

**US presidential election 2024**

## Campus protests become a political liability for Joe Biden and the Democrats

Unrest amplifies party's divisions over Gaza war and gives Republicans fodder for campaign attacks



Pro-Palestinian protesters at the University of Texas at Dallas © AP

**James Politi** in Washington 3 HOURS AGO

Republicans are seizing on campus turmoil from New York to California as they attack Joe Biden for failing to quell the protests over Israel's war in Gaza and portray America as spiralling out of control under the US president's leadership.

Biden on Thursday [denounced](#) the "acts of chaos" on campuses around the country, after police moved in to quell demonstrations at the University of California, Los Angeles. Order "must prevail", he said.

But the unrest, now weeks old, has amplified tensions within the president's Democratic party over his handling of the conflict in the Middle East, and taken some attention away from the trial of Donald Trump, the former president and presumptive Republican nominee in [November's election](#), on charges of falsifying documents in the New York "hush money" case.

"[Democrats] were trying to make a big deal out of these Trump trials, but they've taken a back seat" to the protests, said John Feehery, a Republican strategist and former congressional aide.

As the dramatic scenes of police raiding an occupied building at New York's Columbia University and counter-protesters attacking a pro-Palestinian encampment at UCLA unfolded this week, Trump was campaigning in Wisconsin

during a break from the court proceedings.

He called on college presidents to “remove the encampments immediately, vanquish the radicals, and take back our campuses for all the normal students who want a safe place from which to learn”.

Trump also praised the crackdown by law enforcement in New York: “The police came in and in exactly two hours, everything was over. It was a beautiful thing to watch.”

On Fox News, one conservative news host on Wednesday said images coming from colleges were like those in a “third world” country as rightwing commentators criticised Democratic politicians for the protests. “You’ve got the former president of the US on trial and these thugs who are creating incredible mayhem,” said a guest on the show, Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas.

In addition to Biden’s condemnation of the demonstrations on Thursday, he would deliver a speech on antisemitism on Capitol Hill next week, said Karine Jean-Pierre, the president’s press secretary.

But Republicans have used the turmoil to depict Biden as weak and unwilling to confront his own leftwing critics or deliver more forceful public comments on the subject.

“When will the president himself, not his mouthpieces, condemn these hate-filled little Gazas?” Tom Cotton, the Republican senator from Arkansas, told reporters on Wednesday.

“President Biden needs to denounce Hamas’s campus sympathisers without equivocating about Israelis fighting a righteous war of survival,” Cotton added.

Feehery said the problem for [Biden](#) was no one was “paying attention to him” and protesters were not “afraid” of him: “He should be supporting law and order. He’s like the parent who is trying to get the kids to be quiet by giving them more candy.”

Mike Johnson, the Republican House Speaker, rushed to Columbia University last week, in an effort to make a vivid political statement in opposition to the protesters. The trip came just after the House approved a bill including Ukraine aid that was controversial within his own party, and which has triggered a challenge to his leadership.

“You can hardly come up with a better foil for Republicans than super-left campus

protesters,” said Kyle Kondik, an analyst at the University of Virginia’s Center for Politics. “It plays into their broader narrative of the election, which is that Trump is going to come in and clean up the mess.”

A Biden campaign adviser said Trump had “repeatedly fanned the flames and encouraged civil unrest as a political strategy, and it has repeatedly failed to be effective”, pointing to the former president’s “lying about President Biden wanting to defund the police, stoking chaos around immigration in the recent NY special election, and of course, encouraging a violent mob to stop the peaceful transfer of power”.

On Wednesday the House of Representatives passed a bill expanding the definition of antisemitism to enforce anti-discrimination laws, with the majority of both parties supporting it. Seventy Democrats opposed it, however, as did 21 Republicans.

The political fallout has drawn comparisons with the protests against the Vietnam war, which created a damaging backdrop to the Democratic convention in 1968 and helped pave the way for Republican Richard Nixon’s victory against Hubert Humphrey in the race for the White House later that year.

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With less than four months before the convention, Biden is walking a very fine line between denouncing protests that are unacceptable and not alienating young progressive voters he needs to turn out.

The College Democrats of America, a student organisation affiliated with the Democratic National Committee, said this week it supported Biden for re-election, but added students broadly had “the moral clarity to see this war for what it is: destructive, genocidal, and unjust”.

They criticised Republicans for “smearing all protesters as hateful”, and also Biden’s “bearhug” strategy towards Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

It is not certain that the Republican attacks on Biden will stick, however. Their previous attempts to portray the president and the Democrats as weak on law and order during the 2020 White House race and the 2022 midterm elections were not

particularly effective, as other issues ended up being more important — with the exception of a few congressional races.

Moreover, Democrats have accused Republicans of hypocrisy, pointing out that many of them have defended the January 6 attacks on the US Capitol in 2021. They have also noted Trump’s comment that there were “very fine people on both sides” of the white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017.

Kondik, at the University of Virginia, said that although the college protests were a more “comfortable” issue for Republicans, his outlook for the election to be close had not changed. According to the FiveThirtyEight national polling average, Trump has a 0.8 per cent edge over Biden.

Like Biden, Democrats in tough races in November were working to find a position that limits the political fallout. “There is a narrow but very important line between protected speech and speech that threatens violence or seeks to intimidate,” Elissa Slotkin, a Michigan Democrat running for Senate, said on Wednesday.

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