1. Every four years, Labor Days means more than just the end of summer: it’s also the end of high uncertainty in a presidential election and the time when candidates start to see their real chances. Or at least that’s what it used to mean.

2. The surrealism of 2016— a former secretary of state, who ran eight years ago and is married to a former president who was almost impeached, running against a reality TV show celebrity with a mediocre business record and alleged history of sexual harassment—has finally started to ebb. Voters will have the two least popular presidential candidates in decades on their ballots, and there is still a great deal of uncertainty about how that unpopularity will affect their decisions.

3. One number holds many clues about how we ended up here: 42%. That’s the share of Americans who identify as independent, according to Gallup’s most recent analysis. That number is the highest Gallup has ever seen—it started measuring political inclination in 1988, and it’s considerably higher than the share who now identify as Democrats (29%) or Republicans (26%).

4. Understanding independents is key to understand how Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump became hugely popular. Independents are also crucial for understanding how Hillary Clinton’s support might be overstated in current polls. Currently, Clinton is the most likely candidate to win the 2016 presidential election, according to analysts who rely on polls. At the time of writing, the New York Times projects that she has a 86% chance of winning in November, and FiveThirtyEight puts her chances at 69%.
5. But these probabilities don't take into account the fact that polls have become plagued by systemic issues, from low response rates to media biases, that have made them sometimes unreliable. What's more, in polling (much like every other type of human interaction), it's hard to tell whether people mean what they say. Are Trump supporters reluctant to share their views when a stranger from Ipsos, Rasmussen or Gallup calls them up? If so, Clinton could be in trouble. Forecasting the political future means considering not one probability but many possibilities. Here are the three most likely outcomes in this election.

HILLARY CLINTON WINS

6. Over the past 20 years, there are just 19 states that have flipped between the two main parties at least once. Many of those states are also on the list of closely fought contests this year: Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Virginia, Colorado, Minnesota, Nevada and New Hampshire. Clinton's hopes rest on voters choosing her and those who might vote Trump staying home.

7. Clinton's rhetoric in the coming months will be important for securing these victories. The former secretary of state needs to convince former Bernie Sanders supporters that she shares the values that galvanized so many young voters. Similarly, Clinton needs to persuade voters that she is the only way Americans can keep Donald Trump out of the White House.

DONALD TRUMP WINS

8. Like Clinton, Trump needs to focus his energies on mobilizing supporters to actually go to the polls. Although demographics don't seem to work in his favor (his supporters make up a relatively small fraction of the overall electorate) it's quite possible that Trump's support is understated in polls. Polling analysis appears to privilege left of centre ideas (and many of the journalist who interpret polls, including this journalist, may be viewing the numbers with a misplaced optimism) which helps explains why forecast about the British EU referendum, the Israeli election and the Scottish independence referendum were all off the mark.

9. There's another factor in this election which may well work in Trump's favor: third party candidates. Between them, Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson and Green party candidate Jill Stein stand to pick up 11% of the national vote. Votes for Johnson and Stein appear more likely to erode Clinton's share than Trump's.

10. Those third party candidates have a slim chance of making it to the presidential debates (they need to be polling with at least 15% of the national electorate's support to qualify), meanwhile Trump will want to sow what doubt and frustration he can in Democratic-learning voters, in order to convince them to stay home or vote for a third party candidate.

11. Sexism could also benefit Donald Trump. In a survey of more than 2000 US adults in 2014, only 74% of women and 58% of men agreed that there are not enough women in positions of power.
HILLARY CLINTON WINS BY A LANDSLIDE

12. There mere fact this is a possibility shows just how much uncertainty there is around this election. And its real possibility, even though more than 20 years have passed since anyone won by a double digit-margin. For a start, the distribution of US electoral college votes privileges the Democratic party. Together, Democratic "safe" states (those that have voted Democratic consistenly in the past six presidential elections) yield 242 of the 270 electoral votes needed to win the election. States that Republicans can reliably count on have 102 electoral votes.

13. AS a Democrat and a seasoned politician, Clinton is the most likely candidate to represent continuity in the minds of many voters. Past elections have also shown that even after contemplating the different options, voters tend to revert towards the status quo in the final days before casting their ballot. Then again, this is no ordinary election.
Thanks for reading

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