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‘Inflation is a real president killer’

Political analyst Geoffrey Kabaservice on Trump’s takeover of the Republican Party, Biden’s economic record and his advice to European leaders

Joe Biden vs. Donald Trump — in November, the US will most likely see the first election rematch in nearly 70 years. The 77-year-old former president is seeking revenge, and the 81-year-old incumbent, who hinted before his election that he would give way to a new generation after one term, claims to be the only one able to defeat Trump. Is the United States losing the ability to move forward?

Seventy per cent of Americans didn’t want the 2024 presidential election to be a rematch between Biden and Trump. But I wouldn’t say that the United States is incapable of moving forward. There are certain structural elements of US politics that once upon a time worked and now they don’t. The two big reasons for that are, first, that society has become much more partisan and polarised than it once was. Secondly, this means that some structures, which would not have made much of a difference in the past, now make a huge difference.

The most obvious example is the Electoral College, a counter-majoritarian democratic system, which started to be dysfunctional right after its implementation in the 18th century. Today, this means that this election, like every election for the last 20 years, comes down to six states and the votes of possibly no more than 50 000 people in those states, which is a crazy way for a democratic society to elect its leaders.

More generally, within society, there is a feeling of stasis, maybe even exhaustion. The high level of partisanship means we cannot pass even the most routine bills required to keep the government going. There is no capacity to make compromises or agreements, especially on the Republican side. Even since before he became the candidate, Trump has the ability to forbid Republicans in Congress from making agreements with Democrats. Take the example of immigration: Trump wants the situation at the border with Mexico to be as terrible as possible so that he can pin it on Biden. The Democrats actually

were willing to give up more in an immigration bill than they had in decades. And many Republicans wanted to take that bill, which would have implemented much tighter border controls. In hindsight, many will regret not having taken the bipartisan deal. Who knows what a President Trump could achieve on this issue without a compromise on the side of the Democrats? On the other hand, will voters in November actually remember that it was Trump and the Republicans who prevented a compromise?

What does it mean for the Republican Party that the Republican National Committee (RNC) is now co-chaired by Trump's daughter-in-law, Lara Trump?

Trump taking over the RNC actually turns out to be a very big deal for Republicans. It's not unusual for a presidential nominee to want his own team in place on the Committee, particularly if the previous administration was someone who had a different ideological outlook. However, it is very unusual for a president to throw out so many RNC employees and to appoint his daughter-in-law. There has already been some pushback because of Trump's move, for example following his shut-down of outreach centres around the country, which had been created to encourage Hispanic, African and Asian Americans to vote Republican.

But there are still two bigger worries for the Republicans: One is that Trump is simply going to use all of the resources of the Republican campaign association to pay for his legal bills. The other worry is that he could use the RNC to elect Trumpist Republican candidates down-ballot. This will be a problem because the Republicans need some breadth of ideological representation to win the elections in places that are not 'deep red'. Trump has this habit, shown most vividly in the 2022 midterms, of putting his stamp on candidates he likes because they are loyal to him but who cannot get elected. In 2022, that almost certainly cost the Republicans the control of the Senate, and it might happen again this year with the House of Representatives.

Is there still a place within the party for Republicans who aren't following Trump?

There is very little space. Of course, you can find exceptions. David Valladeo, for example, is one of the two Republicans in the House who voted to impeach Trump in the wake of the 6 January insurrection and who is still in office. But the Republican Party base is pro-Trump. They have enough strength to have guaranteed his re-nomination against any kind of opposition. And they aren't going to

go away, even if Trump vanishes from the planet tomorrow.

It is very difficult for a Republican in office to challenge that kind of populism. Most Republicans are Ronald Reagan kind of conservatives at heart. They don't believe in Trump's turn against globalism, the wish to abandon our allies, especially NATO, the stated preference for Russia, or the turn against trade and national unity. But they cannot say that publicly, which is quite an astonishing and very novel development in American political history. The only people prominent in speaking out against Trump are mostly former elected officials like Liz Cheney.

In 2020, Trump lost the votes of suburban women. Will these votes have an impact again this time?

I don't think they will have a real significant outcome in this election because the dynamic is not going to be that different from the previous two elections. The white working class might be a little more in play because a majority of them voted for Biden in 2020, which might not be the case this time. This is because a big structural transformation of American politics has taken place fairly recently: The parties are switching their class bases. Bill Clinton lost the votes of college-educated Americans but gained a sizeable majority of the votes of blue-collar, working-class Americans. Nowadays, that is reversed. Trump is going to dominate the votes of non-college-educated Americans while almost completely losing the votes of college-educated Americans.

Suburban women typically fall into the latter category. They are very likely to vote Democrat, even by a larger margin than last time. Trump will not campaign very hard for their votes. The real question is how many of them will turn out because they are not typical democratic voters. They want to see a candidate who talks a lot more about a balanced budget, a strong America, a strong defence, higher education and meritocracy than Biden does.

Biden has a good economic record. He brings back jobs and, in comparison to the chaos of the Trump administration, he runs things quietly and smoothly. Why is he losing the votes of working-class Americans?

The fact is that the Biden economy has surpassed the Trump economy of 2019. The performance of Biden's economic team in recovering from the inflation just a year and a half ago is among the best I have seen from any president in my lifetime. But people still feel that they were better off back then. There are two problems for the president: Firstly, the Biden team is not good at communicating his

record. The average voter has no idea that this has happened. Secondly, inflation has not gone away and it has hit the working class hardest. It is at a 30-year high now in terms of the percentage of the income that Americans are paying for food. Unfortunately, inflation is a real president killer in a lot of cases.

Trump is leading the current polls. What advice would you give to European leaders now?

We don't know if Trump will win, and we don't know what the outcome will be if he does. Trump, like many populists, says he will do certain things that, in reality, he has no intention or ability to follow through. On the one hand, he really does seem to dislike America's alliances and empathises with dictators. Yet, on the other hand, that does not mean that the United States actually experienced a significant turn towards Russia or China during Trump's presidency. Europe shouldn't panic at this point but be prepared for an America that is less of a global leader. Even if Trump loses, Europe should prepare because he would not have been able to say things such as 'We need to get out of NATO, our allies are all ripping us off' if that was not a real sentiment on parts of the American people.

Politicians in Europe need to understand that the US does not, at this point, value the relationship in a way that it did in the past. They have to take more seriously what '*Zeitenwende*' truly would mean: a Europe that is more determined to assume leadership, a more robust German military capacity and a Germany that is prepared to go against American leadership and to become the rallying point for democratic societies around the world. Germany needs to occupy a different role within Europe and the world, and in many ways needs to fill the vacuum that will be left behind by America's withdrawal.

This interview was conducted by Mira Groh.



Geoffrey Kabaservice
Washington, DC

Geoffrey Kabaservice is the director of political studies at the Niskanen

Center in Washington, DC as well as the author of *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party*.