

So Joe Biden is starting his 2024 campaign with a problem, which isn't most people don't want him to run again.

And Democrats, when you just pull them, they are split on whether they want to see his name on the ballot.

If you do head to polling, Trump and DeSantis, they're often running ahead of him, sometimes behind him, but definitely competitive.

So not a great place for Biden to begin.

I think particularly not a great place against Trump, who has certainly had a rough couple of years, but also not completely unusual if you take the Trump weirdness out of it.

I mean, we went back in polling and around this point in their terms, Barack Obama and Ronald Reagan, they also look pretty unsteady in the polls and they won re-election pretty easily.

So as Biden following the footsteps, is he in a uniquely bad spot?

How does age play into this?

How does Trump play into this?

I wanted to spend an episode digging into the case for and against Biden.

I wanted to try to get both sides of it.

I wanted to do it with somebody who knows him and knows his team pretty well.

So I want to have John Favron.

John Favron, of course, who's Barack Obama's chief speechwriter.

He's now, of course, one of the hosts of PodSafe America and one of the founders of Crooked Media.

As always, my email as a plan show at NYTimes.com.

John Favron, welcome to the show.

Thanks for having me.

So I want to do this by going through the questions and then the challenges Biden faces in running for re-election and then looking at the strengths he has.

And so I guess the obvious place to begin is that most Americans don't want him to run for re-election.

So there's a recent AP Nork poll found only 26% want him to run again.

Pretty standard from the polls I've seen.

Washington Post poll found Democrats are split 47-47 on whether he should run.

So what do you make of why so few Americans and even Democrats want to see his name on the ballot in 2024?

So I think there's a few reasons for that.

I think the question, do you want an incumbent to run again?

Should an incumbent run again?

The numbers you get from that tend to be lower than approval ratings, horse race numbers, et cetera.

So that's just like sort of an overall thing that happens in polling.

The next sort of level of this is as polarization has increased over the last decade or so, voters tend to be unhappier with the state of affairs and politics, with incumbents, with their choices in both parties.

So there's a general crankiness among voters that sort of seeps into most politicians'

approval ratings.

And then I think specific to Joe Biden, there are of course concerns about his age.

I did a bunch of focus groups in 2022, and it's not necessarily the criticism that you hear from Republicans, which is like, you know, he's completely senile and someone else is running the government, and he's just a puppet and all that kind of stuff.

It's more, they thought when they elected Joe Biden the first time that he was going to be a bridge to the next generation, that even though he didn't say it, that the implication was that he was going to serve one term, and now, you know, they think he's getting up there in age, and they are a little uncomfortable about that.

Let's do age directly.

This for a little later in the conversation, we are going to work up to it.

But when I talk to people and when I've looked at focus groups, this is a thing I hear the most about.

So I mean, obviously, Biden, oldest president in US history, he'd be 86 at the end of a second term, two-thirds of Americans in a Quinnipiac poll, thought he was too old to run.

And one of the particular things I hear from Democrats is that you don't have to buy any of the Republican senility arguments or insinuations to worry that he's got this terrible vulnerability, which is that there is this lurking fear about him, and that if during the campaign he gets a bad flu and he's got to be off the trail for a week, something like his recent stumble over a sandbag happens in a more dramatic way, sort of think back to Bob Dole falling off the stage in 96, and it crystallizes fears of his age in a way that his campaign then can't answer.

Because people already felt this, and now you have this meme-able moment that makes them certain of it.

Yeah.

It's hard to separate what you just laid out, concern voters and Democrats, because him tripping over a sandbag makes them think that he's not fit for the job, or that they think that that will become meme-able, and that other people and other voters will worry that he's not fit for the job, and that will hurt him politically.

And I talk about that difference because when you really push people on this, and you push voters on this, a lot of it is punditry, and I'm not saying that's not fair because voters act like pundits now, because they're especially those who consume a lot of news.

And I think there's a difference between worrying that his age will be a political factor and actually worrying about his age as you go to cast a vote and say, oh, can he actually do this job?

And I do think that you could have one of those moments in the campaign, but I also think there's plenty of them that have been flying all over TikTok and everywhere else.

I don't actually know that another stumble or something like that is going to change the equation.

I think it's kind of baked into a lot of the media that people are consuming and a lot of the understanding that people already have about Biden's age.

I think the deeper fear is the other one you get at, that maybe there's something there.

Not that he's senile, but just that the rigors of a campaign at this age are going to be

too much for him in a way that's going to make him less effective, that he actually just would be less effective as president.

I mean, I think this is a genuinely fair concern.

The Times did a focus group recently when people were asked who were Biden voters if they thought he'd be up to the job at 86, which would be how old he'd be at the end of the second term.

Not a single hand went up.

And I do get the sense that there is a kind of resentment among many Democrats at feeling a little bit forced into this position, like they thought he'd serve a term.

They think this is getting too old to run again.

And while they're not going to vote for Trump over him, they're mad and genuinely concerned about whether or not this is the right choice.

So the White House, whenever they're asked about this, and I think there was a story recently in the New York Times that Peter Baker wrote about Biden's age.

And sort of the White House's case is his schedule is still quite busy.

He is still doing multiple events per day.

He goes on these foreign trips and he's up at all hours.

He did that surprise trip to Ukraine where he's on the train for many hours and he's like barely sleeping.

And so, you know, they talk about all this.

I had wondered for a while like how much of that was spin from the White House and how much of it was real.

And then I went to the White House in December and I was there to interview Ron Klain for Potsdam, America.

And I brought my family because my family was in town.

And so my wife was there with me and our son and my wife's parents.

And I come back from interviewing Ron and in my old speechwriting office, because the Biden speechwriter now we all know very well, is my whole family and Jill Biden is sitting there.

