Daily News Juice

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1. Why presidential elections are always held on a Tuesday in the month of November

Background on Brazil's BRI Stance

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the US has had its Election Day on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November — a choice dictated by the nature of the US economy, the Christian faith of most of its citizens, and criticisms of the previous system.

Month-long elections

Until 1845, states were allowed to hold elections at any time within a 34-day period before the Electoral College met to certify the next President in December. In 1844, for instance, the presidential election was held over a one-month period between early November and early December.

In 1845, Congress passed a law to set a single election day for the entire country. There were two main reasons behind this.

* By the mid-1800s, states were expanding the right to vote to non-landowning white men who were above the age of 21. This significantly increased the scale of elections, and led to calls for streamlining the voting process.

* Critics of the previous system believed that having more dispersed elections led to situations where early voting and declaration of results in some states impacted the turnout and voting behaviour in states which cast their ballot on a later date.

Initially, the law pertained only to presidential elections. But its scope was later expanded to also include Congressional and other elections as well.

Choice of a single day

The question then was which day should be chosen as Election Day.

The US in the nineteenth century was predominantly an agrarian country, and most voters resided in rural areas. They figured prominently in Congress' choice of a date.

November was chosen as the month of voting because it did not coincide with the busy spring planting season or the autumn harvest. And the harsh winter was a month or more away.

The choice of day was trickier, based on both religious and economic considerations.

Given that many rural voters had to travel all day to cast their ballot in the nineteenth century, Sunday, Monday, and Saturday were ruled out, because that would lead to people missing church. Wednesday was ruled out because it was a popular market day across the country, when farmers travelled to nearby towns and cities to sell their produce.

Ultimately, Congress settled on the first Tuesday after the first Monday. This was to prevent Election Day from falling on November 1, when Christians observed All Saints' Day and merchants typically settled their books from the previous month.

In recent years, the choice of this day has copped criticism with less than 12% of the US now in agriculture, and people having to miss work to cast their vote.

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Issues
Source: The Hindu

2. Election Day in US: Here's what to know

Introduction
Tuesday is Election Day in the United States in what some commentators have described as the most consequential presidential election ever. And the race to the White House is as close as it gets.

Democratic nominee Kamala Harris has a slight edge over Republican Donald Trump in the national polling average as of Sunday (in the US). But the winner-takes-all Electoral College system means the presidency will be decided by the way the seven so-called "swing states" fall — and the race is much closer there.

Election mechanics
Americans do not directly vote for their President. Instead, they vote to determine the composition of the Electoral College, which elects the President.

There are 538 electors in the Electoral College, and 270 is the majority mark. Each state is allocated a specific number of electors, which is somewhat based on population.

A vote cast in favour of a certain candidate is, in effect, meant to elect the candidate's slate of electors in a state, who are chosen by the parties prior to the election. To win the presidency, a candidate needs to cobble together victories in enough states to reach the 270 mark in the Electoral College.

Most states (with the exception of Maine and Nebraska) have a winner-takes-all system, which means whoever wins the popular mandate in the state secures its entire allocation in the Electoral College. This makes the result in most states — which are either firmly Democratic or

Republican — a foregone conclusion before the first ballot is cast. It also means that certain states where the race is particularly close have outsize importance in the election.

State of the race
Seven swing states — Pennsylvania (19 Electoral College votes), Georgia and North Carolina (16 each), Michigan (15), Arizona (11), Wisconsin (10), and Nevada (6) — hold the key to the White House this time. Both the Harris and Trump campaigns have targeted these states.

In 2020, Florida, the largest swing state (30 electoral votes) in that election, voted decisively Republican — and will likely go to Trump again.

The final The New York Times/ Siena College opinion poll published on Sunday showed Harris and Trump locked in tight races in all seven states, well within the poll's margin of error. The Vice President held marginal leads in Nevada, North Carolina, and Wisconsin; the former President was just ahead in Arizona. The races in Michigan, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, together accounting for 50 electoral votes, were tied.

In 2020, President Joe Biden won six of these seven states (with the exception of North Carolina). The party is not expected to do as well this time.

What's at stake?
The stakes for the US — and the rest of the world — are extremely high. Since Trump's surprise win in 2016, American politics has continued to become steadily more polarised. This political division is reflected both in the candidates' policy positions on major issues, and in the issues they have prioritised in the campaign.

