

The Perfect Storm: Trump and USA 2024

by Riccardo Alcaro

Donald Trump casts a long shadow over the upcoming presidential – and congressional – elections in the United States. It is a menacing shadow, not only for what the former president could do if he returned to office but also because the political and institutional balances of the United States are threatened by the repercussions of his many legal troubles, the latest of which could even see him excluded from the race for the White House.

Finished before starting

Opinion polls credit the former president with a staggering advantage (up to 63 per cent) in the race for the Republican nomination¹ and have him slightly ahead of Democrat Joe Biden in the general election.²

¹ Shane Goldmacher, Ruth Igielnik and Camille Baker, "Trump's Legal Jeopardy Hasn't Hurt His G.O.P. Support, Times/Siena Poll Finds", in *The New York Times*, 20 December 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/20/us/politics/trump-cases-poll-2024.html>.

² RealClearPolling website: *General Election: Trump vs. Biden*, accessed on 5 January 2024, <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/>

The idea that another candidate could gain such momentum from a victory in the early Republican primary season in Iowa or New Hampshire that they can go on to beat the former president seems remote. State-level polls show Trump leading everywhere, starting from Iowa, often with gaps not too dissimilar from the national data. After Super Tuesday on 5 March 2024, when sixteen states will select their delegates to for the Republican convention in Milwaukee in July, the former president should have closed the nomination file.³

After candidates endorsed by Trump performed poorly in the 2022 midterm elections,⁴ the expectation was that the Republican Party would shift

[president/general/2024/trump-vs-biden](https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/general/2024/trump-vs-biden).

³ A full schedule of the Republican primary is available in the 270toWin website: <https://www.270towin.com/2024-presidential-election-calendar>.

⁴ Aaron Blake, "How Bad the 2022 Election Was for the GOP, Historically Speaking", in *The Washington Post*, 10 November 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/11/10/republican-losses-2022-midterms>.

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towards less controversial (though no less radical) figures, such as Governor of Florida Ron DeSantis, fresh from a triumphant re-election.⁵

In the following months, however, it became clear that this assumption rested on shaky ground. Rather than emphasising his greater electability based on his economic record and resistance to anti-Covid-19 regulations (very much unpopular amongst US right-wing voters), DeSantis doubled down on a fierce anti-progressive culture war, often taking more extreme positions than Trump himself on issues such as abortion.⁶ Other candidates, like the entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, followed suit.⁷ Their strategies do not seem to have paid off: their combined support amounts to a miserable 15 per cent (11 and 4.5 per cent respectively) of the conservative electorate.⁸ Clearly, right-wing voters prefer the original to the copy.

Non-Trumpian or openly anti-Trump Republican candidates – from

⁵ Myranda Bryant, Martin Pengelly and Hugo Lowell, "Trump Branded Midterms' 'Biggest Loser' as DeSantis Win Fuels 2024 Talk", in *The Guardian*, 9 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/mjpfy>.

⁶ Rotimi Adeoye, "Ron DeSantis' Dumb, Failed Strategy to Campaign on Culture War Bullshit", in *The Daily Beast*, 9 July 2023, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/ron-desantis-dumb-failed-strategy-to-campaign-on-culture-war-bullshit>.

⁷ Andi Ortiz, "'Morning Joe' Says Vivek Ramaswamy Is Just 'Doing an Impersonation' of Trump: 'All Style and No Substance'", in *The Wrap*, 31 August 2023, <https://www.thewrap.com/morning-joe-vivek-ramaswamy-doing-trump-impersonation>.

⁸ RealClearPolling website: *2024 Republican Presidential Nomination*, accessed on 5 January 2024, <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/republican-primary/2024/national>.

Trump's former Vice-President Mike Pence to New Jersey's ex-governor Chris Christie – are little more than footnotes in the primary book. The only apparent exception is the great hope of mainstream conservatives, former Governor of South Carolina and former US Ambassador to the UN (under Trump) Nikki Haley.