Because he runs into my mother-in-law at the White House mess, sees her and said, I remember you.

He remembered meeting her in 2018 at an event, knew who she was, clocked that she was related to me through marriage, remembered my father-in-law, my father-in-law, federal judge appointed by Obama, and then decided to spend like an hour with us in the middle of the day, took us up to the oval, started pointing out pictures, told a whole bunch of stories.

And what I took from the whole episode was it's so very Joe Biden and that like on one hand, he was incredibly kind, gracious with his time, very sharp, like remembered everything, was talking about stuff.

And then he was also like telling us stories about the Robert Bork confirmation to my father-in-law that just like lasted a long, long time.

But for me, and what I think this gets to the age thing, which is like, he's always been like that.

Like when he was vice president back in 2009, 10, when I first got to the White House, he was telling long, long stories, right?

The stutter that he deals with has always been there.

His tendency to gaffe has always been there.

I think as he gets older and now that age is an issue, all of these other sort of issues that he has had over the years as a politician, sometimes being long-winded, the stutter, saying things that he's not supposed to say, those all get magnified by the age.

But I came away thinking like the guy's still pretty sharp.

He didn't seem like he lost a step.

He does shuffle a little more, right?

Like there's a little bit of a shuffle there.

His voice is a little quieter.

But as far as mental acuity, I did not see any reason for concern.

Now the question is, how do you communicate that to the rest of the electorate?

Because that's quite difficult to do.

It's not like everyone's going to get to meet Joe Biden and spend some time with him.

Well there is this interesting other side of it that I feel like I've seen play out a few times for him, which is Biden does not lean forward that much into a dominant public persona, not in the way Trump did, not in the way Obama did.

And so that leaves more room for narratives about him to be out there.

Like Joe Biden has not done even one interview with a major newspaper, not done any interviews with say interview podcasters for major newspapers, him, him, and-

Same man, same.

Yeah, right.

We've been trying on Puts of America for a while.

And obviously he could put all these questions to rest if he would come on the Ezra Klein show.

But I think there's a suspicion on the one hand that one reason that's going on is they don't trust him or he doesn't trust himself to be out mixing it up.

And if he was mixing it up and it was going well, people wouldn't feel this way.

On the other hand, it has created this sort of constant exceeding of a low expectation for him.

I saw this very clearly during the State of the Union.

I feel like there's a sense that not really based on anything, because he keeps giving tons of totally normal speeches, but he went up, he gave a good State of the Union, he mixed it up with Republicans on Medicare and Social Security in an impromptu way.

And you could almost feel not just like the relief, but the sense that he had way cleared the bar people had in their head for him.

And so there is this way in which so long as he actually is fine, which is the reports

I get from the people who work with him, that I don't want to call it an advantage.

But because Republicans keep trying to suggest the guy is actually senile and he's not, it allows him to continuously vault over the expectations in a way that is politically useful for him.

Yes, they have drawn the caricature in such an exaggerated way that he doesn't have to do much to show people that he is not that caricature.

I'm glad you mentioned the State of the Union.

I was just about to say that.

I thought that was interesting because if you go back and watch that State of the Union, he does stumble a few different places in that speech, but that was not the story.

The story was him mixing it up with Republicans ad-libbing, showing some fight, showing some energy.

And look, I think that there is a risk.

If you're the White House and Joe Biden's your guy, there's of course a risk putting him out.

Is he going to make a gaffe?

Right?

Is he going to stumble over something?

Is there going to be a memeable moment here, right?

So that's always a risk.

I also think that he is at his best when he is off the cuff, showing energy, showing some fight, talking with people sort of one-on-one because he's really good with people.

And I think you've got to weigh the risks of having the occasional gaffe or stumble against the risks of not ever letting him go out there and mix it up.

As you mentioned, I think the narrative about him takes hold and yes, it sets a low bar for him to clear, but how many people are going to tune in when he finally steps out and gives a speech or does the interview, right?

And so I would like find opportunities to sort of, I don't want to do the very cliché let Biden be Biden, but like let him mix it up and have a little fun and show some fight because yeah, that will definitely lead to a gaffe or two, but I think I would rather have the gaffe or two, but then also have people see him and be like, oh yeah, that's the Joe Biden.

I know he was funny there.

He was taking it to Republicans there or he was really kind to that lady he met in line.

Like those moments are so much more valuable than dealing with the occasional gaffe.

So one thing about the Biden age concerns is they make Vice President Kamala Harris very maybe even unusually important, but polls find her to be more unpopular than Biden.

Not less.

She's had, I think it's fair to say, and this is very widely reported, a pretty challenging run of it.

She's had a ton of staff turnover.

There's a sense she's not found a strong footing as Vice President and would be a weaker candidate than Biden.

And so there's this fear and I hear it from Democrats and voters who like Biden fine, but worry about his age, they don't look at her and are comforted.

So how do you think about her role in this campaign?

This is what's really tough is because so often the presidential candidate picks a Vice President or at least in recent times, whether it's Dick Cheney or Joe Biden, you pick a Vice President who you're a little less experienced as the candidate.

And so the Vice President is this very experienced politician, elected official who's been around a long time.

And so you feel safe if something happens that they could step in.

In a way even Pence was that.

Yes.

That's right.

Even Pence was that.

Pence was really flipped on its head with Biden.

She's in Kamala Harris and he also chooses her after her campaign does not do as well as it was expected, right?

So she already has run this campaign that either people did not really remember it.

She didn't really break through or to the extent that she did.

People were not that impressed.

And then she goes into a job, which is sort of like designed to hide you, frustrate you, keep you out of the spotlight.

You end up doing the shitty jobs.