ECONOMY: According to most polls, this is the top issue for voters. Biden inherited an economy battered by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the rate of inflation has since gone from a peak of 9.1% in June 2022 to 2.4% in September 2024. The unemployment rate has fallen from 6.4% in January 2021 to 4.1% in October 2024. These positives have not, however, improved sentiment among common voters, many of whom believe the economy is doing badly, according to polls.

One reason for this perception is that grocery bills have remained high. Food is 22% costlier since Biden's inauguration, and for many Americans, the cost of living is higher than four years ago. Trump has promised to "make America affordable again". He has said he will increase oil-drilling to reduce energy costs, deliver lower interest rates (something that the President does not control), provide tax cuts to the tune of trillions of dollars, and introduce a new 10-20% tax on imports to incentivise domestic manufacturing.

Harris, on the other hand, has promised to ban price-gouging on groceries, help first-time home buyers, increase housing supply, raise the minimum wage, and tax big businesses and rich individuals more to fund welfare measures. She has been critical of Trump's blanket import tariffs policy.

IMMIGRATION: This was Trump's pet issue in 2016 and 2020, and it has been a highlight of his 2024 campaign. He has vowed to seal the border with Mexico, and increase funding for

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the agency that polices immigration into the US. He has also promised the biggest mass deportations of undocumented migrants in US history. Harris, too, has promised tough action against illegal migration. She has repeatedly invoked her actions as a public prosecutor in dealing with human traffickers, and promised to revive a border control law that failed in Congress (in part due to Trump's objection), which would close loopholes in the asylum process, and give the President greater authority to shut down the border.

This has, however, invited criticism from some people who would traditionally vote Democrat. Harris has been buffeted from both sides on this issue — the Republicans are saying she is not tough enough, while left-wing or progressive Democrats are criticising her for being too hawkish.

ABORTION: The Harris campaign hopes this will be her trump card. The Vice President has positioned herself as a champion of reproductive rights, and has promised to bring national legislation on abortion rights.

Abortion has been a huge concern for women voters after the Conservative-majority Supreme Court overturned the landmark Roe v Wade verdict in 2022. According to The New York Times, 21 states have banned or restricted abortions earlier in pregnancy than what was set by Roe v Wade over five decades ago.

Trump has been shaky on this issue — he has taken credit for appointing the three judges that cemented the Supreme Court's conservative majority, but has avoided talking much about abortion. The New York Times/ Siena poll has found that "the gender gap remains wide across all seven states, with Harris the favorite of women and Trump preferred by men", according to The New York Times.

FOREIGN POLICY: The US is indirectly involved in the ongoing conflicts in West Asia and Ukraine. Harris represents the status quo of the US foreign policy, while Trump's isolationism is seen as a major departure.

So, Harris has promised to keep up support for Ukraine "for as long as it takes", while Trump has long advocated disentangling the US from conflicts worldwide — including in Ukraine. He has claimed that he will negotiate an end to the war with Russia's President Vladimir Putin "within 24 hours".

On the Israel-Palestine issue, their positions are broadly similar. Harris has made some outward gestures towards Palestinians and called for an end to the war in Gaza, but she has been careful to not be overly critical of Israel. This has angered American Muslims and young, college-going voters — both traditionally Democrat-voting groups.

CLIMATE: Trump has been open about not caring much for climate change. During a campaign rally last week, he said: "So they talk all the time about the ocean will rise in 500 years, one-eighth of an inch, who the hell cares?"

During his time in the White House, he rolled back hundreds of environmental protections, pulled out of the Paris Agreement (which Biden re-entered), attacked electric cars, and expanded the US carbon footprint. Climate scientists fear if elected Trump will dismantle the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which does crucial work to document and research global warming and its impact.

As Vice President, Harris has helped pass legislation that has sent hundreds of billions of dollars to renewable energy, and provided for electric vehicle tax credit and rebate programs. However, during her campaign she has dropped her opposition to fracking, much to the chagrin of environmentalists.
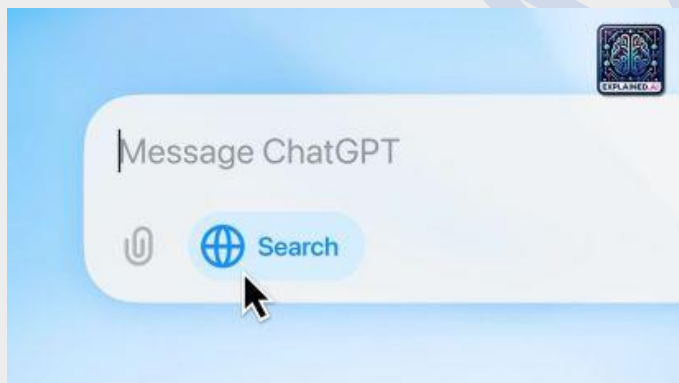
On paper at least, a Harris presidency appears to hold out more hope for the planet than Trump 2.0.

