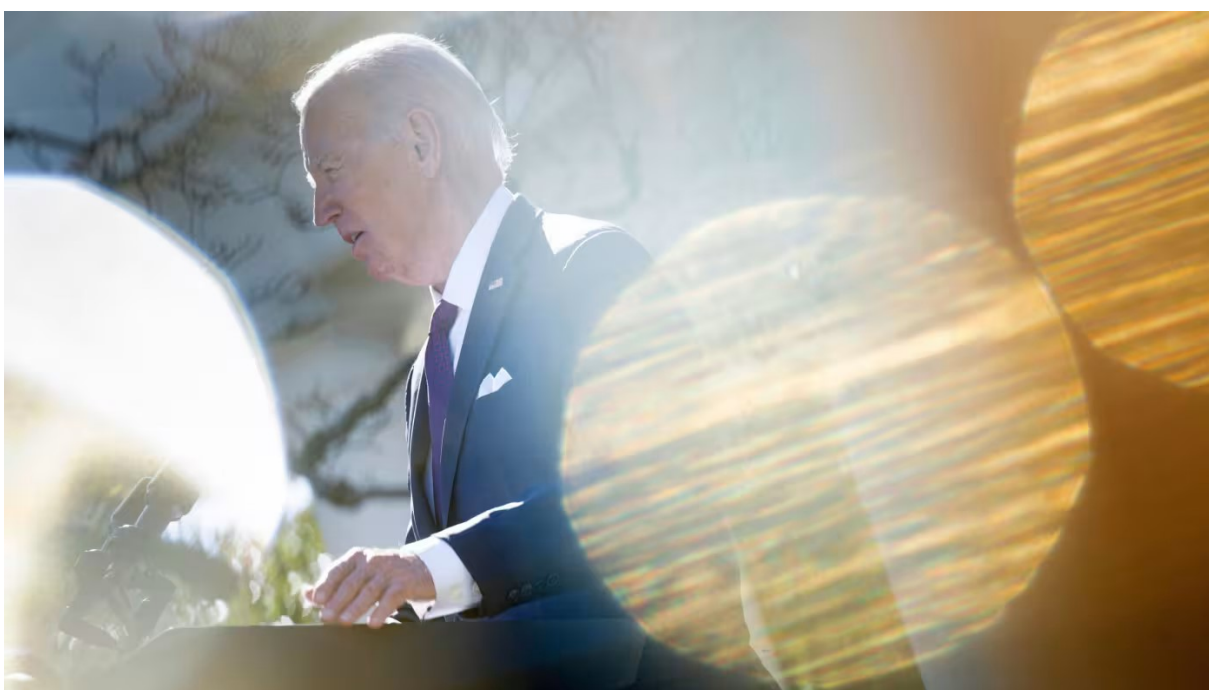


Opinion **US presidential election 2024**

Biden can't spin his way to re-election

The problem is the fundamental Democratic offering, not a failure to communicate

JANAN GANESH



Joe Biden and his party have had years to cultivate a successor, but Democrats have a habit of walking on eggshells around poor candidates © Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images

Janan Ganesh YESTERDAY

There are clever, well-meaning liberals who would have Joe Biden and Kamala Harris run for re-election on the slogan “After All We’ve Done For You”. According to their account of things, the president has given America an economic boom, infrastructure galore and other blessings that voters, hung up on such ephemera as the price of food, are failing to notice or appreciate. (“[It’s not him. It’s us.](#)”) The solution? That recourse of doomed governments everywhere: to communicate its achievements better.

This is worse than conceited. It is tactical public relations fluff. To prevent a second term of Donald Trump, Democrats must accept that what is going wrong is their basic proposition — an aged candidate, his unpopular running mate, the inflation he has overseen — not the framing or messaging of it.

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The Democrats have had years to cultivate a successor to Biden. Donors, grassroots, apparatchiks, potential candidates and the man himself should have settled on, if not an individual, then a process for choosing one while governing. Instead, more out of inertia than calculation, the party is set to put a man who looks each and every one of his 81 years

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through the kind of gruelling nationwide campaign that lockdowns spared him in 2020.

If he had a George HW Bush or even an Al Gore as vice-president, Biden's frailty might not be so off-putting to voters. And so to the Democrats' second un-spinnable problem. Harris is out of her element at this level of electoral politics. She was the first candidate of note to quit the last presidential primaries. Those who outlasted her included the mayor of Indiana's fourth city. Pointing these things out when Biden selected her was, among liberals, thankless work.

Again, the instinct of Democrats is to lose themselves in comms-speak about the need to "relaunch" her, to give her issues to "own", as though this were a gauche but high-potential rookie and not a person closing in on 60. Harris is about as good a politician as she will ever be, which mightn't be quite good enough. That, given the actuarial odds that she will assume the highest office on Earth one day, is a fundamental problem, not a presentational snag.

There is something of the Versailles court about the Democratic elite. Politesse matters. People walk on eggshells around obvious losers. For the second time in a decade, the first being the coronation of Hillary Clinton in 2016, the Democrats are putting a flawed ticket in front of voters on the grounds that it would be bad form to disrupt the line of precedence. (I'd admire the institutionalism if the free world weren't on the line.)

If messaging matters, think of the conflicting messages going out here. First: Trump is a threat to the republic. Second: the job of beating him should go to the default candidates, to avoid an internal fuss. But their ratings are dire? Ah, what are you going to do.

There is something else the Democrats can't spin or present their way out of: the material experience of voters. Any president who oversaw high inflation would be in electoral trouble. But one who had passed vast spending bills, to which those price rises could be plausibly (even if speciously) attributed, should be doomed. It is a measure of Trump's unattractiveness, and of public disquiet at the Republican erosion of abortion rights, that Biden is still competitive.

The Democrats' main error since 2020, after the lack of succession planning, was to attempt an economic overhaul for which there was more demand from commentators than voters. Biden's big-government reforms have been likened to Lyndon Johnson's, even Franklin Roosevelt's, but both those presidents won landslides. Biden's win was

smaller than either of Bill Clinton's. It was never enough for an epochal rupture with "neoliberalism". He should have been a transitional president whose ultimate service was removing Trump. As it is, he stands associated with the worst inflation that lots of Americans have known. Better communication? Democrats should consider that reminding voters of his free-spending record might implicate him even further in high retail prices.

Biden can claim to have been the best president elected this century: more honourable at home than Trump, less derelict abroad than Barack Obama, with nothing like George W Bush's Iraq war to his name. But Americans next November have to decide who leads them for the *following* four years. The Democratic proposition — a man eight years older than US male life expectancy, with an unloved lieutenant — asks voters to accept too much risk. For the world's sake, at least one half of that offering should be changed, not just sold better.

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