Opinion

NCR Voices



President Joe Biden delivers remarks on what he calls the "continued battle for the Soul of the Nation" in front of Independence Hall Sept. 1, 2022, in Philadelphia. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



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There is a strangely carefree way some Democrats discuss the possibility of a rematch between President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump in 2024, as if it was a foregone conclusion Biden would win again. You hear it on the cable TV shows and there is some polling to support it. This way of thinking is dangerous.

In 2020, Biden won 81,283,098 votes, or 51.3% of the vote to Donald Trump's 74,222,958 votes, which was 46.8%, so Biden's margin in the popular vote was more than 7 million. But presidents are selected in the Electoral College and, as James Lindsay explained at the Council of Foreign Relations, "If Trump picked up the right mix of 42,921 votes in Arizona (10,457), Georgia (11,779), and Wisconsin (20,682), the Electoral College would have been tied at 269 all."

One of the ways incumbents lose is when they face a serious challenger for their party's nomination. No serious Democrat is challenging Biden. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., known for his opposition to Covid vaccines, spent time last week walking back comments that he has had "conversations with dead people." Spiritual author Marianne Williamson is again a candidate and she has a small, strangely devoted following. Four years ago, when I suggested that she and other vanity candidates not get a place on the debate stage, I got emails out the wazoo explaining to me why her spiritual insights were just what the country needed in a president. Call me skeptical.



Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is pictured in 2017, and Marianne Williamson is pictured in 2019, in this photo composite. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 3.0; CC BY-SA 2.0)

CNN released a poll that shows many Democrats have deep reservations about Biden, but the comments about his challengers were telling. One voter who said he was considering voting for Kennedy said, "I liked his dad (RFK) and his uncle (JFK) a lot. I would hope he has a similar mindset." He doesn't. Someone voicing support for Williamson said, "She is better than Joe Biden. I haven't heard of her though." All right then. So, Biden will be the nominee.

NBC News reported on May 30 that some Biden strategists were worried about third party candidates, such as the group No Labels. In countries where parliamentary seats are awarded by proportional representation, voting for an alternative like the Green Party makes sense: They won't win the election, but they might secure enough seats to be included in a coalition government.

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In America, with its first-past-the-post voting system, casting a ballot for a third-party candidate is a luxury afforded voters only when the country is not evenly divided. The choice in November 2024 will be a binary choice, and it is difficult to imagine any Republican candidate emerging who would be morally preferable to Biden, for reasons I discussed last Friday.

The polling shows that Biden has his work cut out for him. The issue of his age looms above all others, transcending concerns for this policy or that program. Biden would be well advised to consider giving a speech that confronts the issue, perhaps coming at it by a side route. Going to Franklin Roosevelt's home in Hyde Park, New York, and talking about living with his stutter and overcoming it, even though his words still get caught in his throat sometimes, might be just the ticket. Or he could pull a page from the Pope Francis playbook and remind people that while his age might affect things like his body, "One governs with the head, not the knee."

The issues will play themselves out, but a vote for president is not like a vote for senator or governor. People want to feel a personal connection with the president, who will be in their living room every night on the TV. The president is head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, so people's sense of what it means to be an American is all tied up in how they cast this vote. There is no reason Biden shouldn't beat Trump again, but it was close, very close in 2020. The Democrats need to be disciplined. All voters need to vote like it matters. It will.