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Democratic dilemma

While Biden's approval rating is dropping, Trump may be planning a comeback. Democrats need to get their act together, or else risk losing power

These are dark days for the Democrats in Washington. President Biden's approval rating has fallen into the low 40's, approaching Trumpian lows. In off-year elections, the Democrats lost the governorship of Virginia for the first time since 2009 and barely eked out a win in the heavily democratic state of New Jersey. The party's own polling illustrates how much support Biden has lost, showing him 'down in battleground districts across the country, with 52 per cent of voters disapproving of the job he's doing'.

These setbacks seem to auger a thrashing at the ballot box in the Congressional election coming next November. The Democrats are steeling themselves for the loss of their slim majority in the House of Representatives and possibly even in the Senate.

The causes of this slide of in democratic fortunes are multiple and controversial. Many analysts point to Biden's inability to control the pandemic as he promised; others see inflation, supply chain problems, and a less than robust economy recovery as the source of his woes. Some point to a lack of leadership and policy successes – the disastrous defeat and retreat in Afghanistan, the long agony it took to pass a bipartisan infrastructure bill in Congress, and his continuing inability to convince his own party to pass the massive social spending that sits at the heart of his domestic agenda.

After all, Biden promised that he would restore competence and policy acumen to the White House. He claimed would have a professional foreign policy team and a mastery of the intricacies of the congressional process. To date, however, he has not won a reputation for competence on the headline issues.

Will Trump make a comeback?

All this of course has revived fears of the looming figure of ex-president Donald Trump. He clearly seems to be preparing for another run for president — he is holding rallies, issuing angry statements attacking his foes on quasi-presidential letterhead, and even, for some reason, sending an envoy to the Balkans. He remains incredibly popular within the Republican party, even if he is divisive among the population as a whole. His approval rating within the party often touches 90 per cent, an historically unprecedented rate for a presidential candidate. It means he is a virtual shoe-in for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination if he decides to run and remains healthy.

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His fortunes in the general election are much less certain, but Republicans are fortifying their ability to suppress votes and overturn close election results in key states. In a repeat of the close, contested 2020 election, they might this time succeed in stealing the election in the electoral college. The result would be either a constitutional crisis or a second Trump presidency, neither of which would appreciably cheer up the Democrats.

There are reasons to think that the Democrats might emerge from this slump. It is early days and Biden has time before the midterm elections to pass his 'Build Back Better' social spending bill and demonstrate the fruits of his infrastructure bill for the economy. Though that looks increasingly unlikely after Senator Joe Manchin's 'No'.

Even losing Congress while a disaster, would not necessarily spell the end of his presidency. Many recent presidents have lost at least one house of Congress in the midterms, but recovered sufficiently from the defeat, indeed often profiting from the opportunity to blame the opposition for policy problems, and won re-election two years later. This was the pattern for Reagan, Clinton, and Obama and it could well be for Biden.

Another term for Biden?

Alas, there are reasons to think that Biden's problems run deeper than just the early growing pains of a presidency. The fundamental problem perhaps is that few people really voted for Biden. In 2020, the electorate emerged in unprecedented numbers. Turnout was nearly 67 per cent, of eligible voters, up about 7 per cent from the 2016. But it is clear that Trump – both opposition to Trump on the Democratic side and support

for Trump on Republican side – is what drove previously unengaged voters to the polls. Few of Biden's voters expressed much enthusiasm for Biden, many expressed deep hatred for Trump. It is hard to sustain support based entirely on a negative emotion.

Presidential elections are won on turnout, which in turn requires an emotional narrative of leadership and strength on your side and deep, immovable evil on the other.

As president, Biden has governed as the anti-Trump. He tries to present an image of calm, policy competence rather than bombast and policy chaos. There is a political logic to this, but he seems, at times, tired and uninspiring. He will be nearly 82 on election day 2024 and it is becoming increasingly hard to say that he does not look his age. But he seems determined nonetheless to run for re-election.

Republicans have already honed a message that focuses on Biden's weakness. He is weak on immigration, weak on foreign policy, weak on inflation, and in the thrall to the radical wing of his party on cultural issues, such as teaching critical race theory in schools. Much of this is exaggerated or just plain lies, but an image of Biden is starting to form that could keep his unenthused voters at home in 2024.

Democrats need an emotional message

Democrats are responding to this by doubling down on their policy agenda. They want to finish their legislative agenda next year and then trumpet the achievements of what would by then represent over USD 5 trillion in spending on a variety of popular programmes from coronavirus relief to infrastructure to child day care. Many secretly hope that the Supreme Court will allow states to once again ban abortion, which would set up a national legislative battle on an issue on which many Democrats believe they have the advantage.

This agenda is indeed transformative and broadly popular. But it perhaps misses the fundamental point of our polarised social media age. People barely notice policy – they have mostly become tribal and inconvincible. Presidential elections are won on turnout, which in turn requires an emotional narrative of leadership and strength on your side and deep, immovable evil on the other. This means, that unless Democrats can turn around this image of weakness, they will likely lose the mid-terms and the presidential election in 2024 regardless of their policy achievements.

Unfortunately, the more Democrats focus on policy, the more they risk losing the politics.



Jeremy Shapiro
London

Jeremy Shapiro is Research Director at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), a think tank. He was a fellow in the project on International Order and Strategy at the Brookings Institution. His topics of research include the transatlantic relationship and US foreign policy.

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