And if you don't have a profile that pre-exists your job as Vice President and you don't have name ID and people don't have a good sense of who you are, then I think it's really difficult in that job to introduce yourselves to voters in a way that's going to make them feel comfortable. I always think about Kamala Harris like there are things she can control and things that she cannot.

She cannot control that she is the first black woman to serve as Vice President.

And I imagine that to become the highest ranking black woman in the United States to ever serve an office, that is a tightrope to walk that I think by design makes you cautious, that you deal with sexism and racism that others have not had to deal with.

So these are all things that she cannot control in the category of things that you can't control is what your message is, what you care about, what your passion is.

I would expect that if she gears up for this campaign, they're going to want her to sort of have a message that helps her stand out as an individual, right?

So already that she's been like out there talking about choice, like that sort of the issue that she's trying to make her mark on as an advocate.

And then I think traditionally the Vice President or election campaign tends to draw the contrast with the other ticket.

And I think she's quite good at that when she goes on the offense against Republicans.

So I would expect that she would sort of get out there more as like a bit of a fighter trying to draw contrast to Trump or whoever the Republican nominee is and sort of get a higher profile that way.

If you want to take the dark Brandon approach on this for people familiar with that reference, I sometimes think it helps Biden in terms of that intraparty tension and pressure that his Vice President is rightly or wrongly perceived as politically weaker than he is.

I mean, if you imagine a world where his VP was extremely well liked, like Joe Biden but younger and better now, I think that'd be leading to much louder calls and a lot more pressure for him to step aside.

But the fact that there isn't a consensus or you're going to believe in the party that the Harris could outdo him in 2024 has really muted that.

So on the one hand, he's not facing a primary, which we'll talk about at some point, but



on the other, he's also not facing this kind of pressure to do that generational turnover. Well, and by the way, if you are the Biden White House and I'm sure that the VP and her staff feel this too, that's part of the reason that they don't want to like put her out there all the time.

And that's true of every President-Vice President relationship, right?

If you never want the Vice President to outshine the President, I think for the reason that you just mentioned, especially in this case, they didn't want, at least when they started, when they got to the White House, they didn't want like Kamala Harris looking like this rising star because it starts raising questions about, okay, well, then why is Joe Biden going to run again?

So 538 has a mid 41.2% approval as we're talking, and it's not a great rating, but something we were doing in preparation for this episode was going back and looking at other Presidents. And you go back to 1982, only 36% of voters in one poll we found wanted Ronald Reagan to run again.

At about this point in his presidency, Reagan was at 43%.

Barack Obama was bouncing around the mid to low 40s for much of his third year.

I'm old enough to remember in Obama's third year when there was so much concern about his reelection campaign that there were endless stories about how he should drop the deadweight of Joe Biden and bring the political juggernaut of Hillary Clinton in as his Vice President to shake things up.

You might, you might have some recollection of that as well.

I do.

I do.

Yeah.

And so I'm curious how you think about this historically.

Like is maybe the third year is just kind of doldrums year quite often.

Yeah.

No, the same thing happened with us in 2011.

Obama was dealing with the debt ceiling negotiations and his approval rating after that was at its low point in the eight years he served in office.

But that's why when we were thinking about the reelect from the very beginning, our theory was, of course, we got to turn it into a choice and not a referendum.

And we got to have a theory of the case and we got to have a message.

And that became Barack Obama going out there and talking about sort of defending the middle class as the defining issue of our time.

And it worked even better for us because Mitt Romney was the nominee, but whoever was the Republican nominee, we were going to still have that same message.

And it was a message about Barack Obama in the middle of a fight for people against powerful interests.

Right.

That was like the core of our reelection message.

And I could actually imagine Joe Biden's message along those lines with some additions that we can talk about later.

So I want to get to the Biden message in a sec, but as the bridge there, I think if

I am looking at Biden's numbers and I'm Joe Biden campaign person, I think the one that worries me the most is that he is not trusted on the economy, that voters don't think he's doing a good job on the economy, that Donald Trump is significantly more trusted on the economy when you match them up.

Trump is doing much better in terms of who people trust on the economy, even then he's doing in the head to head race with Joe Biden.

Biden's had a, you know, I mean, there's been inflation, but it's coming down.

They've had a very tight labor market the whole time.

They got through the debt ceiling pretty smoothly.

They've got a lot of policy that they actually passed on economics, particularly long-term policy.

How do you think about why he is not pulling higher there?

I think inflation is probably the biggest explanation, even though it's coming down.

It's still high for people, but I think beyond inflation, it's sort of the same anxiety that we have seen from voters as far back as when Barack Obama was president and we were recovering from the Great Recession, right?

Like the cost of living for so many people is so high right now.

When I did focus groups in 22, when I did like all kinds of different demographics, different parts of the country, different ages, I asked everyone to start what's the most pressing issue for you.

I just open ended question and I did hear a lot about inflation, but specifically I heard about housing and the cost of housing, rent.

I'm never going to own a house.

I'm going to have to live with my parents.

I'm going to have to live with roommates.

I bring that up because these are sort of cost of living issues that have been with us for quite a while before inflation hit.

I think when you talk to voters about what's on their mind, they will complain that they are working harder and not getting ahead.

We have heard that complaint, like I said, as far back as when Barack Obama was president.

I think whoever the incumbent is, that blows back on them.

Why Trump gets those high numbers is I do think that there was a little bit of Trump's an asshole, but he's a business guy and so at least he knows the economy and maybe the economy was doing fairly well before COVID came.

Trump's whole story that he's going to tell, which was everything was wonderful in the economy until COVID hit, will probably ring true to more voters than we might expect, partly because memories are short and partly just because it makes sense to people to think, oh, well, before COVID, everything was great.

I want to turn to the case for Biden, the strengths he actually has, and maybe a good place to begin is a case he's begun making for himself.

