Opinion
NCR Voices
U.S. President Joe Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy hold a joint new confe

U.S. President Joe Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy hold a joint new conference at the White House in Washington Dec. 12, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Leah Millis)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 26, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Biden reelection effort is still confronted by dismal approval ratings, but there is reason for Democrats to be optimistic. Despite the low approval ratings, head-to-head polling matchups between the president and former president are mixed. But the economy is starting to turn the corner with consumer confidence shooting up. Wage increases have overtaken and surpassed inflation. The casualty rate in Gaza has fallen by half since mid-December.

One issue, however, seems to hold the potential to ruin the president's chances and there is not a thing anyone can do about it: his age.

Former Gov. Nikki Haley's best line in her primary night speech in New Hampshire hit the nail on the head: "Most Americans do not want a rematch between Biden and Trump," Haley said. "The first party to retire its 80-year-old candidate is going to be

the party that wins this election."

It turns out that neither party is likely to retire their "80-year-old candidate" and, whatever his other flaws, Donald Trump, who is 77, looks more vigorous than Joe Biden, who is 81.

Biden's team has been thinking about this issue for some time. They know he looks frail at times. His speech is not as fluid as it was. When asked on the stump if he is up to the job, the president invariably answers: "Watch me."

The president needs a better answer. Watching is the problem. We can see with our eyes that Biden walks more slowly, that he holds the rail up to Marine One more firmly, that he sometimes appears confused about where he should be going as he leaves the podium.

The president should take a page from Pope Francis who, at 87, will make Biden look young just by comparison. In an interview with the Spanish daily ABC, the pope was asked about his health:

> Q: When I saw you in the wheelchair I thought your schedule would be scaled down, instead, it has tripled ...
>
> A: You govern with your head, not with your knee.

The pope did not say: "Wheelchair? What wheelchair?" He pointed out that governing the church is not like running the marathon, that his brain is fine even if his knees are not.

Related: As Pope Francis reaches his 87th birthday, the 'age issue' looms large

The American people rightly want a president who is strong, capable of going toe-to-toe with the dictators of the world. But neither Biden nor Trump will be expected to wrestle physically with President Xi Jinping of China nor determine if they can bench press more than Russian President Vladimir Putin. The president of the United States needs to be able to negotiate with America's adversaries, and any president's strongest case is the economic, military and political strength of the nation he represents, combined with his or her personal experience of foreign negotiations.



Campaign signs for Republican presidential candidates Nikki Haley, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, and former President Donald Trump are seen outside Londonderry High School in Londonderry during the New Hampshire presidential primary election on Jan. 23. (OSV News/Reuters/Reba Saldanha)

As well, the American people want a president who is capable of assembling and directing a team capable of delivering policies that help them pay the bills, that addresses problems like the increase in the number of migrants coming to our southern border. They want a president who does his or her best to ensure domestic tranquility at a time of deep polarization. Again, these goals may or may not be reasonable, but they have little to do with the number of chin-ups a president can do.

We don't need to "watch" Biden. The campaign has to gin up creative ways to get the American people focusing on their own lives, not his. The campaign needs to find ways to remind the American people how nice it is to have a president who does not bounce from courtroom to courtroom, who does not need all cameras on him at all

times, who doesn't surround himself with fawning sycophants but with people of substance and character. Four more years may take a terrible toll on Biden the man, but they might be good for the country.

There is one other advantage to Biden citing the pope's comment. He can happily contradict the pope, which is a secret desire of almost all Catholics. (There is much disagreement about which pope one desires to contradict!)

The pope said he governs with his brain but we all know he also governs with his heart. The president, too, is a deeply empathetic person. In polls, the percentage of those who say Biden "cares about people like me" typically runs 5-10 points above his job approval numbers. There is a word that describes the ability to balance one's brain and one's heart in decision-making: wisdom.

Advertisement

Ultimately, physical agility matters less to a successful presidency than wisdom. People know that. Indeed, part of the reason many voters are attracted to Trump is they think he is wise about the ways of business and they also think the government would benefit from business prowess. Biden's team needs to evidence examples of wise governance, such as insisting the infrastructure bill be bipartisan and the decision to be the first president to join a picket line. Even on the issues that dog his candidacy, like immigration, the president is well advised to show the American people he is balancing his humanity with the legal necessity of enforcing an immigration system he can't get Congress to fix. Indeed, compared to the circus that is the House of Representatives, the relative calm of the West Wing these past four years is remarkable.

One last bit of advice from the pope for the president. When my colleague Christopher White wrote in December about the pope's age, presidential historian Tim Naftali commented on some of the pope's recent, decisive initiatives that they "could be interpreted as 'a sign of renewed vigor' or as 'a message to his opponents not to count an old man out yet.' " Rolling out some similarly decisive initiatives this year might have a similar effect on perceptions of the president's fitness.

People who say "age is just a number" are either trying to sell you something or too young to know. Biden can't pretend he hasn't aged or that people do not notice how frail he looks or that it is "ageism" to raise questions. He and his campaign need an

answer to people's concerns, and that answer starts with the pope.