

For Joe and the Dems, No More Biden' Their Time

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During an abruptly organized press conference in the Rose Garden on October 21st, Vice President Joe Biden announced he will not be running for President in the 2016 election cycle. The shadow cast by the White House perfectly bisected the podium. Biden stood flanked by his wife Jill on his sunny left, and President Obama to his right, in the shadow of the West Wing.

The primary reasons behind his decision were already well known. Recovering from the tragic loss of his son Beau to brain cancer in late May, he and his family determined that the grieving process had “closed the window to mounting a realistic campaign for president.”

Biden may not be running as a candidate, but his resolve to remain politically influential was made very clear during this press conference.

“While I will not be a candidate, I will not be silent. I intend to speak out clearly and forcefully, to influence as much as I can where we stand as a party and where we need to go as a nation.” he remarked.

For the remainder of his brief presser, Biden laid out his thoughts on the issues facing the candidates in the 2016 race, the status of the Democratic Party, and state of cancer treatment in America. However what remained unclear after his words in the Rose Garden, were how the ripple effects will impact his fellow Democrats vying for the oval office. There was a significant portion of the Democratic electorate counting on a run from Biden. Now with a Joe-less pool of candidates — exactly how does Mr. Biden plan to introduce himself into the process to use his influence for politics? More broadly, why have Democrats been losing their appeal with these white, middle-class voters, and can they regain enough of them to win the election?

“Both he and the President are unshackled at this point.” said Julia Barnes, New Hampshire State Director for Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaign. “His role as Vice President has been the second fiddle to the president, but for the remainder of time between now and the election he doesn’t really need to do that anymore. Obama doesn’t necessarily have any immediate need for Biden to be a partner in triangulation around policy. He kind of has nothing to lose.”

And she would know. Before the White House was just a twinkle in Senator Sanders’ eye, Ms. Barnes was a staffer with the Vice President’s primary run in 2007. Since that time, she has seen Biden cultivate a remarkably deep political network across the country, especially in some of the early primary states. And with his decision not to run, he is now in a very unique situation for a Vice President.

A perfect storm of time, relevancy, and sympathy has developed which could make Joe Biden one of the most influential voices of the 2016 election cycle.

His more variable duties as VP now and decision not to run a campaign have given him time. The months of speculation around if he will be throwing his hat into the ring have given him relevancy in the media and in households across the country. His family tragedies (Beau most recently, and his wife and daughter in 1972) garner the sympathy of any American who has experienced the loss of a loved one.

Putting this influence into practice will be more than a simple endorsement of one candidate or another. Biden can also choose to use it as a leveraging tool for those candidates who want to put him on the trail, and be a champion of issues important to him.

The electorate that was ready to support him running for President was substantial. Prior his announcement, the Vice President’s poll numbers were hovering at an average of 48% vs. Republican candidates scoring dismal numbers in hypothetical general election situations, according aggregated polling data from RealClearPolitics. Biden’s presence

and support will directly translate to votes amongst the key demographic of white, middle-aged, blue collar voters that has been slipping away from Democrats for roughly the last three decades.

“In 1972, Nixon won by a landslide against George McGovern. Nixon did very well amongst the white working class. There’s been a series of names, and at that time they were the ‘silent majority’ as they called it. White middle class voters who were concerned about crime and race, who had been Democrats but defected.” explained Thomas Edsall, a New York Times political columnist and Columbia Journalism School Professor.

“In the Reagan years, they became known as ‘Reagan Democrats’. In the 1980 and 1984 elections, Reagan also did very well in these white working class areas.”

Even though this phenomenon isn’t new by any means, Biden was ‘working man Joe’ who was able to slow, if not reverse, some of this defection in 2008 — Obama’s running mate who was able to invigorate white blue-collar voters seven years ago.

“I think he will play a similar role to what he did in 2008.”, said a senior Democratic aide who spoke on the condition of anonymity. “He is someone who comes from a working class background in Scranton, Pennsylvania, he represented Delaware in the Senate, and he has a lot of allies in communities across the board. But it will be up to the Vice President as to how much campaigning he wants to do.

The challenge, for Bernie Sanders in particular, is connecting to the consistency Biden has had over his career on issues of income inequality. Bernie needs to make voters see the solution to these issues within his campaign. When asked if this is a priority for the campaign, Barnes remarked, “It’s part of the conversation.”