You listened to his announcement video for 2024.

You're here in the way he's framed in the race.

How would you describe where they're starting out on their message?

They're starting out right where they left off in the midterms, 22, which is interesting.



If you remember, there was this sort of debate right before the midterms, Biden is talking a lot about democracy, he's talking a lot about abortion.

Is he not talking about inflation enough?

Is he not talking about kitchen table issues enough?

And as someone who came of age during the Obama years, when the central issue was the size and role of government and the economy and all that, I wondered that myself and especially I had talked to voters and voters top concern is inflation and the economy.

And I know you have talked to Lynn Vavric before, political scientist, UCLA, and she did this very huge survey of voting behavior in 2020.

And the main finding there is that when you ask voters, when you make them rank which issues are most important to them, vis-a-vis other issues.

Issues related to identity rise to the top of the list even though those voters might say they care a lot about economic issues, when they're actually voting, they are thinking about issues related to identity, cultural issues, social issues, much more than you might think.

And so this is all to say that in 22, I think one of the reasons that Democrats and especially Biden hit so hard on democracy and abortion and voting rights and all of these issues is because I think they know that for whatever reason, and we can talk about some of the possibilities why, people are not necessarily just voting on pocketbook issues, even though those pocketbook issues are super important to them, that when they're making their choice between Democrats and Republicans and especially this Republican party that's so extreme, they are thinking about issues related to identity, both these culture wars and a lot of these social issues because that's where they see the biggest difference between the parties right now.

Let's talk about that in context of 2022 because when I talk to people involved in the Biden campaign and planning out the Biden 2024 race, I will do the thing I did with you at the beginning of this conversation and I will read them these numbers they already know about how people don't want Biden to run and his approval rating is bad and he's not trusted on the economy and the first thing they will say to me is that was true last year too and yet while everybody was predicting a Democratic wipeout, we performed historically well for a governing party in the midterm and we did so despite those numbers being rough, they'll say that the historical trend does not hold for one reason or another for Biden where a soft approval rating leads to poor performance for him or his party.

So how do you read 2022 from that perspective?

Yeah, I do think that in 2022 what you had was Dobbs being a gigantic issue for people because they actually saw that the Republicans were trying to take something away, trying to take a benefit away, in this case the right to make your own health care decisions and when I asked people about inflation in these focus groups, they'd complain a lot about inflation and then I would say whose fault is this and they actually wouldn't say it's all Joe Biden's fault.

They would not blame Joe Biden necessarily for the inflation.

They were grumpy about it, they were grumpy about him but they didn't blame him for it. Then you start talking about abortion and there they understand the differences between the parties in a much clearer way.

When you talk about January 6th and you talk about overturning elections and you talk about election deniers, they understand the difference between the parties there in a much clearer way.

When you talk about the economy and you talk about different economic plans, people tend to support the Democratic plans for the economy over the Republican plans but they also kind of don't think that either party is going to fix anything when it comes to the economy. They don't know that the Democrats are actually going to get their plans through or if they do get their plans through on the economy, they're not necessarily convinced that it's going to improve their life.

They don't think that the Republicans plan they're going to improve their lives either. If the economy then is like a wash, then they go to some of the cultural and social issues where they can see the difference every day when they're consuming news about politics. We just got this really big report from Catalyst, which is this firm that has really deep voter files and can, it takes them some time but can really see what happens in an election in very granular detail and the main thing they found was really interesting to me, which is that if you looked at it nationally, Republicans did have the advantage.

It wasn't quite a wave but actually it kind of looked like it would have been except, except that Democrats way outperformed what you would expect in competitive races and they particularly outperformed when you had a very Trumpy candidate, right?

They find a one to four point penalty for an election denying candidate, which I think they take correctly as a correlate of being very Trumpy.

So what is that weird overperformance in competitive races tell you?

Well, it tells me that campaigns actually matter.

Candidates actually matter.

Of course, in a very calcified electorate, they matter on the margin, but in a divided electorate, the margin means everything.

I think that the Democrats did a very good job of selecting candidates who were mainstream Democratic candidates, right?

They weren't necessarily centrist.

They weren't necessarily super progressive, but they were like mainstream Democratic candidates, good resumes, good bios, particularly in these competitive districts.

And Republicans, you know, they had these Republican primaries and in almost every instance, the more extreme mega candidate wins.

And I'll just use the sort of flip side of this as an example of why this mattered so much in Georgia, Stacey Abrams runs against Brian Kemp.

And Brian Kemp by all accounts is as conservative as any of these other Republicans running in terms of issues.

He signs a six week abortion ban.

There's all kinds of voting issues from Abrams Kemp's 2018 race, right?

But because he stood up to Donald Trump and didn't let Donald Trump steal the election in Georgia, he was perceived by that electorate as more moderate than he actually is.

So what happened is these Republicans who ran as like unabashed Trump fans, proud election deniers, of course, there was a penalty there because voters could see that they were more extreme than the typical Republican.

Now fast forward to what we're about to face in 2024 and what Joe Biden and his team have been doing.

If you look at the debt ceiling fight we just had, part of the Biden strategy there was to say, look, I can negotiate with Speaker McCarthy and some reasonable Republicans who did not want the country to default, even though they certainly threatened that.

But then there were these other extreme Republicans, these extreme mega Republicans that did want

the country to default, that did want to do all these extreme things.

And so what I did as president is I both fought the extremism and negotiated the bipartisan deal voters say they want.

They want parties to get together and they don't want extremes.

And Joe Biden is fighting the extreme mega, but he's also giving Republicans and independents who also think that mega is extreme a place to come home to.

This is a thing that I think is a quiet advantage for him.

And I suspect this can be a pretty big part of Biden 2024 storytelling.

