

SPOTLIGHT

Chinese coverage of the US presidential election

In the run-up to the 2024 US presidential election Chinese state media coverage was limited, even in the week prior to the election. BBC Monitoring reported that the topic only featured in around 10% of sampled state media articles that mentioned the US.^{1 2} Around two-thirds of those appeared on the state-affiliated, nationalist news and blog platform *Guancha*, which tends to accommodate stronger views than top-tier state media.³ Meanwhile, messaging from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs consistently reiterated China's commitment to non-interference and highlighted its hopes for stable China-US relations regardless of the election result.^{4 5}

While concerns about the potential for Chinese influence in the US elections were raised during the campaign, with US lawmakers accusing Chinese entities of attempting to sway public opinion through misinformation campaigns, Chinese officials have consistently denied any interference, asserting that the election is an internal matter for the US.^{6 7 8} Correspondingly, coverage of the election has primarily focused on its relation to broader geopolitical issues rather than detailed political narratives; articles frequently referenced US foreign policy positions, such as its support for Israel, as well as perceived failures in its management of the impact of Hurricane Milton in Florida.^{9 10 11}

On 5 November – the day of the election – Chinese state media increased their coverage, centred on concerns over the potential for violence related to the election results. Reports from state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), as well as *Guancha*, highlighted the heightened security in Washington D.C. and noted reports of aggressive behaviour among some voters in Pennsylvania, even as the voting process was described as proceeding smoothly.^{12 13} Despite this increased coverage, the US presidential election was not prioritised more generally across leading Chinese media outlets, which continued to focus more on domestic events, including the activities of President Xi Jinping and the China International Import Expo.¹⁴ Discussions on social media platforms like Weibo were more vibrant, featuring lively interactions and on-the-ground reports, such as videos of shops in Boston being boarded up due to fears of unrest; users expressed various sentiments, including some voicing support for a Trump presidency, and suggesting it might favour China.¹⁵

In a statement on 7 November the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China reported that President Xi Jinping had sent a congratulatory message to Donald Trump on his election victory.^{16 17} This stated, "Xi Jinping noted that history tells us that both countries stand to gain from cooperation and lose from confrontation [...] It is hoped that the two sides will, in the principles of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation, enhance dialogue and communication, properly manage differences, expand mutually beneficial cooperation, and find the right way for China and the United States to get along with each other in the new era to the benefit of the two countries and the world."¹⁸

Adarga Analysis: It is highly likely that this observation of limited coverage across state media is reflective of a deliberate choice by Beijing to downplay the event within official channels to avoid amplifying the topic domestically and not encourage public discourse that could be seen as interfering or overtly interested in US 'internal affairs'. This is consistent with Beijing's official stance of not commenting on foreign elections. While top-tier state media remained relatively restrained, the coverage of the topic by *Guancha* demonstrates that China's information apparatus is not monolithic; rather, it uses various channels to address different audiences and accommodate a broader range of views. In so doing, this strategy provides space for more nationalist voices without implicating authoritative state outlets, which instead may prioritise diplomatic restraint.

Furthermore, framing the US election in terms of broader geopolitical issues rather than detailed political narratives likely indicates a clear preference for discussing the US within a global, rather than a domestic context. This approach indicates a desire by Chinese media to avoid engaging deeply with specific candidates or electoral processes, and instead to indirectly critique the US and reinforce the broader Chinese narrative about the effects of US policies on global stability. Likewise, the choice to temporarily increase coverage and highlight the risk of election-related violence subtly reinforces a narrative about instability in US democracy, casting doubt on the reliability of the US electoral process by inference. It is likely that this is also designed with the intention to contrast with the stability projected by China's political system, in order to reinforce the appeal of China's own governance model to a domestic audience.

In contrast to traditional media, Chinese social media platforms like Weibo saw more engagement, with some Weibo users expressing interest in a Trump presidency, viewing it as potentially advantageous for China. This reflects a view, common among Chinese 'netizens', that Trump's policies might exacerbate US challenges or isolation, and that this may consequently benefit China's own global standing. The contrast between lively social media discussions and restrained state media coverage also illustrates a nuance to the Chinese information space: allowing public expression of interest without explicitly endorsing or opposing US electoral outcomes.

President Xi's message to Trump after his electoral victory was framed as a diplomatic gesture focusing on principles of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation. This congratulatory note is a traditional, formalised approach in diplomatic relations, but it also subtly advances a preference for continuity in US-China relations. By not addressing Trump's policies directly, China sends a signal of willingness to work with the US regardless of its internal political shifts. Correspondingly, the language of the statement suggests an ideal of cooperation over confrontation and consciously positions China as the proactive, cooperative party in the relationship.

Throughout the presidential campaign, Trump reiterated his stance on tariffs, proposing rates of up to 60% on goods imported from China, along with threats to revoke China's most-favoured-nation trading status.^{19 20} This aggressive trade posture harkens back to his previous administration, which initiated a 'trade war' that saw significant tariff impositions and became a central tenet of his policy towards China.^{21 22} However, although there was notable coverage and anticipation of the potential for a Trump presidency to exacerbate current bilateral tensions, Chinese commentary on the election's implications regularly suggested that regardless of the outcome, the trajectory of US policy towards China is expected to remain largely unchanged.

While the potential for the relationship to deteriorate under Trump may be clearer via his more overtly hostile policies, the overarching perception seems to be that both major US parties hold a generally negative stance towards China, with some commentators expressing a view that there is essentially no distinction between the Republicans and Democrats in their overall attitudes.²³ From the Chinese perspective, the Democratic and Republican parties appear to differ more in their methods rather than their objectives; both are viewed as likely to adopt competitive or 'containment' policies towards China; consequently there is a general expectation that US-China ties are likely to remain tense under any configuration of leadership in the US.

ABOUT

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