

Republican '24 INGov primary preview

Braun raises \$2M, has \$4M cash on hand; Chambers 'north' of \$3M

BY BRIAN A. HOWEY

INDIANAPOLIS - U.S. Sen. Mike Braun's Republican gubernatorial campaign kicked off the first 2024 sequence of this five-way race by saying he will post more than \$2 million for the past six months and will start the homestretch with \$4 million.

Sources close to the campaign of former Commerce secretary Brad Chambers tell



U.S. Sen. Mikew Braun meets with Indiana media last summer in Indianapolis. (HPI Photo by Brian A. Howey)

Howey Politics that he will post “well north of \$3 million” for the six-month period. Chambers kicked off his campaign in late-August, giving Braun a nearly two-month head start.

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The always unpopular Joe

BY BRIAN A. HOWEY

INDIANAPOLIS — President Joe Biden is not popular. On Jan. 2, the FiveThirtyEight polling composite had his approval at 39.3% with 55.5% disapproving. Real Clear Politics had his approval rating at 40.4% with 56.1% disapproving.

In Indiana, according to recent internal polling of a Republican gubernatorial campaign, President Joe Biden has a 40%/58% approve/disapprove among Hoosier voters.

And then there was this historic assessment from Gallup: President Biden's approval is at a historic low ebb. Approval

CONTINUED ON PG. 2

Quote of the Week

“This road map contains the foundation for building a better Evansville. Between now and April 9 we will continue to build a strong team of collaborative, creative city leaders and to create a culture of transparency, accountability and accessibility.”

Evansville Mayor Stephanie Terry

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ratings in December before a reelection year, Biden was at 39%, President Obama stood at 43%, President Trump at 45%, President George H.W. Bush was at 51%, and President Carter was at a lofty 54% (as was President Reagan).

President Lyndon B. Johnson was at 46% approval in December 1967, falling to 36% on March 15, 1968 due to the Tet Offensive. A little more than two weeks later LBJ shocked the world, saying he would forgo reelection in order to concentrate on a resolution to the Vietnam War.



The “December before” poll is not a precursor to any outcome. Presidents Obama and Reagan easily won reelection. Presidents Bush, Carter and Trump lost.

Gallup’s analysis: “Biden enters 2024 with a persistently low job approval rating, the worst of any modern-day president heading into a tough reelection campaign. While the economy has shown signs of improvement and Americans are a bit more optimistic about it, it remains a pressing concern. In addition to dealing with the national economy and overseeing the United States’ role in wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, Biden continues to face a crisis at the southern U.S. border. Given Republicans’ concern about the issue, Biden

can expect immigration to be a central theme in the Republican presidential nominee’s campaign in 2024.”

Biden’s dilemma goes beyond Ukraine and Gaza, beyond the U.S.-Mexican border sieve, beyond inflation and gas prices. Biden has never been a popular presidential figure.

When he first ran for president in 1987, he was viewed as a moderate Democrat and led the Democratic field in fundraising during the first quarter of that year. But he ended that campaign on Sept. 23, 1987, after a plagiarizing incident and staff in-fighting,

with The Associated Press reporting that he said he had been overrun by “the exaggerated shadow” of his past mistakes.

In February 1988, he had surgery to fix a leaking intracranial berry aneurysm, and while recuperating, he suffered a pulmonary embolism, forcing him away from the Senate for seven months.

In the 2008 race that included U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards and Indiana U.S. Sen. Evan Bayh, Sen. Biden never broke out of single digits in national polls and struggled to raise money. He placed fifth in the Jan. 3 Iowa caucuses and withdrew from the race that night.

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“I didn’t deserve to be president just based on the Richter scale of ‘Was I tough enough and did I understand the process?’” Biden told NPR the next day. “I committed that I would say exactly what I believe. I committed that I would not, in any way, truncate anything I thought needed to be said. And ladies and gentlemen, we’ve done it. And let me make something clear to you, I ain’t going away.”

In August 2008, it came down to Biden and Bayh in forming the Democratic ticket behind nominee Obama, who selected the much older Biden (he’s 81 now, Bayh is currently 68). “It was surreal at times, watching the front of your house on TV in real time and literally not being able to go out and get the morning newspaper or take your kids to camp without a pack of press coming around,” Bayh told HPI in August 2008. “The last couple of weeks were a bit of an emotional roller coaster. I knew we were under serious consideration, I knew it was a small group, I knew it was less than 50/50 but still a decent chance. So we were following the process just like everyone else.”

After serving two terms as vice president, Biden was effectively passed over for the 2016 nomination despite a “Draft Biden” PAC forming. With President Obama on board, the party fell in behind former First Lady and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Playing a role in part of that decision was the death of his son, Delaware Attorney General Beau Biden. Speaking about his decision not to run from the White House Rose Garden with President Obama at his side in October 2015, Vice President Biden looked emotionally drained, saying, “Nobody has a right ... to seek that office unless they’re willing to give it 110% of who they are.”