So if you go back to the State of the Union, he says, he brags, I signed over 300 bipartisan laws since becoming president.

And he gives a couple of examples, reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act, which was a big original accomplishment for him, the Electoral Account Reform Act.

But he does get through the debt ceiling fairly smoothly.

The bipartisan infrastructure bill is a big deal.

The CHIPS Act and the Chips in Science Act is a big deal.

These are bipartisan achievements.

I think he's got a case to make here.

I do too, and I don't, I'm not quite sure how much that will matter with voters because

I don't know how much voters are paying attention to all the bipartisan deals and bipartisan legislation that has come out of Washington.

The CHIPS Act doesn't have a very high name ID, but as far back as 2020 and even before, voters saw Joe Biden and see Joe Biden as someone who is willing to negotiate and willing to be bipartisan, and he certainly has proof points on that.

And so I do think that that will help him.

I also think this is by necessity, like the Democratic Coalition necessitates this kind of politics because of how big it has to be in a country where the institutions are countermajoritarian.

And so in order to win the Electoral College, in order to win in the Senate, you need a coalition that spans from fans of AOC to fans of Joe Manchin, and probably never Trumpers and all kinds of people like that.

And that is the only way that Democrats can actually win just because of the Electoral College and because of the way the Senate is.

And so Republicans don't have that, and so Republicans don't necessarily need to be talking about bipartisanship because they have a more conservative, more right-wing base that they can depend on to win.

They're not worried about as much trying to get those voters in the middle.

We need more people, and we need more people.

We need a much more heterodox coalition than they do.

So when I think back to 2012, and I think back to the Democratic Convention that year, a huge amount of effort goes into having not just Obama, but other key messengers in the Democratic Party.

Bill Clinton is a huge player in that convention.

Tell the story of what Obama faced and then this narrative of the policy he actually passed. And it works, right?

Obama has a big win in 2012.

So let's say you're doing the speech here and you're trying to narrativize the Biden policy agenda because as you mentioned a second ago, people aren't paying that much attention to the Chips and Science Act passing, but it did pass, and a lot has passed, and a lot that people don't really know about because these bills are so big has passed.

So you're the speechwriter, you're writing for Joe Biden, or you're writing for Barack Obama to come and make the case for Joe Biden.

What is your accomplishments narrative?

It's funny you mentioned 2012 in that convention because when I was working on Obama's speech, we very intentionally didn't want to just talk about accomplishments and just how to accomplishments because what we had been struggling with since we got to the White House was, okay, we're recovering from this great recession and Obama has achieved a lot, but people are still feeling pretty bad about the economy, still a lot of job loss.

And so if you go out there and start touting accomplishments when people aren't really feeling that in their lives, there's going to be a disconnect there that's going to redound to the Republican benefit.

So we were very careful in how we talked about the accomplishments.

Bill Clinton goes out there and basically just explains why Barack Obama has been great and all the accomplishments that he has done and all that kind of stuff.

And the chattering classes, the press, pundits, Democratic activists loved it.

They thought it was great because they had been like thirsting for that.

They wanted someone to just be boasting about what Barack Obama actually did.

I don't think that works with voters as well.

And I still don't think that because you go and talk to people who tell you that they're struggling, tell you that they can't afford housing, tell you that they can't afford healthcare and you say, yeah, but what about the CHIPS Act and what about the Infrastructure Bill and what about this?

And it doesn't register with them because they're not seeing that in their own lives.

Now I don't think that means you don't talk about accomplishments.

To the extent that you talk about accomplishments, you don't frame them as a report card that shows you deserve the job.

You frame them as proof points that you're taking on the fights that matter to people.

And you promise that you'll keep taking those fights on and as Biden has been saying, finish the job.

So there was this great line I thought in the Oval Office address that Biden recently gave about the debt ceiling deal.

And he sort of goes through, he talks about it, talks about all the things that he stopped

from happening, all the things he was able to protect, social security, Medicare, etc. And then at one point he says, there were all these loopholes, these tax loopholes for the wealthy, for big oil and for crypto and hedge fund managers and Republicans wanted to protect everyone and I don't.

And then he said, but I'm going to be coming back and with your help, I'm going to win. And I think that if I were Biden's speechwriters and Biden's campaign, I would frame the accomplishments

and frame the entire message as we are in the middle of this fight.

And on the other side is a group of people who want to take away your right to choose how many kids you have and when they want to tell your kids which books to read.

They want to take away your health care.

They want to materially harm your life.

And if you give them the chance, if you put them in power, so they're controlling Washington, these are the things that they will do.

And here's what I will do and you know that I'll do it.

You know that I'll fight hard because I've been doing it for the last four years and I'm not done yet and we haven't finished, but we're making progress.

And if you put me back in there, I will keep fighting these fights on behalf of you.

I mean, this gets to the other side of it, which is that there's a question of can you get people to vote for you because they like you, they think you've done a great job.

And can you get people to vote against the other side because they're frankly terrified of what they'll do if they come into power.

One thing I've heard about Biden and the Democrats in 2022 is that there are a lot of voters who somewhat disapproved of Joe Biden.

They didn't think he was doing a great job and an unusual number of them voted for Democrats, voted for Biden and Democrats to have more power.

And the catalyst data shows the Democrats did particularly well among young voters.

If you want to think about a class of voters that Biden does not connect to that well, young voters, right?

Young voters are like Elizabeth Warren, they're like Bernie Sanders.

They did not connect to Joe Biden, different generation, different kind of Democrat from them a lot of the time, but they turned out in huge numbers.

I mean, they really were the difference for Democrats in 2022.

And I suspect a lot of that is because they're pretty terrified of the Republicans of Dobbs of January 6th, of what just Republicans represent and want to do.

