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# We're Not Asking the Right Question About Biden

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There is no end of commentary gently — and not so gently — urging President Biden to act his age and step aside. And all else being equal, I share that sentiment. I don't think we want a president ending his second term closer to 90 than he is to 80. But all else is never equal. And the commentaries that focus solely on Biden's central weakness — his age — are missing his mounting strengths.

One reason for my hesitance to declare Biden too old to run in 2024 is that I thought his age was a problem in 2020, too. Everything people say about his age now was true then. He was halting on the stump. He fumbled words and phrases. But I'd argue the problem was worse then.

The linguistic stumbles were paired with an aging outlook. Biden reminisced fondly about his relationships with segregationist senators and seemed to think the bipartisanship of yesteryear was recoverable in the present. He wielded his connection to Barack Obama as both spear and shield — it was the case for his candidacy and his all-purpose defense against attacks. But Biden wasn't Obama and the Senate of the 1970s is long gone. Biden's problem in 2020, in other words, wasn't just his age. It was that he seemed stuck in the past.

But Biden proved — and keeps proving — doubters like me wrong. He won the Democratic primary, even though voters had no shortage of fresher faces to choose from. He won the general election handily, despite Donald Trump's vaunted talents as an insult comic and a social media force. Voters seemed perfectly happy with Biden as a communicator.

Campaigns are a (lengthy) sprint. But governing is a marathon. Last year, as Biden's agenda languished, I found myself worried about his vigor again. Perhaps a younger, more energetic Biden would've proved better at managing relationships in the Senate. But then he passed a flurry of major bills — the Inflation Reduction Act, the CHIPS and Science Act — that amounted to a remarkable legislative record given the narrowness of Democrats' congressional majorities. His party defied expectations in the midterm elections, gaining a bit more power in the Senate and holding losses down in the House. His State of the Union address was widely regarded as a success. At some point, those of us who keep declaring Biden too old to do the job need to reckon with what they've missed until now and might still be missing.

So let me give it a try: Members of my profession have built our lives around our mastery of words, and so we overestimate the importance of eloquence. We like politicians who speak as if Aaron Sorkin is cranking out their dialogue. But voters don't see malapropisms and run-on sentences and unfinished thoughts and occasional fabulism as the disqualifiers that we do. Ronald Reagan proved that, and George W. Bush proved it again; then Trump tried to teach us the same lesson, and now Biden is taking his turn.

And Biden's age has carried some quiet benefits. One is that he has deftly bridged Democrats' generational and demographic gaps. The Democratic Party has in recent years become younger, more liberal, more educated and more online. Biden's politics were formed in a past era, when blue-collar workers were still a core constituency and liberal was often an epithet.

When Biden was younger and more combative, he might have sought to vanquish the left wing of his own party. Instead, he's welcomed them in and run an administration that has achieved something of a synthesis. Much of Biden's staff comes from the party's younger, more liberal wing. His core group of senior advisers is made up of longtime loyalists, forged in the same era he

was.

The result has been a policy agenda that reflects today's Democratic Party married to a political style that is more of a throwback. It would be best if Democrats had the kind of political talent that could transcend their party's current divisions, but in the absence of that figure, a leader who can bridge them is no small thing. Biden is perhaps alone, at this moment, in being that leader.

Age has also brought Biden, perhaps out of necessity, a sense of restraint. He does not delight in the sound of his own voice as he once did. He leaves space for others — in particular Republicans — to reveal themselves to voters. We are used to politicians who always want to be the center of attention. But that carries costs. Frances Lee, a political scientist at Princeton, has shown that when presidents take strong positions on issues, they generate enormous backlash to the positions they take. Biden's relative quiet is perhaps why his policy agenda has remained more popular than he is, and why there was so much room for voters to focus on the dangers of Republicans in the midterms.

Then there is what Biden will have in 2024 that he did not have in 2020: a record of his own. He has passed the largest infrastructure, climate, science and technology investments in a generation. Unemployment is 3.4 percent — its lowest level since 1969. Inflation is coming down. (I think Biden's 2024 chances will revolve around whether the labor market remains tight as inflation ebbs more than they will revolve around his age.) He has rallied a steady coalition against Russia and helped Ukraine keep its resistance alive. He has turned Trump's inchoate anger toward China into a suite of policies to make America and its allies less dependent on Chinese manufacturing and to actively slow China's technological progress. Biden hasn't gotten any younger, but he has a purchase on the present and an argument about the future that he didn't have in 2020, and one which no other Democrat (or Republican) has now.

Typically, columns end on a point of certainty. Let me instead end on a point of uncertainty. Age or accident could fell Biden tomorrow. I could say that this is true for any of us, and it is, but the actuarial tables darken in one's mid-80s, and there is no sense pretending otherwise. I too worry about how Biden will match up against a younger, more vigorous Republican than Trump. But there is a strength and purpose and substance to the re-election campaign he could run in 2024 that was absent in 2020. And I have underestimated Biden before. Age matters, but so, as Biden keeps showing, does much else.

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