

# [***The general election is here and it's Trump vs. Biden***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BGN-R411-DY7V-G225-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) left the White House a loser.

But now, only one man - [*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) - can thwart his predecessor's return in what would be the most astonishing political comeback in history.

Only three years after Trump slunk out of Washington in disgrace - days after the mob he told to "fight like hell" ransacked the US Capitol - and even as he faces four looming criminal trials, he has already engineered a bounce back for the ages in the Republican primary.

Trump went on a roll on [*Super Tuesday*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/super-tuesday-primary-03-05-24/index.html). He won the Virginia, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Maine, Texas, Arkansas, Alabama, Colorado, Minnesota, Massachusetts and California Republican primaries. Every big state called in his favor brought the ex-president ever closer to a general election campaign against his 2020 vanquisher that polls show he's got at least an even chance of winning.

To adapt the title of one of his books, it's the "Art of the Comeback."

As the results rolled in, Biden and Trump took aim at each other, setting the stage for what is sure to be a bitter clash in November certain to cleave even deeper national political divides.

"We're going to win this election because we have no choice," Trump said at his Mar-a-Lago resort as he savored his sweetest election night since he beat Hillary Clinton in 2016. He spoke against a backdrop of American flags that conjured the theatrics of the presidency that he hopes to regain.

Trump evoked his one-term in the White House as if it was some kind of economic golden age and added: "If we lose this election, we're not going to have a country." That last line was a chilling echo of his searing speech in Washington on January 6, 2021, before the most brazen attack on democracy in modern American history.

Biden reacted to Trump's Super Tuesday victories by immediately cranking up his general election attack on the former president - previewing an argument that will be at the center of his own campaign for a second term.

As he seeks to paper over his vulnerabilities on issues like immigration and the economy, Biden is warning that Americans face an existential dilemma.

"Tonight's results leave the American people with a clear choice: Are we going to keep moving forward or will we allow Donald Trump to drag us backwards into the chaos, division, and darkness that defined his term in office?" Biden said in a statement.

"If Donald Trump returns to the White House, all of this progress is at risk. He is driven by grievance and grift, focused on his own revenge and retribution, not the American people. He is determined to destroy our democracy ... and he'll do or say anything to put himself in power."

Victory after victory for Trump

Officially, the ex-president is still short of the delegates needed to be the presumptive GOP nominee. He'll probably push past the magic number of 1,215 next week. His wins Tuesday obliterated any hypothetical path to the nomination for his last GOP rival, former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, [*who announced Wednesday*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/06/politics/nikki-haley-2024-presidential-race/index.html) that she is exiting the race. Haley withheld an endorsement of Trump, calling on him instead to earn the support of voters who backed her.

His cruise through this year's primaries has underscored his utter dominance of the Republican Party. It has highlighted his imperviousness to scandals and shame that doom mortal political careers - at least among activist voters who decide the GOP nomination.

Hundreds of thousands of Republican voters can't sign up fast enough for Trump's vows of "retribution" against his enemies as he paints a dark picture of a nation paralyzed by crime, invaded by migrants and slipping toward World War III.

Democrats will enter a rematch with Trump deeply concerned, given Biden's rock-bottom approval ratings and increasing public doubts over whether the oldest president in history is fit to serve a second term that would end when he is 86. Many voters still feel deeply insecure despite the robust economic recovery that has racked up record job numbers and is outpacing other industrialized states. Still, elevated grocery prices and high rents are a reminder that many are waiting for the return to pre-pandemic normality that Biden promised in 2020.

Yet amid Trump's dominance, there were sufficient data points to suggest that he's still beset by some liabilities that resulted in his ejection from the White House four years ago. His greatest weakness still lurks - his character and extremism alienate more moderate, suburban voters. The fate of the 2024 election may well rest on whether GOP primary voters who picked Haley in such areas overcome their antipathy and vote for Trump in November.

The Biden campaign has long said that the president's polling numbers are being depressed by the fact that he's not yet being judged as the alternative to Trump. The time for that excuse is going to fast run out now that the shape of the 2024 general election is clear.

