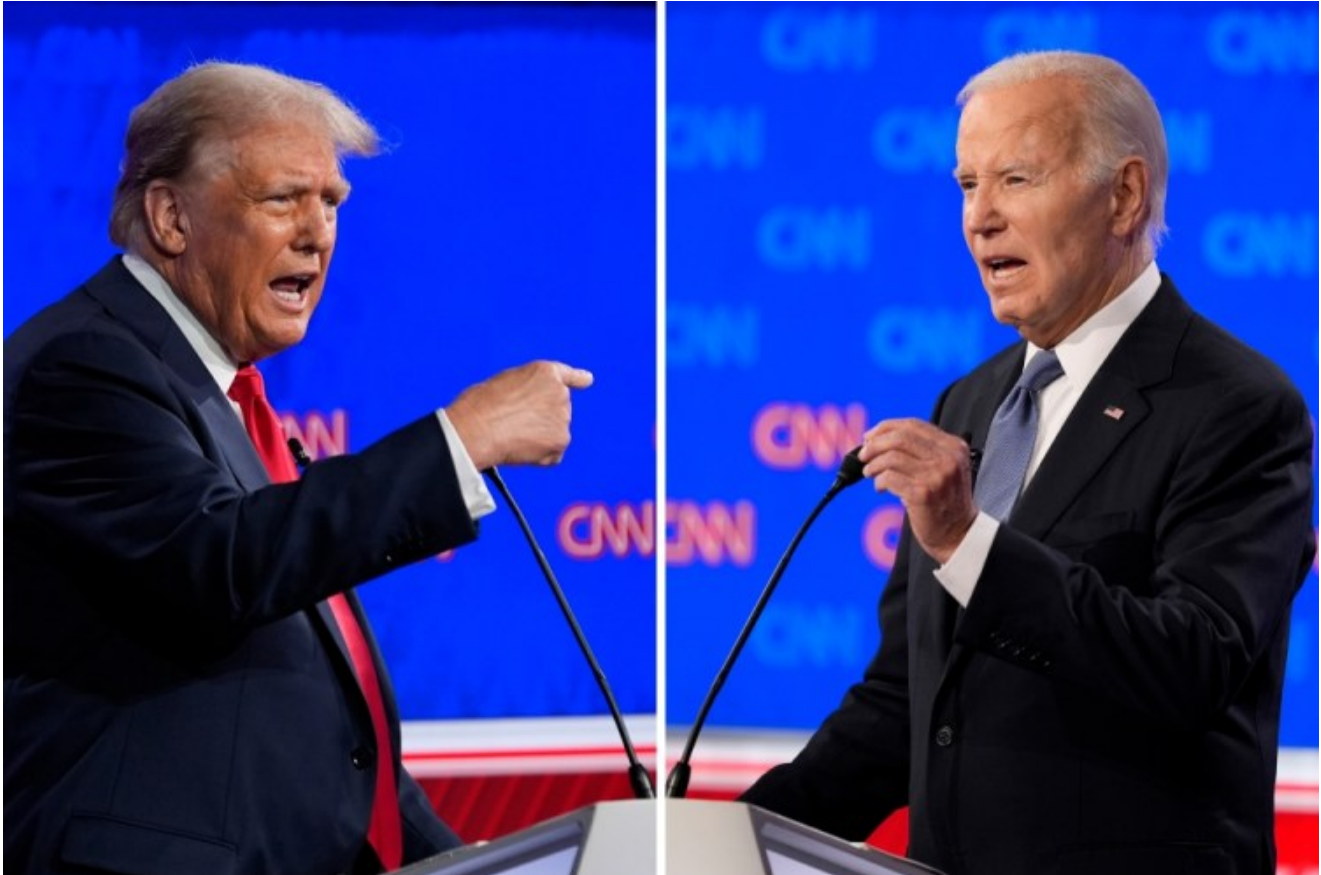


Maine political scholars see no precedent for divisive, unpredictable presidential race

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This combination of photos shows Republican presidential candidate and former President Donald Trump, left, and President Biden during a presidential debate hosted by CNN on June 27 in Atlanta. *Associated Press photos*

The 2024 presidential election was without precedent even before the attempted assassination of Donald Trump at a rally in Pennsylvania on Saturday.

One candidate unsuccessfully tried to overturn the election results four years ago and then, earlier this year, became the first former president ever convicted of felony crimes.

The other is an 81-year-old incumbent who has increasingly showed his age, leading many in his party to suggest they might be better off if he stepped aside.

Where things go between now and November is unclear – there is nothing in recent history to make sense of things – and political experts in Maine say there is still time for the narrative of the 2024 presidential election to change.

“It used to be said that a month is a lifetime for a campaign, but I think it’s closer to two weeks now,” said Dan Shea, a professor of government at Colby College. “There is no doubt Trump is having a good period, a lot of things are swinging his way, and he has the energy, but it’s still the middle of the summer.”

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The attempted shooting of Trump galvanized his base while also providing made-for-campaign-ads imagery of a bloodied candidate raising his fist and shouting “fight.” Some have suggested that alone will ensure a Trump victory.

But it’s far too early to tell whether that moved any undecided voters, a bloc much smaller now than in many past presidential elections.

“My guess is that elections these days are all about mobilization,” Shea said. “After the assassination attempt, Trump voters are extremely motivated. I think the Democrats need to be worried about enthusiasm for Biden.”

