results don't support Trump's claims of a landslide and mandate

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President-elect Donald Trump and his allies have exaggerated his victory since the November election, claiming a "landslide" win and a sweeping mandate despite having prevailed relatively narrowly — assertions Trump continued to press during a pre-inauguration rally in Washington.

"We achieved the most epic political victory our country has ever seen," Trump told supporters Sunday at Capital One Arena.

Such claims are not supported by the election results, which show a starkly divided electorate and a historically slim win by Trump. His margin of victory over Vice President Kamala Harris in the national popular vote — 1.5 percentage points — is the smallest of any president who secured a popular-vote win since Richard M. Nixon in 1968.

And though Trump won the popular vote, he did not secure a majority, coming just shy with 49.9 percent of the vote, according to certified state results compiled by the Associated Press.

Trump's margin of electoral college victory, 86 votes, was in line with historically tight races — including 2020, 2016 and 2004 — and is smaller than the winning margins of Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, and George H.W. Bush. Trump's margin was nowhere close to those in historic landslide elections, such as Ronald Reagan's in 1984 and Nixon's in 1972, who both had electoral-college margins above 500 votes.

"What's obvious is that he won by a very narrow margin and that there is no big mandate here," said Alex Keyssar, a presidential scholar and history professor at the Harvard Kennedy School.

Trump and his allies have pushed the "mandate" narrative over the past two months as they have prepared for his return to the White House on Monday, including in social media attempts to influence House and Senate members.

Trump is planning to push an ambitious agenda, through executive actions and legislation, on immigration, trade, taxes and a host of other issues.

Trump moved swiftly on election night to frame his victory as historic, declaring Americans had delivered him an "unprecedented and powerful mandate."

He has since repeated and embellished the claim, incorrectly calling it "the biggest mandate in 129 years" on Truth Social last month, saying he won "in a landslide" and asserting in his Time magazine "Person of the Year" interview that he won "by so much."

"We just won a Historic Landslide and Mandate from the American People," Trump wrote last month on Truth Social, echoing similar boasts he has made since defeating Harris in November.

House Speaker Mike Johnson also repeated those claims after members of Congress certified Trump's victory on Jan. 6.

"His landslide election and corresponding mandate from the American people dictate that Congress waste no time in delivering on the America First agenda, and we are prepared to hit the ground running," Johnson said in a statement.

For Trump — who lost the popular vote in 2016 and lost the presidency in 2020 — certain aspects of his win represented major victories that added to his comeback: taking all seven battleground states, securing a clear and swift victory, winning the popular vote for the first time and receiving more votes than he did in 2020.

But those triumphs don't equate to a landslide, presidential historians said, and the full count of votes revealed a closer election, partly because of the number of voters who went for independent and third-party candidates. While Trump's party also secured both chambers of Congress, their majority in the House is razor thin.

Trump's numbers in the popular vote and the electoral college are ones that, by historical standards, would generally spur a new president to move cautiously, experts said.

Having a more fragile backing from the American people historically increases the danger that a president will lose support into his first term, said historian John Woolley, co-director of the American Presidency Project at the University of California at Santa Barbara, adding that Trump's modest electoral vote means the president-elect is "not supported by the population as a whole."

"We would not normally call an election outcome like this a landslide victory," Woolley said. "By most standards, a president would consider not having won a majority vote to be a problem."

Trump received more than 77.3 million votes to Harris's more than 75 million, according to the Associated Press, which put Harris at 48.4 percent of the vote. It is the second time in Trump's political career that he has won the presidency without receiving support from a majority of voters, though he came extremely close.

Asked about Trump's continued claim, his transition team criticized news outlets for fact-checking it.

"Legacy media outlets are embarrassing themselves by trying and failing to undermine President Trump's historic victory, where he decisively won every battleground state and became the first Republican to win the popular vote in 20 years," Anna Kelly, a Trump transition spokeswoman, said in a statement.

"President Trump won by a landslide, he has a resounding mandate by the American people to deliver on his campaign promises, and The Washington Post should get over it," Kelly added.

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-New York) recently told reporters Republicans are representing their victory as a "big beautiful historic overwhelming mandate," pointing out that Republicans are entering the new session of Congress with fewer House seats than they had when Trump took office in 2016.

"What do we think they're going to be able to do ... with a one- or two-seat majority at best and a group of people on the other side of the aisle who can't stand each other?" Jeffries said.

Trump's critics say he is attempting to project more political strength than he has, given the Republicans' slim majority in the House, the party's already emerging internal divisions and the split electorate. The overblown claims reflect Republicans' worries about their slim House majority, Democratic strategist Jim Manley said.

"He can claim a mandate until the cows come home, but the reality is, that based on historical averages, he had a very, very narrow win," Manley said.

"They're using the word 'mandate' because [they] realize they don't have an effective working legislative majority in the House," Manley added. "It's right out of the playbook. ... You claim something that doesn't exist so you can try to cow your opposition into doing what you want."

Boston University history professor Jonathan Zatin said the tactic of claiming a mandate is usually used by leaders who do not actually have one and can be an attempt to push other politicians to fall into line.

"This is usually a tactic that's used ... when presidents have won but don't actually have a mandate. In other words, it's a reflection of their weakness politically," Zatin said. "It's coming from a place of weakness in an attempt to persuade people that he's going to be able to do more than he actually can."

For Republicans, however, the win is what matters — and many argue that Trump's victory reflects a broadly held sentiment. While Trump's margins were slim, he won them in the majority of states, said Republican strategist Doug Heye. "So it was maybe an inch deep, but much more than a mile wide."

"Incoming administrations usually claim a mandate, whether it's true or not, and the debate around that usually doesn't serve a purpose," Heye said in an email to The Post. "Having the White House, and congressional majorities — even slim ones — are what matter."

In addition, regardless of the margin of victory, Trump gets "a tremendous psychological benefit" from pulling off the nearly unprecedented feat of being a former president who lost reelection and then won in a clear victory, Woolley said.

"Close elections in the past have often led to presidencies that focused on being bipartisan," Keyssar said. "There are no signs that the current administration is regarding their narrow victory as a reason to approach governing in a bipartisan fashion."

Sabrina Rodriguez contributed to this report.

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