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Issues
Source: Indian Express

3. ChatGPT is now a search engine: What does it mean for the future of AI-powered search?

Introduction

The latest version of AI chatbot ChatGPT has the capability to search the web, OpenAI announced last week. This means that the chatbot can now retrieve and deliver information from across the internet in real time, including top headlines, stock prices, and sports scores. Currently, the feature is only limited to paid subscribers.

It has arrived at a time when tech bigwigs such as Meta announced that it was working on its proprietary AI search engine to be integrated with its social media apps, and when AI-powered search by companies like Google, Perplexity, Microsoft Copilot, etc., are thriving.

How do we search for information on the web?
Before the advent of Large Language Models (LLMs) such as OpenAI's GPT family, search engines were powered by keyword-based algorithms. For instance, when a user searched for "best shoe store", the search engine would go through a vast library of web pages that had been identified or categorised based on these keywords, and then show the most relevant pages.

Although this is efficient in most scenarios, it is restricted to the literal search and often misses the nuances and complexities of human language. For instance, a Google search of 'Llama' will show you both Meta's LLM and the animal Llama. This is also based on which of the

descriptions appears frequently on its indexed pages. Here, the traditional search engine is simply matching words and is not really aware of what the user may be seeking.

Since traditional search engines are inept at understanding the relations between concepts or how users ask questions, they often fail to offer the best answer when prompted with more complex and conversational queries.

LLMs changed this and introduced the era of a more sophisticated, contextual search based on the user's intent.

What sets AI search apart?
AI-powered search is much beyond matching keywords as it uses natural language processing (NLP), machine learning, and semantic understanding (the ability to comprehend the meaning and context of words). With machine learning, search engines can now analyse user behaviour, learn from their search habits, and refine their outputs over time.

NLP allows the engine to understand language closer to human comprehension, essentially allowing it to grasp context and also the intent of words. For example, if one searches for "Llama," the AI-powered search engine will analyse their older searches and other patterns to see if they are interested in the animal or Meta's LLM. In case one recently searched for "animals from camelids family", the AI would recognise that the new search is about the animal and show relevant results.

In case a user asks a more complex query such as "What are the health benefits of pistachio", the search would showcase a wide range of sources like research papers, medical journals, studies on nutrition, and health blogs to give a detailed answer. The ability to come up with contextual and cross-domain analysis of various topics is one of the major advantages of AI-powered search over traditional search.

AI-powered search also continuously evolves based on its interactions. The AI upgrades and learns each time a user clicks on a certain result, offers feedback, spends time on a page, etc. This continuous learning enables AI to come up with highly personalised search experiences for users.

So will AI replace search engines?
Not really. Google, Bing, DuckDuckGo, and even Chinese search Baidu have all introduced generative AI models and are integrating them into their search products. AI will most likely enhance the capabilities of search engines.

Most search engines, as of today, use AI to understand complex queries. They consider aspects such as location, and previous searches, to offer personalised results. ChatGPT and Gemini employ conversational interfaces that allow users to engage with search engines in a natural conversation. Some of these search engines also support multimodal interactions, meaning users can do image and voice searches.

Why are tech giants rushing to build AI-powered search engines?

Tech companies want to increase their user base and revenue streams by building proprietary AI search engines.

AI-powered search tools allow companies to retain their user base in their ecosystem. For instance, if Meta integrates its search engine into Facebook and Instagram, it could increase user engagement by keeping them in the ecosystem. These users would no longer need to go on a conventional search engine to look up information while interacting on any Meta platform.

With increased engagement there are more possibilities for revenue generation. Google, Meta, and OpenAI can use their AI-powered search to push relevant ads, bringing new possibilities for ad revenues.

Proprietary AI search engines would also let tech companies collect user data directly, offering them a reservoir of user interaction insights. This can help them further personalise user experience, support AI training, and improve the relevance of future responses.

Even though there are advantages for companies, AI-powered search engines are not without challenges. Ethical considerations are crucial as companies would be required to do more to manage AI biases, and misinformation to build trust among users.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology
Source: Indian Express