

# [***What an intense weekend on the campaign trail tells us about a Biden-Trump matchup***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BHR-4BR1-DY7V-G01R-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; President Joe Biden and ex-President Donald Trump are battling as though their general election showdown is eight days rather than eight months away. An intense weekend of campaigning, with the rivals both [*visiting the critical swing state of Georgia*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/09/politics/biden-trump-georgia/index.html), laid out the stakes of their clash - as well as their strategies and vulnerabilities.

Biden this week will try to build on his successful [*State of the Union address*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/07/politics/takeaways-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-address/index.html) and flesh out his message that while he cares about Americans - their jobs and their health care - and the nation's global leadership, Trump is obsessed with himself. Biden will lay out policy ideas in his annual budget expected Monday, which won't go anywhere in the GOP-controlled House but will underscore his economic pitch to voters and preview his possible second-term agenda.

The extraordinary entanglement of the 2024 election and [*Trump's legal woes*](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/07/politics/trump-indictments-criminal-cases/) will also be back in focus with a hearing Thursday in the federal classified documents case in Florida. Judge Aileen Cannon will hear arguments from Trump's attorneys and special counsel Jack Smith's team that could help decide whether the case goes to trial before the election.

Biden's own controversy over classified documents will be back in the spotlight on Tuesday when House Republicans grill special counsel Robert Hur, who [*cleared Biden of criminal liability*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/politics/white-house-special-counsels-report-response/index.html) but questioned his memory for key details - playing into a core GOP election theme.

Biden seeks to lock in his new image

Biden wants to lock in the image he projected at his State of the Union address - that of a feisty statesman in command of his faculties, his campaign and his country.

The speech helped temper months of headlines about a presidency in decline. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, for instance, told ABC News on Sunday, "Anybody who watched that address saw not just in the substance, but in the delivery of President Biden's remarks, a leader who is in command, showing strength and clarity of vision."

But it will be hard to extend last week's triumph through grueling months on the campaign trail. Biden now heads on a post-speech sprint through swing states where he must avoid literal and rhetorical stumbles that could revive concerns among voters that he's too old to serve a second term. And all the way to November, he'll be vulnerable to outside events, at home and overseas, that can't be neatly packaged in a televised speech.

Still, a successful State of the Union address can clarify a president's purpose not just to voters - but to himself and his own campaign. It can also anchor strategic and thematic choices. Thursday's speech, for example, crystalized his case for reelection more clearly than ever before.

Warming to his theme, Biden slammed Trump on Saturday as an insult to America's founding values and as a force of "resentment, revenge and retribution." He also rebuked his rival for putting on a lavish welcome Friday for [*Hungarian strongman leader Viktor Orban at Mar-a-Lago*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/08/politics/trump-orban-mar-a-lago/index.html), highlighting Trump's dictator worship and anti-democratic mindset.

The Hungarian prime minister's rule, which has weakened democracy and eroded judicial institutions and press freedoms, is seen by some pro-Trump conservatives as a model for the former president's possible second term. Trump posted a video of his guest endorsing him on his social media platform Sunday. "It is up to Americans to make their own decision, and it is up to us Hungarians to frankly admit that it would be better for the world and better for Hungary too if Donald Trump were to return to power," Orban says in the video.

There will never be a new Trump

Every now and then, the Trump campaign sends signals that the ex-president will project a more sober persona as he courts suburban voters who disdain him and could decide the election. History shows this to be just spin.

On a wild Saturday night in Georgia, the ex-president - now the presumptive nominee after former South Carolina Gov. [*Nikki Haley dropped out*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/06/politics/nikki-haley-2024-presidential-race/index.html) last week - let his extremism rip. He mercilessly mocked Biden's lifelong stutter, showing again that cruelty and bullying underpin his political brand. He called the press "criminals" and made more false claims of election fraud. Trump, who destroyed more presidential conventions than all of his predecessors, also complained that Biden debased the occasion of the State of the Union address, typically charging his opponent with transgressions of which he is guilty. He blasted Biden's "angry, hate-filled rant," adding, "He's a threat to democracy."

Trump's speech clarified the choice before voters in November as he conjured an apocalyptic vision of a nation under siege from invading migrants, crime and economic blight.

The election will unfold at a time of deep national polarization. Voters must choose from two competing visions after tough decades characterized by economic shocks, overseas wars and heated debates over social issues such as abortion and gender while they process the enduring trauma of a pandemic. And this is all playing out against the backdrop of a migration crisis and societal pressures triggered by an increasingly diverse population that some conservative Americans see as a threat.

