

Joe Biden, Generic Democrat; On Politics With Lisa Lerer

The New York Times

October 26, 2020 Monday 19:36 EST

Copyright 2020 The New York Times Company All Rights Reserved

Section: US; politics

Length: 1594 words

Byline: Lisa Lerer

Highlight: He was barely seen in public today, just eight days before the election — but that's all part of the strategy.

Body

He was barely seen in public today, just eight days before the election — but that's all part of the strategy.

Hi. Welcome to On Politics, your guide to the day in national politics. I'm Lisa Lerer, your host.

Sign up here to get On Politics in your inbox every weekday.

As we enter the final days of this presidential campaign, the Democratic Party is bursting with electoral energy. But very little of that energy seems to be coming from Joe Biden.

Instead, his advisers seem to hope that voters will just think of him as a generic Democrat — a broadly acceptable alternative to President Trump. Mr. Biden spent most of the day today out of public view, not making any waves.

Mr. Trump delivered speeches to thousands at three rallies across Pennsylvania, a critical battleground state. Then he was scheduled to hold an event at the White House celebrating the confirmation of his third Supreme Court nominee.

Mr. Biden spoke for less than 10 minutes in Chester, Pa., barely over the state line from his home in Delaware. Even that stop seemed hastily thrown on the schedule, was limited to a small group of reporters and was not announced in advance.

When asked by reporters about his travel schedule, Mr. Biden became a little defensive.

"There's not been a day that hasn't been a 12-hour day yet," he said, citing his travels to swing states and virtual events. Immediately after he finished speaking, his campaign announced a Friday trip to Wisconsin and Iowa; he also has visits planned to Georgia and Florida this week.

The candidates' contrasting itineraries underscored their divergent approaches to health and safety amid the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, the reality is that Mr. Biden's light schedule of public appearances has also been a core tenet of his campaign strategy.

The Biden campaign's bet is that it can win by giving the president exactly what he craves: dominance of the news cycle. In many ways, Mr. Biden is not so much a candidate running on his own merits as an avatar of what he is not — Mr. Trump.

In a poll released this month by the Pew Research Center, 63 percent of Mr. Biden's supporters said their vote was more a vote against Mr. Trump than a vote for Mr. Biden. At this point, the Biden campaign is probably happy to keep it that way.

For his part, Mr. Trump rarely lets a TV camera pass by without mentioning Mr. Biden's lack of campaign events.

"He's waved a white flag on life. He doesn't leave his basement," Mr. Trump told reporters in Allentown, Pa., when asked about Mr. Biden's accusation that he had waved "the white flag" on combating the virus. "He is a pathetic candidate, I will tell you that."

Of course, the Biden campaign is not completely silent. As my colleagues have detailed, Mr. Biden has been overwhelming Mr. Trump on the airwaves, running lots of ads with a positive biographic message and lots of others that condemn Mr. Trump's response to the virus.

But there are certainly reasons for Mr. Biden's decision to keep a lower public profile.

After casting himself as the sober leader taking the virus seriously, Mr. Biden can't be gallivanting across the country campaigning. The prospect of his contracting the virus is almost too scary for many Democrats to contemplate (though perhaps it's the kind of political disaster we've come to expect in a thoroughly unsettling year).

And there are signs that Mr. Trump has grown increasingly erratic, losing much of the discipline that characterized the final weeks of his 2016 campaign. In recent rallies, he has tried to dismiss the virus completely, a view both disconnected from rising case numbers and the sentiments of a majority of Americans who believe that the pandemic will only worsen this winter.

At times, some Democrats in swing states have gently griped about Mr. Biden's approach. But I've yet to hear a Democrat argue that he should headline the kind of large-scale rallies held by the Trump campaign, which flout public health guidelines, local rules and common sense.

Democratic voters are already plenty motivated anyway — if you want a glimpse of that, check out an episode of "The Daily" on suburban women that I hosted today.

Of course, it's not a giant rally or nothing. On Saturday, former President Barack Obama held a drive-in rally in Miami. Senator Kamala Harris, the vice-presidential nominee, made three stops around Detroit on Sunday, including at a drive-in church service. And lots of Democratic candidates across the country have held smaller, socially distanced campaign events.

Rather than finding ways to be creative with his appearances, Mr. Biden is often choosing not to appear at all.

If he wins, this will be viewed as a smart strategy — the Democrats will have finally vanquished Mr. Trump by simply getting out of the way.

And if he loses?

