

Analysis by [Ronald Brownstein](#), CNN

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Former President Donald Trump attends his hush money trial in New York City on May 13, 2024. Spencer Platt/Pool/Reuters

(CNN) — During [Donald Trump's](#) four years in the White House, he was famously the only president whose job approval rating never reached 50% in Gallup Organization polls since the firm began systematically tracking that measure in the 1940s.

But now more positive retrospective assessments of Trump's record in office are setting off warning flares for Democrats — especially as [President Joe Biden's](#) own approval ratings remain stuck at historically low levels. In a [CNN poll](#) from April, 55% of Americans said they

considered Trump's presidency a success — a big jump from the 41% who viewed his presidency so positively when he left office in January 2021, according to a CNN survey from the time.

If Biden is to win a second term, “the fact that Trump is getting this level of credit cannot stand,” said Democratic pollster Jay Campbell, who conducts surveys on the economy with a Republican partner for CNBC.

It's not unusual for approval ratings of presidents to rise out of office. The difference is that none of Trump's defeated predecessors sought to return to the White House four years later. The public's shifting ratings of those former presidents was of interest mostly to historians; this year, these reassessments will help decide control of the White House.

Generally, Biden's campaign has spent less time challenging Trump's record in his first term than highlighting what he might do in a second one. But that balance appears to be shifting.

Biden's campaign has invested heavily in emotional swing-state television advertisements that tie Trump to the 2022 Supreme Court decision overturning the constitutional right to abortion with the stark concluding tagline: “Donald Trump did this.”

Now, Biden's team is escalating its efforts to contrast his record against some of Trump's other controversial initiatives. An ad aimed at Black voters that the campaign released Tuesday, for instance, juxtaposes Trump's attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act with Biden policies that have expanded coverage, lowered premiums under the law and capped the price of insulin at \$35 per month. “Trump was a failure on health care,” a narrator declares, before a Black woman in the ad says: “We cannot go back.”

Michael Tyler, the Biden campaign's communications director, said more of those messages are coming. “This is exactly why you run a campaign,” Tyler said. “As we move forward here, reminding people of the damage he caused, the damage he will cause and how he made you feel every single day is imperative.”

Almost every president sees their retrospective approval ratings improve after they leave office; when Gallup last measured views of former presidents in 2023, each one it included except for Bill Clinton received a higher approval rating than when they left the White House. Even Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush, the previous two one-term presidents before Trump, were each much more popular in the poll than when they lost their reelection bids. Trump's recovery since

leaving office is “not a completely new phenomenon,” said Emory University political scientist Alan Abramowitz, who specializes in studying presidential approval.

In Gallup’s poll last year, Trump’s retrospective approval rating stood at 46%. That was up 12 percentage points from his final approval rating in office of 34%. Trump’s improvement in the Gallup poll since leaving office was about the same experienced by both Carter and George W. Bush in their first Gallup post-presidential assessments.

Other surveys suggest the backward-looking judgments on Trump have further improved since then. In an April national New York Times/Siena College survey, for instance, slightly more registered voters (48%) now say Trump left the country better off than worse off (46%) after his presidency.

Nearly two-thirds of voters in the April New York Times/Siena survey said they approved of how Trump handled the economy and about half said they approved of his handling of both immigration and crime.

The April national CNN survey conducted by SRSS reported some of the most dramatic change in attitudes. From the 2021 CNN survey until last month’s poll, the share of people who termed Trump’s presidency a success increased more for women than for men; more for people of color than for White voters; more among working-age adults than seniors; and more among Democratic voters than Republican. The 55% in the recent CNN poll who termed Trump’s presidency a success far exceeded the 39% who gave the same positive verdict to Biden’s time.

Abramowitz, the political scientist, said that in today’s highly polarized political atmosphere, it’s not surprising that discontent with Biden is boosting Trump, almost in hydraulic fashion.

“There’s always going to be an inverse relationship to some extent in how people assess the current president of one party versus the previous president of the opposite party, but given that partisan loyalties are stronger today, that is probably a stronger tendency now,” Abramowitz said. “If you are unhappy with how things are going now, that may influence your assessment of the previous presidency.”

Republican strategist Brad Todd likewise said that Trump, in effect, looks bigger to many voters because Biden looks smaller. “We judge presidential approval by strength and success more than anything,” Todd said. “People think the economy was better when Trump was president, whether they liked him or not, and they think Trump projected strength rather than weakness, and plenty of voters find aspects of Biden’s presidency weak.”

The Biden comparison also could be benefiting Trump in a more specific way: by encouraging voters to shift the issues around which they are judging Trump’s tenure. Because inflation is

voters to shift the issues around which they are judging Trump's tenure. Because inflation, as well as immigration and crime, are much more relevant to voters today, in their retrospective judgments about Trump's record they may be focusing more on those issues and less on other elements of his presidency that disturbed them at the time, such as his open use of racist language or the general atmosphere of chaos that surrounded his presidency, strategists in both parties said.

Jim McLaughlin, a pollster for Trump, pointed mostly to shifting public concerns and the contrast with Biden to explain these post-presidential gains for the former president.

