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He's no dream candidate, but Joe Biden may be the best hope to oust Trump

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The best thing about Joe Biden is he is not Donald Trump. That's not exactly a ringing endorsement but it could be a winning card. As the Democrats bid to recapture the White House in less than a year, it's Biden, despite his multiple failings, who looks like their safest bet.

It's already clear the election will not be about ideology or ideas. Leftwing candidates Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, and the youthful insurgent, Pete Buttigieg, would like to make it so. But the main battle will be fought over issues of identity and character, national and personal. Last week's vitriolic impeachment clash was a foretaste.

This is ground of Trump's choosing. It's inevitable he will make the election about himself and his contemptuous brand of politics. The election will be about fitness, truth and lies, rehabilitated white majority racism and xenophobia, and Trump's crude, flag-waving beer-and-blue-jeans nationalism.

Sad to say, this nauseous stew of Oval office prejudice, vanity and vice, masquerading shamelessly as strong leadership, has visceral appeal for many. "He speaks for us" is the cry heard at adulatory pre-campaign rallies. They may not like his manners (though many do). But they like his message.

Trump and his Republican lackeys believe the House impeachment vote will backfire, that he will be acquitted in the Senate, and that his re-election chances will have been boosted. They point gleefully to polls suggesting his popularity has risen during the "rigged" impeachment

process. "Millions of Republicans who dislike Mr Trump's character and behaviour are nonetheless repelled by the attempt to oust him months before another election," the Wall Street Journal commented.

"Democrats are impeaching Mr Trump not for Ukraine but because they believe he is simply unfit to be president."

There is some truth in that. But national and state polling figures appear challenging for Republicans. Trump's approval rating remains historically low, at about 44%. Memories of the fierce anti-Trump backlash in last year's Congressional elections remain fresh.

And this is where Biden comes in. In five of six key battleground states that Barack Obama won in 2012 and which fell to Trump in 2016, Biden wins in a notional match-up with the president – according to projections based on poll averages.

In Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, where the white middle-class and blue-collar swing vote is critical, Biden is ahead by between 4 and 7 points. He leads narrowly in Florida; only in Iowa does he trail. Nationally, Biden edges Trump by 4.5 points. Equivalent poll figures for Biden's main Democratic rivals, Sanders and Warren, suggest they, too, could beat Trump in some of these same six states. But their projected margins are significantly smaller or non-existent.

Biden's appeal rests on familiarity and name recognition – he entered the Senate in 1973, has run for the presidency twice before, and was Obama's vice-president for eight years. His affability, Irish Catholic upbringing, and supposed common touch has made him a favourite with working-class voters. But he is no dream candidate, especially for those seeking an urgent national renaissance. At 77, some say, he is too old. He has stumbled in debates. He has a reputation for gaffes and waffle. His son, Hunter, is a target in the Ukraine scandal. More significantly, perhaps, Biden is a conventional, establishment figure – the sort of professional politician it's fashionable to vilify. His so-say moderate, centrist views look rightwing to younger voters who note his support for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and his attitude to women. In Iowa, where Democrats will hold their caucus on 3 February, the relatively inexperienced Buttigieg, 40 years younger than Biden, leads party polls. In New Hampshire – the first primary – Sanders, another veteran, is ahead. Biden has a fight on his hands, before he even gets to Trump.

It's becoming ever plainer that Democrats who want a radical new beginning, a remaking of America through universal healthcare and programmes promoting social and economic equality, will not get there by backing Biden. But for those who believe the all-important aim is defeating Trump, he's an obvious choice.

In Britain's election, Labour supporters lacked comparable options. It was Jeremy Corbyn and his socialist agenda or bust. Bust and Boris is what they got. But Democrats and independents do have a choice. Whoever they pick, Trump will be difficult to beat. He has the power of incumbency on his side. He has a booming, jobs-rich economy and a new Canada-Mexico free trade deal. He has an attractive narrative about renewed American greatness that, while delusional, plays well in blue-collar America. He has suitcases stuffed with cash. He has Fox News – and Russia, too.

To win again, expect Trump to do almost anything, including doubling-down on the immoral, manipulative and corrupt behaviour that characterises his presidency. This is the inescapable

context in which the campaign will be fought. And vanquishing Trump, either in the Senate next month (unlikely) or the election (too close to call, notwithstanding recent polling) will not vanquish Trumpism. America was a deeply divided country long before he hove into view; it just didn't realise how much. Trump has brought polarisation over race, religion, class and geography into the open – and exploited and deepened it.

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This schism will not be easily or quickly repaired. But it needs fixing, and people know it. All things being equal, a majority of Americans, Republicans and Democrats, would probably prefer a more respectable, less divisive, less objectionable version of Trump. The looming battle is not about founding a new republic. It's about stopping the rot.

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