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# Can Biden force a second referendum on Trump? It may be his best chance

*3-minute read*

**Carl Golden** Special to the USA TODAY Network

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The Biden campaign is floundering — directionless, unable to formulate a coherent second-term vision and battered by a series of national polls that place his public standing on performance and issues at historic low levels for an incumbent president seeking reelection.

Despite monthslong efforts to promote it, Bidenomics, the president's economic policy once heavily touted as the centerpiece of the administration's agenda, became the most celebrated flop since Ford introduced the Edsel sedan in 1958. It has since been abandoned and replaced by a strategy of an all-out attack on former President Donald Trump.

Biden's campaign rally and fundraiser — masquerading as his State of the Union speech — brought greater clarity to the new approach with repeated references to “my predecessor” as the greatest threat to the republic since the Civil War.

Lest the audience mistake his intended target, Biden uttered the “predecessor” characterization 13 times over the course of his 68-minute address — an average of once every five minutes.

Granted, Trump — the Republican presidential nominee in all but official name — has given Biden a treasure trove of wild, apocalyptic and often unhinged rhetorical rants to work with, but is it enough?

His State of the Union address was pitched directly toward relieving the anxiety of his party's base, a plea to put aside its doubts and misgivings, ignore the increasingly dismal polls and cease fretting about his physical and mental strengths.

The polling, however, paints a far grimmer portrait — 39% overall approval and rankings below 30% approval for his handling of immigration and the economy while nearly 70% of Americans believe the nation is heading in the wrong direction.

More telling is the finding that a stunning 80% believe he is too old and his cognitive strength too diminished for him to effectively serve a second term.

He has trailed Trump in matchup polling since last September — albeit often within the margin of error — but his ongoing failure to overtake or surpass the former president is a clear indication of a seriously weakened incumbent.

He faces as well a restive and alienated progressive wing of his party, angry over his unqualified support for Israel in its war with Hamas and his administration's inching closer to Trump-era restrictions on immigration at the southern border.

As opposition to his immigration policy grew in intensity until it became the overriding issue on the public's mind, the administration was thrown on the defensive and has failed to regain the initiative.

It veered from denial, stubborn refusal to describe it as a crisis while insisting against all evidence that “the border is secure.” The administration's position became increasingly untenable as Democratic mayors in cities like New York, Chicago, Denver and Los Angeles pleaded for federal assistance to offset the enormous drain on their budgets to cope with the influx of tens of thousands of migrants and the economic, social and public safety crises it caused.

Either fearful of offending immigration advocacy groups or simply at a loss for how to deal with it, the administration did nothing and handed Republicans and Trump a potent campaign issue, accusing Biden of disastrously repealing the former president's policies and opening the door to more than 7 million immigrants.

Three years into his first term and facing reelection in a bitterly polarized nation, Biden's tentative steps toward enhanced border control have infuriated the progressives on the left and further reinforced Democrats' reputation as the party of open borders.

The president owns the issue now, and by taking three years to acknowledge it and act decisively rather than blaming others, the president has lost credibility.

He came to the issue far too late, and his attempts to blame Trump and Republicans in Congress for failing to act rang hollow in light of the administration's unyielding defense of the president's repeal of Trump's executive order restrictions on immigration.

While he points to a declining inflation rate, job creation and low unemployment, the president's efforts to mitigate the economic harm inflicted in the early stages of his

administration have been largely unsuccessful.

Chronically high mortgage interest rates have placed homeownership out of reach for many, and families hope to squeeze one more year out of their car because a new model is unaffordable.

Dragging out traditional, boilerplate Democratic rhetoric — corporate greed, price gouging and millionaires who avoid paying their fair share in taxes — as the root cause of the high cost of living was a lame attempt to deflect arguments that massive government spending fueled inflation.

**Opinion:** Biden old and frail? Nope. President delivers fiery State of the Union his campaign needed

His side foray into “shrinkflation” — higher prices for less quantity — was borderline silly, suggesting a greater concern that because a two-pack of smaller Twinkies now costs more money, some sort of government intervention is necessary to right this grievous wrong.

While cold statistics indicating recovery are noteworthy, the reality of significantly higher prices for everything from cars to a dozen eggs is even colder.

Declining inflation, low unemployment and job creation are small comfort to consumers in the supermarket checkout line hoping the final tally isn't too far into triple digits.

The blame-Trump strategy along with warnings he would impose an authoritarian government and deny basic fundamental rights to Americans may pay off for Biden.

Turning it into a referendum on Trump rather than Biden worked four years ago. It may again.

*Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.*