Historically, the 1968 election perhaps has the closest echoes. That period was marked by widespread tension over the Vietnam War and the fight for civil rights.

Democratic candidate Robert F. Kennedy, a leading contender for the nomination, was shot and killed that June at a Los Angeles hotel, which eventually led to the nomination of Hubert Humphrey, who lost to Republican Richard Nixon. Humphrey’s running mate was Maine’s own Edmund Muskie, then a U.S. senator. Kennedy’s son, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., is a longshot third-party candidate in this year’s race.

The 1968 presidential campaign started in a historic way, too. The incumbent president, Democrat Lyndon Johnson, was quite unpopular and declined to seek a second term – but only after Humphrey and Kennedy openly challenged him.

Biden has been similarly unpopular but has resisted calls to step down.



Prof. Dan Shea of Colby College *Dennis Griggs photo*

The next presidential election, in 1972, also featured an assassination attempt. Democrat George Wallace, a segregationist, survived a shooting that left him in a wheelchair. That effectively ended his campaign, but he wasn't seen as a leading contender at the time.

More recently, President Ronald Reagan was shot by would-be assassin John Hinckley in March 1981 – just two months after he was sworn in. That event changed the trajectory of his presidency and helped propel him to reelection in 1984, when he won 49 states in the biggest landslide in modern history.

“There are other races that have modest echoes, but I think we're in uncharted waters here,” Shea said.

John Baughman, associate professor of politics at Bates College, agreed that the 2024 race, at this stage, is difficult to characterize.

“There had been mixed signals among Democrats about how much appetite there is to replace Joe Biden as the nominee, and that has created a level of uncertainty we haven't really seen,” he said. “And then you add the shooting, and the obvious jolt that caused for everyone, it's hard to process and figure out, what does it mean?”

Baughman said the comparisons to 1968 are apt but not quite the same.

“I don't want to overplay how fraught politics are today in light of what was happening then with Vietnam and civil rights, but I think there is one thing different now that is important to consider, and that's the role of negative partisanship in driving behavior of voters.”

The phenomenon of voters making their decision more about how much they dislike one candidate rather than how much they like another has been trending upward for years, but it may have reached its peak.

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Baughman said that dynamic, in some ways, could be contributing to complacency among Democrats over whether Biden should be replaced.



Professor John Baughman of Bates College

“There is enough ambiguity in polling that it’s not implausible for Democrats to think negative partisanship will bail them out,” he said. “That’s risky, especially in light of the shooting.”

Another thing that is hard to capture at this stage – even in such an unusual election cycle – is the sentiment of voters who simply are not paying close (or any) attention.

“It’s still far enough from the election that there are voters who haven’t made their minds up about voting, let alone who they will vote for,” Baughman said.

Baughman said the biggest area of uncertainty following the shooting was whether it might lead to additional violence or instability. That hasn’t happened yet, he said, mostly because it doesn’t appear to be a clear-cut case of someone targeting a political opponent or enemy.

L. Sandy Maisel, an emeritus American government professor at Colby College who has followed U.S. politics for decades, said the shooting could change things from a practical standpoint. There is a palpable sense of unease hanging over the election cycle, even fear about what else might happen.

“In the near future, we may not see big outdoor rallies for a little bit, and they will probably keep Biden from doing the rope lines,” Maisel said. “This is a very dangerous time for our society.”

Some Republicans have used the shooting to cast Democrats as the ones advocating violence, but Maisel said that doesn’t match reality. The shooter’s motivations are unclear, but he was a registered Republican and a troubled young man with easy access to high-powered weapons.

Maisel also said just because Trump was targeted doesn’t mean he’s absolved of the countless incendiary things he has done and said about political opponents.

“The minute he walked down the escalator at Trump tower (in 2015 when he announced his candidacy), his goal was to divide society along grievance lines,” Maisel said. “He and the Republican Party had no qualms about putting Hillary Clinton in crosshairs.”

Maisel is among those who thinks Biden should step down. He said the assassination attempt of Trump makes it somewhat harder for them to go after him directly as a threat to democracy, which has been a common refrain.

“What they have to do is make it about the issues and views of government and how they are more in line with the majority of the American people,” he said. “That is difficult, but Democrats have failed to do that so far.”



Sandy Maisel, a political science professor emeritus at Colby College *Submitted*

Democrats still have time to shift the narrative, “But I don’t know if they have the messenger,” Maisel said.

Stephanie Kelley-Romano, a Bates College professor who teaches a course on presidential campaign rhetoric, said she’s paying close attention but doesn’t have any idea how things will play out.

“It’s such a weird time,” she said. “We’re going to have so much to talk about (in September).

“I’ve always told students that the race for the presidency has always been who is going to tell the more popular version of America’s story? Who is going to hold the narrative? I don’t know which narrative will resonate more.”

The attempted assassination certainly helped Trump, she said.

“He now has that picture of him with blood on his face with his fist in the air, which is seen by most Americans in stark juxtaposition to an increasingly frail Joe Biden,” Kelley-Romano said.

But Trump is still unpopular and seen as an existential threat, she said. And the increased attention on Project 2025 – a conservative effort to effectively remake all of government and society – could give Democrats an opportunity to seize back the narrative.

[Congressional leaders privately warned Biden he could imperil Democrats](#)

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Stephanie Kelley-Romano, a Bates College professor *Submitted photo*