

Cozen Currents: Why This Rematch Isn't a Rehash

The Cozen Lens

- While President Biden's age has sparked worry among traditionally Democratic-leaning voters, it may help him make inroads with older voters, one of the most important voting blocs.
- President Biden and former President Trump are set to face off in their first debate of the cycle on Thursday. While many won't be able to look away, whether it will really have much of an effect on the race is a debate in itself.
- President Biden and former President Trump are vying for the support of union members, who will be a key voting bloc in the critical Rust Belt.

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How Biden's Age Could Be a Net Positive

Relative Age. Concerns about President Biden's age and his fitness for office have led a number of early 2024 news cycles, prompting calls for Biden to step aside in favor of a younger candidate.

- President Biden was sworn into office at 78 years old, making him the oldest president in US history. If re-elected for another four years, Biden would leave office at age 86.
- While former President Trump is only four years younger than Biden, polling has found that voters are significantly more concerned with Biden's age than Trump's. A February poll found that "67 percent of voters said the 81-year-old president is too old to effectively serve another term — compared with 57 percent who said the same of Trump." Another poll from February similarly found that 61 percent of voters believe Biden is "too old" to effectively serve as president.
- Voters' worries over the president's age led Democratic-aligned pundits such as the New York Times' Ezra Klein to suggest Biden should consider stepping aside at the August party convention. The Trump campaign has also seized on the news cycle, sharing misleading or altered videos of Biden appearing lost or confused online.

An Older Crowd. Although Biden's age is perceived as a liability, it could also be among the reasons the president is making significant gains among older voters.

- Among the unusual trends of this presidential election, recent polling shows Trump making inroads with Democrats' traditional base of young and minority voters, while Biden is performing unusually well among seniors. An April poll has Biden leading Trump among voters over 65 years old, 51 percent to 42 percent.
- If the trend holds through November, it would result in the best performance for a Democratic presidential candidate with this voting bloc since 2000.
- For Biden, losing support from voters ages 18 to 29 while picking up support from those age 65 and older could be a worthwhile tradeoff. Seniors are more likely to turn out on Election Day than young voters, making them both a more reliable and valuable voting bloc. According to analysis from the University of Virginia's Sabato's Crystal Ball, voters 65 and older made up 26 percent of the electorate in 2020 compared with 16 percent for those ages 18 to 29.

Biden's Best Retirement Investment. Biden's campaign is capitalizing on his recent success among seniors, launching a targeted outreach campaign to solidify the president's advantage.

- According to Bloomberg, the Biden campaign is focusing ads on daytime TV shows popular among seniors such as Good Morning America and Wheel of Fortune. The campaign also launched a Seniors for Biden-Harris initiative, which will reportedly include bingo nights and



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- The Biden campaign's early investment in outreach to older voters is already paying off. The president was recently endorsed by three retirees' groups: the National Committee to Preserve Social Security & Medicare, Social Security Works PAC, and the National United Committee to Protect Pensions.
- For Biden, the gains among older voters could be pivotal to his success on Election Night. Voters in the trio of states most important to the election outcome – the “blue wall states” of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin – are disproportionately older. Data from the health policy non-profit KFF shows that the three states fall within the top 16 oldest states by population.

Debating the Debate

We've Seen This Before. If history is any indication, it's unlikely Thursday evening's presidential debate will move the needle much with voters.

- Both candidates are very known quantities to the American people. On top of high name recognition, most people's opinions of the pair were baked in a long, long time ago. How many people's votes are actually going to change as a result of this debate?
- Research suggests that debates have little influence on election outcomes. In 2019, researchers Caroline Le Pennec and Vincent Pons analyzed survey data from 31 elections in 10 countries since 1952 and did not find an association between TV debates and voting choice. “Debates are short-term events, so they have less effect on people's choices,” University of Texas at Austin government professor Christopher Wlezien told *Scientific American* in 2020. He and Columbia University professor Robert Erikson reached a similar finding in their 2012 book, *The Timeline of Presidential Elections*.
- President Biden's State of the Union address was well-reviewed by critics but nevertheless did not substantially shift the trajectory of this race. Although this is expected to be a close election, that's more a reflection of the evenly divided nature of the highly polarized electorate than the existence of a large number of persuadable voters up for grabs (as was more true in the past). This debate only matters insofar as it affects the outcome of a handful of voters in a handful of states, reducing the chance it has much of an effect at all.

We've Never Seen This Before. There are a couple factors that differentiate this from past presidential debates.

