

Can We Talk About Joe Biden?

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President Biden smiling as he steps through a stage curtain.

Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

y David Brooks

Nearly two decades ago, I tried to write a group biography about the senators whose offices happened to be on the second floor of the Russell Office Building on Capitol Hill. The group included John McCain, Joe Biden, Lindsey Graham and Chuck Hagel. I got to know and study each of those senators during that long-ago-abandoned project.

The more I covered Biden, the more I came to feel affection and respect for him. Then, as now, he could be a tough boss, occasionally angry and hard on his staff. But throughout his life, Biden has usually been on the side of the underdog. I've rarely met a politician so rooted in the unpretentious middle-class ethos of the neighborhood he grew up in. He has a seemingly instinctive ability to bond with those who are hurting.

Our politics have gotten rougher over the ensuing years but that hasn't dampened Biden's basic humanity. When he was vice president, I remember a searing meeting with him shortly after his son Beau died, his grief raw and on the surface. And like many, I've felt the beam of his empathy and care myself. A year and a half ago, the day after my oldest friend fell victim to suicide, Biden heard about it and called me to offer comfort. He just let me talk about my friend and through his words and tone of voice joined me in the suffering. I experienced the solace of being seen.

He has his faults — the tendency to talk too much, the chip on his shoulder about those who think they are smarter than he is, the gaffes, that episode of plagiarism and the moments of confusion — but I've always thought: Give me a leader who identifies with those who feel looked down upon. Give me a leader whose moral compass generally sends him in the right direction.

But I've also come to fear and loathe Donald Trump. I cannot fathom what damage that increasingly deranged man might do to this country if given a second term. And the fact is that as the polls and the mood of the electorate stand today, Trump has a decent chance of beating Biden in November of next year and regaining power in 2025.

Voters know both men very well at this point, so when I hear Democrats comforting themselves that people will flock to Biden if the alternative on the ballot is Trump, I worry they are kidding themselves. Biden's approval ratings are stubbornly low. In a recent ABC poll, only 30 percent of voters approve of his handling of the economy and only 23 percent approve of his handling of immigration at the southern border. Roughly three-quarters of American voters say that Biden, at 80, is too old to seek a second term. There have been a string of polls showing that large majorities in his own party don't want him to run again. In one survey from 2022, an astounding 94 percent of Democrats under 30 said they wanted a different nominee.

I thought Biden's favorability ratings would climb as economic growth has remained relatively strong and as inflation has come down. But it just hasn't happened.

So I'm emotionally torn these days, the way so many are — feeling strong affection and appreciation for Joe Biden and yet feeling gripped simultaneously by a pounding fear that a Biden-led party will lose next year and lead to a Trumpian Götterdämmerung. Like many Americans, I've found myself having The Conversation over and over again, with friends, sources and people who work in Democratic politics: whether Biden is the best candidate to defeat Trump, his chances of winning, if there's some better course.

Some Democrats tell me in these talks that they hope their party leaders will somehow persuade Biden to retire and open the door for a fresher candidate. Others argue that Biden needs some stiff primary competition. Most of the filing deadlines for the early primaries are approaching — Nevada and New Hampshire this month, Michigan and California and more in December. There's still time for other Democrats to jump in the race.

But many party leaders act as if this is madness, speaking with a fervor that is loyal but also patronizing: Biden is vehement about running again, and there's zero chance he'll be talked out of it, so Democrats had better just deal with that fact. Plus a serious primary challenge would merely weaken the inevitable Biden candidacy, the way Ted Kennedy weakened Jimmy Carter in 1980 and Pat Buchanan hurt George H.W. Bush in 1992. We just have to pull this guy over the line.

I don't find this passive fatalism compelling. The party's elected officials are basically urging rank-and-file Democrats not to be anxious about a situation that is genuinely anxiety inducing. Last month Gov. Phil Murphy of New Jersey told The Times, "This is only a matter of time until the broad party and, broadly speaking, Americans converge with the opinions of folks like myself." Really? Surely if there's a lesson we should have learned from the last decade, it's that we should all be listening harder to what the electorate is trying to say.

