

# [***Why does Biden keep mentioning January 6? Because Trump won't stop talking about it***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJV-RKW1-JBSS-S3VY-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; The rallies start with a recording of January 6 prisoners singing the national anthem. Campaign staff hand out pre-made "Too Big to Rig" signs to supporters. When the candidate takes the stage, he calls the rioters "people who love our country" and "hostages unfairly imprisoned for long periods of time."

There is nothing subtle about how central [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45) has made [*January 6, 2021*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/january-6-insurrection), to his campaign. More than just continuing to feed denialism and conspiracies about the 2020 election, he is constantly distorting the reality of what happened that day, preaching vindication to his base of voters.

In ways big and small - but often overlooked because they have become so commonplace at his events - the former president glosses over the violence. He promises pardons for the people who committed it.

On this, Trump and President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) agree: January 6 itself is a central issue of the 2024 campaign and will be even if Trump's trials on related indictments get delayed past Election Day.

It's Biden's campaign aides who have been surprised how much that's true.

"People know what happened on January 6," said Mike Donilon, one of Biden's closest advisers. "I think most of the country is going to say, 'We don't embrace political violence. We do embrace democracy. We do embrace the rule of law. We're not interested in pardoning people who ransacked the Capitol, and we're going to have a real problem supporting someone who embraces all that.'"

Though Donilon and a few others - including Vice President Kamala Harris, in private conversations to CNN - had been adamant for three years that January 6 would continue reverberating, Biden aides use words like "stunning" to describe the way Trump has not just kept January 6 present, but burrowed ever deeper into conspiracy theories that are embraced in the right-wing echo chamber but push away more mainstream voters.

And while Biden aides in the Wilmington reelection office have been closely monitoring Trump's rallies, stockpiling clips for future use to likely pair with the many disturbing videos of the mob breaking down the doors and attacking police, they don't need to go further than keeping an eye on Trump's Truth Social account.

[*"My first acts as your next President will be to Close the Border, DRILL, BABY, DRILL, and Free the January 6 Hostages being wrongfully imprisoned!"*](https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/112079753989223875) he wrote.

Some Biden aides say they were shocked that January 6 keeps coming up in every focus group, to the point that Democratic operatives these days tend to use words like "indelible image" or "scar tissue" to describe how the memories still hit.

"We were all surprised," acknowledged one senior Democrat involved with the reelection effort, asking not to be named to describe private strategy development.

"Anyone who is being honest was surprised Jan. 6 continues to be this resonant," the person added. "But in hindsight, when you combine extreme rhetoric, extreme policy and lasting imagery, that ends up being a pretty powerful memory."

The Trump campaign did not respond to questions sent by CNN about his embrace of January 6.

A running mate litmus test

Biden aides say January 6 and the footage from it will be a central feature of their advertising campaigns, the convention and beyond. They are counting on more attention from Trump's trials, if those happen-and already, a Biden senior aide told CNN they have thought through how the president will keep talking about the topic while insisting he is sticking to not interfering in the legal process.

Trump, for his part, keeps talking about it and his aides aren't really trying to stop him. The rally crowds keep cheering. And every ambitious Republican trying to get in Trump's line of sight as he draws out the jockeying to be his running mate knows the bar for entry: Was Mike Pence in the wrong on January 6 - and if you were in a similar position in the future, would you be ready to toss out electoral votes in favor of a conspiracy to keep your losing boss in power?

New York. Rep. [*Elise Stefanik*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2024/02/09/elise-stefanik-mike-pence-2020-election-src-vpx.cnn) and Ohio Sen. [*J.D. Vance*](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/jd-vance-defends-trump-claims-invoking-jean-carroll/story?id=106925954) have said that they would not have certified the election results in 2020 as constitutionally obligated. [*Stefanik*](https://www.politico.com/news/2024/01/07/stefanik-declines-to-commit-to-certifying-2024-election-results-00134189) would not commit to certifying the next election. South Carolina Sen. [*Tim Scott*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/18/politics/tim-scott-2020-election-trump-vice-president/index.html) refused to say what he would have done if he was in Pence's position at the time. Trump's housing secretary [*Ben Carson*](https://twitter.com/BidenHQ/status/1765140798419386398) and North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum [*wouldn't answer*](https://twitter.com/kaitlancollins/status/1765235981387493708) when asked if Pence did the right thing. As presidential candidates, Scott and Burgum had both indicated that Pence was in the right during a debate last August.

Pence has defended his actions many times. On Friday, he said he would not be endorsing Trump.

Faded hopes that January 6 would be 'decisive moment'

Biden always says the reason he ran at all in 2020 was because he wouldn't let America be a place where the 2017 neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville happened or was equivocated about from the White House. He started his presidency not wanting to believe that America would be a place where so many Republicans almost immediately absolved Trump, and where so many of those who didn't quickly fell into line anyway.

Biden's speech at the US Capitol on the one-year anniversary of January 6 at first seemed like a kind of capstone to the topic - and not as essentially a preview of the speech he would end up giving at Valley Forge on the third anniversary as a way to kick off his 2024 campaign year.

"There was a hope that January 6 would have been a decisive moment in terms of the threat to democracy. But it's not. It's an ongoing battle," Donilon said.

Fewer Trump voters think the protesters who entered the Capitol were "mostly violent" than they did in the past, according to Washington Post-University of Maryland surveys from December of last year and in 2021. Among his supporters, there's been a significant jump in the view that punishment is too harsh for those who broke into the Capitol from 45% to 57%, and nearly 9 in 10 of them now think that Trump bears little or no responsibility for the attack.