That conversation is bigger than Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden considering Democrat's track record the last 30 years with the white middle-class. And Democratic Party leadership is keenly aware of this obstacle.

In a press release sent out right after Biden's Rose Garden announcement, DNC chair, Rep. Debbie Wassermann Shultz was already laying the groundwork, "There are few people in Washington over the last four decades who have been a greater champion for middle class Americans than Joe Biden. For the last seven years, Vice President Biden has served as one of President Obama's closest advisers and played a critical role in advancing middle-class economics that brought our country back from a severe recession that was costing our economy 750,000 jobs a month."

As prepared as party leadership may be, it is going to be a hard fight for the current slate of Democratic candidates to buck this trend. "The Democrats have this as an increasingly fundamental problem." explained Robert Shapiro Ph.D., a professor and former chair of the Department of Political Science at Columbia University. "The Republican Party strategy is basically to increase it's proportion of the white vote. Particularly the white male vote. And that's going to be a problem for the Democrats."

This substantial demographic was the foundation of the economy during the golden days of industrialization in the United States. From automobile production to steel workers, they were in many regards the epitome of the American dream — men and women who saw themselves as the backbone of prosperity for their country, putting in a hard days work to earn an honest living and support their family.

But as industry and technology have shifted, there has understandably been growing alienation of these voters as they see less jobs, less opportunity for growth, and more economic marginalization. In other words; high expectations for stability, and subsequently high disappointment.

This frustration for non-college educated white Americans has led them astray from voting for Democrats, because they see no solutions within government for the economic woes.

Additionally, the problems they see attached to potentially voting Democrat are a hindrance. From the point of view of many centrist white middle class Americans, they are overlooked by a Democratic Party that favors only socially marginalized populations.

Professor Shapiro continued, “That base of voters is not happy with other liberal Democratic policies. Also there is the how issue of race plays out. Not simply Barack Obama being a black president. The Democratic Party is the pro civil rights party, and their extent of liberalism on that issue is something many white voters are not happy with. Affirmative action and so forth.”

All of this can explain why Republicans with no political experience, and the rise of the Tea Party style libertarianism; have appealed so much to these voters. A poll conducted in mid-summer 2015 (during the height of Bernie’s initial surge) by ABCNews and Washington Post, asked voters which party has better ideas about how to make the economic system more fair. For the non-college educated whites polled, 50% responded Republican compared to 29% Democratic.

In recent election cycles, the people who depend most on policies that act as economic life rafts are the same ones voting for candidates who are actively trying to sink the ship.

Or, they aren’t voting at all. In a Pew Research survey published in the fall of 2014, they found that non-voters in the U.S., primarily white, are substantially more likely to depend on government programs for financial benefits, have borrowed money from family or friends to pay monthly bills, and are very unsatisfied with their financial situation.

“Comparing the policies of Democrats vs. Republicans when it comes to middle class voters, Democrats are the party that support paid family leave. We are supporting

increased minimum wage, and tax plans that help the middle class get ahead.” continued the Democratic aide.

“Where as on the other side, Republicans support plans that are in the vein of George W. Bush that put wealthy first. When people start to tune in to the Presidential election even more than they are now, they will realize that Democrats like Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, and Martin O’Malley are fighting for policies that will help the middle class get ahead. While Republicans like Marco Rubio are supporting tax plans that help the wealthy and corporations. It’s going to be a no brainer from the middle class; the Democrat will get their support.”

Even though some Democrats are confident in the appeal of the current slate; the Vice President may very well be the x-variable in reaching these voters. Biden has one year to reach and mobilize this crowd as effectively as he did in 2008, complimenting Obama’s broader appeal within other demographics. But for the next 2 months, both Hillary and Bernie have the chance to inherit Biden’s current base and stay as viable as possible as they enter the general election. Even though Biden likely will not endorse any single candidate before then. According the Democratic aide, “Biden recognizes the pitfalls of coming out for one person over another at this stage. And there is still a lot of time for people to decide.”

The outcome of the primaries will determine the strategy Democrats will take to energize their estranged electorate. And then Biden can finally jump into the pivotal support roll he will inevitably play after Super Tuesday. As Professor Shapiro concluded, “In terms of galvanizing that base of Democrats, [Biden] is significant.”