Opinion
NCR Voices



President Joe Biden speaks next to Vice President Kamala Harris as he delivers a statement a day after Republican challenger Donald Trump was shot at a campaign rally, during brief remarks at the White House in Washington, July 14. In an announcement July 21, Biden said he made the historic decision to end his 2024 election bid. (OSV News/Reuters/Nathan Howard)



by Michael Sean Winters

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With President Joe Biden dropping out of the race and the GOP convention concluded, stories of Secret Service incompetence that keep the failed assassination attempt on the front pages, and inflation finally ticking downward but not enough to get the Fed to cut interest rates yet, you would think that the Democrats' chances of holding the White House and the Senate, still less seizing control of the U.S. House, would be vanishing fast.

Then 538 came out with an Electoral College simulator that had Biden winning in 53 out of 100 scenarios. What is going on? What is the state of the race?

There is no easy answer to those questions.

The GOP's coronation, I mean, convention solidified Trump's effort to unify the Republican Party around his agenda and person. The failed assassination attempt days before the convention began made criticism of the dear leader impossible. Worse, it cemented Trump's image as a strongman.

As Carlos Lozada wrote in The New York Times, Trump pumping his fist in the air and mouthing the words "Fight! Fight! Fight!" are the stuff of political iconography:

> With that terse, defiant refrain, Trump accomplished many things at once. He offered reassurance that he remained both safe and himself; he issued a directive for how supporters should react to those who attack him; and he captured the emotional state of a nation that was on edge well before the horror of an attempted assassination. Trump's social-media posts and interviews since the shooting have stressed the need for national unity, but unity was not his first impulse.

Trump's acceptance speech aimed at a spirit of unity but the only unity Trump wants is one in which his will is unquestioned. And one that allows him to go off-script and revisit his vast and varied grudges and lies, meandering through the forest of

grievances and conspiracy theories that constitute identity.

No one puts the id back into identity as forcefully and comprehensively as Trump does.

The cravenness to which the GOP has been reduced still manages to shock. Two years ago, at a rally in Ohio, Trump said that J.D. Vance was "kissing my ass" because he needed the former president's endorsement. Trump acknowledged that Vance had said disparaging things about him in the past but that was before the author-turned-Senate-candidate fell "in love." Trump compared Vance's trajectory in this regard to that of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un.

The whole thing was cringe on steroids, both for Vance personally and for what it said about the Republican Party. Last week's convention was more of the same.



Republican presidential nominee and former U.S. President Donald Trump and Republican vice presidential nominee J.D. Vance point to the stage during Day 1 of the Republican National Convention, July 15 in Milwaukee. (OSV News/Reuters/Elizabeth Frantz)

Today's GOP is an entirely different party from its pre-Trump iteration. Did you notice who was not on stage in Milwaukee? Or even in the hall? Former President George W. Bush, former Vice Presidents Dan Quayle, Dick Cheney and Mike Pence, former GOP nominee and current U.S. Sen. Mitt Romney — none of them were seen at the Fiserv Forum where the convention was held.

The GOP may still be pledged to tax cuts, but its economic policies are, at least rhetorically, a far cry from the neoliberal orthodoxy we associate with Ronald Reagan and Alan Greenspan. Trump and vice president pick Vance are aggressively pitting the working class against the elites and presenting themselves as champions of the working class.

Similarly, ideas about American leadership in the free world have been set aside. The people and government of Ukraine must be especially worried about a GOP victory. Apart from the bromance between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump's new sidekick Vance has repeatedly indicated he has no interest in supporting Ukraine.

"I don't really care what happens to Ukraine one way or the other," Vance said when running for Senate two years ago. Can you imagine Reagan saying such a thing?

So, the Republican Party has problems, but at least their situation is straightforward. Their internal struggles have been set aside and the Never Trumpers have left the party. Their "America First" campaign mantra echoes the slogan adopted by Charles Lindbergh for his fascistic isolationism in the 1930s, which is bad enough. The real worry is what that mantra presages.

The Democrats' situation has been murkier all year, and Biden's decision to drop out raises as many questions as it answers. The Democrats face problems both internally and externally. The internal divisions were mostly covered up in 2020 by the manifest necessity of defeating Trump and by widespread affection for Biden.

As president, Biden has governed in a way that has kept the party together, moving away from the embrace of Bill Clinton's and Barack Obama's kinder, gentler neoliberalism on economic issues toward more populist and aggressively pro-labor policies. Biden really has governed in ways that help the working class.

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Biden is not comfortable leaning into the culture war issues, but he has allowed his administration to be pressured into policies like supporting surgeries for transgender minors, even though most Americans are opposed to it. Abortion went unmentioned at the 2020 Democratic convention and was not a key part of his campaign until the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In the post-*Dobbs* era, it has inescapably become a central part of every Democratic campaign even though it is not always enough to get a pro-choice candidate across the finish line.

The president's commitment to student loan forgiveness — the administration announced another round of debt relief costing taxpayers $1.2 billion last week (July 18) — shows how captive the party is to college-educated voters and how distant it is from the concerns of those millions of Americans who do not have college degrees. It is not clear why plumbers and laborers and cooks and masons should pay for other people's kids to go to college. Look for Vance to be hitting this issue again and again.

The worry for those of us who are more socially conservative and economically progressive, a voting bloc I have called "Pope Francis voters," is that Biden may have been the last Democrat capable of keeping the radical, cultural politics of the faculty lounge at arm's length and the political interests of those on the factory floor front and center.

Even though there are many more voters in the socially conservative/economically progressive bloc than in its opposite, Democrats tend to highlight their moderation by abandoning populist economic policies and clinging to more radical cultural politics. It is a recipe for a Trump victory.

Doubts about Vice President Kamala Harris' ability to win the support of voters who backed the Democrats in 2020 are unanswerable. The vice president has not demonstrated the kind of political skills that inspire confidence, yet it is inconceivable that the Democrats could push her aside for anyone else. In 2024, asking a Black woman to step aside is not going to fly.

The GOP will do everything they can to make her appear responsible for all California's real and perceived problems — high taxes, homelessness, population decreases, extreme political correctness, all of it.

That is the state of the race: It's a mess. One candidate decided he was not physically fit and will be replaced by someone who may not be politically fit. The other is not morally fit.

Anyone who tells you they know how this will play out is deluded. We are in uncharted waters, we can see danger all around, and the boat that is the republic is taking on water. "Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the theater?"

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