

# [***Biden-Trump rematch kicks off in Georgia with dueling visits***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BHB-4C91-JBSS-S230-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Rome, Georgia (CNN) &#8212; Sixty miles of Georgia highway and a political universe apart, [*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) and [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) kicked off the sequel to their 2020 contest in earnest Saturday with competing rallies in what could be a decisive state this November.

Biden and Trump are not quite four years removed from their first presidential matchup and, if this opening volley of the general election campaign was any indication, the new race could sound a lot like the old one.

Speaking in Atlanta, Biden slammed Trump over "who he keeps company with," pointing to the former president's rally alongside Rep. [*Marjorie Taylor Greene*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2024/03/08/marjorie-taylor-greene-laken-riley-biden-state-of-the-union-vpx.cnn) here in Rome, Georgia, and his gushing review of a Friday night meeting [*with right-wing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/08/politics/trump-orban-mar-a-lago/index.html), before again describing Trump as an existential threat to the republic.

"My lifetime has taught me to embrace the future of freedom and democracy," Biden said. "But we all know Donald Trump sees a different America, an American story of resentment, revenge and retribution. That's not me, that's not you."

In a preview of the campaign to come, Biden also promised that if the country elects him, along with a like-minded Congress, "I promise you I will restore Roe v. Wade as the law of the land."

Trump offered a less substantial, though equally familiar message in his own speech, criticizing Biden's Thursday State of the Union address as an "angry, dark, hate-filled rant" and then mocking the president's stutter - a lifelong struggle that Biden has often reckoned with in public.

The former president also hit Biden [*over remarks he made earlier in the day*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/election-campaign-news-03-09-24/h_c3e2915f131ccef02d24e35c5a5bf98b) about the alleged killer of nursing student Laken Riley - whose family Trump met with backstage before his rally. Biden told MSNBC he should have used the term "undocumented" to refer to Riley's alleged killer after he called him an "illegal" during a heated portion of his speech to Congress.

"He was an illegal immigrant," Trump said of the Venezuelan migrant charged with murdering the 22-year-old. "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. ... Biden should be apologizing for apologizing to this killer."

The head-to-head appearances offered an early window into the competing strategies for courting an electorate less-than-enthused about another Biden-Trump showdown. Few battlegrounds will be more closely watched than Georgia - where Biden won by less than 12,000 votes four years ago - for signs of how voters are responding to the outreach, making the Peach State a fitting kickoff to the eight-month fight ahead.

"Georgia has been ground zero on the national political landscape since 2018," Fred Hicks, a Democratic strategist based in Georgia, said before the rallies. "It's appropriate that this would be the first major stop after the State of the Union where the president is restarting his campaign, and where Donald Trump is trying to regain momentum."

The two arrived in Georgia at a key turning point in the presidential race. Saturday's rally marked Trump's first since emerging as his party's presumptive nominee after pushing former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley [*to finally end her long-shot presidential campaign*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/06/politics/nikki-haley-2024-presidential-race/index.html), nearly sweeping the Super Tuesday nominating contests and picking up nine more delegates in Friday's Republican caucus in American Samoa. His nomination could take another symbolic step toward becoming official on Tuesday when Georgia and three other states award their delegates.

Meanwhile, Biden's [*rousing State of the Union address*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/07/politics/takeaways-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-address/index.html) marked an unmistakable pivot toward the political challenge ahead. His nearly 70-minute speech did not mention Trump by name, but included multiple references to "my predecessor" and went to extraordinary lengths to set the stakes for the November election.

It's the second split-screen appearance by the two men in as many weeks. Last month, Biden and Trump visited the US-Mexico border on the same day.

Biden hits the battlegrounds

Saturday was the second in a line of trips anticipated this month as Biden's team seeks to amplify the president's State of the Union message and build on its infrastructure, kicking off what it's calling the "I'm on Board" campaign. Biden visited a Philadelphia-area middle school on Friday.

Campaign manager Julie Chavez Rodriguez told reporters Friday that the team is engaged in new efforts to "dramatically expand our volunteer engagement, scale up our battleground staff, launch our coalition groups, and invest in new paid media campaigns."

There are plans for Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris to travel to every battleground state in the coming weeks, the campaign said. Next week, Biden will head to New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Michigan.

"Throughout this month of action, we will aggressively mobilize the diverse Biden-Harris coalition," Rodriguez said.

That includes Saturday's visit to Georgia, a state that has proved critical to Democrats winning the White House and the Senate in the past two cycles.

Early polls of the state, however, show Trump ahead. And unlike in 2020, the race for the US Senate will not come through Georgia, leaving it up to the Biden campaign to mobilize voters without the help of key down-ballot candidates.

"Without any statewide races, anything of note on the ballot, turnout is going to be a challenge," said Andrew Heaton, a Democratic strategist who worked for Georgia Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock.

Biden's team is seeking to make age an asset, releasing a minutelong advertisement - his first of the general election - addressing the political vulnerability. (Trump's campaign, in turn, put out a video Saturday featuring several clips of the president falling.)