When the exit polls conducted by Edison Research for a consortium of media organizations including CNN asked voters what issue was most important to their decision in 2020, McLaughlin noted, the survey didn't include either the cost of living or immigration as a specific choice. That omission, he said, measured how little concern there was in the country at the time about each problem.

Now, both of those issues routinely poll near the top of voters' worries in 2024, with Biden receiving some of his weakest marks on each. To many voters, said McLaughlin, Trump "looks better and better on these issues compared to Joe Biden's failures."

Many Democratic pollsters say that shift in emphasis about Trump is particularly evident among Black and Hispanic voters, especially younger to middle-aged men. "Particularly among working-class Latinos. ... They will tell us that they think he's racist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-Latino," said Ben Tulchin, who served as the principal pollster for Sen. Bernie Sanders' two Democratic presidential campaigns. "But then they say, 'Comma but,' and the 'but' is they view his economic record more favorably than Biden's. Maybe through rose-colored glasses, but that is a challenge the Biden campaign has."

In that New York Times/Siena survey last month, for example, 70% of Hispanic voters said they disapproved of how Biden is handling the economy, while 74% approved of how Trump did.

Democrats acknowledge that while it is important for Biden to improve views about his own economic record, it may be difficult for him to tarnish the positive impressions most voters hold about the economy under Trump — at least before the Covid-19 pandemic struck in 2020. "I don't know if it's possible to impeach the state of the economy under Trump," said Campbell. It will not be easy, he added, to say to voters, "'Well, your memory is wrong, things were not that great in the economy under the previous guy.' I just don't think that will get them very far."

Rather than trying to erase positive views on Trump's economic performance, Campbell and other Democrats think Biden could have more success reminding voters about everything else they didn't like about his time in office. "Economy aside, you can't let people think the rest of

life was hunky-dory under Donald Trump, because it wasn't," Campbell said. "His approval never got above 50% for a reason. There is plenty to dislike there and plenty that people did dislike."

In fact, while Trump was president, polls underscored the dynamic Campbell describes. In that final CNN/SRSS poll in 2021 before Trump left office, a majority of Americans said they approved of his handling of the economy, but even so, 55% described his presidency as a failure, and just 26% said he had changed the country for the better.

The challenge for Democrats, Tulchin said, is that while current conditions are constantly reminding voters that staples like gas, groceries and rent cost less under Trump, the controversies he ignites tend to burn out faster. "What we have seen with eight or nine years of life with Trump as a presidential candidate is unless the glaring awful things he does are right in people's faces — January 6, 'good people on both sides' post-Charlottesville, kids in cages — then two weeks later, it fades away," he said. "You've got to force people to watch the horrific person that Trump is. They can't look fondly back on five years ago by overlooking his character flaws, because they are major."

The new Biden ad aimed at Black voters released Tuesday may encapsulate the campaign's emerging approach to talking about Trump's record. The ad takes one of the most controversial episodes of Trump's presidency — his attempt to repeal the ACA — and uses it to create a point of comparison with Biden's policy initiatives to expand access to health care and to lower medical costs. The same approach is evident in a new Biden ad aimed at Latino voters that contrasts the former president's policy of separating migrant children from their parents at the border with Biden's efforts to reunite the families.

Another example of that strategy was evident when Biden last week visited Racine, Wisconsin, where Trump had gone as president to trumpet a \$10 billion investment from the Taiwanese electronics manufacturer Foxconn, which never materialized. Biden was there to tout a \$3.3 billion Microsoft investment in an artificial intelligence center on the site, which he offered as evidence for the success of his broader agenda to promote private-sector investment in advanced industries such as clean energy and semiconductors.

"Folks, during the previous administration, my predecessor made promises which he broke more than kept and left a lot of people behind in communities like Racine," Biden declared. "On my watch, we make promises and we keep promises. And we leave no one behind."

Biden's campaign expresses optimism that by reminding Americans about Trump's record on these fronts it can move voters — particularly in core constituencies that have drifted toward Trump such as younger Black and Hispanic men. Trump's standing with some of these groups

may wilt, these Democrats think, simply as he spends more time back in the spotlight.

But Todd, like many Republicans, believes Democrats are wrong to assume that more exposure inevitably means less support for Trump. “Democratic strategists ... have been saying that for a year now,” Todd said. “I think it’s time to reevaluate that geometry.”

Refreshing voters about Trump’s prior record could add weight to all of Biden’s warnings about his future plans. Reminding college-educated voters about Trump’s record on abortion and January 6, for instance, could heighten their concern about how basic rights and democracy itself would fare in a second Trump term. Likewise, recalling for Latinos Trump’s family separation policy may add credibility to Democratic warnings about his plans to undertake a mass deportation program of undocumented immigrants, complete with internment camps. If Trump is convicted in his New York hush money trial, in which he’s pleaded not guilty, it will remind voters not only about his willingness to push the boundaries of law and morality, but also the volatility that perpetually envelops him.

What’s less clear is whether enough voters will make their decisions in November based on those concerns as opposed to the issues where polls show they now express more faith in Trump than Biden, such as inflation, the border and crime. In the end, what voters *remember* about Trump’s presidency may be less important than what they *prioritize*. The real risk for Democrats is that Biden’s present may have irrevocably changed what swing voters care most about in Trump’s past.

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