

OPINION
THE EDITORIAL BOARD

A Clear Choice on the Issue Voters Care About Most



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The most important distinction between the two candidates for the White House is that Vice President Kamala Harris is committed to democracy and the rule of law and Donald Trump is not. It's a race that is, fundamentally, about who has the right temperament and is fit to be the next president, and the answer is not in question.

Consider, for instance, Liz Cheney's endorsement last week of Ms. Harris. Ms. Cheney, a former Republican congresswoman, supports the vice president even though she disagrees with many, perhaps most, of Ms. Harris's policy positions. "As a conservative, as someone who believes in and cares about the Constitution, I have thought deeply about this, and because of the danger that Donald Trump poses, not only am I not voting for Donald Trump, but I will be voting for Kamala Harris," she said. Her father, Dick Cheney, a former vice president and fellow lifelong conservative, followed suit the next day.

Yet policy matters, too. And voters have been clear that they are less interested in debates about the future of democracy than they are in the matters of governance that affect their everyday lives.

For many voters, the defining issue in this year's election is the high cost of living. They are outraged by the prices of familiar items at the grocery store. Their dreams of owning a home have slipped beyond reach. When Mr. Trump and Ms. Harris take the stage for Tuesday night's debate, Americans will be weighing which candidate is more likely to improve his or her fortunes and prospects.

Neither candidate can quickly deliver a big cut in the cost of housing, food, gas or any other significant expense American households pay each month. That kind of change is beyond a president's power. But the choice for voters still is straightforward: Ms. Harris has begun to describe thoughtful plans that could help American families to better afford the things they need and want. Mr. Trump has offered bad ideas and promises that he can't keep.

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The candidates' proposals to address the high price of housing, the average family's biggest expense, highlight their differences. Ms. Harris has proposed a target of building three million new homes and described policies to move toward that goal, including tax incentives for builders, financial support for buyers and ways to encourage local governments to allow more housing to be built. Mr. Trump says he'll lower prices by deporting undocumented immigrants — a notion that ignores the [research](#) showing that reducing the number of immigrants actually could have the opposite effect of raising prices because it would reduce the ranks of construction workers.

Ms. Harris's housing plan is part of her broader economic agenda. She has proposed coupling higher taxes on large corporations with larger tax breaks for small businesses. She wants to continue the Biden administration's investment in building new industries, like battery factories for electric cars, and to use the government's power to check corporate power in existing industries. She has also proposed more government aid for families, including a \$6,000 tax credit for new parents, which would help ease the burden of higher prices.

Mr. Trump, by contrast, has continued his tactic of making big commitments and then hoping he isn't held accountable for them.

He boasted that he would "rapidly defeat inflation, quickly bring down prices and reignite explosive economic growth." He has specifically promised to cut energy prices in half during his first year in office by increasing domestic production of fossil fuels.

Under President Biden, domestic oil production has reached the highest level on record, and a wide range of analysts have said that the government cannot lower prices significantly by allowing more production.

Some of Mr. Trump's other promises are even more vague. Mr. Trump was asked after a speech last week if he would act to make child care more affordable. He said he would, but in the following two minutes, he didn't manage to say anything coherent about how.

In other areas Mr. Trump has been more specific, but his plans would be disastrous.

He has proposed a tariff, or tax, of up to 20 percent on imports from foreign countries, along with an even higher tariff on imports from China. That bill would be paid by American consumers, in the form of higher prices, no matter how many times or how loudly Mr. Trump says otherwise.

He has proposed rounding up and deporting millions of undocumented immigrants. Beyond the enormity of the impact on the lives of immigrants, their families and communities and the expense of the plan itself, mass deportations would blast a hole in the American economy, depriving employers of labor and retailers of consumers.

He has proposed extending tax cuts for the wealthy and for large corporations. [Repeated experiments](#) over the past half-century have made clear that the benefits of such tax cuts do not trickle down, do not generate economic growth and do not pay for themselves. They just make the rich richer.

Mr. Trump's sweeping tax cuts would also increase federal borrowing much more than Ms. Harris's proposed expansions of federal spending. Mr. Trump's plans would increase federal deficits by \$5.8 trillion over the next decade, while Ms. Harris's plans would increase federal deficits by \$1.2 trillion, according to analyses by the Penn Wharton Budget Model, a nonpartisan research center at the University of Pennsylvania. A larger federal debt means that a larger share of federal revenue goes out the door in the form of interest payments to the wealthy, which [limits spending on programs](#) that benefit everyone else.

For voters motivated by issues other than the economy, the contrast between the candidates is just as stark. And yet, as a New York Times/Siena College national poll demonstrated over the weekend, Ms. Harris still has work to do. About [60 percent of likely voters](#) said they believed America was on the wrong track, and many wanted more information from Ms. Harris about her plans — on immigration, climate change, foreign policy and other important issues.

She should also continue to show that she takes seriously the power and responsibility of government to improve American life. Americans need and deserve a president committed to that work.

Source photographs by sanapadh, Twoellis and Yevgen Romanenko via Getty Images.

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