

Opinion **US presidential election 2024**

Biden's unavoidable time bomb

An open Democratic convention to choose a new nominee risks being messy but could save the republic from Trump

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Edward Luce YESTERDAY

The oddest aspect of the Joe Biden debate is that Democratic clocks seem to stop after November 5. Whether you want Biden to stay on as the party's presidential nominee or quit now is based on how you think he would fare against Donald Trump. The small question of whether he would be fit to govern for the next four years rarely surfaces. If minds were focused on his second term, diehard Bidenites would be on even weaker ground. I know of no one who sincerely thinks he could function until January 2029.

As it happens, opinion polls could be making that argument unnecessary. At the national level, Biden has lost a point or two since last week's debate. In the electoral swing states, however, the numbers have shifted more decisively. Democratic-leaning states, such as New Hampshire and Minnesota, are potentially in play. A few more days of this and calls for the president to withdraw will turn into a clamour. Even a sentimental party flinches when it stares defeat in the face.

But public opinion can change. One good interview by Biden, or a couple of passable speeches, could pause the recent drift. On Friday ABC will release Biden's first interview since the debate. His bar has now fallen so low that he might clear it. All he needs to do is sound modestly coherent in a controlled setting with a friendly interviewer. It would give little reassurance that he would avoid last week's disaster at

his second debate with Trump in September. But it would buy him a reprieve.

This is how precious days get wasted. Even now, the US electorate is paying far less attention than it will in September, let alone November. Only 51.3mn Americans tuned in to last week's debate, against 73mn for the Trump-Biden encounter in late September 2020.

Were the Biden camp shielding the president in the final stretch of the race to the same degree it is now, voters would draw conclusions. Just 27 per cent believe that the president has the cognitive ability to serve another term, according to CBS News last Sunday. The number for Trump is 50 per cent. If that gap does not terrify Democrats, it is hard to know what would.

Now imagine what the Biden camp's spin would be after a second bad debate. This week, the president blamed his performance in his first encounter with Trump on jet lag. He had returned from overseas 12 days earlier. After two days of rest, he undertook six full days of debate preparation that began at 11am and included a nap after lunch. This is not the schedule of a man with the energy to defeat Trump, let alone govern afterwards. It stretches credulity to claim that Biden had "one bad night".

Another of the Biden camp's lines is to question why critics are not calling for Trump to withdraw with the same vehemence that they apply in the president's case. This is childishly performative. None of the Democratic and media figures urging Biden to stand down has influence over Trump. It is hard to think of a Republican who has sway with him. The critique also elides the point about the future of America. Trump will be the Republican nominee. The question is how to stop him from becoming president.

This week's decision by the Supreme Court to give near blanket immunity to the US president ought to have snapped people to attention. America's commander-in-chief is above the law, says the majority of the court. Virtually anything he does in his official capacity, including ordering the assassination of rivals, will be protected by the immunity ruling. Presumably this would include the power to investigate the berobed Caesarian judges who are trampling over their republic's animating spirit — to stop the return of kings.

Here was a chance for Biden to lay out what was at stake in November — the coronation of King Donald — and say why a zealous Supreme Court must be overhauled. Instead, he issued a few rote condemnations and took no questions. Soft disapproval is no substitute for righteous indignation when the US republic is in the

balance.

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Then there is the claim that an open Democratic convention in August to replace Biden would be a cure worse than the disease. Leaving aside that it is odd for a party claiming “democracy is on the ballot” to be so afraid of it, a contest would not necessarily go badly. It would be short, noisy, personal and even bitter. Welcome to democracy. The main risk is that the winner would be rejected by one or more of the losers. But that must be weighed against the perils of sticking with an old man in rapid decline.

One way of avoiding that mess would be for Biden to pass the baton to the vice-president, Kamala Harris. This has been suggested as an immaculate solution. It is entirely plausible that Harris would win an open convention in Chicago. True, simply handing her the nomination would have its downsides. She has never contested a primary, let alone won one. She pulled out in 2020 because she was trailing so badly. She polls roughly as poorly as Biden. Handing her the prize could easily be depicted as an establishment fix-up.

Finally, Biden and his family might retreat further into us-against-the-world defiance. It gives me no pleasure to say that we can guess how that would end.

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