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Joe Biden knows how to use Donald Trump

Midterm elections are typically bad for the president's party. And yet, that's not how this election looks, at least right now

According to Gallup, 56 per cent of Americans disapprove of the job President Biden is doing. Around 80 per cent say the country is on the wrong track. 82 per cent say the state of the economy is 'fair' or 'poor,' and 67 per cent think it's only getting worse.

Midterm elections are typically bad for the president's party. But a midterm taking place alongside this kind of disappointment in the president and his party? It should be cataclysmic.

And yet, that's not how the election looks, at least right now. The FiveThirtyEight forecast gives Democrats a roughly 1-in-3 chance of holding the House and a roughly 2-in-3 chance of keeping the Senate. Other forecasts, along with betting markets, tell similar stories.

Perhaps the polls, which have tightened a bit in recent weeks, are underestimating Republican turnout. We've seen that before and, worryingly for Democrats, we've seen it in some of the states they most need to win this year. But even a strong Republican performance would be a far cry from the party-in-power wipe-outs we saw in 1994, 2010 and 2018. It's worth asking why.

Biden's absence and Trump's presence

Begin with the seats the parties hold now. Only seven House Democrats won districts Trump carried in 2020. Democrats aren't defending many of the crossover seats that led to huge losses in 2010 and 1994. On the flip side, the Senate map is pretty good for Democrats, with Republicans defending more seats.

Then, of course, there's the Dobbs decision, which led to a surge in

Democratic interest and of young women registering to vote. Every candidate and strategist and analyst I've talked to, on both sides of the aisle, believes Dobbs reshaped this election. The question they're mulling is whether that energy is fading as the months drag by and the election draws close.

But there's something else distorting this race, too: Biden's relative absence and Trump's unusual presence.

Here's an odd fact: 'Trump' has led 'Biden' in Google searches since July. During the same stretch in 2018, Trump was far ahead of Obama in search interest, and during this period in 2010, Obama was ahead of Bush. That's the normal way of things: Midterms are a referendum on the incumbent. The ousted or retired predecessor is rarely much of a factor. But this midterm is different.

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Trump's relentless presence in our politics comes from a few sources. One is, well, Trump. He never stops talking, insulting, complaining, cajoling, provoking. He's publicly preparing for a 2024 campaign. As I was writing this piece, I got an email from 'Donald J. Trump,' headlined 'Corrupt News Network,' announcing that Trump was filing a defamation suit against CNN. This isn't a guy trying to stay out of the news.

Then there's the unusual aftermath of the Trump presidency, which reverberates throughout our politics. The 6 Jan. investigation is ongoing, and the F.B.I. searched Mar-a-Lago to reclaim classified documents that Trump is alleged to have taken with him inappropriately. (Trump, for his part, recently told Sean Hannity that the president can declassify documents 'even by thinking about it,' which, sigh.)

Trump also bears responsibility for some of the lacklustre candidates causing Republicans such problems. Trump pushed J.D. Vance in Ohio and Herschel Walker in Georgia and Mehmet Oz in Pennsylvania — all of whom are underperforming in their respective matchups. In a speech to the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, Mitch McConnell admitted Republicans might not flip the Senate and observed, acidly, 'Candidate quality has a lot to do with the outcome.'

Less talk, more action

Trump's efforts to stay in the news, however, are matched by Biden's efforts to stay out of it. Biden gives startlingly few interviews and news conferences. He doesn't go for attention-grabbing stunts or high-engagement tweets. I am not always certain if this is strategy or necessity: It's not obvious to me that the Biden team trusts him to turn one-on-one conversations and news conferences to his advantage. But perhaps the difference is academic: A good strategy is sometimes born of an unwanted reality.

Biden simply doesn't take up much room in the political discourse. He is a far less central, compelling, and controversial figure than Trump or Obama or Bush were before him. He's gotten a surprising amount done in recent months, but then he fades back into the background. Again, that's a choice: Biden could easily command more attention by simply trying to command more attention. When he picks a fight, as he did in his speech on Trump, the MAGA movement and democracy in Philadelphia last month, the battle joins. He just doesn't do it very often.

Which isn't to say Biden doesn't do anything. He governs. Just this week, Biden pardoned all federal convictions for simple marijuana possession. Before that, he cancelled hundreds of billions dollars in student debt (though legal and administrative questions continue to swirl around that plan). He signed the Inflation Reduction Act. But then he moves on. He's not looking to take his policy ideas and turn them into culture wars.

Biden didn't win the Democratic nomination in 2020 because he was the most thrilling candidate or because he had legions of die-hard supporters. The case most often made for Biden was that other people would find him acceptable. And that proved true. Biden was able to assemble an unusually broad coalition of people who feared Trump and considered Biden to be, eh, fine. That strategy demanded restraint. A lot of politicians would have vied with Trump to make the election about them. Biden hung back and let Trump make the election about him.

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I suspect that's part of why Biden's approval rating is, and has been, soft. Biden's appeal to Democrats has been transactional more than inspirational. You don't need to love, or even really to like, Biden to support him. You need to believe in him as a vehicle for stopping something worse. That's still true today.

What was never clear to me was what Biden and the Democrats would do when Trump wasn't on the ballot — when Biden had to drive Democratic enthusiasm on his own. But Biden is running a surprisingly similar strategy in 2022 to the one he ran in 2020, with some evidence of success. He doesn't try to command the country's attention day after day. And that's left space for Trump and the Supreme Court and a slew of sketchy Republican candidates to make themselves the story and remind Democrats of what's at stake in 2022.

I'm too burned by recent polling misses to take a decent Democratic year as certain. Republican victories in both the House and the Senate wouldn't surprise me in the least. But it's worth noting: At this point in 2010, Republicans were much more enthusiastic about voting than Democrats. At this point in 2018, Democrats were more enthusiastic about voting than Republicans. This year? It's about even, with some polls even showing a slight lead for Democrats.

If these numbers hold up and Democrats avoid a wipe-out in November, Biden is going to owe Trump a fruit basket.

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