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‘Joe Biden is not a candidate who inspires, but he is authentic’

US President Biden is running for re-election. Knut Dethlefsen on his age, the unity of the Democratic Party and the challenges for the Republicans

US President Joe Biden has announced his candidacy for re-election, stating that he wants to ‘finish the job’. What is it that Biden still considers unfinished that makes him throw his hat into the ring once more as an 80-year-old and already the oldest president in US history?

On 25 April, President Joe Biden declared his renewed candidacy with a video. In it, he explains his reasons for running again. He describes the election campaign, as he did in 2020, as a ‘battle for the soul of the nation’. What kind of country does the US want to be in the future? He appeals directly and also symbolically to the patriotism of Americans, just as the successful governors Josh Shapiro and Wes Moore did in their election campaigns in Pennsylvania and Maryland last autumn. Biden addresses the majority's sense of freedom. While also sharply attacking the growing Republican extremism, more precisely the ‘Make America Great Again’ Republicans. In doing so, he is not only targeting Donald Trump but also other possible candidates such as Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley. Joe Biden recalls the violent coup attempt by Trump and his partisans on 6 January 2021, which still lingers as a shock in the bones of most Americans. On top of that, he warns that the Republicans will deprive the citizens of the US of freedom and opportunity should they resume the helm.

Polls show that nine out of ten Democrats are satisfied with Biden's work, but among those under 30 as well as the electorally crucial group of undecideds, the figure is only about 35 per cent. Still, Biden is not being challenged from within the party. Why?

Incumbents are traditionally supported by their party. In cases where this has not happened, there were negative consequences for the candidates. When Jimmy Carter was challenged by Ted Kennedy in the election campaign, he lost the presidency to Ronald Reagan. The

Democrats have not forgotten this experience. The leadership of the Democratic Party is united behind President Joe Biden, believing he has the best chance of winning back the presidency in 2024. The Democrats want to avoid the uncertainty of an open confrontation in the primaries, fearing to be moved too far to the left. They know that they have to win over the centre of society if they want to be politically successful. Joe Biden is not a candidate who inspires, but friend and foe know him. He is authentic and it is hard to portray him as anything other than what he really is. He brings a comforting sense of security, experience and a sense of perspective to politics. And yet, his great weakness is his advanced age. Obviously, the Democrats are worried about the health of their first man. But at this point, it is stable.

Joe Biden personally sees himself strengthened by the popularity of his party, the successes of his presidency and the relative success in the mid-term elections last autumn. And he sees himself as the only candidate who can beat Donald Trump.

Biden boasts that only he can beat Trump. But what if Ron DeSantis, the much younger and more agile governor of Florida, passes Trump after all and becomes the Republican nominee? Would the Democrats be prepared for that?

The Democrats are very well prepared for the 2024 election campaign. The presidency will be decided in six states: Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Arizona and Georgia. If you look at the 2020 and 2022 election results in these states, the Democrats are very well positioned. They hold the governorships or senatorships there, for example, and in certain cases also have majorities in the state parliaments – in some states even in all three institutions. It will be very difficult for the Republicans to succeed in these states, and they would actually have to win politically in all six in order to win the presidency.

The Republican Party is driven by the social conservative and right-wing populist base. At present, it is not politically led but behaves opportunistically to the sentiments on the right fringe of society. This has a major impact on candidate selection but also on the Republicans' ability to win over independent voters.

Ron DeSantis is politically not that different from Donald Trump. He has just introduced a very restrictive ban on abortion in the state of Florida, where he is currently governor. He is waging a kind of culture war in schools and is in litigation with big companies like Disney. All this makes him very unattractive to moderate voters. In general, the Republicans’ position is damaged by their restrictive

stance on abortion. Most people want a pragmatic and humane approach to the issues surrounding this question.

As recently as the 2020 election campaign, Biden had said he saw himself as a bridge and so hinted at retirement after one term. But he is now delaying the renewal. How does he want to reach the youth, Blacks and Latinos, whose lives have not deteriorated under him but have not really improved either?

Donald Trump's last year in office was a socio-political nightmare. In 2020, the US experienced several crises at the same time and the president did not seem to take them seriously. The African-American section of American society in particular was badly affected. If Donald Trump is on the ballot, this will be extremely mobilising for the Democrats. On the whole, the Biden presidency was characterised by progressive politics with a sense of proportion.

Joe Biden has never seriously intended to give up the presidency. He wants to modernise the country and make it fit for the future. Those around him have tried to portray his policies as a kind of 'New Deal'. It certainly isn't, but the Biden administration has proven to be crisis-proof. It has led the country out of the Covid-19 crisis, brought together an international coalition against Putin's war of aggression in Ukraine and successfully led it to date, preventing Ukraine's collapse. While the Biden administration has not been able to stop inflation, it has so far succeeded in stabilising the US economy. It created many new and good jobs, got long-delayed investment programmes off the ground and has finally also tackled the fight against climate change. In the Covid crisis, for example, there was help for many to at least get back on their feet and not go under.

The Biden administration's policies are specifically aimed at the regions that will be important in winning the presidency in 2024, and it is trying to use investments there to promote a successful transformation of structures with good jobs. With the partial forgiveness of student debt, Biden specifically wanted to appeal to younger male and female voters. He brought many African-American women into important and high offices – these are also important socio-political changes. But it is also true that many of his progressive promises have not yet been fulfilled, such as banning BB guns, lowering the cost of medicines and codifying the right to abortion. This, too, is what Joe Biden is running for again. Overall, he is concerned with getting a grip on the centrifugal forces in society and holding together the broad coalition that carries his presidency.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



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