

## President Biden's 2024 State of the Union address

On 7 March 2024, the President of the United States (US), Joe Biden, used his State of the Union (SOTU) address to a joint session of the 118th US Congress (2023-2024) to start his re-election campaign in earnest. Biden has been trailing Donald Trump, his only remaining Republican challenger in the presidential race, in polls in six swing states that Biden won in 2020 and where several thousand voters are expected to decide the outcome of the US elections on 5 November 2024. The SOTU was an opportunity for the President to tout his achievements and set out his vision for a second term in stark contrast to that of Trump, whom he referred to as his 'predecessor' rather than by name. With his age seen by many as a liability, Biden's performance seemed more relevant than the substance of his speech, and was widely perceived as a forceful demonstration of his readiness to fight.

### Background

President Biden delivered his 2024 [SOTU address](#) against the backdrop of severe global security challenges and a domestic audience that is [deeply and increasingly divided](#) over both domestic and foreign policy priorities. Throughout 2023, Republicans in the House of Representatives were [engulfed](#) in infighting, ousting former Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-California) and replacing him with Mike Johnson (R-Louisiana), but passing only a scant number of bills. The 118th Congress therefore risks becoming the [most unproductive](#) in modern history. Reagan-era Republicans who believe in the benefits of US leadership in the world and of supporting Ukraine against Russia have largely been side-lined by Trump-era Republicans eager to divert US funds away from Europe and towards the Indo-Pacific or towards bolstering security at home.

### State of the Union address

The SOTU address is [mandated](#) by the [US Constitution](#), which in Article II dictates that the President 'shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient'. From 1790 to 1946, the speech was referred to as the 'Annual Message', and since 1947, it has been known as the SOTU address. Over time, both its content and form have changed, with some presidents choosing to [present](#) the address in writing.

This ideological shift has recently also reverberated in the Senate. In response to President Biden's 2023 emergency supplemental funding [request](#) for key national security priorities in 2024, which included appropriations for Israel, Taiwan, Ukraine, border security and humanitarian aid for Gaza and Ukraine, the Senate [negotiated](#) a [bipartisan](#) border security and immigration package that ultimately failed to pass because of [election politics](#). Speaker Johnson stated that the bill would be '[dead on arrival](#)' in the House. However, on 13 February 2024, the Senate [passed](#) (70-29) the [National Security Act](#) ([H.R. 815](#)), which includes US\$60 billion for Ukraine but is devoid of border security provisions. Speaker Johnson has not brought the [amended bill](#) to the House floor, calling it a '[status quo](#)' bill that lacks the provisions of the House Republican-spearheaded Secure Our Border Act ([H.R. 2](#)). (NB: five days after the SOTU, House Democrats launched a rare '[discharge petition](#)' which, if it receives enough signatures, would force the Speaker to bring the bill to the floor. Its outcome remains uncertain.) Amid Trump's [tightening grip](#) on the Republican Party, the longest-serving Republican Senate leader, Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky), who has been a strong advocate of US support for Ukraine, announced that he would step down from his position in November. As Biden gave his address, Ukraine funding continued to be blocked in the House, with border security becoming a politically charged campaign topic, Republican support for Ukraine steadily [diminishing](#), and new [conflicts](#) (Gaza) and other flash-points (Taiwan Strait) capturing Americans' attention.

### Foreign policy: Ukraine, Gaza, Red Sea and China

Whereas US foreign policy played a marginal role in the [2023 SOTU](#), Biden's 2024 SOTU featured prominent references to the [need](#) for the US to support Ukraine, the US response to the Hamas-Israel conflict and the [Houthi attacks](#) on merchant ships in the Red Sea, and US policy on China. In a departure from the traditional SOTU structure, Biden began by addressing foreign policy, comparing the current reality with the 'unprecedented moment' in US history that President Franklin Roosevelt faced when he delivered his 1941



'[Four Freedoms Speech](#)' to Congress as war raged in Europe. Biden framed his SOTU as a similar effort to 'wake up the Congress and alert the American people' that 'freedom and democracy are under attack, both at home and overseas'. In a swipe at Trump, he made an energetic and passionate case for US leadership in the world, continued US support for Ukraine, and for speaking the truth and burying the lies about the 'stolen' 2020 elections and the 6 January 2021 [attack](#) on the US Capitol. He reminded Congress that 'history is watching' and urged it to pass the bipartisan National Security Bill, pledging that he would not bow down to Russia, unlike his predecessor who, Biden highlighted, said he would encourage Russia to do '[whatever the hell they want](#)' to NATO members that do not spend 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on national defence. Biden welcomed Sweden to NATO and greeted Sweden's Prime Minister, who was present in the Chamber as one of the [President's private SOTU guests](#).

