

Judge sets March 4 date for Trump trial on charges in 2020 election coup

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In a ruling issued Monday, US District Court Judge Tanya Chutkan set March 4, 2024 as the date for the trial of ex-president Donald Trump on federal charges of election interference in the period leading up to the fascist mob assault on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021.

The decision formalizes the intersection of the criminal cases against Trump relating to his efforts to overturn the 2020 election, and the 2024 presidential election campaign, in which Trump is the frontrunner for the Republican nomination. The trial would begin one day before Super Tuesday, the most important of the primary election contests, where more than a third of all delegates to the Republican National Convention will be selected.

At a 90-minute hearing in her Washington D.C. courtroom, the judge heard arguments from lawyers for Trump and for Department of Justice special counsel Jack Smith, who had Trump indicted on four felony counts August 1. The prosecution argued for a January 2, 2024 trial date, while Trump's attorneys proposed an April 2026 date, a transparent effort to postpone the trial until after the election and give Trump the opportunity, should he win the election, to order the case shut down.

Judge Chutkan largely sided with the prosecution, setting a trial date only two months later, and she was clearly provoked by Trump's conduct outside the courtroom and by the arguments and demeanor of his chief lawyer, John Lauro, inside it.

Trump has denounced both Smith and Chutkan on social media, calling them crazed, deranged, biased and corrupt, statements that would have put any ordinary defendant in jail for contempt of court. Chutkan has rejected such a sanction, indicating it would be inflammatory, but warned Trump that the more he vilified the legal proceeding the sooner the trial date

would be set, to minimize the effect of his rhetoric on the potential jury pool.

Lauro denounced the proposed January 2, 2024 trial date as a recipe for "a show trial, not a speedy trial," only to have the judge set a date only two months later.

He argued throughout the hearing that Trump was being prosecuted to assist the reelection campaign of President Joe Biden. "This prosecution provides an advantage to these prosecutors' boss," Lauro said. "This is a political prosecution. We're going to have to raise that issue squarely with Your Honor and do it justice."

The Trump attorney said he would file a motion next week based on the authoritarian premise that Trump was immune to the charges since the indictment covers the period when he was in office as president. He also said there could be a motion charging selective prosecution, claiming that the charges were brought by the special prosecutor as retaliation for the federal investigation of Hunter Biden, the president's son, on tax and corruption charges.

Prosecutor Molly Gaston made the argument that an early trial date was particularly necessary because of Trump's nonstop social media attacks on the court process. "On a near-daily basis, the defendant posts on social media about this case," Gaston said. "He has publicly disparaged witnesses, he has attacked the integrity of the court and of the citizens of the District of Columbia" from whom the jurors will be selected.

The judge, who is African-American, was reportedly stung by a court filing by Trump's lawyers which included the obscene and provocative comparison of the billionaire ex-president to the Scottsboro Boys, the nine young black men framed up on rape charges in Jim Crow Alabama in the 1930s—because they were rushed to trial only a week after their indictment. Trump would

have seven months, she said, and there was hardly any similarity in the two cases.

The judge's action sets up an extraordinary conflict between the criminal prosecution of Trump and his campaign for the presidential nomination of the Republican Party in 2024. The trial would begin only one day before the "Super Tuesday" primaries in which a huge number of delegates to the Republican National Convention will be chosen.

The trial would likely extend throughout the month in which the vast majority of these delegates are chosen in primary contests in 25 states. On March 5, 15 states hold primaries to select 865 delegates. From March 12-23 there are primaries in 10 more states and Puerto Rico to select 521 delegates. A total of 1,386 delegates, well over a majority, would be selected while Trump was spending much of his time in a Washington D.C. courtroom.

This prospective calendar only underscores the deepening crisis of the entire US political system. The setting of the trial date likely ensures that the Republican-controlled House of Representatives will retaliate by launching an impeachment probe of President Biden, with the goal of teeing up a vote to impeach him even before the trial of Trump begins.

The impeachment probe is based on claims that Biden personally profited from his son Hunter's business dealings in Ukraine and China when he was vice president in the Obama administration. While Hunter Biden certainly cashed in on his father's status, particularly his role as head of US policy in Ukraine, the Republicans have not yet produced evidence of money flowing directly to Joe Biden.

The Republican Party hopes to use impeachment hearings as a counterweight to the prosecution of Trump, although the fascist ex-president faces far more serious charges, including two indictments-- the federal indictment before Judge Chutkan and the indictment by the state of Georgia--for actions related to the attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

Judge Chutkan said she had considered the conflict in timing between the case in her courtroom and three other felony cases being brought against Trump, but that it was not her task to sort out conflicts with the political calendar. "Mr. Trump, like any defendant, will have to make the trial date work regardless of his schedule," she said, adding that "there is a societal

interest to a speedy trial."

Prosecutors have indicated that they will require four to six weeks to present their case, and Trump's lawyers have made a similar estimate for the defense case. That would extend the proceeding until the end of May, setting up potential conflicts with two other cases. Trump is to be tried March 25, 2024 in Manhattan on charges of covering up hush money payments to porn actress Stormy Daniels. His trial in Florida on federal charges of withholding and concealing secret documents is set to begin on May 20, 2024.

No trial date has yet been set in the Georgia case, which is the most complex to schedule because it involves Trump and 18 codefendants and a variety of charges. Trump alone faces 13 felony counts.

Several of the codefendants, including lawyers Kenneth Chesebro and Sidney Powell, who played key roles in the conspiracy to use "fake electors" to block the certification of Biden's election victory by Congress, have effectively broken with Trump by seeking an early trial.

In response to their efforts, Fulton County Prosecutor Fani Willis and state judge Scott McAfee initially set a trial date of October 23, less than two months away, for the cases against Chesebro and Powell, with Willis suggesting she would be ready for a trial of all 19 defendants on that date.

Other defendants are seeking to have their cases severed from those of Trump and their codefendants, while still others have claimed that their actions in relation to the fake electors were directly ordered by Trump—in effect, providing evidence against him.



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