I've tried to set aside my affection for the man and look anew at the question of Biden and 2024: Should we really do this?

The thing that so many of us are stuck on is Biden's age, of course. On this subject I have some personal observations. I've been interviewing the man for a quarter-century, including during his presidency. The Republicans who portray him as a doddering old man based on highly selective YouTube clips are wrong. In my interviews with him, he's like a pitcher who used to throw 94 miles an hour who now throws 87. He is clearly still an effective pitcher.

People who work with him allow that he does tire more easily, but they say that he is very much the dynamic force driving this administration. In fact, I've noticed some improvements in his communication style as he's aged. He used to try to cram every

fact in the known universe into every answer; now he's more disciplined. When he's describing some national problem, he is more crisp and focused than he used to be, clearer on what is the essential point here — more confidence inspiring, not less.

What about four or five years from now, at the end of a second term? Will he still be competent enough to lead? Biden is fit, does not smoke or drink alcohol, exercises frequently and has no serious health conditions, according to the White House. A study in *The Journal on Active Aging* of Biden's and Trump's health records from before the 2020 elections found that both men could qualify as "super-agers" — the demographic that maintains physical and mental functioning beyond age 80.

But Biden's age is obviously and understandably going to be a greater concern than it was in 2020. It seems especially to worry some White House staff members or whoever is trying to cocoon him so he doesn't make a ruinous tumble. But if the president I see in interviews and at speeches is out campaigning next year against an overweight man roughly his own age, then my guess is that public anxieties on this front will diminish.

To me, age isn't Biden's key weakness. Inflation is. I agree with what Michael Tomasky wrote in *The New Republic*: Biden's domestic legislative accomplishments are as impressive as any other president's in my adult life. Exactly as he should have, he has directed huge amounts of resources to the people and the places that have been left behind by the global economy. By one Treasury Department estimate, more than 80 percent of the investments sparked by the Inflation Reduction Act are going to counties with below-average college graduation rates and nearly 90 percent are being made in counties with below-average wages. That was the medicine a riven country needed.

But it is also true that Biden's team overlearned the lessons of the Obama years. If Barack Obama didn't stimulate the economy enough during the Great Recession, Biden stimulated it too much, contributing to inflation and the sticker shock people are feeling.

Anger about inflation is ripping across the world and has no doubt helped lower the approval ratings of leaders left, right and center. Biden's 40 percent approval rating may look bad, but in Canada, Justin Trudeau's approval rating is 36; in Germany, Olaf Scholz is at 29; in Britain, Rishi Sunak is at 28; in France, Emmanuel Macron is at 23; and in Japan, Fumio Kishida is also at 23. This is a global phenomenon. As the journalist Josh Barro argued recently, "Inflation is the reason Biden could not deliver on his core promise to return the country to normal and the main reason his poll numbers are bad."

Because of inflation, Americans now trust Trump to handle the economy more than Biden. As ABC News reported, voters are looking back and retroactively elevating their opinion of Trump's presidency. When he left office only 38 percent of Americans approved of his performance as president. Today, 48 percent do, his high-water mark.

Inflation also contributes to a corrosive national mood that you might call American Jaundice. Nearly three out of every four Americans believe the country is on the wrong track. Bitterness, cynicism and distrust pervade the body politic. People perceive reality through negative lenses, seeing everything as much worse than it is. At 3.8 percent, America's unemployment rate is objectively low, but 57 percent of voters say that the unemployment rate is "not so good" or "poor."

The nation's bitter state of mind is a self-perpetuating negativity machine. Younger people feel dismissed; the older generations are hogging power. Faith in major institutions is nearing record lows. The country is hungry for some kind of change but is unclear about what that might look like. As the incumbent, Biden will be tasked with trying to tell a good news story of American revival, which is just a tough story to sell in this environment. And Biden is not out there selling it convincingly.