Three years after Donald Trump’s historic upset of Clinton in 2016 in a race between two historically unpopular nominees, Biden was the lone moderate in a 2020 field of progressive Democrats that included South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg and U.S. Sens. Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders and Amy Klobuchar. He finished fourth in the Iowa caucuses, fifth in the New Hampshire primary, and trailed Sen. Sanders by 21% in the Nevada primary. It wasn’t until U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn endorsed him that Biden won the South Carolina primary just as the COVID pandemic began shutting America down, and then he basically secured the nomination on Super Tuesday as Buttigieg and Klobuchar withdrew.

Biden defeated Trump with a record 82 million votes in 2020 while running the “basement campaign” that steered away from big rallies due to the pandemic. So Biden’s campaign was hardly the “movement level” effort that we witnessed with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, President John F. Kennedy, U.S. Sen. Robert F. Kennedy’s 1968 campaign, Obama in 2008 or Trump in 2016.

President Trump’s handling of the pandemic, the societal shutdown and his inability to expand his appeal beyond the MAGA base led to his defeat. The 2020 race was more of a referendum on President Trump than an overt affirmation of Joe Biden.

President Biden now presides over a fractured nation. When The Washington Post and University of Maryland asked in December 2021 whether Biden was legitimately elected, 69% of Americans said he was. It’s down to 62% in December 2023. Slightly fewer Republicans (31%) say Biden’s election was legitimate compared with 2021 (39%). More than one-third of Americans, or 36%, do not accept Biden’s victory as legitimate.

And, according to the Post/Maryland poll, most Americans, 55%, believe the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, was “an attack on democracy that should never be forgotten,” with majorities of Democrats and independents holding this view while most Republicans and Trump voters reject it. More than seven in 10 Republicans say too much is being made of the attack and that it is “time to move on.”

Can President Biden win reelection next November? Yes, but at this point it looks like a difficult endeavor.

According to economist Steve Rattner, Americans are “still fretting” about rising prices, “even as inflation subsided significantly. In fact, the prices of some goods actually fell. Gasoline dropped to an average of \$3.12 a gallon from a high of \$5.02 a gallon in June 2022. Few appreciated that their inflation-adjusted incomes rose in 2023 as inflation fell

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close to the Federal Reserve’s target of 2%. By November, real incomes were 2.7% above their January 2021 levels.

“Nor were Americans moved by the surprising plethora of positive economic news,” Rattner said on MSNBC’s Morning Joe. “The economy was projected to lose 10,400 jobs a month, and instead, it gained an average of 232,000 a month. The unemployment rate, which started 2023 at a five-decade low, was projected to rise to nearly 5% by the end of the year. Instead it ticked up only trivially, to 3.7%. More than 80% of economists predicted that 2023 would end in a recession, and instead, the economy is likely to have expanded by a remarkable 3%. On top of that, the stock market boomed. In 2023, the S&P 500 index rose to near record highs.

“Usually a strong economy buoys an incumbent president,” Rattner said. “Not this year.”

What if Donald Trump is convicted on any of the 91 felony criminal counts he faces?

According to a New York Times analysis from special counsel Norman Eisen, Democratic pollster Celinda Lake and campaign operator Anat Shenker-Ororio: “If he is criminally convicted by a jury of his peers, voters say they are likely to punish him for it.

“A trial on criminal charges is not guaranteed, and if there is a trial, neither is a conviction,” says the trio. “But if Mr. Trump is tried and convicted, a mountain of public opinion data suggests voters would turn away from the former president.”

In a recent Wall Street Journal poll, Trump led Biden by 4%, but if Trump is convicted, there is a five-point swing, putting Biden ahead, 47-46%. In a recent Yahoo News and YouGov poll, the swing is seven points. In a December New York Times/Siena College poll, almost a third of Republican primary voters believe that Trump shouldn’t be the party’s nominee if he is convicted even after winning the primary.

In a July Yahoo News poll, 62% said if Trump is convicted, he should not serve as president again. A December Reuters/Ipsos national poll produced similar results, with 59% of voters

overall and 31% of Republicans saying that they would not vote for him.