And this feels like something that Biden understands pretty deeply, that even more so I think than in 2012, say, you don't have to like Joe Biden to vote for him.

He doesn't have to be your dream presidential candidate, but he's a tool against letting Trump and Republicans like Trump back into power.

And that that's fundamentally the choice here.

The sort of young voter performance in 2022 strikes me as some evidence that they're right about that.

Yeah.

I mean, I did one focus group of a diverse group of like college age voters in Orange

County and then I did Orange County, California, Orange County, California, my hometown. There you go.

And then I did one in Atlanta with like young black voters in their 20s and 30s.

And those two groups out of all the groups, the view of Joe Biden was quite bleak.

They did not think he was doing a great job.

They were upset about the idea that he was going to run again.

They thought he was too old.

He doesn't understand their issues, all that kind of other stuff.

Then you start talking about the Republicans and they were all terrified.

This was right around Dobbs and they were terrified about Dobbs.

They were terrified about election deniers.

They were terrified about what was going to happen with climate change.

They were angry.

They were scared.

And even I remember in the Atlanta group, it was probably the most negative group about Biden that I had heard and Kamala Harris and like they weren't even that excited about Stacey Abrams, which really surprised me.

And then at the end I said, okay, well, is anyone voting for Herschel Walker?

And they all said, no, are you crazy?

Of course I'm not voting for Herschel Walker.

Are you voting for Brian Kemp?

No, I'm not going to vote for it.

Not as much as Herschel Walker, which, you know, should tell you something.

But they were quite as negative towards Brian Kemp.

But in every single focus parade, the same thing happened.

It was the same pattern, unhappiness with Biden, disappointment.

But as soon as you bring up Trump and as soon as you bring up Trump-like Republicans and the choices there, they automatically go back with Biden and go with the Democrats.

So I have a theory about this in Biden that I want to try out on you, which is it.

I think Biden's kind of soft approval ratings and you can tell me if you think this is wrong, but just experientially, I don't think Democrats like Joe Biden the way they liked some of the other Democratic presidents or standard bears of my lifetime.

But that is actually the flip side of something he does.

It has helped make him successful, which is that he doesn't really create all that much for Democrats to rally around.

He's not trying to take up that much political space.

You know, as we mentioned earlier, it doesn't give a ton of interviews, but he doesn't take a bunch of shots in his speeches.

I mean, there are ways, you know, this much better than me as a former speechwriter.

If you want to get the president to be the person leading the news, there are ways to do it.

And Biden lets those pitches go by like day after day.

They just don't try to do that.

But what that means is they create and leave a lot of open space for Republicans to be



the headline figures in the news and for Republicans to over and over again, so to speak, show who they are for Trump to continue being a headline figure in the news.

And for Republicans to motivate Democrats against them, in many ways, one of Biden's strengths as a politician, I think, is that he doesn't get in the way of Republicans motivating Democrats, right?

Biden is, he's often a kind of pretty broad canvas on which a lot of kinds of opposition Republicans can operate through him.

He doesn't turn off that many Democrats for the same reason he doesn't light them up because he's kind of letting Republicans be the energy in his own coalition.

I think that's definitely part of what he's doing.

I also think it is just the political context that we're all living in right now.

And then I think that Biden and his team recognize, which is the Republican Party is now so extreme,

has gone so far to the right, so far outside the mainstream, that they have left sort of a broad, broad middle of fundamentally American values that a Democratic candidate like Joe Biden can easily embrace and stand for and reclaim.

And so in Biden's announcement video, right, it was a very patriotic video, I believe the first ad that ran was called the flag.

And it's very, you know, we claim this flag and we believe in freedom and opportunity and what the Republicans have done by going so far to the right is that they have left open to the Democratic Party, sort of this very large, broad coalition where you can appeal to a lot of people and a lot of different kinds of voters by just not being as crazy as they are.

And I think Biden understands that it is actually a good fit for this moment because he's never been the kind of politician that has embraced those kinds of extreme tactics or rhetoric or even tried to get himself in the news with potshots like the kind that you're talking about.

So let's talk a bit about some of the possible matchups here because we're beginning to see the Republican field take shape.

So the advantage for Trump, I think, in that rematch is that Trump goes back to being a challenger where he's always more comfortable.

So the whole pitch in 2016 was all these politicians screwed everything up, especially the Democrats.

I'm an outsider.

I can take on the establishment.

If you're pissed about the way things are going, vote for me.

That's the nicest version of Trump's message.

Obviously, there was a lot of other stuff thrown in there.

In 2020, he was the incumbent, and so he was saddled with people's dissatisfaction with the state of the country, the state of the economy, the pandemic, and he had to deal with all of that.

Now he gets to go back to saying, oh, it wasn't so bad when I was in office and now I'm the challenger and I'm the outsider again, and so put me in there and I can fix things again.

So that's what the advantage to Trump is.

I think the advantage for Biden, and sort of an obvious one, is Trump didn't leave on great terms, and most people in this country have formed an opinion of Donald Trump, and the opinion is not good, and most people don't want him to run again, and he is an extremely polarizing figure, and he still does poorly with independence, and he still does poorly with a lot of the voters who cast a ballot for him in 2016 and then decided to vote for Joe Biden in 2020, and he is still losing among voters who are dissatisfied with both Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

People who don't like both of them, Biden is still winning those voters.

He won them in 2020.

Trump won those voters in 2016 when it was people who didn't like Trump or Hillary Clinton.

Trump won those voters by a lot.

So I think the advantage that Biden has in a Trump-Biden rematch is, look, we're re-running the last race.

He won the last race.

How many people who voted for Joe Biden over Donald Trump in 2020 are going to say, yeah, you know what?

I'm going to go back to Trump now.

Now, again, it could happen.