Yet, despite impressing the press with her strong debating skills⁹ and gaining growing financial support from a number of wealthy donors,¹⁰ Haley is not a strong candidate – in fact, she is quite weak. After all, she languishes at a meagre 11 per cent in national polls.¹¹ In Iowa, where the assault on the former president should begin, she hovers around 16 per cent, a whopping 35 points below Trump and even below DeSantis.¹² In New Hampshire she fares somewhat better (25 per cent) but still trails Trump by around 20 points.¹³

⁹ Jazimine Ulloa, "For Haley, Rise in Polls Feeds Voter Enthusiasm on Trail", in *The New York Times*, 29 November 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/29/us/politics/nikki-haley-campaign.html>.

¹⁰ Fredreka Schouten, "Nikki Haley Draws Growing Interest from Deep-Pocketed Donors as GOP Presidential Field Shrinks", in *CNN*, 16 November 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/16/politics/nikki-haley-donors/index.html>.

¹¹ RealClearPolling website: *2024 Republican Presidential Nomination*, cit.

¹² RealClearPolling website: *2024 Iowa Republican Presidential Caucus*, accessed on 5 January 2024, <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/republican-primary/2024/iowa-caucus>.

¹³ RealClearPolling website: *2024 New Hampshire Republican Presidential Primary*, accessed on 5 January 2024, <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/president/republican-primary/2024/new-hampshire>.



The phantom Republican opposition

The Republican primary season opening next week seems to have a foregone conclusion. Once the nomination is secured, any residual opposition to Trump amongst conservatives will fade away, and the entire party and right-wing electorate will rally around the former president, as most of them have largely done already in recent years.

After the 2020 election, when Trump's attempts to overturn Biden's victory culminated in the 6 January 2021 assault on Congress by a crowd of his supporters, a number of exasperated Republicans counted on Trump being finished. The fact that most expressed those feelings behind closed doors was telling, though.

Indeed, it did not take Republicans long to show that their love affair with Trump was anything but over.

On the very night of the attack on Capitol Hill, in which five people were killed,¹⁴ 139 Republican representatives and eight senators still refused to certify Biden's victory,¹⁵ with no other justification than to maintain support in a conservative base convinced that the election was rigged, despite evidence

¹⁴ Jack Healy, "These Are the 5 People Who Died in the Capitol Riot", in *The New York Times*, 13 October 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/who-died-in-capitol-building-attack.html>.

¹⁵ Karen Yourish, Larry Buchanan and Denise Lu, "The 147 Republicans Who Voted to Overturn Election Results", in *The New York Times*, 7 January 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/01/07/us/elections/electoral-college-biden-objectors.html>.

to the contrary.¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, Republican opposition prevented Trump's second impeachment from resulting in his formal removal from office.¹⁷

Only two Republicans, both subsequently forced to leave the party, later participated in the House inquiry into the 6 January events,¹⁸ which concluded with the recommendation to indict the former president for insurrection.¹⁹ And when the indictments did come, Trump did not lose support among conservatives. If there was an effect, it seems to have been that of galvanising the right, persuaded that Trump is a victim of politically motivated charges.

The former president is under investigation by a federal special counsel²⁰ and a Georgia district

¹⁶ Alison Durkee, "Republicans Increasingly Realize There's No Evidence of Election Fraud—But Most Still Think 2020 Election Was Stolen Anyway, Poll Finds", in *Forbes*, 14 March 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2023/03/14/republicans-increasingly-realize-theres-no-evidence-of-election-fraud-but-most-still-think-2020-election-was-stolen-anyway-poll-finds>.

¹⁷ "Here's How Senators Voted on Trump's Second Impeachment", in *Politico*, 13 February 2021, <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2021/trump-second-impeachment-senate-vote>.

