



OPINION: WHAT TRUMP NEEDS TO DO IN DEBATE - BEN SHAPIRO

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The 2024 election is Donald Trump's to lose.

Right now, he is running even with Joe Biden in all the national polls. He's running ahead in Arizona, Georgia and Nevada; he's running even in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin; he's closing within striking distance in Minnesota and New Hampshire. The map has radically expanded for him. Meanwhile, Biden's approval ratings are stagnant: he's stuck at below 40%. Americans' view of the economy remains dim, as does their view of Biden's foreign policy; they don't see Biden as a commanding or charismatic figure.

What's more, Americans' perceptions of the two candidates are unlikely to change dramatically before the election. Biden has been underwater with voters since September 2021 and his ignominious Afghanistan withdrawal. He's been losing to or dead even with Trump in the national polling since September 2023.

But that doesn't mean that Trump will necessarily win.

The debate this week is one of the few possible turning points in the race. The Republican and Democratic conventions are unlikely to shift momentum. There's the possibility that Donald Trump will be sentenced to jailtime in July, but even that is unlikely to radically shift the numbers. And, of course, it is possible that Joe Biden suffers a health crisis.

But the debate itself can change opinions. Or, rather, it can change focus.

So far, the race has been about Joe Biden. No new information has been added to the litany of criticisms against Donald Trump since 2021. Meanwhile, Joe Biden has been the president — and he's been doing a terrible job of it, setting things on fire both at home and abroad. He's also

in a state of obvious mental and physical decline.

But the debate could shift the focus back to Trump. Obviously, that's Biden's plan — and, presumably, the plan of the interlocutors at CNN. As George Stephanopoulos recently told CNN's Abby Phillip, the "most important question" is whether Trump will accept the results of the 2020 election as legitimate. "If you can't pass that fundamental threshold of saying, 'Yes the last election was not stolen,' two, 'I will abide by the results of the next election,' then I think that's all voters and viewers need to know," said Stephanopoulos.

Presumably, Biden and anchors Jake Tapper and Dana Bash will follow that advice. Which means that Trump had better have an answer that shifts the focus away from his views of 2020 and back toward 2024. He ought to say, "We disagree on what happened in the 2020 election. I believe, for example, that your Democratic colleagues changed a lot of the voting rules in shocking ways, and that you and your friends in the media covered up a story about your son's corruption, even though they knew it was true. But none of that matters much to the American people. What matters is now. Today. 2024. You're the president, regardless of what I think happened in 2020. And you've been awful, which is why you're losing."

Keeping the focus on Biden will be key. If asked about Jan. 6 — which he surely will be — Trump should respond, "Joe, you've said I'm a threat to democracy because I don't believe I lost the 2020 election. Well, Hillary Clinton doesn't believe she lost the 2016 election, and that's apparently just fine. In reality, you're the threat to democracy: you've sicced your political allies on me in the courts, used OSHA to try to mandate vaccines for 80 million Americans, violated the Constitution to try to let people skate on their student loan debt, and violated your Constitutional oath by keeping the border open and letting through 7 million illegal immigrants. Americans care less about Jan. 6, 2021, than Nov. 5, 2024."

Again, this election is Donald Trump's to lose. That means steadily, calmly keeping the focus on the man who occupies the White House — regardless of whom Trump thinks ought to have occupied the White House in January 2021.

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