It could be a small number of people that just tipped the race in those key states.

But if I'm the Biden folks, that's why I probably like that matchup.

So behind Trump on the Republican side is DeSantis.

And DeSantis is a place where one of the Biden team's best arguments, which is that Democrats performed really well in 2022 falls apart because they did get crushed in Florida.

And DeSantis is not going to let anybody forget that correctly.

So if you're on his political team, so what do you make of a DeSantis-Biden match?

So if you'd asked me this six months ago, I would tell you that it concerns me.

It concerns me a lot more than the Trump-Biden matchup.

After DeSantis' not just his performance, but the press he's gotten, what people have gotten to know about him over the last several months, it's now for me a toss up whether I'm worried more about a DeSantis-Biden matchup or a Trump-Biden matchup because you see this in focus groups now.

You see that in polling, independent voters, swing voters, sort of the middle of the road voters that Biden will need to win, they now see DeSantis as an extreme Republican.

There was a moment, I think, where they thought, oh, he's conservative and all, but he's not quite as right-wing as Trump, or he's not as scary as Trump, or he's not all that.

And I think whether it's him going after Disney, whether it's the six-week abortion ban, there is a perception of DeSantis now in the electorate, to the extent that people know him, that he is fairly extreme and very, very Trumpy.

And so I don't think that serves him well in a general.

And then I think the other problem is, for DeSantis, if he's the nominee, I don't think that if Trump loses the primary, that he just endorses DeSantis and rides off into the sunset and says, good luck.

I think he tries to burn down the party on the way out.

And so DeSantis would have to deal with that.

And I think back to those, talking about those non-college educated voters, I think some of those voters, a good portion of those voters, they turn out for Donald Trump and no one else.

They didn't turn out in the midterms.

They haven't turned out for other candidates.

They are Trump voters.

That's who they like.

And if Trump is not on the ticket, maybe you don't get quite that level of turnout on the Republican side.

I think those are problems for DeSantis.

But then how do you take the Florida results in 2022?

I think we had a weak candidate on the Democratic side.

I also think that the way Democrats or people don't know is sort of re-ran Charlie Crist to it already.

Re-ran Charlie Crist.

Lost.

Yeah.

I also think that the way DeSantis governed, he did a lot of the culture war stuff for the national media, for the right-wing media.

That's how we get to know him.

When he first started as governor, he passed enough policies and did enough things that made him seem, if not moderate, at least like a traditional Republican stuff around the economy.

I think he proposed teacher pay increases.

He did enough things as governor that I think within Florida, which also has gotten redder over time as well and where the Democratic party has just sort of fallen apart over the last couple of years, he did enough to make sure that voters were not perceiving him as extreme as I think the national electorate perceives him today.

This is obviously now getting to less likely, but I don't think impossible territory at all.

You can imagine a world where Republicans are getting nervous that neither Trump nor DeSantis after mauling each other across debates and rallies and whatever else are the right candidate.

In 2020, Democrats ultimately acted very strategically.

They looked at the situation.

They decided Joe Biden, who they didn't all like the most, was going to be the best candidate to be Trump and they went with Joe Biden.

There are candidates in the Republican party who are more strategically positioned, I think, to take advantage of where the country is and what Biden's weakness is our attempt

Scott and Nikki Haley.

The more off chance, but you can imagine something.

One of them wins Iowa and all of a sudden things begin to balloon.

The more off chance that one of these more long shot candidates wins.

How do you think about that?

I have gone over this many times in my mind because I don't want to make such a bold prediction

since I haven't been good at that in the past, but I find it extremely unlikely that one of these candidates who is not Ron DeSantis or Donald Trump is going to be able to pull through and here's why.

They all seem to me like they would be decent candidates in a Republican primary that was taking place in 2008 or 2012.

Tim Scott, Nikki Haley, Nikki Haley was at her town hall the other day and she's like hitting DeSantis and Trump on not being honest on entitlement reform and is it going to hurt?

Is it going to cause some pain?

Yes, it's going to cause some pain.

By the way, now I'm going to start talking about what a hawk I am on Russia.

That's fine, but that's a Republican party that just doesn't exist anymore, at least in terms of the electorate.

The Republican electorate now is a very MAGA-like electorate and they have embraced populism, cultural populism, to an extent economic populism, cutting social security and Medicare, extremely unpopular with the general electorate, also very unpopular with Republican voters right now.

I just don't know that I can't think of the candidate running who could be ready to step into the role of MAGA king or queen if Trump or DeSantis falters because to me it seems like Nikki Haley is doing a poor MAGA impression.

Tim Scott isn't even trying because he's trying to run as like a kinder gentler Republican, which there's been no evidence that Republican voters want that kind of Republican.

Mike Pence has the highest unfavorable ratings of any candidate running in the Republican party because he decided not to commit treason on January 6th.

And then you have someone like Chris Christie who is just going to go right at Donald Trump and he's going to take it to Donald Trump and make an argument that I think we would all find quite compelling and recent poll shows 60% of Republican voters won't even consider supporting Chris Christie for president.

And that's before he started taking on Donald Trump as strong as he has been since he announced. So I think that's basically right.

But I do think it's interesting and it gets a bit to this lack of fear somehow Republicans have toward Biden or maybe just what the Republican party is that nobody thinks the Republican party is going to act strategically here.

Yeah.

I mean, look, I know people who voted for Joe Biden and don't like Joe Biden, right?

He was not their second choice, not their third, not their fourth, not their fifth, if they were actually getting down to it, right?

That's true for a lot of very young liberal voters.

And Democrats, like they really sat there thinking, God, we got to get this back and came to Joe Biden as the answer to that problem.

It's just remarkable to me how that conversation just does not exist on the right and nobody thinks it is going to exist on the right.

