

The Case for Biden to Step Aside

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There is no reason to believe that President Biden will reverse his decision to seek a second term. He personally has sent no signals, nor have his remarkably disciplined White House staff, his kitchen Cabinet, or anyone on the reelection campaign.

But it is hard to look at recent survey data and not question whether his reelection bid really is such a good idea. The most recent surveys from CNN and The Wall Street Journal are brutal and corroborate similar findings by Fox News, The New York Times/Siena College, Marist College/NPR/PBS NewsHour, and Quinnipiac University, among others. The numbers show a very difficult road ahead for Biden and are tough to spin in any way that would soften the impact.

There is a pretty fair chance that a Democrat can win the national popular vote, but then again, that and five dollars will get you a cup of coffee at Starbucks. The country is evenly split, but as this column has repeatedly addressed (ad nauseam, as my Democratic friends and wife would say), the “wasted vote (<https://www.nationaljournal.com/s/721534/why-democrats-should-be-nervous/>)” challenge facing Democrats is daunting. As Al Gore and Hillary Clinton can attest, it isn’t about how many votes you get, it’s about where you get them. Simply put, national polls, which attempt to measure the national popular vote, greatly inflate Democratic strength. A Democrat would probably have to win the national vote by at least 4 or 5, and possibly 6 or even 7 points, to translate their national win into 270 Electoral College votes. That is a tall order in a highly polarized and evenly split country.

That wasted vote conundrum is compounded by the additional baggage that Biden carries— namely, his age and concerns about his handling of the economy.

On a substantive level, polling shows strong negative feelings about Biden’s economic stewardship in general and his handling of inflation in particular. That scourge had become a distant memory from 30 years ago but resurfaced almost immediately after the first spending from the American Rescue Plan hit, with

White House assurances that it wouldn't be a big problem still echoing in voters' ears. Polls give Donald Trump double-digit advantages for his handling the economy during his four years compared with public assessment of Biden's so far. There are several reasons why there has been little pressure on Biden to step away. First of all, he's widely liked personally in his party. Second, he's largely in sync ideologically with where the Democratic Party is and seems to be headed. Third, profound and widespread concerns that Vice President Harris is not ready for the presidency now (and maybe not ever) have kept the pressure on Biden down to a minimum.

But these new data raise the question of whether it is time for a fresh horse for this upcoming ride. The party is not without alternatives, and even having to endure a fight over the nomination might be preferable to this course of action under these circumstances.

It is pretty simple. A focus on Biden is not what Democrats should want; conversely, the spotlight on Trump is a scenario that the GOP shouldn't want. If either party went with a different nominee than their current prohibitive favorite, they could keep the focus on the other and have a real edge in the election.

Don't get me wrong; the odds of Biden stepping aside are no better than 1 in 5. It is pretty unlikely for elected presidents to pass up a bid for a second, full term. It's only happened three times: James K. Polk in 1848, James Buchanan in 1860, and Rutherford B. Hayes in 1880. Presidents Coolidge, Truman, and Lyndon Johnson each ascended to the presidency from the co-pilot seat and won a full term in their own right, but ultimately passed up on the chance to go for a second full term.

A decision not to run would need to happen fairly soon. Several states have filing deadlines by the end of the year. Nevada (<https://www.nvsos.gov/sos/elections/election-information/2024-election-information>)'s filing period for Democrats will arrive next month, on Oct. 2-16. Alabama and Arkansas have filing deadlines in November. California, Illinois, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas join them in December.

Some argue that if Biden were to step aside, how could he not name Harris to be his heir apparent with an endorsement? But one might have asked in 2016 why President Obama stayed on the sidelines as his former secretary of State Hillary

Clinton and Sen. Bernie Sanders duked it out. He didn't endorse Clinton until June, after the final primaries were held. And why did Obama hold out on endorsing Biden himself until April 2020, after his former vice president had effectively nailed down the nomination? A sitting or former president staying above the fray and letting the nomination process work itself out is hardly unprecedented.

The reality is that a general election with Trump and without Biden would be about Trump and his many shortcomings, just as a general election with Biden and without Trump would shift the spotlight exclusively on Biden. Yet Biden really relishes the job that he has spent a half-century preparing himself for. The president saw himself as the one person who could beat Trump in 2020 — and he may believe he's the only one who could again.

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