

Here's the real Democratic autopsy

di Doug Sosnik

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Jill Biden had the chance to come clean. She could've used her new memoir, "View From the East Wing," to write about the former first family's role in allowing Donald Trump to return to the White House. Instead, the public has learned that the Bidens live in an alternate universe in which they made no mistakes and the country *isn't* paying for their decisions.

A good political rule of thumb is that a handful of moments determine the outcome of an election, and they seldom happen in a campaign's final days or weeks. That held true in 2024. There were three decisions President Joe Biden made that ultimately determined his party's fate.

The first was his choice to run for a second term. Campaigning in Michigan in March 2020, the then-77-year-old said he viewed himself as a transitional figure, a "bridge" to a new "generation." That tapped into the American zeitgeist. The country was exhausted from Trump's first term and viewed the former vice president as an acceptable short-term fix. Nothing more. Voters weren't looking for a return to "normal" or a defender of the status quo. They were, and remain, desperate for a generational change in leadership.

Biden, he would soon come to forget, was an accidental president. He was elevated only after the party establishment coalesced around him before Super Tuesday, fearful of Sen. Bernie Sanders's (I-Vermont) chances of becoming the nominee. The covid outbreak helped, too, as the lockdown concealed Biden's deficiencies as a

candidate and allowed him to campaign from his compound in Delaware. Once in the Oval Office, he lost this cover.

Compounding the president's challenge was that he ran as a rebuke to Trump with no affirmative vision for how he wanted to govern. Biden became the first president since George H.W. Bush to be elected without a political base of his own. He thus entered office indebted to that disparate coalition and captive to its demands.

That led to the second factor that proved decisive in 2024. After taking office, Biden, under pressure from reform groups, immediately relaxed or rescinded a series of Trump administration immigration enforcement policies. This led to an unprecedented increase in illegal immigration that reversed more than a decade of decline. Pew estimates that the [unauthorized immigration population](#) in the United States reached approximately 14 million in 2023, up from 10.2 million in 2019. By the time the White House adopted emergency border restrictions in 2024, the damage had been done.

The Biden administration's early handling of the pandemic also proved costly. Rather than foster a sense of national unity against a common threat, the White House allowed the issue to become politicized. It took Biden until the end of 2021 to publicly thank Trump for facilitating vaccines going to market in record time. Worse, he bowed to pressure from the teachers unions, which opposed reopening schools.

The price for these and other decisions became clear quickly. Biden's 57 percent job approval in January began to collapse by July when he said covid "no longer controls our lives," which everyone knew to be false. Then came the disastrous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August and inflation creeping toward 6 percent in September. By the end of that month, Biden's job approval had sunk to 43 percent, roughly where it stuck throughout the remainder of his presidency.

The third factor that led to the Democrats' 2024 defeat was the party's misreading of the 2022 midterms. In the run-up to those elections, the public had grown increasingly concerned about Biden's age. There was a broad expectation that Democrats were going to lose, and badly, putting more pressure on the president not to run for a second term.

But in June, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, supplying an animating issue for the Democrats that fall. The party was further aided by a favorable Senate map and poor Republican candidate recruitment in federal and state races. The Democrats went on to outperform historical trends for the party in power, and the White House touted the success as a sign of support for Biden's presidency. It used the results as a cudgel against anyone daring to primary him in 2024.

The reality was that Democrats succeeded in spite of the president. Biden had only a [41 percent](#) favorability rating. The exit polls couldn't have been clearer on how big a drag he would be if he ran again; sixty-seven percent said they didn't want him back on the ticket. Seventy-six percent rated the economy as "not so good" or "poor."

Underlying party leaders' reluctance to take on the president, despite the obvious discontent, was the fear of being blamed for reelecting Trump. In the cases of Gerald Ford in 1976, Jimmy Carter in 1980 and George H.W. Bush in 1992, history showed that if a sitting president was challenged by a member of his own party, he lost the general election. Once Biden dug in, this fear put restraints on credible challengers.

Much has been made of Biden's late withdrawal and Harris's limited opportunity to put together a campaign in 107 days. Such chat misses the broader point that Democrats had already blown their chances for 2024. The president's debate performance merely confirmed what the public had already known. If Biden had stepped aside the year prior, there would have been an open and competitive primary. Harris might have become the nominee, though it's unlikely she could have defeated Trump. The vice president never demonstrated that she had the vision or temperament to win. She also showed no sign of growth as Biden's No. 2, which was no doubt due in part to the White House's failure to make her a bigger asset for the administration.

When Harris became the nominee, her "good vibes" campaign misread the angry mood of the country. Her biggest problem, however, was her association with the Biden White House. The best chance to have defeated Trump was to break cleanly from the president and make an argument for change, not maintain the unappealing

status quo. Instead, when asked what she would've done differently, Harris said "not a thing."

The Democratic Party largely ignored these three issues in its ill-conceived autopsy of the 2024 election. For what it's worth, such organized efforts have never been effective for the losing political party. The Republican National Committee's introspection after Mitt Romney's 2012 defeat is the most recent proof point. Its report recommended comprehensive immigration reform in part to attract Hispanic voters, an effort toward more cultural inclusivity with a focus on expanding outreach to moderate voters. The RNC wasted \$10 million implementing those findings, which Trump repudiated in his 2016 victory.

It's essential to remember: Candidates, not political parties, win presidential elections. The Democratic National Committee's job is to make the Democrats' brand less toxic. Its focus should be on raising money, building ground operations, preparing the 2028 nomination calendar and selecting a city to host the next convention. If the committee wanted to scrutinize its 2024 losses, it could discern how the Harris camp spent \$1.5 billion in the last 15 weeks of the campaign. Democrats ought to provide a full accounting, particularly if they plan on asking the same donors to fund the 2028 campaign.

That race will come down to a choice between two visions of America after the Trump era. Democrats, unpopular even during an unpopular Republican presidency, need to remake themselves. That ought to mean nominating a candidate who stands for change; who acknowledges that the current system disproportionately favors the rich and powerful; who can articulate a vision for how the 60 percent of Americans who don't have a four-year college degree can work hard, get ahead and grow hopeful that their children will have better lives than their own.

The ways we do politics and even what the parties stand for have changed radically, but when it comes to what it takes to win elections, some fundamental truths endure.