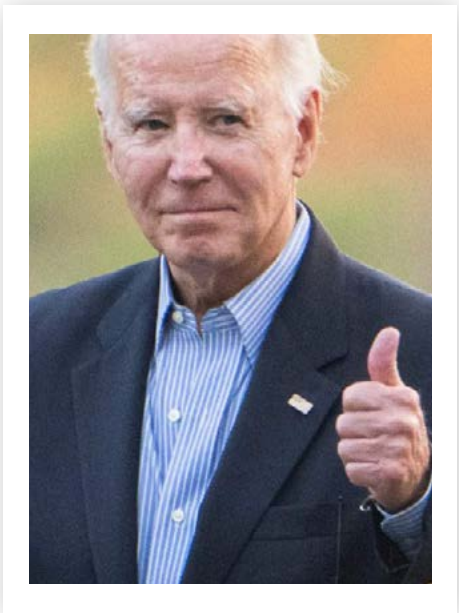
“The negative impact of conviction has emerged in polling as a consistent through line over the past six months nationally and in key states,” Eisen, Lake and Sheker-Ororio write. “We are not aware of a poll that offers evidence to the contrary. The swing in this data away from Trump varies — but in a close election, as 2024 promises to be, any movement can be decisive.”

CNN analyst Stephen Collinson observed: “The presidential election is about to become inextricably entangled with Donald Trump’s criminal turmoil as his crushing calendar of legal obligations collides with the race to the Iowa caucuses in two weeks. The juxtaposition of the courtroom and campaign trail will set the tone for an unprecedented White House race overshadowed by the ex-president’s four looming criminal trials.”

My take: It’s impossible to predict what will happen over the next 10 months. Any Biden health issue (even a minor one) would set off a political earthquake. Any domestic terror attack traced to the U.S./ Mexican border could shift the outcome. And it is hard to fathom how a Trump conviction would pan out politically. His 91 indictments swelled his campaign fundraising, but would a conviction doom his general election chances?

Fasten your seatbelts; anything can happen.

Howey is a senior columnist for Howey Politics/ State Affairs Indiana Pro. Find him on X @hwypol.



Braun's campaign said that unlike 2018 when he pumped more than \$10 million into his Senate campaign, this time he's relying on traditional fundraising. "He is not self-funding his campaign," said spokesman Jahan Wilcox.

Braun said, "Being a conservative entrepreneur, not a politician, I'm humbled by the support from every corner of Indiana. Our campaign's remarkable fundraising success, achieved without dipping into my own pocket, underscores Hoosiers' belief in our mission. We're here to champion conservative values, overhaul our education system, bring tax relief, reduce health care costs, and protect Hoosiers from the crime and drugs surging across our broken borders."

Chambers campaign senior advisor Marty Obst said Wednesday, "After running for political office for 20 years and self-funding more than \$11.5 million to join the world's most exclusive club, the United States Senate, Mike Braun is continuing to mislead voters, but Hoosiers are smart. Our fundraising report on January 17 will speak for itself."

Wilcox added, "Just a friendly reminder that the other GOP candidates have not been pressed on who they support for president and if they will vote for [Donald] Trump if he has a nomination secured by the Indiana primary." Trump endorsed Braun last fall. HPI reached out to the other four campaigns on whether they will support Trump if he is nominated. The former president faces 91 criminal charges related to the Jan. 6, 2021 insurrection, the top secret document case in Florida, a RICO indictment from Georgia, and the Manhattan hush money case to pornographic actress Stormy Daniels.

The Braun campaign also noted that Chambers "has served on a Biden Administration Committee and donated to Obama, Donnelly, Bayh, Carson, and over 10 Democratic state parties." It added, "There's another candidate who endorsed a Democrat running for mayor in the second-largest city," a reference to a past Doden endorsement of Fort Wayne Mayor Tom Henry.

Chambers had been on a fundraising tear in December, posting nearly \$425,000 in large donations, including \$100,000 each from Carol Edwards, William Weaver and Doug Moore since Dec. 20. He posted another \$65,000 from Doug Rose and \$50,000 from Amy Schumacher. Sen. Braun posted \$195,000 in large donations in December. In contrast, Lt. Gov. Crouch posted just under \$120,000 in December, including \$50,000 from Richard Keith Byers. Doden picked up two \$10,000 checks, while Hill posted a \$25,000 check.

Last July, Sen. Braun posted \$2.22 million raised and \$4.6 million cash on hand. Doden

raised \$1.7 million and had \$3.8 million cash on hand. Lt. Gov. Crouch had raised \$1.11 million by July 2022 and had \$3.8 million cash on hand. A fourth Republican — former Attorney General Curtis Hill — entered the race in July with a balance of \$22,426.

Crouch campaign manager Liz Dessauer told HPI late Wednesday afternoon, "Through their tireless efforts Suzanne Crouch's grassroots supporters and volunteers have made sure we met the required signature threshold in all nine congressional districts. Suzanne is very proud and humbled by all her team's hard work and dedication to victory."

Asked about his year-end report and ballot signature process, Hill told HPI on Wednesday, "In 2023, our campaign witnessed a remarkable surge in fundraising, driven by the impassioned contributions of grassroots donors. Their unwavering dedication and commitment not only propelled the campaign past its financial targets but also underscored the widespread enthusiasm and support for our vision and policies. Hoosiers are hungry for proven conservative leadership. That is how we have proudly secured more than 6,000 signatures across the state. Our team isn't stopping and momentum is on our side."

