
Biden and Trump, two elderly, befuddled presidential candidates. US voters' concerns

(from New York) As America grapples with a war with no prospect of peace between Israel and Hamas, divided even over plans to finance not just Ukraine but its defence, with mounting polarisation over which textbooks to allow or ban, and over immigration - vital to agriculture and critical to borders -, the age of the future president is taking centre stage. In recent weeks, daily opinion polls have continued to survey US citizens about the upcoming November elections and the issues that will be decided on election day. At the top of voters' concerns is the age of the US president, as they brace for yet another seasoned election campaign, as it was in 2020. Next November, the US will face a choice between two octogenarian candidates, but Joe Biden's age seems to cause more concern than that of his potential challenger Donald Trump. At 81, Biden will be the oldest presidential candidate in US history, with 77-year-old Trump coming in second. But the public perception is different. President Biden referred to deceased former European leaders as his contemporary counterparts and confused Egypt with Mexico in the same weeks that Donald Trump praised Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban for his leadership in Turkey and confused Nikki Haley with Nancy Pelosi. These incidents, which should have raised equal concerns about their age and mental sharpness, have instead seen Biden increasingly criticised for his age, while Trump has not faced the same political backlash. The difference lies in the perceptions and expectations of the American people. While Donald Trump is more of an entertainer than a politician, and can get away with gaffes and nonsensical statements, the President is expected to be competent, experienced and skilled. Last week, Biden was forced to publicly defend his mental sharpness following the release of the Special Counsel's Report on Classified Documents after he left office as Vice President. Criminal charges against Biden were not warranted, but the motivation shocked the American people. The Special Counsel described the President of the United States as a "well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory", a man who struggled to even remember the date of his son's death. Biden summoned journalists to challenge the report and vehemently denounced the remarks about his memory. Trump was also faced with questions about his health and fitness for office, after he said he had beaten Barack Obama rather than Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, and sounded the alarm that the US was on the brink of World War II. The tycoon responded with hyperbole, and his towering physique continued to hold his own despite dyed hair and an unnatural tan, as he stood before cheering crowds. Both candidates have been making embarrassing gaffes for years, long before their age could be blamed, but this time they will not escape public scrutiny: they speak to an America that is either lacking in young leaders or is so divided that the latter struggle to emerge. There are calls to set an age limit for the presidency, as well as for other government offices, while opponents point to the virtuous cases of octogenarian Supreme Court justices or former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi herself, who at 83 is in her 19th term. Congresswomen Grace Napolitano and Maxine Waters are both over the age of 85. Finally, there are evergreen cultural icons: Mel Brooks is as funny as ever at 97; Clint Eastwood is still performing at 93; while Paul Simon and Bob Dylan are both 82, producing music and performing concerts. US citizens want a strong president. One who can stand up to dictators and global threats. But physical strength is not a requirement, not even from the rest of the world. What is needed is the ability to build and lead a team capable of implementing policies that address domestic and foreign issues without dragging anyone into more wars or crises. Catholic political commentators suggest taking inspiration from Pope Francis, who at 87 continues to lead the Church and innovate despite his age, precisely because of his ability to combine mind and heart, while remaining closely attentive to contemporary challenges. Will the two presidential candidates let themselves be inspired? Or will they persist in this challenge against time, withdrawn into themselves, while the world watches and witnesses the crisis of this old American democratic system?

Maddalena Maltese