

# Trump can't run on his economic or COVID-19 record. Now, he's banking on his "law and order" message breaking through.



*This week, President Trump visited Kenosha, Wisconsin, after several days of protests in the city which followed the police shooting of an unarmed Black man, Jacob Blake. In this Q&A, LSE US Centre Director [Professor Peter Trubowitz](#) writes that Trump's visit will likely do little to help him to close the gap in the national polls with his Democratic challenger, former Vice President, Joe Biden. Trump's trip, he comments, shows that he will continue to push his "law and order" strategy in the face of a poor economy and a resurgent COVID-19 virus.*

## Will Trump's visit to Kenosha this week make a difference?

I'd be surprised if it moves the political needle a great deal. The presidential race remains where it was a few weeks ago, before the Democratic and Republican conventions. Democratic nominee, former Vice President, Joe Biden is showing a consistent lead in the national polls and is ahead of Trump by smaller margins in most of the key battleground states. There is time for Trump to close the gap, and there are reasons to expect that the race will tighten in the coming weeks. Trump has a number of things going for him: a strong stock market, a huge war chest of campaign money, enthusiasm among his core supporters, and the advantages of incumbency, which were very much on display at the Republican convention. Still, Trump is presiding over the worst health crisis in over a hundred years and an economic downturn at risk of becoming an even more [severe recession](#).

## Why is Trump playing the "law and order" card?

Trump is desperately trying to shake up a race that has been remarkably stable and running in Joe Biden's favor. Reprising [Richard Nixon's "law and order"](#) strategy of 1968 could work with some voters who sat out the 2016 election (see below), but there are also reasons to be sceptical. First, Trump has actually been playing this card since the protests erupted over the killing of George Floyd by police back in May. While there are signs that support for Black Lives Matter has weakened, this has not translated into increased support for Trump in the polls (see [here](#)). He still trails Biden overall and especially in the white suburbs which Trump is targeting with his law and order messaging. Second, Trump played this card in the 2018 midterm elections (remember the ["invasion of migrant caravans"](#) heading north from Central America to the US) in an attempt to take the focus off health care. The diversionary tactic didn't work: Republicans lost badly in many House races. Finally, in 1968 Nixon was running as outsider. Trump is the incumbent. As Biden insisted in [a speech in Pittsburgh](#) earlier this week, the violence Trump talks about is happening on Trump's watch. There is a chance that Trump's message breaks through and works, but it is not a given in an environment where most Americans are more worried about [public health and the economy](#).

## Where does the race stand two months out?

The race remains a [referendum on Trump's presidency](#). The reason he is desperately trying to focus voters' attention on what is happening in Portland and Kenosha is because he cannot run on his handling of the pandemic or the economy. This is what the "law and order" messaging that the Trump campaign amped up at the Republican convention is all about. If that message breaks through in the white suburbs (see above) or intensifies turnout among [blue collar voters who did not vote in 2016](#), Trump could close the gap with Biden and score an Electoral College victory again. (There is little chance he will win the popular vote.) But there are a number of "if's" here and while we are still waiting on state polling data, the results so far at the national level (see [here](#)) suggest that Trump's messaging is not having the desired effect.

- This article is based on interview comments Professor Trubowitz gave to Bloomberg on 2 September.
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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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Peter Trubowitz is Professor of International Relations, and Director of the LSE's US Centre. His main research interests are in the fields of international security and comparative foreign policy, with special focus on American grand strategy and foreign policy. He also writes and comments frequently on US party politics and elections and how they shape and are shaped by America's changing place in the world.