Meanwhile, here are elements of the gubernatorial campaign that HPI/State Affairs will be monitoring in the weeks and months ahead:

1. Will all five Republicans gather enough ballot signatures? The Braun, Crouch, Doden, Hill and Chambers cam-



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paings are indicating they will. Brian Gamanche of the Doden campaign told HPI that signatures are “100% ready — completely collected — and we’re set to go out to the clerks next week.” Chambers campaign senior advisor Marty Obst told HPI, “He’s on target for ballot signatures. He’s well above the threshold in each district, [and we] feel confident we will verify at a high rate.”

Each candidate must get 500 signatures of registered voters from each of the state’s nine congressional districts. The signatures must be verified by the Indiana Election Board. There is some speculation about Hill getting enough signatures, particularly in southern Indiana. At least two rival campaigns would benefit if Hill qualifies, believing that he will cut into Braun’s support.

2. Will Gov. Holcomb and former governors Mitch Daniels and Mike Pence endorse a candidate?

Gov. Eric Holcomb called himself a “prognosticator” during his year-end State Affairs interview, and did not rule out weighing in once the candidates make enough policy pronouncements. He discounted the value of political endorsements in this era. Asked how he viewed the five Republican candidates, Holcomb said:



“I would say my partner [Lt. Gov. Suzanne Crouch] has a lot of experience in this building and around the state of Indiana and the relationships that come with that. I would say Sen. [Mike] Braun has had similar experience and levels of government service — school board, state legislative and senatorial federal experience — and can see how those pieces snap together. I would say that our former secretary of economic development [Brad Chambers] has a brain for looking into the future, around corners and seizing the day. I would say that the next two I know less about. [Eric] Doden, who served my predecessor in a similar role as Brad Chambers, has experience in community development and economic development. And the former Attorney General Curtis Hill has deep roots in much of the base of the party and has some experience and relationships that go back to his days in county government and then as attorney general.”

Holcomb, Crouch and Braun all called for Hill’s resignation following a 2018 sexual harassment incident.

As for Daniels, he dropped his Purdue-era political neutrality last October when he endorsed Indianapolis mayoral nominee Jefferson Shreve in a letter to voters. Should he weigh in between now and the May primary, his endorsement would have an impact. The Chambers campaign has attracted a lot of Daniels administration alums and allies.

Former Vice President and Gov. Mike Pence has not backed any of the candidates. Doden served as head of the Indiana Economic Development Corp. during his administration and, along with Hill,

is considered the most socially conservative. A Pence endorsement at a time Donald Trump is wrapping up his third presidential nomination would likely have limited value.

3. Will U.S. Rep. Jim Banks endorse?

The likely U.S. Senate nominee has not weighed in on an endorsement, though

it would be coveted by any of the candidates. Banks has also been endorsed by Trump and Club for Growth, as well as the Indiana Republican Party. He faces a potential challenge from Jackson County egg producer John Rust, who is awaiting an Indiana Supreme Court decision on whether he qualifies for the GOP primary ballot.

4. Will Eric Doden receive more financial support from his family?

In his mid-year report released last July, Doden raised \$600,000 from his father,

Daryle Doden of Fort Wayne, who owns Ambassador Enterprises. That came atop two \$50,000 checks from Doden and his wife Maci on Dec. 27, 2022. But Doden's big donations have fallen off, with just two \$10,000 checks posted in December, and none from his family.

5. Will Donald Trump come and rally for Braun like he did in 2018? President Trump endorsed Braun's U.S. Senate bid, then appeared with him at four "Make America Great Again" rallies beginning in Elkhart right after the primary, followed by Evansville, Southport and Fort Wayne in the final weeks of the campaign. The campaign of U.S. Sen. Joe Donnelly told HPI that after each Trump foray into Indiana, the Democrat's standing slipped and Braun won by a 6% plurality. Trump is expected



to clinch the Republican presidential nomination as early as Super Tuesday in March, but he will be balancing his own campaign as well as four criminal trials.

6. What happens to the Trump endorsement of Braun if he is convicted of a felony? After Trump endorsed Braun, the senator told HPI in October, "I can tell you that every one of my opponents would have loved to have the endorsement in a state like Indiana." HPI asked Braun if Trump is convicted of a crime, does that make his endorsement a problem? "There's a political intertwining," Braun responded. "You look at all the venues and almost all Republicans will say that it has a political underpinning. Whether those indictments get parlayed into a conviction — I'm just extrapolating what I see Republican primary voters are doing, I don't think that makes much difference."

The Braun campaign exhorted Indiana media to get the other four contenders on the record as to their support of Trump after the Colorado Supreme Court barred him from the ballot there. The Crouch campaign declined comment. Doden said in a statement to HPI, "As I've said before, using the legal system for political gain degrades it and our entire election process. Hoosier voters I talk to are tired of national political theater.

