

US presidential election 2024

Democrats contemplate the unthinkable: nudging aside Joe Biden

The first lady may hold the decisive vote on whether the president stays in the race



Joe Biden looks on as Jill Biden speaks during a campaign event in Raleigh, North Carolina on Friday © Stan Gilliland/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Joshua Chaffin in New York JUNE 29 2024

How do you convince a politician whose life-long ambition has been the American presidency to give it up?

Democrats were wrestling with that question this weekend in the aftermath of President Joe Biden's [disastrous debate performance](#) against Donald Trump.

That 90-minute session, featuring a rasping and often incoherent Biden, has jolted a presidential race that had for months been frozen in stasis. [Democrats](#) are now in full-blown panic.

Yet as they consider changing candidates 131 days before the [November election](#) they are also uncovering the complexities.

Even if Biden quit, his vice-president Kamala Harris, is unpopular. It is hardly clear that there is another candidate who could unite a party increasingly riven on racial and generational lines and mount a forceful campaign against a vigorous [Trump](#).

“Anyone other than a known entity would be a suicide mission,” said one veteran Democratic strategist, who called the notion of replacing Biden at this point not merely folly but “folly squared”.

Biden attempted to repair the damage at a rally in North Carolina on Friday, acknowledging his flaws but reminding supporters of his character. “I know how to tell the truth. I know right from wrong. And I know how to do this job,” he said — a message that his former boss, Barack Obama, echoed in a supportive post on X.

Biden was scheduled to attend fundraisers in New York and New Jersey before retiring to Camp David on Saturday night. His advisers insisted he would not leave the race.

But the shock at Biden’s debate performance was in some quarters hardening into anger at the president’s inner circle, whose members have for months rebutted questions about his age and fitness for office.

“I think there’s going to be a huge backlash against even a beloved figure like Dr [Jill] Biden for telling us that everything was hunky-dory when it clearly was not,” a Democratic consultant said.

Among those who know and have closely studied the Bidens, the first lady is regarded as her husband’s ultimate confidante and perhaps the only person capable of prevailing upon him to exit the race — a task akin in sensitivity to persuading an ageing boxer to hang up his gloves.

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The president also takes counsel from his sister, Valerie, and at times, his wayward son, Hunter. Surrounding them is a ring of aides and former aides who have been by Biden’s side for decades, including Ted Kaufman, Mike Donilon, Steve Ricchetti and Anita Dunn.

It was Kaufman who helped ease a defiant Biden out of the Democratic primary in 1987 after his campaign was sunk by allegations of plagiarism. According to Biden’s own account, his mother clinched it during a

family meeting in his Delaware living room, telling her son: “I think it’s time to get out.”

Many of those same figures were involved when the then-vice president Biden decided not to seek the presidency in 2015 — and so make way for Hillary Clinton. The decision took Biden, who was grieving the recent death of his eldest son, Beau,

four agonising months and a nudge from Obama.

Chris Whipple, who chronicled the clan in his book *The Fight of His Life: Inside Joe Biden's White House*, believed a “family intervention” was now the only chance at shifting the president’s course.

“If they all went to Biden, collectively, could it happen? Maybe,” Whipple ventured — although he suspected not. “Presidents, because of who they are and the way they’re made, don’t walk away from power voluntarily,” he said.

Others have suggested Democratic party potentates — such as Obama, the Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer or some billionaire Hollywood or Wall Street donors — might make the difference. But, as one longtime political consultant explained, it is simply not countenanced to ask the commander-in-chief to step aside.

The last time that happened, in 1974, Richard Nixon was mired in the Watergate scandal and persuaded to leave office for the good of the country.

A hallmark of Biden’s career has been a refusal to give up. His political story is that of the boy with the stutter, from blue-collar Scranton, Pennsylvania, who believed he could be president and, after it seemed his chance had passed, somehow succeeded.

“One of the great things about him is how he falls down and gets up,” said Jon Reinish, a Democratic consultant at Mercury Public Affairs. “Biden has been counted out more times than most.” To recover this time “he’s got to do it now, do it fast, and do it consistently”.

A younger group of Democratic candidates has been waiting to succeed him. Among the most oft-mentioned is Gretchen Whitmer, the popular Michigan governor, who was tweeting sharp rebuttals to Trump on Thursday night as Biden meandered.

“Gretchen has a national network,” one Democrat said. “She’s ready to go.”

But picking Whitmer would mean dumping Biden and then Harris — what the strategist referred to as “a double coup”. Passing over a Black vice-president for a white candidate risks alienating a core part of the Democratic coalition. The party is already split between progressives and moderates, with tensions further inflamed by the war in Gaza.

Other potential candidates may sound appealing but still lack the national appeal or record to convince donors to write the necessary cheques.

“It’s not a simple matter of who is the best candidate, it’s a matter of who is the best candidate to win.”

“He’s as close to unanimity as our party gets,” the strategist said, recalling how Biden handily defeated Harris, New Jersey Senator Cory Booker and a host of others four years ago. “We knew what we were buying. He didn’t conceal his age from us.”

Additional reporting by Aiden Reiter in London

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