

IDEAS

Democrats Should Pick a New Presidential Candidate Now


The party needs to wake up and stop sleepwalking toward disaster with Biden as its nominee.

By Damon Linker



Damon Winter / The New York Times / Redux

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The Democratic Party is heading into the 2024 election with a presumptive nominee who may well be incapable of defeating former President Donald Trump. The incumbent on whom the party is relying to run against Trump's dangerous threat to the country and the world currently rates at an anemic and steady 39 percent approval. Worse, no less than three-quarters of Americans and half of Democrats worry that President Joe Biden lacks "the necessary mental and physical health to be president for a second term." And those figures come from a survey released *before* Special Counsel Robert Hur's damning comments last week about Biden being an "elderly man with a poor memory."

Yet partisan Democrats, from the president on down, responded with anger and defensiveness to Hur's report. *This is so unfair! How dare he use his office for a partisan hit job!* To which I'm inclined to respond: *Stop whining!* The reason Hur's comments seemed damaging is that they confirmed what most of the country already believes: Biden is too old and frail for the job he holds right now. So the prospect of his serving another four years is a reasonable source of concern (especially because his vice president is as unpopular as he is).

How did we end up in this situation? The lion's share of the blame belongs to Biden himself. His decision to run for reelection, after initially indicating in 2019 that he'd probably serve only one term, is understandable in human respects but indefensible in political ones. It's very common for an aging person—especially a man—to deny the truth about his decline and the need to pull back from responsibilities. Such transitions typically involve a painful, arduous struggle for any family facing the situation.

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A good part of it is stubborn pride. But decline itself can impair judgment. Close family members, equally disinclined to accept the reality of what's happening, can also become complicit in the self-deception. (I'm looking at you, Jill Biden.)

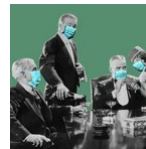
Whatever the source of this problem, Biden is putting his self-regard ahead of the good of the country. As a result, both he and his party are badly undermining the most compelling rationale of the 2024 campaign, which is the need to do everything possible to prevent Trump from returning to the White House. If the prospect of a second Trump term really poses a dangerous threat to American democracy, why is the Democratic Party depending on an incumbent president with an approval number lower than Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, or even Trump himself were facing at the equivalent moment before their failed reelection bids?

Many Democrats will say it's too late now. And that's true if we're talking about having an open primary season in which voters get to decide on an alternative nominee. Except for Representative Dean Phillips's quixotic primary challenge, the party has chosen to circle the wagons, angrily swatting away any talk of Biden making way for someone else.

For God's sake, *why?*

The Democratic Party appears to be stuck in a self-destructive contradiction, combining stupefying risk aversion (*We can't change horses mid-stream! It'd be chaos!*) with unjustified arrogance (*Republicans are such morons to nominate Trump-the-loser again! That plus Dobbs means we're golden! We're so likely to prevail, you might as well ignore the polls!*). I'd wager that precisely this unstable mixture of emotional

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responses helped produce the kind of unseemly displays we've seen since Hur's report, in which just about everyone on the center left has been pretending that everything would be fine and dandy with the Biden campaign if only the special counsel hadn't played his dirty tricks and the media's both-sides-ing hadn't amplified his dishonest insinuations.

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We've been through this before. Democrats always find a *diabolus ex machina* to blame for failure: If it's not Vladimir Putin, it'll be Robert Hur. Anyone but those making inexplicably bad decisions in the Democratic Party.

Let me be clear: As a former conservative who hasn't voted for a Republican candidate since 2002, I am going to be voting for the Democratic nominee in November, whether or not it's Joe Biden. I would be doing that even if the party ran a potted plant in Biden's place. A potted plant in the Oval Office would be infinitely preferable to a president who embodies a potentially fatal threat to the country's democratic institutions.

But in place of either Biden or a house plant, what would I like to see?

For starters, every major figure in the party prevailing on Biden to drop out. That can be done behind the scenes at first, out of respect for the president. But if he refuses to budge, then it will be time for embarrassing leaks to the press. I would like to think that Biden will see the only way to preserve his reputation, record, and self-respect as announcing, somewhat as Lyndon B. Johnson did in March 1968, that he's withdrawing from the race. Biden should also announce that the delegates he's won up to that point in the primaries will be freed up at the August convention to throw in behind whichever candidate seems best positioned to beat Trump.

This past weekend in *The New York Times*, Ross Douthat suggested that Biden should hold off on making such an announcement until the convention itself, or at least until the primaries are over. I think that would be a mistake, because it would guarantee

several more months of bad press and make the eventual announcement seem more beleaguered and desperate than it needs to be. Better that Biden drop out sooner and allow open jockeying for support within the party among multiple candidates to begin right away.

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Would this be an ideal process? Not at all. Biden should have announced a year ago his intention to retire on January 20, 2025. But here we are. *Better late than never* remains a wise bit of advice in many situations, including this one, because it would give the party more of a fighting chance against Trump in the crucial final months of the campaign.

As for those insisting that Biden would have to treat Vice President Kamala Harris as his heir apparent for fear of alienating the party's base of Black voters, this is another good example of misplaced risk aversion. The party's message should be that no one is entitled to a presidential nomination. If Harris wants it, she will have to persuade her party that she's more likely to defeat Trump than formidable alternatives such as Governors Gretchen Whitmer, Josh Shapiro, Gavin Newsom, Jared Polis, and J. B. Pritzker, and Senator Raphael Warnock. That's how politics works—or should work.

More generally, I'd like to see the Democratic Party and its defenders spending more time running popular, charismatic candidates and less time desperately trying to work the refs—that is, more time doing whatever is necessary to win and less time trying to prove that Democrats *deserve* to win.

Trump is a sociopathic menace who must be defeated in November. However well-suited Biden was to the task of dispatching him four years ago, the situation has changed. Biden cannot possibly be the best person for the job today. The time to fix this mess is now—before it really is too late.

This story was adapted from a post on Damon Linker's Substack, Notes From the Middleground.

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