The bracing reality is that Trump's cynicism and fury match the national mood more than Biden's faithful optimism. It's one of the reasons Trump is now leading Biden by 1.2 percentage points in the RealClearPolitics polling average. It's one of the reasons Trump is in a stronger polling position now than at any point in 2016 or 2020. It's one of the reasons even some Republicans are mystified by the way Democrats are standing pat behind their incumbent.

"They seem hell bent on nominating the one Democrat who would lose to Donald Trump," Karl Rove told me recently. "They've got a lot of talent on their side, let's not kid ourselves," he continued, pointing to younger Democrats like Gretchen Whitmer, Mitch Landrieu, Gavin Newsom and Cory Booker.

But once you start to think carefully about whether Democrats could nominate one of those non-Biden alternatives, all sorts of other concerns rise into view. First, there is the Kamala Harris problem. If the door were open, the vice president would probably run even though her poll numbers are lower than Biden's. Her shambolic 2020 presidential campaign does not inspire confidence, and her record includes being a leading player on the administration's divisive immigration policies. People can make an all-star wish list of other Democratic nominees, but in the real world there is simply no easy way to push Harris aside.

Then there's the fact that there is no other viable candidate in the Democratic Party with a national base of support. The rising Democratic stars Rove referred to are all talented, but none have compellingly stood on the national stage. In the polling right now, possible candidates not named Biden or Harris are in the low single digits.

Plus, there are good reasons no major Democrat has so far stepped up to mount a challenge. Anyone who did throw a hat in the ring would face such vitriolic contempt from the party establishment, it would probably be career ending. Such a candidate might also face withering criticism from rank-and-file Democrats. As a former Obama administration official, Dan Pfeiffer, has pointed out, Biden has higher favorability ratings among Democrats than Trump does among Republicans. Democrats may be anxious

about the old guy running, but that doesn't mean they'd automatically warm to someone trying to take him down.

Finally, and most important, when you really start to imagine what it would look like if the Democrats didn't nominate Biden, one whopping issue becomes clear.

A lot of the dump-Biden conversations are based on a false premise: that the Democratic Party brand and agenda are somehow strong and popular enough that any number of younger candidates could win the White House in 2024 and that if Biden were just to retire, all sorts of obstacles and troubles would go with him.

But Biden is not the sole or even primary problem here. To the extent that these things are separable, it's the Democratic Party as a whole that's ailing. The generic congressional ballot is a broad measure of the strength of the congressional party. Democrats are now behind. According to a Morning Consult poll, Americans rate the Democratic Party as a whole as the more ideologically extreme party by a nine-point margin.

When pollsters ask which party is best positioned to address your concerns, here too, Democrats are trailing. In a recent Gallup poll 53 percent of Americans say Republicans will do a better job of keeping America prosperous over the short term while only 39 percent thought that of the Democrats. Fifty-seven percent of Americans said that the Republicans would do a better job keeping America safe, while only 35 percent favor the Democrats. These are historically high Republican advantages.

Here are the hard, unpleasant facts: The Republicans have a likely nominee who is facing 91 charges. The Republicans in Congress are so controlled by a group of performative narcissists, the whole House has been reduced to chaos. And yet they are still leading the Democrats in these sorts of polling measures.

This is about something deeper than Joe Biden's age. More and more people are telling pollsters that the Republicans, not the Democrats, care about people like me.

When I think back to the glory days of the Democratic Party, the days of the New Deal and the Great Society, even to the days when Joe Biden was a young senator being mentored by the likes of Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic Party was at its core a working- and middle-class party. Over the last half-century, the Democrats have become increasingly the party of the well-educated metropolitan class.

It is not news that the Democrats have been losing white working-class voters ever since the emergence of the Reagan Democrats. But today, the party is bleeding working-class voters of all varieties. As John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira point out in their forthcoming book, "Where Have All the Democrats Gone?," Democrats have been losing ground among Hispanics for the last few years. In 2012, Barack Obama carried nonwhite voters without a college degree by a 67-point margin. In 2020, Biden carried

this group with a 48-point margin. Today, the Democratic ticket leads among this group by a paltry 16 points.