"Tonight the campaign started up," Biden's National Campaign Co-Chair Mitch Landrieu told CNN on Tuesday night. "Until now, people didn't think it was going to be Biden versus Trump, but here we are and we're ready to go," he said.

A comeback for the ages

Other politicians have seen their careers in tatters and come back to triumph. Richard Nixon lost the 1960 presidential election and then a California gubernatorial race two years later. He vowed people wouldn't have the chance to kick him around anymore as political retirement beckoned. But in 1968, he was back and won the presidency.

Bill Clinton was mired in personal scandals in the 1992 presidential primary race but became the "comeback kid" in New Hampshire on the way to the White House. And Biden cemented his grip on the Democratic nomination four years ago on Super Tuesday after a disastrous tramp through early state contests that he only turned around with a victory over Bernie Sanders in South Carolina several weeks before.

But Trump faced headwinds like no candidate before him. They include two impeachments, 91 criminal charges, four criminal trials, a devastating $450 million civil court judgment pending and a legacy scarred by chaotic leadership in a pandemic. But none of it stopped his surge toward the GOP nomination. Indeed his manipulation of his indictments - including for his attempt to steal the 2020 election - energized supporters as he branded himself a persecuted dissident.

One-term presidents are almost always done after being drummed out of the White House. But Trump's surge to the GOP nomination means he has a chance to emulate the ultimate comeback in American ***politics*** - the victory of former President Grover Cleveland over sitting President Benjamin Harrison. In 1892, Cleveland became the only commander in chief (so far) to win a non-consecutive second term.

One reason why Trump didn't come across as a loser to his supporters was that he convinced grassroots GOP voters that he didn't actually lose the 2020 election. Even though he did. [*Tuesday's early exit polls*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/05/politics/exit-polls-super-tuesday/index.html) showed that about 6 in 10 GOP primary voters in North Carolina believe that Biden's victory over Trump four years ago was illegitimate. Roughly half of Republican primary voters in Virginia thought the same, mirroring sentiments of Trump supporters all around the country that reflect the former president's unmatched capacity to create an alternative reality.

The bond between Trump and his most faithful supporters was never severed. Their unstinting affection for their champion became clear as soon as long lines of supporters lined up all day, shivering in their "Make America Great Again" souvenir regalia, outside his early events in frigid Iowa and New Hampshire in January.

Trump's march toward the GOP nomination is even more striking given how far his political star had dimmed. His intervention in the 2022 midterms was mainly disastrous as he strong-armed candidates in swing states that signed up to his election denialism - often at the price of seats his party might have won. Democratic control of the Senate and the tiny House GOP majority that fell short of red wave expectations were widely blamed on his botched strategizing. When people started filing out of Trump's early presidential announcement speech at Mar-a-Lago late that year, it appeared that the former president was a busted political force and that 2024 would be a race too far.

The key to Trump's lasting resurgence may turn out to lie in an extraordinary moment inside a notorious jail in Atlanta last in August. Trump became the first former president to suffer the indignity of providing a mug shot, as he surrendered following his fourth criminal indictment.

But [*Inmate No. P01135809*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/24/politics/trump-mug-shot-analysis/index.html) did not cower in shame. He weaponized his misfortune, claiming he was being persecuted by the administration of his successor to ensure he couldn't mount a political comeback. Trump's fundraising soared. His Republican true believers embraced his narrative of political martyrdom. And Trump's potential 2024 GOP rivals soon found their running room clipped.

Former Vice President Mike Pence, who refused to aid Trump's Constitution-busting on January 6, quickly worked out there's no room in the modern GOP for standing up for democracy. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis had a theory that what Republican voters wanted after the mayhem of the Trump years was the same kind of "Make America Great Again" extremism minus the chaos. Wrong again. And the campaign of the last-standing Haley will mostly be remembered for disproving the long-held conventional wisdom that once the ex-president got in a one-on-one race with an opponent, the anti-Trump forces in the party would soon overwhelm him.

Trump beat them all. And now he's taking on Biden.

CNN's Kylie Atwood contributed to this reporting.

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