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Joe and Bernie versus Trump

The hard-fought primary race is over and the Democrats are closing ranks – it's looking good for the presidential election

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'We need you in the White House,' Bernie Sanders told Joe Biden in a public live stream. Because of the current movement restrictions, the two men were at their respective homes in Vermont and Delaware. They conveyed a genuine mutual affection. And that is probably also what defines Biden as a person: he appeals to lots of people across the political spectrum. This sets him apart from the man he is up against in the autumn, Donald Trump, who is not even liked by many of his supporters and allies.

So the US Democrats have nominated their presidential candidate with no fuss or fanfare. Their choice is Barack Obama's 77-year-old former vice-president, whose political career was all but written off just a few weeks ago. The formal nomination must be made at the party's national convention, originally scheduled for mid-July but now postponed until August. From a political perspective, though, this party conference is no longer necessary. The election campaign is under way.

Bernie Sanders has thrown his political weight behind Joe Biden. He had just ended his dynamic campaign, which gained the support of lots of young Americans, a week earlier. Particularly at a time of national emergency, it is important to focus fully on how to overcome the crisis in the country. Senator Sanders has paved the way for Joe Biden and the Democratic Party to concentrate on the task in hand: challenging Donald Trump, opposing his incompetence and corruption and defeating him in November.

Well-timed support for Biden

All this is a far cry from four years ago. In 2016, Sanders remained in the running until July, and his support for presidential candidate Hillary

Clinton was ultimately half-hearted. At any rate, lots of 'Sandernistas' refused to back her. Only one in five Sanders supporters voted for Clinton in the presidential election. This time, Sanders has said it would be irresponsible not to support Biden. He has clearly concluded that it is better to focus the political debate on Donald Trump and uniting the moderate and progressive wings of the Democratic Party to achieve this.

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For Sanders as the figurehead of the progressive Democrats, it is also about influencing the wider political process – especially the programmatic shaping of the party platform and governing agenda. In this respect, the end of his campaign is not a tragedy, but rather an opportunity to gain political influence. Sanders has given way to Biden and expects political concessions in return. His concession speech made clear that he sees himself as part of the Democratic Party leadership and is ready to take responsibility. And Joe wants Bernie onside, too: for the election campaign and for forming a government. Small teams are now set to devise joint positions for the party platform. This suggests that the Democrats are pulling together and ready for the fight.

And they have another ace up their sleeve. Barack Obama had kept his counsel during the primary race. Now, he can play his part in the election campaign. His support for Joe Biden was well-timed. In a video, Obama spoke of the importance of good governance, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. He praised Bernie Sanders and his policies. He advocated major structural changes in the US, embracing Elizabeth Warren's cause. He made clear that the US's role in the world had to change for the better. Most of all, though, Obama gave Joe Biden a boost. Obama rallied the troops – with decency and dignity. A few days later, progressive senator Elizabeth Warren gave her own endorsement, emphasising Biden's integrity, amenable nature and ability to work with others – qualities that are not associated with Trump. This election will be about people and personalities.

Biden's challenges

Despite all suggestions to the contrary, the former vice-president now has a good chance of beating Trump on 3 November later this year. He is well-known and popular throughout the country, especially in key states. In the primary race, he demonstrated broad electoral appeal. His Achilles

heel is younger voters, the majority of whom have not supported him in the past. That is what makes his endorsement by Bernie Sanders so important. The Democrats cannot afford to lose 20 per cent of Sanders' support base in 2020. The prospect of four more years under Donald Trump if they lose will generate extra motivation. This has prompted the likes of left-wing icon and Queens congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to speak up for Biden.

Biden now has the chance to consolidate his campaign and secure funding – two of his weaknesses as a candidate so far. He contested the primaries with practically no organisational structure behind him. The primary race was a lengthy one and it is high time the Democrats made Donald Trump the focus of their political campaign. Although Biden is the candidate Trump fears the most, US election campaigns swallow up billions of dollars these days and Trump is way ahead of Biden in terms of funding and campaign organisation.

One thing in Biden's favour is that he now looks like a viable alternative to the current president. If he wins, he can get going straight away. The public confidence that he has built up over his long political career as a senator and vice-president could tip the election in his favour, particularly during the coronavirus crisis and the recession. People believe that Biden is capable of putting together an impressive team for government even before the election.

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The unveiling of his running mate will be an important moment. Biden has stated that he will choose a woman. As he hardly reflects the diversity of modern US society, this was a wise decision. There is wild speculation over who it will be and various lists are doing the rounds. Senators Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris and Amy Klobuchar are regarded as potential candidates. The Democrats' Afro-American hope, Stacey Abrams, who almost won the gubernatorial election in Georgia in 2018, would also be an interesting choice. She can inspire and mobilise people. Another strong candidate would be the feisty governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer. Not least due to the president's incompetence, the fight against the coronavirus pandemic is putting the governors in the spotlight, as they decide on the key measures to stem the disease and look after the population.

Trump's faltering campaign premise

On the other hand, the crisis situation, where the executive usually takes centre stage, makes a normal election campaign impossible. It is not easy for Joe Biden to make an impact in the media, as he holds no office and cannot make public appearances. Trump showcases himself every day and is keen to shape the narrative of the crisis.

However, the figures are stacked against Trump. There are almost 800,000 cases and over 42,000 deaths. Over 22 million people have lost their jobs in four weeks. Consumption and industrial production have nosedived and share prices continue to fall. Trump wanted to win the election as president of a booming economy. That's not going to happen now. The presidential election is likely to become a referendum on crisis management. Even outstanding communicators would struggle to sell the shocking figures as good results. So Trump is looking for scapegoats. Yet he is losing his grip on the situation.

A leading member of the White House staff under President Obama puts it like this: 'The way he's behaving in this crisis, Trump isn't attracting votes.' His narcissistic manner and lack of empathy for other people's suffering in these difficult times make him unelectable to many, especially women and non-partisan voters. The slight increase in Trump's approval ratings should not be overestimated. Satisfaction with his presidency is declining again and has never gone above 50 per cent. In this context, the Democrats can take this historic opportunity to regain control of the US's destiny from 2021.



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