Also on Saturday, the president received the backing of three political action committees aimed at ensuring equality for AAPI, Black and Latino Americans - The Collective PAC, a group aimed at building Black political power; AAPI Victory Fund, which aims to increase representation in US ***politics*** for Asian American and Pacific Islanders; and Latino Victory Fund, which seeks to do the same for Latinos.

Democratic strategists say that one part of the winning coalition that Biden will need to address is Black men.

Hicks stressed that there is little awareness among Black voters of many Biden policies, such as his efforts to lower health care costs and crack down on price gouging.

"They live inside the DC bubble," Hicks said, referring to Biden's team. "And they think that their policies are known, understood and the impact of which are felt outside of the DC bubble, and that simply is not the case. So, they're going to have to tell people what they've done."

This week, the Trump-aligned super PAC, MAGA, Inc., launched a three-week radio ad campaign targeting Black voters in battleground states, including Georgia, which saw the largest buy.

The Trump campaign has said that it sees an opening with Black voters who feel disenfranchised or left behind by the Democratic Party and is working on strategies to court these voters. Some Republicans were optimistic after polling in critical battleground states last fall indicated that Trump was making inroads with Black voters. At his rally Saturday, Trump [*appealed to "disillusioned" Democrats*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/election-campaign-news-03-09-24/h_64c9def8e2d4dca4a57e769f3178bc84) to join his campaign.

Trump's Georgia headwinds

But there are headwinds for Trump in Georgia as well - many of his own making.

After Trump became the first GOP presidential candidate to lose Georgia in 24 years, he lashed out at statewide Republican officeholders, baselessly accusing them of concealing widespread voter fraud. In a phone call with Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger two months after the 2020 election, Trump pressed Georgia election officials to "find" the votes needed to overturn the election result.

Shortly after his defeat, the state's two Republican senators - David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler - lost their respective runoff contests against Jon Ossoff and Warnock, handing Democrats a slim Senate majority at the beginning of Biden's presidency. Many in the party blamed Trump's election denialism and criticism of mail-in ballots for lower party turnout in those runoff contests.

Trump attributed his 2020 loss to Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp and Raffensperger, both of whom refused to aid him in overturning the election in the state. Trump personally recruited primary challengers to both men in 2022, though Kemp and Raffensperger prevailed and won reelection.

Trump has been indicted for his alleged efforts to interfere in the 2020 election there - making Georgia home to one of several legal battles he faces while running for president. Trump has regularly attacked Fani Willis, the Fulton County district attorney who brought the charges. A judge is expected to rule in the coming weeks whether to disqualify Willis over her past relationship with the special prosecutor overseeing Trump's case.

One Republican strategist in the state said Trump's antics there have hardened many swing voters against the former president. In 2022, that resulted in a sizable number of conservative-leaning independents and moderates splitting their tickets, voting for Kemp for governor but Warnock for Senate.

"This polling mirage is very dangerous for us to count in our favor," said the strategist, who asked not to be named to speak freely about the Trump campaign there. "These Kemp-Warnock voters, they will not even have a conversation about Trump. You can't even start the conversation. They don't like him."

Notably, Trump and Kemp have not reconciled, though Kemp last year said he would vote for the former president over Biden. Kemp was not invited to Trump's rally in the state.

Even Republicans rooting for Trump to succeed are unconvinced whether he can make the necessary adjustments to win Georgia.

"It depends on Trump. I want to see a gracious winner," said Jule Windham, the local Republican Party chairman of Macon County in Middle Georgia. "I want to see someone who reaches out to the other side and that has not always been his MO. But that would get some of the voters turned off by his personality and not turned off by his policies."

One senior adviser told CNN that Trump's team expects to build out its campaign operations in Georgia in the coming weeks. His messaging, though, has already shifted to the general election, particularly seizing on national angst over the flow of migrants crossing the US-Mexico border.

In recent weeks, that has included regular mentions at campaign rallies of Riley, who was killed while on a jog on the University of Georgia campus. Trump has talked up his communication with Riley's parents and tied her killing to Biden's immigration policies.

Riley's death became a political flashpoint for Biden during his State of the Union address. Several Republican members of Congress wore pins with her name and she became the subject of heckling from Greene, sparking a colorful exchange between the congresswoman and Biden during the speech.

Picking up a pin handed to him by Greene as he walked into the House chamber, Biden acknowledged the death of "Lincoln Riley, an innocent young woman who was killed by an illegal" - at once misstating her name and using a term for undocumented individuals that many Democrats consider a pejorative.

"To her parents, I say my heart goes out to you," Biden continued. "Having lost children myself, I understand."

Notably, Rome, the location of Trump's Saturday rally, is in the heart of Greene's Georgia district. Another Georgia Republican, Rep. Mike Collins, also attended Trump's event. Riley was killed in Collins' district, and he invited her parents to the State of the Union.

In a sign of how the tragedy may be further politicized in the months ahead, Greene on Thursday said she told Biden during their face-to-face, "You're responsible for her murder."

This story and headline have been updated with additional details.

CNN's Kate Sullivan, Alison Main, Donald Judd and Samantha Waldenberg contributed to this report.

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