DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 01.09.2022 | Marco Bitschnau

If not Biden, then who?

With Joe Biden turning 80 and the halfway mark of his Presidency near, the question of who his political successor will be is still open

While summer temperatures may prevail in Washington D.C., at the moment, it hardly feels as though the sun is shining brightly on the Biden administration. More than a year and a half after taking office, the 46th US president is confronted with a decidedly patchy near-mid-term record. Although the thorny issue of Corona has largely been shelved, many of the new administration's more ambitious planned projects have either become bogged down in the day-to-day grind or have died a quiet death in the Senate committees. Where, to make matters worse, the Democrats still have only a wafer-thin majority, and where they are dependent on the cooperation of the two declared moderates Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin. If those two say 'No', then that's it for all the grandiose plans for reform. And they have said 'No' plenty of times in recent months.

Even though Biden's situation has improved somewhat recently – in part because he was able to get the Democratic caucus in the Senate to agree to his Inflation Reduction Act, in part because of the aftermath of the Supreme Court decision in the case of Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organisation - it is still likely that he will have a distinctly nervous stomach as he approaches what has proved a major stumbling block for almost every post-war presidency: the mid-term elections, scheduled for early November, in which the party of the incumbent president traditionally takes a beating. (The last one to achieve an overall positive midterm election result was George W. Bush in 2002, at a time when the country was lurching headlong towards war in Iraq.) In the absence of any fundamental change, at the very least the House of Representatives will fall to the Republicans and the government's power to act will be severely diminished.

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Apart from such shifts in power, the midterms also mark another watershed moment, as the president then officially enters the second half of his term in office. The time horizon thus

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inexorably shifts towards the next election cycle and brings up the inevitable question of a second candidacy: to run again or not to run again? This is usually a purely formal consideration, and no incumbent since Lyndon B. Johnson has chosen to voluntarily relinquish the chalice of power - and even in Johnson's case, it took a miserable primary result in 1968, failing health, and a lot of pressure from inside his own party. It is hardly likely that Biden will prove to be the exception to the rule, even if many Democrats would like that to be the case. At any rate, he has already expressed to confidantes his readiness to run, and - wily politician that he is - has ensured that the public is only too well informed about these private declarations.

Thus, everything could take its expected course, were it not for the tricky issue of his age. For the president is not only heading towards the mid-term elections this autumn, but also towards his 80th birthday. This is a major political liability for Biden; if he were an athletic man in his mid-fifties (Jimmy Carter, 1980), let alone a boyish just-turned-fifty (Bill Clinton, 1996), no one would doubt his suitability for, or entitlement to, a second run. But as an 80-year-old, one has to contend in the public perception with a factor that is beyond the reach of political strategists. Not that there is any physiological inevitability about this: Biden per se is no more too old for the office than Kennedy or Roosevelt were too young. But it's just a fact that politics revolves around narratives, and every fleeting moment of infirmity, every slip, every symptom of age increases the pressure on the president to make way for younger blood. One way or another, the question of who is to succeed him is always in the background now. And with it, a whole raft of problems.

Difficulty finding an alternative

Replacing Biden could turn out to be more difficult than expected. If Biden were to decide not to run, the favourite to replace him would no doubt be Vice-President Kamala Harris, who has at least some claim to the status of crown princess by virtue of her office. However, the Californian has a put on a comparatively weak performance so far - to which defections from her staff, confusing media appearances, and an increasingly visible frustration at the lack of opportunities to raise her profile have all contributed. Unquestionably, it can be a thankless task to try to discharge successfully an office as ill-defined as the vice-presidency.

But in the case of Harris, there is also a certain sense that she is out of her depth, something which was overshadowed at first by the initial euphoria surrounding the historic achievement of being the first woman to take the office of vice-president. Biden's number two may be politically savvy, but she has little instinctive appeal beyond a narrow left-liberal constituency on the coasts. Even the much-maligned Mike Pence was a good deal more popular after a year and a half in office.

Should the party decide that Harris represents too big a risk, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg would probably be the next on the list. He is seen as dynamic, is popular with the party's big donors, and, unlike the vice-president, has already proved with his strong showing in the 2020 primaries that he can gain some traction within the party. It was only when the rank and file of the party had swung behind Biden by the time of the Super Tuesday elections that he dropped out of the race - with his head held high and with newly acquired political capital. There are, of course, a number of things that would speak against Buttigieg as presidential candidate: first and foremost, his age (he would only be 42 in 2024), but also repeatedly cited are his lack of experience, his controversial background as a consultant and his weak pre-election ratings among ethnic minorities.

For Buttigieg, it might therefore be a smarter strategy to first build up a power base within the party and to aim for a seat in the Senate, which is a classic springboard to the presidency. In this context, it is noteworthy that he recently relocated from the deeply Republican state of Indiana to Traverse City in the battleground state of Michigan - officially for family reasons, but the fact that a successor for 72-year-old Senator Debbie Stabenow may be sought there in the foreseeable future might just have had some influence on his decision to move. In any event, there would be good reason to prefer the prospect of joining the powerful US upper chamber to the pitfalls of an all-or-nothing candidature. Especially since it is still true that anyone who fails too often in the primaries is soon politically dead in the water. Former would-be presidents who fell very hard, from Dennis Kucinich to Rick Santorum, can testify to that.

A dangerous gap in the Democratic party

Behind the Harris/Buttigieg duo a visible gap is already opening up. Bernie Sanders is probably finally beyond his sell-by date; Elizabeth Warren burned several bridges to the progressive camp in 2020; Amy Klobuchar is considered too brittle; Beto O'Rourke is fighting for his political survival these days; and neither Tammy Duckworth nor

Gretchen Whitmer, let alone Michelle Obama, the perennial dream candidate, seems interested in switching jobs. California governor Gavin Newsom would be a more likely contender, having effortlessly survived the recall ballot - but it is highly unlikely that he would be able to manoeuvre his way past his fellow Californian Harris. So perhaps Roy Cooper after all? In terms of content, the appointment of the North Carolina governor would be tantamount to a continuation of Biden's course by different means (and with a different aesthetic). More of a cautious upgrade than a new product launch, so to speak.

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The reasoning behind this is that Cooper exudes competence and calm, has a good reputation among independents especially, and would probably be the most effective counter pole against a Republican firebrand. 'He's a Democratic governor from a purple state and has governed in a divided state - that's a recipe for success,' as the Carolina Journal quotes political scientist Chris Cooper (no relation to the governor). An assessment which (excepting the purple state part) would also apply to candidates like John Bel Edwards or Andy Beshear. The only question is whether a white man with decidedly centrist tendencies would still be acceptable to the progressive wing of the party in 2024. Their disappointment at the largely unconfrontational course taken by the Biden administration might well translate into an aversion to any outward appearance of moderation. There are already signs of this today.

After all is said and done, of course, US politics remains an incredibly fast-moving business. It is a well-known maxim that whoever goes into the papal conclave as pope comes out as cardinal - and it is not very different with the White House. Who could have guessed in 2004 that the then Senate freshman Barack Obama would battle his way to the top within four years? Or that reality TV star Donald Trump would effortlessly outmanoeuvre party heavyweights like Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio in 2012? So, there is plenty of scope for surprises and shooting stars - which does not, of course, make the problem of the Democratic succession any easier. The issue may surface in 2024 or not until 2028: but while the Republicans are more and more clearly lining up behind Florida's popular governor Ron DeSantis as the alternative to Trump, within the Democratic party a dangerous gap has opened up behind the

unifying figure of Biden.



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