This is another distraction from where our focus should be: on the real problems and solutions Indiana needs to move forward."

This is utterly uncharted territory. Never in American politics has a former president faced criminal charges, and Trump faces 91 of them. Thus, it's unprecedented that aspiring candidates like Sen. Braun and Rep. Banks would not only receive, but headline such an endorsement. And if Trump is convicted of a felony (or multiple felonies prior to the May primary), there is evidence that it could have an impact, with national polling showing that some 30% of Republicans would not support him. Stay tuned.

7. Will media scrutiny on Chambers and Doden at IEDC change the dynamic? Both Chambers and Doden headed the Indiana Economic Development Corporation. Chambers touts the more than \$50 billion he attracted in investments while at the IEDC helm. Expect considerable media scrutiny on this quasi-government agency and its track record in the coming months.

8. Will AFP and Club For Growth endorsements propel Braun to the nomination? Sen. Braun has been endorsed by the Koch-network's Americans for Prosperity, as well as Club for Growth. Will these two national groups contribute to Braun's ground game as well as provide further funding and Super PAC support?

HPI Horse Race Status: Leans Braun.

On Trump's ballot eligibility

BY JACK COLWELL



SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Legally. Right now. In accord with the Constitution. Donald Trump should be on the presidential primary ballots.

He will be.

And those Democrats seeking to keep him from running have made a mistake — enhancing, not diminishing, Trump's chances of returning to the White House.

The argument that he shouldn't be on Republican primary ballots is based on interpretation of Section 3 of the 14th Amendment. It was ratified in 1868, aimed at barring Confederate officials from holding office in the government they waged war against. It received little or no attention in modern times. Until now.

While "a section of the 14th Amendment" is referred to often in the news and in political discussion today, complete wording isn't cited. It's long. And the wording seems kind of stilted.

Well, here's what it says:

"No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any State, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State Legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any State, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof. But Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House remove such disability."

Got that?

Interpretations include disagreement over whether failure specifically to cite "the president" could exempt Trump and over whether reference to Congress means that's where a decision rests.

The key political dispute, however, is over whether Trump "engaged in insurrection" in rallying supporters in the Jan. 6 storming of the Capitol to prevent acceptance of the 2020 presidential election results.

A lot of people — including me — think that he did.

Thinking something isn't the same as proving it in a court of law.

Trump hasn't been convicted of insurrection. He hasn't even been charged with insurrection. That specific charge isn't among the 91 counts he currently faces.

A court in Colorado ruled nonetheless that Trump's actions on that Jan. 6 were sufficient to rule him off the ballot in that state. The secretary of state in Maine made a similar decision. Other states, including California and Michigan, ruled that Trump will be on their ballots.

The Supreme Court will decide.

The court won't decide in favor of removing Trump's name.

Does anybody really believe the court, with its present composition, including three Trump appointees, would kick him off the ballot?

No matter the composition, the court couldn't decide to uphold an insurrection conviction. There has been none through a standard court process.

With no insurrection conviction to keep Trump off the ballot, should Republicans who want Trump as their nominee have a right to vote for him? Yes. Isn't that democracy?

Those seeking to be rid of Trump by keeping his name off the ballot won't keep him from the nomination that way. Instead, they increase determination among his supporters for victory in the primaries and beyond.

Trump, skilled at portraying himself as a victim of evil forces seeking to keep him from making America great again, prospers now in the polls and in raising funds as he lashes at a plot to rig the 2024 election. Trump, who tried to rig the 2020 electoral count, thus seeks to shift attention away from that and get back to his perpetual claims of being a victim of rigging.

Those wanting to be rid of Trump need to concentrate on issues and the obstreperous, dangerous conduct that taints his name, not on removing his name. His name was toxic in his endorsements in the 2022 elections. It could be again. Whether or not it is, his name now should be on presidential primary ballots.

Colwell is a columnist for the South Bend Tribune.

Where do we go from here?

BY CRAIG DUNN



CARMEL, Ind. — Whenever I am driving and get lost or can't seem to get my dang computer working right, I find myself belting out one of the great rock anthems by Guns and Roses, "Sweet Child O Mine." The song keeps coming back to the refrain of "Where do we go, where do we go, where do we go from here?" And so I find myself sitting here on New Year's Day pondering the state of the world and my country and asking plaintively, "Where do we go, where do we go, where do we go from here?"

By all appearances, the United States seems to be in a pretty kettle of fish. Russia is a belligerent nation who is nearing the end of a second year of brutally pounding the smaller nation of Ukraine in the name of territorial conquest. China is rapidly modernizing its huge military and flexing its political and economic muscles in its quest to top the United States.

Iran has been emboldened to strike directly at American troops and naval forces through its many surrogates in the Middle East. Israel is engaged in a life and death struggle for survival and the right for its citizens to live their lives without fear of devastation.