They're going to do the thing they feel like doing, right?

They like Trump or they like the Santas and hope for the best.

It's just a genuine difference between the parties right now.

Yeah.

And I let myself believe that at the outset of this Republican primary is that Republican voters have to care about electability.

They have to now because they, you know, even if they think that Donald Trump won the last election, they're still pissed that they don't have a Republican in power.

So they got to focus on electability.

But there is a segment of that party that is still thinking a lot about electability and being strategic, but it's like the Republican consultants and strategists and Republicans living in blue areas in the coast and, you know, in this small segment of college educator Republicans in that party, which is again, a minority of the party.

And I think the vast majority of Republican voters, they're not making that strategic decision and they're looking around to say like, look, I like Trump and I don't think everything he says is great.

I don't think his tweets are good.

I think it might be if they think his character is bad, but like, I don't know.

I don't know if I trust this DeSantis guy.

He seems kind of weird or I like DeSantis plenty, but let's give Trump four more years and then we'll give DeSantis eight years after that.

You know, there's that thought as well.

And then I think when they look at everyone else, they're just like, yeah, those people remind me of Paul Ryan or Mitch McConnell or the rhinos, right?

Like Trump has done such an effective job at marginalizing so many of the Republican politicians serving today as the Rhino establishment that I really do think it has trickled down to most of the Republican base and that has poisoned a lot of these candidates for them. So one thing that Trump DeSantis, anyone will have is that they all will go through this primary and be out there campaigning and out there doing speeches and out there doing debates.

And presidents can get out of practice on this very famously.

Barack Obama did not perform terribly well in his first debate with Mitt Romney and widely I think that's considered because he was just out of practice for that kind of campaigning and that kind of debate stage.

I think this is more of a fear with Biden given some of the age issues that they don't want to activate in the voters minds.

So what do they have Biden do?

I mean, I don't get the sense he's going to be out there campaigning super hard in the Democratic primary against Marion Williamson and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

So what do they do to have him be prepared here?

I think he's got to be out there quite a bit actually.

Like I don't know that a sort of rose garden strategy and I'm not saying this is what they want to do, but I don't know that a rose garden strategy necessarily works because that vacuum gets filled with everything that Republican candidates are saying every single day on the trail and they're getting media attention for it and they're saying it at debates all the time.

So like I think they got to get him out there in front of bigger crowds with some energy.

I think they got to give him a stump speech that shows some fight.

I think they've got to use humor to diffuse the age question and also just sort of, you know, when we were in the White House and he was Uncle Joe, like sometimes people rolled their eyes and again, he committed gas, but like people liked him, you know, and it showed him having fun.

And I think they need to have a little fun too, especially, you know, I've heard you talk about this, like they need a theory of attention here and how you're going to break through when you are the incumbent president, you're in the White House, you're governing, and then there is a complete circus on the other side in the Republican primary.

And I think getting him out there in town halls, meeting people one on one, showing that how great he is with voters when he meets them and how compassionate he is.

Like I think all of that is going to be really important.

And I would worry about, again, feeling like getting him out there too much is taking a risk and it's not worth it.

And so we should just sort of, you know, keep his schedule light.

And again, I don't think they're going to do that, but I would get him out there more because I would be worried about Republicans filling the vacuum.

The other thing is Joe Biden is actually president and he doesn't have a Democratic Congress anymore, but he does have that office and the ability, I mean, there's a reason incumbents tend to get reelected and it's not just fundraising, it's that they can actually do things and the things they do can shape the stories they can tell and what they can bring to voters.

So what should they actually substantively do?

I mean, they have the problem of, you know, legislation has to go through McCarthy, but if you were in there, what would you be trying to achieve?

I mean, I think it's tough for this next year, right?

Like they've almost exhausted every executive action that I think they think is possible, legally possible already.

I don't think there's any chance for additional legislation at this point.

And so what does that leave them?

Well, all the legislation they've passed, whether it's the inflation reduction act or the chips act or the infrastructure bill, sure, there are plenty of projects that are starting that he can go to ribbon cuttings and all that.

And I think that they will, they have been doing that and they'll continue to do that.

And I would look for, again, back to like how you handle the accomplishments, even when I'm at an event celebrating some shovel ready project or some grant or, you know, a climate investment in the inflation reduction act, I would be pushing the message forward so that you're the context is a fight that you're waging and send me back and I'll finish this fight.

Also like look at the Republican House and every time they have a message vote or a show vote or try to do something unpopular, I go out there and whack the shit out of them.

And just you got to get people in the mindset over the next year that this is a choice, that there are two visions, there are two paths.

And if you do not return me to office, these people will take over and they will do all of these things that seem horrific right now and will materially harm your life.



And they will do that the second they get into power.

And I think his most important job is to like remind people of that every single day between now and the election.

And then always final question, what are three books you'd recommend to the audience?

Oh, three books.

Well, on another podcast I do that you've been on called offline, we have been doing a challenge where we are trying to help our screen time reduce our screen addiction.

And so I just finished Catherine Price's *How to Break Up with Your Phone*, which has been fantastic and very helpful.

What else am I reading?

I'm embarrassed because as you were saying that, I actually glanced at my phone.

I want to admit this in full view of the audience and God.

I'm telling you, all of those kinds of books now I'm reading, all the offline...

It was barely conscious too, it just sort of happened.

As I'm breaking up with my phone, I've like reacquainted myself with my Kindle because I famously do not read that much because I'm on Twitter all the time.

And I'm finally reading *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan, which is fantastic.

And also I'm reading Patricia Lockwood.

No one is talking about this, which is a fantastic little weird book about the internet, of course.

John Feverell, thank you very much.

Thanks, Ezra.

This was fun.

This episode was produced by Roland Hew.

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