The same, though, cannot be said for most other Americans, including the kinds of voters who swung away from Trump in the last election. For example, 61% of college educated White voters still think the protesters who breached the Capitol walls were violent, up slightly from 2021. About 56 percent of independent voters continue to believe Trump was largely responsible for it, virtually unchanged during that stretch.

Congressional Republicans eager to give Trump more January 6 fodder

In one of his first moves after taking over the job, House Speaker Mike Johnson [*announced*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/17/politics/speaker-johnson-releases-january-6-footage/index.html) in November he would release all Capitol Hill security footage from January 6, 2021, that does not contain sensitive information.

GOP Rep. Barry Loudermilk of Georgia is spearheading the Republican-led investigation into the work of the former January 6 select committee, going after star witnesses of the probe and alleging the former select committee withheld witness transcripts from the public to undercut some of their most explosive claims.

That's earned Loudermilk being called a "hero" by Trump at that rally in Georgia.

Meanwhile, leading Trump ally GOP Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida introduced a largely symbolic resolution last month declaring Trump did not incite an insurrection or rebellion on January 6. More than one-third of the House Republican Conference have signed on.

Some are true believers. Some, said GOP Rep. Tim Burchett of Tennessee, are attached because "I'm sure they are afraid not to."

Some Republicans argue it's the Democrats who are keeping the issue alive.

"It happened, not the very best day. But Democrats are focusing on it because they have nothing else to focus on," GOP Rep. Jeff Van Drew of New Jersey said of January 6. "They have to make you look at the shiny object over here because otherwise you're going to keep your eye on the game. And in the game, [Biden] is losing badly. He's in trouble."

Appeals to voters

Biden aides are confident that pardoning acts of political violence isn't popular, but also isn't anywhere near top of mind for people wondering what a president's top three priorities are for Day One. But it's more than that: While Trump is talking about what he will do for insurrectionists, Biden aides believe they'll be able to make the case to voters that the president will make a difference in the lives of people who aren't in jail for invading the Capitol.

Biden aides believe that argument draws in wavering swing voters, while seeing those images of January 6 will help keep anti-Trump Republicans repelled from the former president and lights up the Democratic base to boost turnout.

Aides know one of the issues they're running up against is younger voters and voters of color who have been telling pollsters and focus groups that protecting "democracy" doesn't mean as much to them because they start out skeptical that democracy was ever working that well. That's why several top Democratic strategists working with the Biden campaign, as well as Harris herself, have been stressing "freedom" instead, believing that gets people more actively connected to abortion rights, LGBTQ rights and other fights.

But Biden aides say that's a big part of why the images and memories of January 6 itself are so important.

Black voters have responded in focus groups by being offended to see the right to vote that they or their parents and grandparents fought for be abused like that. Those conversations can also quickly turn to dark speculation about how much rougher and bloody the response from law enforcement would have been if the rioters had been Black.

Latinos who either immigrated themselves or are children of immigrants have told focus groups that they are upset to see people disrespect the process that they worked so hard to take an oath of citizenship to be part of.

Matt Barreto - one of Biden's pollsters in 2020 who then continued to conduct focus groups and polls for the Democratic National Committee and remains close to the reelection campaign - said that unlike abortion, Ukraine aid, Israel, or pretty much any other issue in a divided time, January 6 stands apart.

Barreto shared one response from a recent focus group of undecided Latino voters that he oversaw for a Latino advocacy group: "the way they're going about it, and the time that is taking them to prosecute the criminal acts that he engaged in is just is very dangerous game they're playing with-because a lot of his people are, for you know, a dictatorship. Apparently, they never had it, so they don't know what it is, or if they do, they support it. And unfortunately, the U.S. is young, and we never had a dictatorship."

"People are going to sit around and talk about the state of the economy, the cost of gas, and other things like that. Those frustrations are real. We know that, and we're taking them very seriously," Barreto said. "But when it gets to January 6, it still hits a nerve with people."

Biden not only Democrat counting on January 6 revulsion

Biden isn't the only Democrat counting on voters to be repelled by Trump's approach to January 6. In Arizona, Democrats are hoping that the combination of Republican candidate Kari Lake's 2020 election denialism and her refusal to accept the results of her own 2022 gubernatorial race will make her a more toxic candidate to voters who almost elected her last time.

Rep. Chris Deluzio, a Democrat running to hold onto his seat in a divided district in top presidential battleground Pennsylvania - where one of the local Republican leaders was a fake elector himself who has not been condemned by the congressman's Republican challenger - said January 6 is "remarkably still out there for folks."

"There are Republicans and independents who are just disgusted that their nominee is the guy who tried to rip up the Constitution," Deluzio said. "Irrespective of ***politics***, these aren't our values."

Will Rollins, a former federal prosecutor involved in several cases of Southern Californians who were at the Capitol that day and is running in a rematch as a Democrat against GOP Rep. Ken Calvert - who voted to overturn the results after the riot and said recently he hopes the people in jail get out - said that he hears constantly from independents and Republicans who say that Trump's embrace of January 6 is continuing to drive them away.

"It's become bigger than January 6. Those images of course are visceral for people, and we all remember seeing them on TV," Rollins said. "It's more of a forward-looking threat that people recognize. They're thinking about not January 6 of 2021, but they're thinking about the next certification in 2025."

CNN's Ariel Edwards-Levy contributed to this report.

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