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Joe Biden's balancing act

In 2024, contemporary US history is poised for a big change. The upcoming November presidential elections are anticipated to be a pivotal moment in US politics that will significantly influence the nation's political and social landscape. The contest between Joe Biden and Donald Trump is a zero-sum game, with the outcome holding profound implications.

Should Trump emerge victorious, it would mark a dramatic chapter in US history, introducing an openly authoritarian president, who has raised the spectre of civil war in response to potential judicial challenges. In this scenario, while Trump's inexperience in 2016 limited his room for manoeuvre, in 2024, his political experience would enable him to assert control over key US institutions, appointing trusted allies from his inner circle.

The intricate federal structure of the US, designed to disperse and balance political power, will face an existential threat under a Trump presidency. The potential for an authoritarian shift could intensify internal polarisation, further fracturing the country's domestic cohesion. While the impact on US democratic institutions would be serious, Europe too is expected to feel the repercussions, with a likely US disengagement from Ukraine, which, in turn, would create geopolitical openings for Russia.

Trump's approach could herald a reconfiguration of alliances, with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán emerging as a favoured interlocutor of the US administration. Simultaneously, Serbian President Aleksander Vučić might ascend to the role of the primary regional partner in South-Eastern Europe, potentially legitimising Serbian revanchism in the region. Trump's America, in this context, stands as a threat to the EU, contributing to its isolation on the global stage.

Conversely, while certainly less tumultuous, a Biden victory would bring its own set of challenges. The nuanced approach of the Biden administration to Europe would be expected to remain cooperative and constructive. However, the aftermath of the elections holds an air of uncertainty, with the likely post-election retirement of key White House staff introducing an element of unpredictability.

As the 2024 electoral battleground takes shape, both Trump and Biden's strategies count on the 'negative' mobilisation of their voters, stressing the importance of voting against their challengers rather than in favour of their own agendas. Trump's campaign

strategy is based on casting Biden as lacking the political sharpness and vigour necessary for the presidency. Trump will portray Biden as the embodiment of America's decline. Echoing his 2016 campaign, Trump's message weaves elements of nativism, protectionism and social conservatism under the banner of "Make America Great Again", with migration emerging as a focal point of the campaign.

Biden's strategy, on the other hand, seems less apparent. Rather than emphasising his achievements, the Democratic campaign will likely focus on the perceived risks associated with Trump's re-election. This demonisation strategy may hinge on Trump's legal challenges, denouncement of unilateral changes to electoral legislation and attacks on voting rights by Republicans in most US states, as well as the defence of reproductive rights, particularly abortion.

The effectiveness of these strategies remains uncertain. In 2024, Trump will often appear in court to defend himself in several cases. However, Trump's legal issues have so far strengthened his base without significantly mobilising Democrats. Drawing parallels with situations involving political leaders such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, despite the evident differences, reveals a pattern where legal actions against these leaders, while appropriate and legitimate in the Italian context, have had limited success in undermining their leadership. On the contrary, these legal initiatives are often used by leaders as tools of victimisation, effectively rallying and energising their electoral bases.

The battle over voting rights and reproductive rights holds promise for Democrats. These two issues have significantly helped the Democrats to achieve unexpectedly good results in the 2022 mid-term elections. The outcome of these strategies also hinges on Trump's evolving approach to voting rights and electoral legislation, with the year 2023 witnessing a downplaying of the importance of this issue in Trump's political discourse. Should Trump talk less about the "2020 electoral fraud" and "rigged elections", Democrats will be unlikely to mobilise their 2020 electoral base to the extent required for a victory in the upcoming elections.

Reproductive rights, especially in the wake of the Supreme Court decision to overturn the *Roe v. Wade* decision – where the US Supreme Court ruled in 1973 that the US Constitution generally protected the right to abortion – have become a potent tool for Biden. Referenda on abortion rights in key swing states like Nevada and Arizona are anticipated in 2024, with Democrats banking on these measures to galvanise women voters in support of Biden. The Biden campaign's attention to female voters offers a glimpse into its broader strategy to remobilise the electoral coalition that brought Biden into the White House in 2020. In 2023, opinion polls highlighted signs of fatigue in certain constituencies, notably among young voters and non-white minorities.

The delicate balancing act between appealing to non-white voters while avoiding the potential alienation of white voters poses a significant challenge for Biden's campaign. Non-white voters massively supported Biden in 2020, also as a result of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that gained momentum in the wake of George Floyd's tragic death.

The support from non-white voters for Biden seems to have diminished over the past three years. While the momentum of the BLM movement has waned, Biden's relatively

weaker appeal to non-white minorities might be a strategic choice rather than merely a consequence of a faltering BLM movement. In contrast to Hillary Clinton's approach in 2016, Biden has chosen not to emphasise issues that activate group identities, particularly for Latinos and Black voters, such as taking a clear liberal stance on migration. Instead, he has prioritised more broad, cross-group issues, such as the economy and abortion, aiming to resonate with a diverse voter base that includes white voters.

This strategic shift towards issues appealing to white voters was crucial in Biden's success in key swing states, such as Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, in the 2020 presidential election. However, this approach is now under scrutiny due to the growing dissatisfaction among non-white voters, posing a potential threat to Biden's chances in the 2024 presidential race. Democrats are currently confronted with a challenging dilemma: whether to refocus the political discourse on identity issues around non-white voters, risking the alienation of white voters; or to adhere to the 2020 strategy, risking the loss of disenchanted non-white voters that could bolster support for Trump. In essence, the potential trade-off between white and non-white voters emerges as a pivotal issue that could shape the trajectory of Biden's campaign. The outcome of this balancing act could ultimately decide the results of the elections, defining the course of America's political future and its implications for global relations.