Biden's references to the Hamas-Israel conflict were a delicate balancing act between affirming Israel's right to pursue Hamas and reminding Israel that humanitarian assistance 'cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip' and that 'protecting and saving innocent lives has to be a priority'. The President has drawn heavy [criticism](#) for his strong backing of Israel after the October 2023 massacre and hostage-taking by Hamas and for failing to obtain a ceasefire to ease the suffering of innocent Palestinians in Gaza. Many Arab and Muslim Americans and young progressive voters in key swing states voted '[uncommitted](#)' in recent primaries, rather than for Biden. Biden, while not able to announce a ceasefire, stated that he would be directing the US military 'to lead an emergency mission to establish a temporary pier in the Mediterranean on the Gaza coast that can receive large ships carrying food, water, medicine and temporary shelters'. The pier would complement ongoing US [aidrops](#) of humanitarian aid packages. The day after the SOTU, the activation of the Cyprus maritime corridor – a joint effort of the EU, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the US – was [endorsed](#).

Regarding the Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea, Biden stated that he had 'built a [coalition](#) of more than a dozen countries ([Operation Prosperity Guardian](#)) to defend international shipping and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea' and had 'ordered strikes to degrade Houthi capabilities and defend U.S. forces in the region'. With China, Biden emphasised that the US seeks competition, not conflict, underscoring that his China policy has been more successful than that of his predecessor. Countering assertions that the US is falling behind China, he stressed the strong US GDP, the US trade deficit with China being at its lowest point in over 10 years, [US measures](#) taken [against](#) China's unfair economic practices and [to prevent](#) the most advanced US technologies being used in Chinese weapons, US promotion of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, and the [bolstered](#) US [partnerships](#) and alliances in the [Indo-Pacific](#).

### Domestic policy: Health, education, tax fairness and voting and labour rights

Biden showcased his accomplishments in terms of numbers of jobs and [infrastructure projects](#) created and the volume of private investments in manufacturing and research. As many Americans [believe](#) they were better off under Trump, Biden touted the strong economic [recovery](#) from COVID-19, [GDP](#) growth, declining inflation and lower [prescription drug costs](#) seen during his administration. He set out a laundry list of [initiatives](#) for a second term, each time needling Republicans over positions he believes are backwards rather than future-oriented. Notably, he bolstered his case for fixing the immigration system by calling out Trump's demonising statement that immigrants '[poison the blood of our country](#)'. His plans address extremely divisive subjects such as defending [reproductive freedom](#) (including [abortion rights](#) and in vitro fertilisation, topics set to once again play a major role in mobilising the electoral power of women), extending caps on prescription drug costs and making tax credits for healthcare premiums permanent. He announced plans to use tax credits to lower mortgage rates, to build and renovate affordable homes, to provide access to pre-school for three and four year-olds, to make college more affordable, to restore the child tax credit, to raise the corporate minimum tax from 15 % to at least 21 % and to introduce a minimum tax of 25 % for billionaires now paying 8.2 %. He called on Congress to pass a bill to transform [women's health research](#), to pass the [Shrinkflation Prevention Act](#) to crack down on price gouging and deceptive pricing, and to finally pass the [Freedom to Vote Act](#), the [John Lewis Voting Rights Act](#), the [Equality Act](#), the [Protecting the Right to Organize \(PRO\) Act](#) and a [ban](#) on assault weapons. Commentators noted the SOTU's '[far feistier tone](#)' designed 'to prove his doubters wrong by flashing his combative side', and how he at times went off-script to [respond](#) to hecklers and jokingly tackled concerns about his age. [Fact checking](#) of his figures revealed most of them to be accurate, although some claims were found to lack [context](#).

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