

# [***Opinion: Democrats could be repeating their mistake from 2016***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B61-00Y1-DY7V-G043-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Democrats should not make the mistake of underestimating former President Donald Trump. This is exactly what the party did in 2016, when former Secretary of StateHillary Clinton was the Democratic nominee, and there are some who currently risk repeating the error.

Following Trump's strong showing in the New Hampshire primary, which has effectively knocked his final opponent - former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley - out of the race, some of his critics continue to search for slivers of good news.

They point to the fact that despite [*"almost" being an incumbent*](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/23/trump-primaries-election-biden-robert-reich), he didn't receive a share of the vote on par with what previous incumbents have encountered in primary contests. Incumbents usually bring to the table unequaled name recognition, fund-raising capacity and the benefit of looking presidential as they run for reelection. Trump has most of this, with his supporters holding on to the memory of him in the Oval Office, and with many of his backers believing he literally won the presidency in 2020, yet Haley pulled a decent part of the electorate away from him.

Moreover, they note, [*Haley was able to win independent voters*](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/new-hampshire-primary-sees-strong-turnout-unaffiliated-voters/story?id=106613187) who theoretically would be more amenable to President Joe Biden than Trump in the fall. Moreover, the number of Republicans who keep saying they [*won't vote for Trump*](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article284562880.html) under any circumstances, gives Democrats hope that on Election Day, many voters in the GOP won't turn out.

But these arguments downplay the threat Trump will pose to Biden in November by ignoring several fundamentals. In fact, given the extraordinary baggage and problems Trump brings to the table, it is remarkable that the former president is doing so well and points to the formidable threat he poses.

Most important, Trump is not an incumbent; he is a one-term president who lost to the person he is running against just four years ago. Moreover, he is polling well and defeating his primary opponents despite the fact that the [*GOP suffered stunning blows*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/09/20/trumpism-costs-gop-crucial-election-again/) to their congressional power, costing the party [*control of the Senate*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/11/09/trump-candidates-underperform-2022/) in 2020 and again in the midterm elections of 2022, and hurting them in state offices in a [*number of special elections*](https://abcnews.go.com/538/democrats-winning-big-special-elections/story?id=103315703).

Trump is succeeding even though the United States has never had a major presidential candidate saddled with so much legal baggage. Trump is not just a defeated one-term president, but a one-term president who allegedly attempted to overturn an election he lost - a period that can truly be called unprecedented in American history. As if that was not enough, he has subsequently been indicted four times, including on charges that revolve around an alleged massive abuse of presidential power (he has denied all wrongdoing).

Meanwhile, two states have decided to ban him from the ballot based on allegations of insurrection (he is appealing). And civil cases about sexual assault, tax fraud and defamation are also underway (he has challenged these as well). Yet, not only is Trump defeating his Republican opponents despite these legal challenges, but they keep defending him and rallying to his side even in the heat of political battle.

Indeed, Donald Trump continues to win as Donald Trump. There has been no turning point, no shift to acting presidential and no serious effort to abide by the traditional norms of national ***politics***. He has continued to blast his opponents with name-calling insults, to spread disinformation and falsehoods and to conduct ***politics*** in the spirit of a WWE cage match rather than a forum of serious deliberation. Trump 2024 is acting very much like Trump 2020 and 2016.

That's no doubt because the qualities that propelled him in the past to command media attention continue to be effective. Even if he has lost many steps as a result of age - as [*Haley and others have argued*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/20/us/politics/haley-trump-mental-decline.html) - Trump continues to retain all of his talents as a showman. Trump still knows how to do television. He is the entertainer in chief.

Trump's enduring ability to garner attention through provocative performances was clear right after the media projected Trump as the winner in New Hampshire. Instead of a standard victory speech, Trump lit into Haley. He unleashed a series of vindictive comments about her, even going so far as to [*insult her clothing*](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jessica-tarlov-narcissism-rage-donald-trump_n_65b0fe98e4b09e7f5b9de7e9). Though some analysts were surprised by his decision and noted that he might have goaded Haley into continuing to run, they missed the point. The point was to do and say things that drew attention to him, that created 24 hours of social media conversation about Trump, that took attention from everyone else on the playing field.

Trump, who lives by the maxim that all publicity is good publicity, will no doubt create similar obstacles for Biden in communicating his message and securing national attention as the race heats up.

Finally, by most indications, Trump still has strong support in the Republican Party. It is not clear whether those currently telling pollsters they would never vote for Trump will feel the same way by November, once Trump has unleashed his scorched-earth attacks on Biden and depicted him in conservative circles as the second coming of Karl Marx.

When voters go to vote on November 5, many of those Americans might very well decide that tax cuts, deregulation and conservative justices are much more important than any concerns they have about what a second term Trump presidency would do.

And despite the legislative success of the Biden presidency, as well as strong economic indicators, Trump benefits from the fact that many Republicans perceive the pre-Covid years of his presidency to have been much more prosperous than today, when they see higher prices, major wars abroad and chaos at the borders as well as in cities as a result of undocumented immigration. To them, it is "[*American carnage*](https://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/full-text-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-transcript-233907)" all over again.

In 2016, many observers wondered if the election would be like 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson trounced [*right-wing Arizona Sen. Barry Goldwater*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/05/05/political-journalists-grapple-with-an-unexpected-nominee-does-this-sound-familiar/), who many saw as an extremist and dangerous to the nation. The answer was no. Most [*Republicans came home*](https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/).

None of this is to say that Trump is invincible. He is not. Indeed, 2020 proved the point. Polls for 2024 show that the race is close and will probably come down to turnout in a handful of swing states. A [*few swing*](https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/pa/pa01102024_pidf24.pdf)[*state polls*](https://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Marist-Poll_NH-NOS-and-Tables_202401181559.pdf) have Biden ahead. As [*Democratic strategist Simon Rosenberg*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/25/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-simon-rosenberg.html) recently told The New York Times' Ezra Klein, Democrats have been doing extraordinarily well in national elections.

Trump can be defeated with a massive voter turnout operation. But his performance thus far in the caucuses and primaries, especially given the context of what he faces, has been notable for the underlying strength behind his candidacy that the contests have revealed.

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