Domestically, there is equal uncertainty. Inflation has bored its way into the American economy like a nasty tick. Interest rates are high, denying many Americans the ability to afford home ownership at the same time that inflation drives rents higher and higher.

Although the mall parking lots are full and restaurants are busy, ask the average American what they think about the economy and they will tell you that it stinks. Turn on the television news and get a nightly dose of hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants pouring across our borders, thousands of illegal immigrants being bused into our cities and view the tragedy of thousands of unwanted innocent people forced to live in the purgatory of virtual internment camps as they await our government to take some sort of meaningful action to provide clarity and some hope for their future. You add to this the maelstrom created by the United States Supreme Court's decision regarding abortion and the various states reaction to the ruling and the relentless assault on the social fabric of our country.

Our political system is totally broken at a time when we face challenges and threats around the world and here at home. The dysfunctionality of our government on the national level is simply breathtaking. Virtually no productive legislation has been passed and signed into law in the past three years. Creating and passing a budget short of continuous trips to the edge of an economic cliff has proven impossible. I am not sure that if a representative filed a bill stating that the sun arose in the east and set in the west that it would make it through the halls of Congress.

Congress and the White House have sunk into a morass of ineptitude and inaction that threatens our way of life and has dismayed the vast majority of Americans — white, Black and brown, liberal and conservative, Republican and Democrat and man, woman or any hybrid thereof. The American people are sick of the status quo. Don't believe it is this bad? Please explain why 67.3% of Americans say that the country is on the wrong track and nearly 75% say that they disapprove of the direction of the country. To the average Joe and Jolene Sixpack, things stink like a three-day old diaper.

And what, my friends, is the answer offered up by the best minds in the Republican and Democratic parties? A redux of Trump versus Biden! A rerun of the geezers at Caesars! Biden in Hiding versus Vito Trumpolini! Ah yes, where do we go from here?

Here we are, two weeks out from the meaningless Iowa caucuses and the unthinkable is

moving inexorably toward us like the ship of state on a crash course with an iceberg. We have two men who would probably not be hired at Walmart because of their age, looking like they will be the two presidential candidates once again. Old man, Joe Biden, visibly cognitively impaired, stumbling, bumbling and enfeebled running against another near-octogenarian, Donald Trump, prosecuted, sued, pilloried and vilified. If it wasn't for bad choices, we'd have no choice at all.

Of course, leave it to our politicians to try and take the easy way out and instead of actually offering up a quality candidate of intelligence, integrity and vitality, the political dung beetles who live in the shadows are doing their best to remove one or the other presidential candidate by hook or by crook. Democrats have given us their very best efforts to militarize the justice department and the courts to tie Donald Trump up in knots or give him the justice system equivalent of death by a thousand cuts. They've even resorted to using a U. S. constitutional amendment written up to deny former confederates the ability to hold federal office in an effort to keep Donald Trump off of the presidential ballot in both Colorado and Maine. These efforts and those like them will fail because of the muddled language of the amendment itself and by the inconvenient fact that Donald Trump has not been found guilty in a court of law of any felonious conduct, nor is he likely to be found guilty.

Republicans have done their best to knock down Joe Biden by tying him to his low-life, drug-addled son and his equally conniving brother. The threat of impeachment floats through the halls of Congress, cheapened by its previous failed use against both President Clinton and twice against Donald Trump. It is frankly a non-starter, doomed to failure and a colossal waste of taxpayer time and congressional energy. It just happens to be the intellectual product of the Marjorie Taylor Greenes and the Loren Boeberts who represent the new brain trust of the Republican

Party.

So, I ask again, where do we go from here? The historian in me can't avoid thinking back to the months leading up to the cataclysm of the First World War, when each side knew they were perilously moving toward war, but no one could figure out how to stop the slide until millions had been killed. A collection of accidents, misunderstandings, misread signals and toxic alliances took the world to war while politicians and potentates dallied and missed every opportunity to step back from disaster.

I also recall the final days of the Weimar Republic when a German population, beaten down by war and the Depression turned to a relatively talentless World War I corporal, who offered them false promises for a return to civil order and prosperity to lead them as chancellor.

These are not happy thoughts and they worry me terribly. I just cannot get my arms around

the thought that we are left with the Hobson's Choice of "take it or leave it." There must be a better way and better people to lead us. We are a nation of over 300 million people. If Joe Biden and Donald Trump are truly our best choices, then perhaps we are destined to go the way of ancient Rome.

Here's hoping that our nation, the American nation, has a most happy and rewarding New Year and that the answer to the question,

"Where do we go from here?" has a happy and peaceful answer. Oh, sweet child 'o mine!

Assessing the '24 presidential race

BY KYLE KONDIK

CHARLOTTSVILLE, Va. - Welcome to 2024, the year of a presidential election that feels both sleepy and explosive at the same time.

