

The Placeholder President

[Matthew Continetti](#) January 8, 2022 6:30 AM



President Joe Biden delivers remarks before signing into law the Accelerating Access to Critical Therapies for ALS Act at the White House in Washington, D.C., December 23, 2021. *(Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters)*

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The most impassioned speech of Joe Biden's presidency was about events that took place before it began. I'm talking about [the president's remarks](#) on the first anniversary of the January 6, 2021, riot at the Capitol. The energy, force, and direction of Biden's delivery have been missing from practically every address he's made since his inauguration. The Biden who spoke from Statuary Hall on Thursday was not his usual self — listless, reactive, defensive, and confused. This Biden was angry and purposeful and on the attack.

True, it was a partisan speech. How could it not have been? The driving force behind the events of January 6 was a Republican president who remains the most important figure in his party. Many Republicans will accuse Biden of divisiveness. They will say he ignored the faults of his own side. Well, sorry, but what did you expect? Biden was lively and pointed because public opinion is with him. A [majority](#) says the 2020 election was legitimate. A plurality blames Trump for the mob assault on the Capitol. Fifty-nine percent of adults [don't](#) want Trump to run for president in 2024. When Trump is the issue, Biden wins.

And Biden's troubles start. Trump for now is the least of his worries. Trump is on the sidelines. He's out of office. He's banned from social media. He doesn't figure in the everyday lives of most Americans. He won't be on the ballot this November. A White House midterm strategy based on portraying GOP candidates as Q-Anon shamans ready to storm the Capitol won't work. The hundreds of state and local campaigns will be too diverse. The candidates will be too distinct. And public anger over the economy, the pandemic, the schools, the border, and the cities will matter most of all.

Biden's January 6 speech was a reminder that he's a placeholder president. He's in office because independent voters in the suburbs rejected Donald Trump's personality and Donald Trump's response to the coronavirus. No one expected — or wanted — Biden to be a world-historical statesman. Biden himself said he's a "transitional" figure with a singular goal: Keep Trump away from the White House. He accomplished that task, which is why he began his presidency with [healthy](#) approval ratings. The electorate didn't sour on him until he took on additional employment: live-action role-playing FDR and LBJ, dismantling immigration protocols on the southern border, deferring to public-health experts and regulatory bodies, and midwifing the Taliban reconquest of Afghanistan. Now Biden is at [43-percent approval](#) in the *FiveThirtyEight* average of polls.

Biden's dilemma is that "I'm not Trump" is a winning message only when Trump is on the ballot, holds office, or is tied to a major event such as January 6. The message doesn't work on the other 364 days of the year. If Biden had grasped why he became president, he would have pursued a modest agenda directed at the independents who elected him. He would have sounded and acted more like Governor Jared Polis than like Senator Elizabeth Warren. Instead, Biden has catered to the Left at the expense of the center. He's at odds with the median voter as he fails to control the coronavirus, inflation, the border, and events overseas. His domestic agenda is stalled. And the Democratic congressional majority is at risk.

But not all is lost. A GOP Congress in 2023 may provide Biden with a rationale to shake up his staff, work with Senator Mitch McConnell, and distinguish himself from the cultural Left. And the 2024 cycle may not be as good for Republicans as the 2022 cycle is shaping up to be. The last two Democratic presidents won reelection during periods of divided government. The mix of issues may be different. And Biden will be able to play his "I'm not Trump" card if the former president enters the presidential race and wins the GOP nomination.

Listening to Biden speak Thursday, I kept thinking of his recent interview with David Muir of ABC News. When asked if he'll run for reelection, Biden gave the only answer possible: Yes. But he added an escape hatch when he said that his health would be the deciding factor. Then Muir asked Biden if Trump's decision would shape his 2024 calculus. And the president became animated. He sounded as engaged as he was on January 6. "You're trying to tempt me now," he [said](#). "Sure. Why would I not run against Donald Trump for the nominee? That'll increase the prospect of running."

Biden has seen the Democratic bench. He works with Vice President Kamala Harris. He understands that despite everything, he remains the Democrats'

best chance of preventing a second Trump term. Joe Biden is an unpopular, unloved, and ineffective president. But he's beaten Donald Trump once and isn't wrong to think he might do it again. He won't transform America. He might keep his job for a while longer if voters don't like their options. That's what a placeholder does.

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