- This is the first debate not held by the Commission on Presidential Debates since 1988, the first without a live audience since 1976, and is being held three months earlier than the previous earliest contender (which was the very first in 1960). Candidates will have their mics muted while the other is talking. This will be the very first time the broadcast will feature (two) commercial breaks, two presidents (one current, one former), and a rematch. In many ways, this will not resemble anything we've ever seen before.
- Biden insisted on a debate this early to break a polling deadlock that his team assumed would have evaporated by now. He hopes to remind people of former President Trump's boisterous faults and show he can handle the presidency at his advanced age (Trump himself is no young'un). The re-election campaign wants a shot in the arm and the chance to re-define the race at an early stage. However, even a solid performance throughout can be marred by mistakes that will be played ad infinitum as short clips, as well as running the risk of a complete “senior moment.”
- The audience each candidate is trying to win over is a new one — double-haters — people that disapprove of Biden and Trump. The percentage of these voters is at a record 25 percent of the electorate. They were won by Trump in 2016, Biden in 2020, and likely hold the key to victory this year. At the moment, many of them are giving thought to independent candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who won't be joining the main candidates on stage this week. This debate may be the opportunity for each candidate to persuade those skeptical of both major parties why they should nevertheless side with them over their opponent (or at least not vote for their opponent): more an effort in trying to fatally taint the other guy over inspiring people with a hopeful banner to rally behind.

Working Hard for Labor's Support

Fighting for Union Votes. Both President Biden and former President Trump are vying for union support.

- While union leadership has generally been supportive of Biden, the rank and file are a highly contested voter bloc. Working class, non-college educated voters will be crucial to the election outcome. A February NBC News poll found that Biden's performance with union voters fell by seven points since November 2020. Trump is unlikely to gain the support of union leaders or even a majority of members, but peeling off enough votes in the Rust Belt could tip the balance.
- The United Auto Workers (UAW) and AFL-CIO have both endorsed Biden, but the Teamsters have so far withheld an endorsement. Teamsters President Sean O'Brien met with both Biden and former President Trump earlier this year and will speak at the Republican National Convention, a sign that the Teamsters seek to play the two parties off each other rather than grant Biden an unconditional endorsement. This cycle, the Teamsters have also made contributions to the Republican National Committee, a highly unusual move for the union, and to the re-election campaign of Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO), a populist conservative who has been more supportive of labor than many in his party.
- Winning the votes of union members is crucial for Biden to win the traditional Blue Wall states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin and their 44 electoral votes. The Teamsters' stance shows that he cannot take their votes for granted even as Biden argues that he is the "most pro-labor president in history." Last fall, Biden became the first sitting president to join a picket line when he supported UAW workers during a strike at a Michigan plant. His appointees on the National Labor Relations Board have made decisions favorable to the labor movement. Biden has also come out against Nippon Steel's proposed acquisition of Pittsburgh, PA-based US Steel.
- Trump has departed from the traditional Republican mold by making more direct appeals to union voters. Last fall, he called on autoworkers to get union leadership to back him during a Michigan rally. "Do me a favor, just get your union guys, your leaders to endorse me. And I'll take care of the rest," he said. Trump has also argued that Biden's electric vehicle policy is hostile to the domestic auto industry and will cost American jobs.

Biden's Labor Pains. Biden faces a potential major work stoppage just weeks before Election Day.

- A year after resolving a labor dispute at West Coast ports, the White House now faces a similar one on the other side of the country. The International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) has pulled out of contract talks for over 45,000 dock workers at East Coast and Gulf Coast ports, raising the risk of a strike after the contract expires September 30th. The union made the move in protest of the deployment of automated machinery at some ports. ILA President Harold Daggett has previously threatened a strike. "More and more, I feel strongly to form and lead a global, international, maritime alliance, armed with the weapon to go on strike together, and show foreign-owned companies like Maersk and the world how powerful we are," he said.
 - A work stoppage at ports only a month before Election Day could be deeply politically damaging to Biden and threaten to reverse the recent improvement in inflation. The economy is one of Biden's weakest issues, and a further increase in prices could put the president even more on the defensive. Biden has faced other potentially significant strikes in his term which were resolved after White House intervention, including freight railroads in 2022 and West Coast ports last year.
 - If the ILA and employers do not get talks back on track soon, Biden will likely deploy acting Labor Secretary Julie Su to intervene. Su played a pivotal role in bringing the two sides together in last year's West Coast port labor dispute. This experience would position her well to facilitate a speedy resolution to boost the president's political fortunes.
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