The former feeling stems from a primary season that does not seem all that competitive. Less than two weeks away from the kickoff Republican caucus in Iowa, former President Donald Trump's position continues to look strong, while President Joe Biden is doing what recent incumbent presidents have done, deterring truly notable opposition as he seeks renomination.

The latter feeling comes from the unprecedented specifics of the potential Biden versus Trump rematch, namely Trump's litany of legal problems—including efforts to keep him off the ballot in certain states based on his role in the events of Jan. 6, 2021 that likely will necessitate intervention by the U.S. Supreme Court—as well as Biden's struggles in recent horse race polling and the potential for third party candidates to siphon off some not-insignificant share of the vote, in large part because of the weaknesses of the front-running Biden and Trump.

In order for the Republican primary to awaken from its slumber, Trump will need to be defeated, in all likelihood, more than once before Super Tuesday. It's not unimaginable for Trump to lose New Hampshire, most likely to former Gov. Nikki Haley (R-SC), given that its electorate is generally less conservative and more highly educated than the overall GOP primary electorate (Trump doesn't poll as well with these kinds of Republicans as he does with Republicans overall). Independents and even Democrats may cross over to vote in the GOP primary to try to block Trump. But even if New Hampshire rebuked Trump—and it very well may not, as Trump has comfortably led most polling in the Granite State—that

doesn't mean other states would follow suit.

Following New Hampshire on Jan. 23, Nevada holds confusing, dueling Republican events on Feb. 6 and Feb. 8, a primary on the former date where Haley is the only candidate of note on the ballot for a "beauty pageant" contest that does not award delegates and a caucus on the latter date

that includes Trump and Gov. Ron DeSantis (R-FL). So even if Haley is doing well after New Hampshire, she's not directly competing with Trump for delegates in Nevada. Then there is South Carolina on Feb. 24, Haley's home state, which has a more conservative electorate that is less well-suited for her coalition than Trump's. Super Tuesday follows a week and a half later—by the end of that day, March 5, nearly half of the delegates to the Republican National Convention will have been awarded. The bottom line is that Trump will have to prove to be way weaker than polls currently show for any of the others to have a chance. It's worth noting, too, that probably the biggest story in the GOP primary over



the holidays was Haley’s fumbling of a town hall question about the origins of the Civil War—it remains to be seen whether this did her any damage.

The Democratic primaries will mainly measure how much of a protest vote there is against Biden—that, along with the polls and other developments, will help us assess how much trouble he’s in as the year grinds on.

It is not hard to find trouble for Biden right now. While the polling picture for Biden may not be quite as bleak as it was a few weeks ago, Trump has often led him in national polls and in key swing states, and the president’s approval rating has remained a little south of 40%.

We are closely monitoring the polls, but we think it’s too early to be overly reliant on them. There are some plausible reasons why Biden’s position might improve. Trump has his ongoing legal problems, which may strengthen him with his own base but likely not with Democrats and independents. There also are some signs that the public’s persistent economic pessimism could be improving, which any White House would want, even in a time where economic beliefs are probably less important than they used to be in determining elections. We could see how these two factors (Trump’s problems and the economy) could converge to make the public think more about Trump than Biden, and this is a year in which both major party nominees would be wise to avoid the spotlight given their weak favorability numbers.

It may also be that Biden’s numbers just don’t get better, and Trump remains resilient despite it all, buoyed both by the poor assessments of Biden as well as a potential third party candidate mix that appears to threaten Biden a bit more than Trump. But we do not yet know the actual roster of third party candidates and where they will (or will not) be on the ballot.

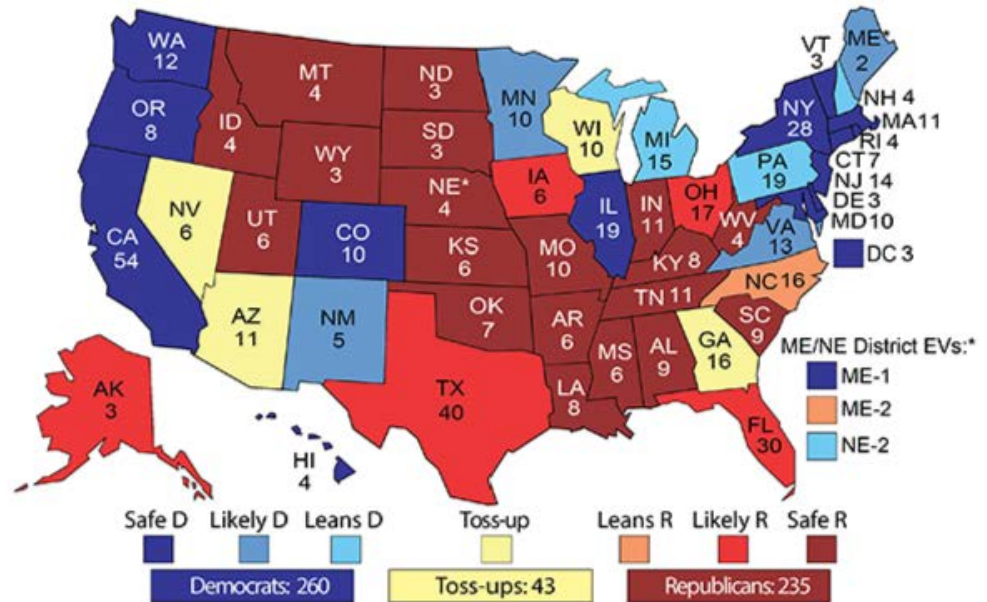
Our Electoral College ratings, shown in Map 1, reflect a close and competitive election but also one in which Biden is in better shape than what polls show now. These have been our ratings since the summer, and we’ve decided to stick with them, at least for the moment. Biden has more electoral votes at least leaning to him than Trump, but Biden’s not over 270, and we can more easily imagine some Leans Democratic states—most obviously Pennsylvania—fall-

