



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on November 9, 2023

How Trump's Candidacy Nullifies Biden's Incumbent Advantage

Joe Biden continues to find himself floundering in general-election matchup polls against Donald Trump. There are certainly many reasons Biden's appeal has apparently dimmed this time around compared to 2020. But an intriguing factor in the lack of momentum for the Democrat's reelection bid is that he lacks one important advantage typical to incumbents: the ability to define the race and his opponent on his terms.

Firstly, it's worth noting that new polling further amplifies what has, over the last several months, become the accepted wisdom: Despite being the incumbent in the race and having ostensibly beaten Trump before, Biden is polling below the 45th president. This is in spite of the fact that Trump is running while dealing with a number of indictments.

As [CNN](#) reports of their latest polling:

The topline of a new CNN/SSRS survey of registered voters published Tuesday shows ex-President Donald Trump leading Biden 49% to 45%, which is bad enough for the president. But a deep dive into the data reveals alarming challenges for Biden and bolsters the impression that despite the mayhem and mismanagement of Trump's first term, the GOP front-runner has a strong chance at a second.

The new poll reveals deep public discontent with Biden's job performance at a time when his economic optimism is failing to connect with a disgruntled nation weary of high prices. The survey exposes cracks in Biden's multiethnic Democratic coalition and a lack of confidence in his leadership in a war-torn world. Most damagingly, the data show that just a quarter of Americans believe he has the stamina and sharpness to serve as president.

Bidens' poor numbers are reportedly prompting major concern among Democratic senators.

"The question about the polls concerns people," Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) told [The Hill](#).

He added, "I hear immense praise for what he has done and how well he is doing on foreign policy and on extremism at home. He's doing everything right, is what I'm hearing. And yet there's this lingering concern about electability."

Ironically, Democrats like Blumenthal, who are quick to sing Biden's praises on supposed policy



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achievements, ignore major domestic issues that most observers would recognize as being unfavorable to someone running for reelection. For example, inflation and the price of goods continue to skyrocket, leaving families reeling as they struggle to buy groceries and pay utility bills.

Do Democrats truly expect voters to turn a blind eye to the very real struggles they face with their stomachs and pocket books in order to praise Biden on what he's doing in other countries and on vague ideological issues like "extremism"?

In addition to the obvious ramifications of his performance, Biden is missing out on an advantage almost always enjoyed by incumbents — being the known factor versus the unknown challenger.

The adage of "better the devil you know" communicates a true fact of human nature that is often seen in American politics. Voters typically trust an incumbent more, even if they don't fully agree with his performance, because at least they already know what to expect, whereas the challenger would be a completely unknown factor.

Adept incumbents make use of this tendency to define their opponents. Since the challenger has not held the position before, the image of what he would be like if elected isn't concrete, but speculative — and the incumbent with a solid persuasion game happily fills in that blank canvas with an image that favors him while damaging his opponent.

Politico's Jeff Greenfield [recounts](#) how incumbent presidents have achieved this in the past:

In 2004, the campaign of President George W. Bush argued that John Kerry was too risky an alternative to be commander-in-chief, too inconsistent, too inclined to shift with the wind (cue the clip of Kerry windsurfing). Kerry's own self-inflicted wound was the memorable statement that "I actually did vote for the \$87 billion [Iraq War money] before I voted against it."

In 2012, President Obama's campaign painted Mitt Romney as an out-of-touch plutocrat, distant from the concerns of ordinary Americans....

This is clearly what the Biden campaign is aiming at; it's what the president means when he says repeatedly, "Don't compare me to the Almighty. Compare me to the alternative."

The difference is that Trump is not an unknown factor. He actually *was* president already, so the people know what to expect from him and can contrast that with what they have grown to expect from Biden. Voters can easily pit Biden's economic woes and border crisis, along with the exorbitant spending on foreign wars, against the abundant jobs and growth that characterized the Trump era.

Despite the rhetoric from Trump's GOP rivals that the nomination cannot be trusted to a proven "loser," It can be argued that a former president has a better chance than a total newcomer of defeating an incumbent, for the reasons mentioned above.

The historical record offers some support for this. After all, Democrat Grover Cleveland became president again in 1888, beating the man (Benjamin Harrison) he lost to four years earlier.

While historians often emphasize that this was the only time a former president won a second nonconsecutive term, it should be noted that Cleveland was the only one who managed to get the nomination of his party again. Some, such as Ulysses Grant, failed to secure the nomination, while others, such as Martin Van Buren and Millard Fillmore, made third-party bids. It's not inconceivable to



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believe that these former presidents could have won the general election if their parties had nominated them once more.

Theodore Roosevelt's famous third-party bid supports this possibility. After failing to get the Republican nomination (he lost it to incumbent President William Howard Taft, whom Roosevelt had picked as his successor) in 1912, he ran the strongest third-party campaign to date, placing second in both the popular (27.4 percent) and electoral (88) votes — beating incumbent Taft but allowing Democrat Woodrow Wilson to win. It's clear Roosevelt would have won that race if the GOP had nominated him.

That hypothetical “what if” situation — if Roosevelt had run on the Republican ticket in 1912 — is the most likely reality for Trump, who at this point appears the inevitable nominee, leading the GOP field by about 50 points.

Thus, like Grover Cleveland, Trump enjoys an incumbent advantage without being the incumbent. Will the factors that worked in Cleveland's favor have the same effect for Trump?



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