Immigration remains a real problem for Biden

The weekend showed that immigration will dominate the campaign in a way that may deepen the divides that have for years made it impossible for Congress to mitigate an overwhelmed system. Backstage in Georgia, Trump [*met the parents*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/election-campaign-news-03-09-24/h_bc4571a0ebae3106a282167ee73a316b) of [*Laken Riley*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/25/us/uga-augusta-university-student-killing-monday/index.html), the 22-year-old nursing student who was allegedly killed by an undocumented migrant. Her stolen life has become a pillar of Trump's campaign as he claims that the US is plagued by an out-of-control border crisis.

Speaking on CNN's "State of the Union," Georgia Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock on [*Sunday accused Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/election-campaign-news-03-09-24/h_1d3d680426b0632b19b391b5c485373a) of exploiting the killing in an example of "craven ***politics*** at its worst," adding, "It's what turns people away from ***politics***."

In an interview with MSNBC that aired Saturday, Biden said he should not have referred to the alleged killer in his State of the Union speech as an "illegal" as he sought to temper criticism from progressives over his word choice. He also seized on Trump's [*sabotaging of a bipartisan bill*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/07/politics/senate-border-ukraine-israel-aid-vote/index.html) that would have tightened border security, which he also highlighted in last week's address.

But the ex-president, who swept to power in 2016 demagoguing immigrants, was relentless on Saturday on the Riley case, [*accusing Biden of apologizing*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/election-campaign-news-03-09-24/h_6bb5fc259e50e9bd26187ae6d6e8b26a) to the alleged killer. "He was an illegal immigrant. He was an illegal alien. He was an illegal migrant and he shouldn't have been in our country, and he never would have been under the Trump policy," the ex-president claimed.

The intensity of the exchanges - and the fact that polls show the ex-president rather than the current one is more trusted to deal with immigration - underscored a deep vulnerability for Biden.

The age issue isn't going away

For all Biden's vigor in the State of the Union, the age issue is here to stay - and both campaigns know it.

The scrambled GOP reaction to Biden's speech showed that he had scored a tactical victory with his energetic presentation. Going into the event, Republicans argued the 81-year-old president was dithering and confused. Immediately afterward, they claimed he was too amped up and loud. But Trump, 77, renewed the assault by focusing on Biden's stuttering, and his campaign released a new digital ad showing clips of him falling over or looking disoriented.

Biden's campaign knows it must do more to defuse concerns about his capacity to fully serve a second term. In its own new advertisement, Biden says directly to camera, "I'm not a young guy, that's no secret. But here's the deal, I understand how to get things done for the American people." Biden touts in the ad that he got infrastructure reform done and Trump didn't, contrasts his leadership in the Covid-19 crisis with the chaos of his predecessor and vows to restore the national constitutional right to an abortion removed by the conservative Supreme Court majority that Trump built. "Donald Trump believes the job of the president is to take care of Donald Trump. I believe the job of the president is to fight for you," Biden says, striking another key contrast of the coming campaign.

But pro-Trump Republicans will use the expected testimony of Hur before the House Judiciary Committee on Tuesday to try to put the focus back on Biden's cognitive abilities.

Georgia - the king of 2024 swing states?

Biden is expected to visit New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Michigan this week, as part of a post-State of the Union tour of battlegrounds, including [*Pennsylvania last Friday*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/08/politics/biden-reelection-pitch-pennsylvania-post-sotu-speech/index.html), that will decide the election.

The trip to Georgia on Saturday also reflects the reality that Biden, whose approval ratings are below 40% - a level that usually dooms first-term presidents - is on the defensive all over the map. He's trailing in most swing states, according to recent polls.

And even in 2020, when the nation was reeling from Trump's self-serving and erratic leadership in the pandemic, Biden prevailed only by a matter of thousands of votes in these critical battlegrounds. Now that he's being judged on his own record, he appears even more vulnerable.

Each state has its own particular conditions. But the dueling visits to Georgia from Trump and Biden on Saturday show they both realize its importance. "Joe Biden won Georgia the last time by about 12,000 votes - votes, by the way, the former president tried to steal," Warnock said on "State of the Union" on Sunday. "And yet here we are. Both of those men were here yesterday because the road to the White House goes through Georgia."

The ex-president may benefit from the lack of a competitive Senate race in the state, compared with 2020, when two such races helped drive Democrats to the polls. Yet Trump, who has long feuded with popular GOP Gov. Brian Kemp, hasn't done much to win back the critical suburban voters he alienated.

Given Georgia's importance, voters should expect to hear a lot about Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, who heckled Biden in his State of the Union and is seen by his campaign as an exemplar of MAGA extremism, partly due to her antics and ubiquity at the side of the former president.

"Here's a guy who's kicking off his general election campaign up the road with Marjorie Taylor Greene. It can tell you a lot about a person, who he keeps company with," Biden said Saturday.

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