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COLUMNIST

One-Term Biden – and why it's not One-Term Byrne

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In 1976, just over two years into his first term as New Jersey Governor, Brendan Byrne was nicknamed OTB – One Term Byrne.

It was quintessential New Jersey – a streetwise, instantly recognizable political dart that will live forever, playing off the shorthand version of the then wildly popular Off Track Betting parlors.

By that point, Byrne's job performance rating had sagged to under 30 percent and fellow Democrats were jumping the line to challenge him in the 1977 primary election.

Forty-six years later and just shy of two years into his first term, President Joe Biden risks snatching the OTB crown from Byrne.

Like Byrne, his public approval has plunged into the low 30's (net negative five in NJ (<https://morningconsult.com/2022/07/18/biden-approval-rating-all-50-states/>)) and Democrats are publicly discussing ways to persuade him to forego seeking a second term or, in the extreme, mounting a primary challenge.

Byrne had won a landslide victory in 1973, rolling up a 66-31 percent margin and a plurality of 738,000 votes — both records at the time and stood until Gov. Thomas H. Kean won re-election in 1985 with 70 percent of the vote and a plurality of 760,000.

It all came crashing down for Byrne in 1976 when he muscled through the Legislature New Jersey's first income tax after pledging in his campaign that he saw no need for such a tax "in the foreseeable future," a phrase that became an indelible part of the state's political lore.

When he sought a second term in 1977, Byrne faced 10 opponents in the primary, including, among others, a sitting Congressman, incumbent and former state senators and former members of his own cabinet. With 30 percent of the vote, Byrne was re-nominated.

Despite record low public approval and trailing his Republican opponent, Senate President Raymond Bateman, by as much as 17 points that summer, Byrne coasted to a 56 to 42 percent victory.

Despite Biden's insistence he'll stand for re-election in 2024, he's staring down significant and potentially insurmountable obstacles to avoid the OTB nickname that stuck to Byrne.

His age — he'll be 80 in November, 82 as a candidate, and 86 at the conclusion of a second term — is now talked about openly as a disqualifier.

What had been merely whispers about his physical stamina and cognitive strength have become matters of public debate on television public affairs roundtables and commentaries and on editorial pages.

Each of his movements — walking or climbing stairs, for instance — is examined for hints of instability or hesitation and magnified by television coverage while his forgetfulness, mispronunciations, verbal stumbles, occasional incoherence and ramblings are amplified through traditional and social media outlets.

Piled atop runaway inflation, punishing increases in the cost of living, rampant violent crime in large cities and immigration crises at the southern border, the prospects of the oldest president in the nation's history standing up successfully to the intense and physically exhausting rigors of a campaign are dim, indeed.

If Democrats — as universally anticipated — are swept out of power in the House of Representatives this November and barely survive with a majority in the Senate, the pressure will grow on Biden to stand down for the greater good of retaining the White House in 2024.

In 1977, Byrne overcame the heavy odds against him by turning what all saw as a mortal political liability — a state income tax — into an asset by convincing New Jersey voters that without the additional tax revenue, public education would collapse, and schools would close statewide.

The state Supreme Court aided his argument by doing precisely that — ordering schools closed until a constitutional funding mechanism, i.e., an income tax, was enacted. The court order, of course, came in August when schools were shut for summer vacation.

Byrne also deftly forced his opponent onto the defensive by demanding he propose a plan of his own to avert a school funding crisis, a demand largely ignored and ultimately met with a hastily cobbled together plan so haphazard and unworkable that it actually damaged the Republican.

The coup de grace, however, was the Byrne homestead rebate program which used income tax revenue to send checks — signed by Byrne — three weeks prior to election day to every homeowner in the state as proof that he could deliver on his promises to address local property taxes.

Bateman, it was reported at the time, retrieved his check from his mailbox, and instantly lamented he'd lost the election.

There exists no similar redeeming feature for Biden, no path to follow to turn his fortunes around and demonstrate to the American people that his Administration is competent and capable of responding effectively to the economic disruption and hardship gripping the nation.

Whether the president will be able to weather the storm and maintain sufficient control of the party to fend off a rebellion as Byrne did successfully in 1977 appears unlikely.

The derisive One Term Byrne sobriquet was put to rest by the significant accomplishments of the governor's second term, he left office with majority public approval and became a beloved elder statesman.

A similar bright and comfortable future appears out of reach for One Term Biden.

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