But Democrats are losing something arguably more important than a reliable base of supporters. The party is in danger of letting go of an ethos, a heritage, a tradition. The working-class heart and soul the Democrats cultivated through the Roosevelt, Truman and Kennedy years rooted Democratic progressivism in a set of values that emphasized hard work, neighborhood, faith, family and flag. Being connected to Americans' everyday experiences kept the party pinioned to the mainstream.

As the party became dominated by the more educated activist and media sectors, it lost touch with some of what can be called its psychological and emotional power sources. It grew prone to taking flights of fancy in policy and rhetoric, be it Medicare for All or "defund the police," going to places where middle-of-the-road voters would not follow. It became more vulnerable to the insular outlooks of its most privileged and educated members.

This is what happened in 2020. There were moments in that campaign when it looked as if Bernie Sanders was going to run away with the race, sending the party into uncharted ideological waters. Most of the other candidates sprinted leftward. In a June 2019 debate, nine of 10 Democratic presidential candidates raised their hands when asked if they supported decriminalizing border crossings. Elizabeth Warren and Kirsten Gillibrand were even further left than their colleagues. The year prior, both of them called for dismantling Immigration and Customs Enforcement. College-educated voters are less worried about illegal immigration than high school-educated voters and that influence showed.

Joe Biden was nominated in 2020 because he was the cure to this malady. He was the guy most plainly with roots in the working and middle class. He was the guy who didn't engage in the culture war and identity politics theatrics. He was the most moderate major candidate in the race. Democrats from James Clyburn on down swung to Biden because he offered the most plausible connection back to the Democrats' working-class soul — and it worked. Biden gave the party what it needed to come back to life.

And that is the fact I keep returning to. Biden is not what ails the party. As things stand, he is the Democrats' best shot at curing what ails the party.

There is no other potential nominee who is so credibly steeped in knowing what life is like for working- and middle-class people, just as there was no other potential nominee in 2020. After watching him for a quarter-century, I think he is genuinely most comfortable when he is hanging around the kinds of people he grew up with. He doesn't send out any off-putting faculty lounge vibes. On cultural matters he is most defined by what he doesn't do — needlessly offend people with overly academic verbiage and virtue signaling. That is why I worry when he talks too stridently about people on the right, when he name-calls and denounces wide swaths of people as MAGA.

These cultural and spiritual roots give him not just a style but a governing agenda. He has used the presidency to direct resources to those who live in the parts of the country where wages are lower, where education levels are lower, where opportunities are skimpier. Biden's ethos harks back to the ethos of the New Deal Democratic Party, but it also harks forward to something — to a form of center-left politics that is culturally moderate and economically aggressive. Aggressive in investing resources in the left-behind places, aggressive in using industrial policy to revive manufacturing, green tech and other industries, aggressive in using federal largess to bolster the care economy. His administration has put racial justice at the top of the agenda. It has moved the party beyond the technocratic centrism of the Clinton-Obama years.

It is a first glimpse, but only a first glimpse, of a future Democratic Party that could once again compete for working- and middle-class support and would once again rest on its historical values.

Something almost spiritual is at play here, about not just whether the Democrats can win in 2024 but who the Democrats are.

As I've thought about Biden's chances in 2024, I find myself deeply conscious of all the disadvantages that he and the Democrats have as they try to retain power, and preparing for what that could bring. But I also find myself arriving foursquare at the conclusion that rejecting the president now would be, in the first place, a mistake. He offers the most plausible route toward winning the working- and middle-class groups the Democrats need, the most plausible route toward building a broad-based majority party.

But it would be worse than a mistake. It would be a renunciation of the living stream of people, ideas and values that flow at the living depths of the party, a stream that propelled its past glories and still points toward future ones.

More on President Biden's re-election