¹⁸ Ivana Saric, "Trump: McCarthy Should've Put Republicans on Jan. 6 Committee", in *Axios*, 22 June 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/06/22/trump-mccarthy-republican-jan-6-committee>.

¹⁹ US Congress Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, *Final Report*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-J6-REPORT>.

²⁰ Charlie Savage and Adam Goldman, "The Trump Jan. 6 Indictment, Annotated", in *The New York Times*, 1 August 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/01/>

attorney²¹ for attempting to overturn the 2020 election. He has also been indicted for illegally keeping classified documents in his private residence by the federal special counsel²² and for violating campaign finance laws by the Manhattan district attorney.²³

Biden is weaker than Trump is strong

Nearly certain of securing the nomination, Trump can look to November with some optimism. The former president remains an extremely controversial candidate in light of his legal troubles, increasingly extreme rhetoric²⁴ and authoritarian instincts.²⁵ Nevertheless, he has gained support in key demographic constituencies for Democrats, such as Black and Latino males.²⁶

[us/politics/trump-jan-6-indictment-2020-election-annotated.html](https://www.nytimes.com/politics/trump-jan-6-indictment-2020-election-annotated.html).

²¹ Hannah Grabenstein, "Read the Full Georgia Indictment against Trump and 18 Allies", in *PBS NewsHour*, 15 August 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/read-the-full-georgia-indictment-against-trump-and-18-allies>.

²² Charlie Savage, "The Trump Classified Documents Indictment, Annotated", in *The New York Times*, 27 July 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/06/09/us/trump-indictment-document-annotated.html>.

²³ Hannah Grabenstein, "Read All of the Charges against Trump in the New York Hush-Money Case", in *PBS NewsHour*, 4 April 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/read-all-of-charges-against-trump-in-the-new-york-hush-money-case>.

²⁴ Michael Gold, "Trump, Attacked for Echoing Hitler, Says He Never Read 'Mein Kampf'", in *The New York Times*, 19 December 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/19/us/politics/trump-immigrants-hitler-mein-kampf.html>.

²⁵ Charlie Savage, Jonathan Swan and Meggie Haberman, "Why a Second Trump Presidency May Be More Radical Than His First", in *The New York Times*, 7 December 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/04/us/politics/trump-2025-overview.html>.

²⁶ Aaron Blake, "Trump Hits New Highs

His winning card is Biden's unpopularity, with the president struggling to break away from the 40 per cent approval mark.²⁷ Despite the economy growing at a robust pace²⁸ and unemployment at historic lows,²⁹ Biden is grappling with the effects of inflation (now back under control but from the highest levels since the early 1980s), ongoing anxieties over immigration and, above all, the perception that he is too old for another term. This opinion is widespread among Democrats too.³⁰

In contrast to 2016, this time Trump can rely on an organisational infrastructure – the so-called Project 2025, created by the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation – to implement a radical government agenda.³¹ The plan includes an effort to hollow out the federal

with Black, Hispanic Voters. What to Make of It?", in *The Washington Post*, 19 September 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/09/19/trump-poll-support-black-hispanic>.

²⁷ RealClearPolling website: *President Biden Job Approval*, accessed on 5 January 2024, <https://www.realclearpolling.com/polls/approval/joe-biden/approval-rating>.

²⁸ Abha Bhattarai, "The Economy Is Booming, But Inflation Continues to Sour Americans", in *The Washington Post*, 13 November 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/11/13/biden-economy-inflation-gdp-unions>.

²⁹ Louis Jacobson, "Fact Check: Did Biden Set a Modern Record for Low Unemployment Rates?", in *WRAL News*, 7 July 2023, <https://www.wral.com/story/20940134>.

³⁰ Aaron Blake, "Biden's Age May Be a Growing Problem for His Reelection", in *The Washington Post*, 5 September 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/09/05/biden-age>.