Well, the wave of Democratic fury that Mr. Biden will face will make the angry second-guessing that followed Hillary Clinton's decision not to campaign in Wisconsin seem cordial.

We want to hear from you about voting

So many Americans have already voted — more than 62 million, in fact! We want to hear about it. How is voting different for you this year? And what do you want to know about how the election is going to work? (Other than who is going to win, of course!)

Email us at onpolitics@nytimes.com, and your question or comment could be featured in a future edition of the newsletter. Be sure to include your full name and where you live.

Dispatch from Wisconsin: Trump, China and the ginseng farmers caught in the middle

WAUSAU, Wis. — In China, ginseng is a popular gift prized for its healing powers, and surprisingly enough, Wisconsin-grown ginseng is considered the world's best. In 2016, 590,000 pounds of the root, claimed to boost immunity and ease the effects of chemotherapy, was exported from the United States, most of it to China — with 98 percent coming from here in Marathon County.

But Mr. Trump's trade war with China, along with the coronavirus pandemic, which has stymied air travel between the countries, has caused ginseng prices to plunge to 1970s levels, far below today's production costs. Many farms, some of them generations old, are rapidly failing, according to Joe Heil, a longtime grower in Edgar, Wis., and a 20-year member of the Ginseng Board of Wisconsin.

In Marathon, Wisconsin's largest county by area, voters traditionally lean Republican. Although Barack Obama won Marathon County in 2008, he lost it in 2012, and Mr. Trump enjoyed a sweeping win in 2016.

For local Chinese-American ginseng farmers like Ming Tao Jiang of Hatley, the pain of the downturn has been worsened by Mr. Trump's rhetoric blaming China for the virus.

Mr. Jiang and his wife, Feng Lu, a physician at Marshfield Clinic, "feel physically threatened for the first time in our lives," he said. He has gotten stares, he said, and heard echoes of Mr. Trump's references to the "Chinese virus" and "kung flu." Mr. Jiang, who holds a Ph.D. in physiology, has worked to placate neighbors by giving away masks and ginseng.

In Wausau, home to a large population of Hmong-Americans, residents have reported several racist attacks since the coronavirus outbreak, including being spat on, said Yee Leng Xiong, director of the city's Hmong American Center.

The heightened tensions, along with Mr. Trump's immigration policies, have energized local Asian-American voters in this election, Mr. Xiong said, adding, "This is the most active and engaged I've ever seen them."

Throughout Wausau, competing Trump and Biden yard signs are evidence that Democrats are winning favor here. Along Highway 29, just outside Edgar, a dazzlingly bright LED billboard flashes "Trump," but seconds later changes to a Biden ad.

Trump flags fly over many farm fields, including Mr. Jiang's, but he has no say, because, like many farmers here, he rents the property.

Because the Trump administration's trade war hurt local dairy farmers as well, "I'm sure 5 to 10 percent of them are not so sure anymore" about their Republican allegiances, Mr. Jiang said.

Mr. Jiang's farm equipment still sports "Yang Gang" stickers in support of the former Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang, but he now hopes that Mr. Biden will win, fearing that Mr. Trump's stubbornness could "boil over into war" with China.

"It started out as a business dispute," he said. "Now it's more 'who's the bigger guy on the block.' It's chilling."

Mr. Heil, on the other hand, hopes Mr. Trump is re-elected and will play hardball with China until that nation backs down and rescinds tariffs as high as 41 percent on ginseng, or until U.S. tariffs on China's exported ginseng match that level.

"We've always had to pay a tax and a duty to get ginseng into China — it's never been a fair playing field for us," he said. "Nobody will survive. There will be no ginseng industry in the U.S. if things don't change soon. It's sad."

Joe Biden, Generic Democrat; On Politics With Lisa Lerer

This item was part of a series of short Battleground Dispatches our reporters have been filing from swing states, offering an in-person snapshot of what it's like to be on the ground in Iowa, Minnesota and elsewhere. You can read all of the dispatches [here](#).

... Seriously

A modest proposal: Make voting a dance party.

Thanks for reading. On Politics is your guide to the political news cycle, delivering clarity from the chaos.

On Politics is also available as a newsletter. Sign up [here](#) to get it delivered to your inbox.

Is there anything you think we're missing? Anything you want to see more of? We'd love to hear from you. Email us at onpolitics@nytimes.com.

PHOTO: (PHOTOGRAPH BY Drew Angerer/Getty Images FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Load-Date: October 26, 2020

End of Document