³¹ See the Project 2025 website: <https://www.project2025.org>. For a short introduction, see Spencer Chretien, "Project 2025", in *Heritage Foundation Commentaries*, 31 January 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/node/25154496>.

administration and replace career officials (at least in key positions) with individuals selected on the exclusive basis of their absolute loyalty to Trump. The Department of Justice would thus be subordinated to the White House and used to eliminate legal threats (Trump could even pardon himself from federal crimes if convicted) and prosecute political opponents. It is no wonder that even conservative analysts openly speak of America's impending authoritarian drift.³²

Rule of law vs the will of the people

A second Trump presidency is not guaranteed. Biden could regain ground and defeat the former president, as he did in 2020. Crucially, a possible conviction in one of the four criminal trials could erode his support among independents and even Republicans (a third of whom claim they would not support him in this case).³³

Alternatively, Trump could be preemptively excluded if the Supreme Court were to uphold the verdict by which the highest court in Colorado declared Trump ineligible (as did Maine's secretary of state) due to his guilt in the insurrection.³⁴

³² Robert Kagan, "A Trump Dictatorship Is Increasingly Inevitable. We Should Stop Pretending", in *The Washington Post*, 30 November 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/30/trump-dictator-2024-election-robert-kagan>.

³³ Shane Goldmacher, Ruth Igielnik and Camille Baker, "Trump's Legal Jeopardy Hasn't Hurt His G.O.P. Support, Times/Siena Poll Finds", cit.

³⁴ Jenna Russell, Ernesto Londoño and Shawn Hubler, "Maine Joins Colorado in Finding Trump Ineligible for Primary Ballot", in *The New York Times*, 28 December 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/28/us/maine-trump-ballot.html>;

The Supreme Court's verdict, not expected before Super Tuesday, is perhaps the most important – certainly the most anticipated – in the history of the United States. In essence, the nine justices – six conservatives (half of whom appointed by Trump) and three progressives – face the question of whether, in a constitutional democracy, the judgment on the eligibility of a citizen as president ultimately descends from the law or the electorate.

Regardless of the outcome, a portion of the citizens will perceive the verdict as illegitimate, further widening the divisions in the already ultra-polarised American electorate.

Law or politics? Rule of law or the will of the people? The history of the United States (and not only) has also been a constant attempt to reconcile them, making them complementary parts of an organic whole. Today, they are separated and indeed in conflict with each other. Even before it concludes in a year or five from now, the political saga of Donald Trump has already left a weighty and damaging legacy for American democracy.

8 January 2024

Maggie Astor, "Trump Is Disqualified from 2024 Ballot, Colorado Court Says in Explosive Ruling", in *The New York Times*, 19 December 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/19/us/politics/trump-colorado-ballot-14th-amendment.html>.

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- 24 | 01 Riccardo Alcaro, *The Perfect Storm: Trump and USA 2024*
- 23 | 67 Aurelio Insisa, *Timing Is Everything: Italy Withdraws from the Belt and Road Initiative*
- 23 | 66 Max Münchmeyer and Pier Paolo Raimondi, *Between Security and Transition: Prospects for German-Italian Energy Cooperation*
- 23 | 65 Ghazi Ben Ahmed, *Critical Crossroads: Tunisia's Choice between a Comprehensive EU Partnership and Economic Collapse*
- 23 | 64 Leo Goretti, *The Olympics of Discontent: Paris 2024 and Russia's War against Ukraine*
- 23 | 63 Michaël Ayari and Riccardo Fabiani, *To Deal or Not to Deal: How to Support Tunisia out of Its Predicament*
- 23 | 62 Manuel Herrera, *Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Ambitions: Frozen Once Again?*
- 23 | 61 Rafael Ramírez, *The Lifting of Sanctions and the Oil Collapse of Venezuela*
- 23 | 60 Maria Luisa Fantappiè and Nathalie Tocci, *Europe is Stuck Over the Israel-Hamas War*
- 23 | 59 Lorenzo Colantoni, *Technologies to Protect Global Forests: The Case of Indonesia*