ing into the Toss-up column than any state currently at least leaning to Trump. Another way of looking at this is that if you exclude all the Toss-up and Leaning states/districts, and just focus on the Safe and Likely states—the groupings that represent a realistic floor for both candidates—it’s Biden 221 to Trump 218, or basically a tie.

Map 1: Crystal Ball Electoral College ratings

Readers sometimes ask us if we have a set schedule for updating ratings. We do not—we make updates when we believe that they are warranted, although we also don’t want to be changing ratings

Map 1: Crystal Ball Electoral College ratings



willy nilly throughout the election season: The ratings are designed to be a best guess projection of November, not a measurement of where things may stand now. An “if the election was held today” assessment is pointless, because, well, we know that the election is set for November, not for today or tomorrow. Thus far we haven’t been compelled to change our initial Electoral College ratings, although we of course have taken note of Biden’s poor current polling. It will be harder to downplay the numbers if they persist, particularly even as Trump becomes more prominent because of the primary season and other factors.

Vinzant wins Melton Senate seat

MERRILLVILLE — A longtime Hobart community leader is heading to Indianapolis next week as Northwest Indiana's newest state senator (Carden, [NWI Times](#)). Democratic leaders in Senate District 3 selected former four-term Hobart City Councilman Dave Vinzant to complete the 11 months remaining in the Indiana Senate term of now-Gary Mayor Eddie Melton. Vinzant prevailed by a 34-32 margin over Gary Councilman Mark Spencer, who was endorsed by Melton, at the Democratic caucus held Wednesday night in the Dean and Barbara White Community Center in Merrillville. The new senator faces a steep learning curve. The Republican-controlled General Assembly convenes its 9-week session Monday, and the Senate deadline to file proposals for new state laws is Tuesday afternoon — just a few hours before the governor delivers his annual “State of the State” address. While getting acclimated to his new role at the Statehouse, Vinzant also will be preparing to run for a four-year term in his own right. Candidate filing for the May 7 primary election is set to begin Jan. 10.

Women to head Gary Council

GARY — For the first time in recent history, the Gary Common Council will be led by two women (DeVore, [NWI Times](#)). On Tuesday, during the council's first meeting of 2024, Councilwoman Tai Adkins, D-4th, was elected president and Councilwoman Lori Latham, D-1st, was elected vice president. Councilwoman Mary Brown, D-3rd, who is entering her 24th year of service, said it was the first time she can remember the council having an all-female leadership team. In 1981, former state Sen. Earline Rogers became the council's first female president. “I want you all to know that I will lead with integrity. I will represent the city of Gary as well as our

body with poise, with class and with all of the learnings and teachings that I've acquired during my first term,” Adkins told fellow council members.

Peters won't seek reelection

FORT WAYNE - Allen County Commissioner Nelson Peters issued the following Thursday, Jan. 4, 2024 ([Fort Wayne Journal Gazette](#)): After an almost 40 year career in local government, Nelson Peters has announced that he will not seek re-election when the filing period begins next week and will step down as Allen County Commissioner at the end of his 5th term. Peters served 3 years as Allen County's Human Resources Director, 8 years as Director of Human Resources for the City of Fort Wayne, 10 years on the Allen County Council and will be completing his 20th year as Allen County Commissioner at the end of this year. Peters said, “There has been nothing more rewarding than to be able to watch this community grow and thrive over the past several decades and to have been in a position to shepherd some of that change. To be able to serve Allen County has been the honor of a lifetime.”

INGOP files brief in Rust ballot case

INDIANAPOLIS - The Indiana Republican State Committee filed an amicus brief last week supporting a law that limits who can run under major party banners in Indiana ([Indiana Public Media](#)). U.S. Senate candidate John Rust is challenging the statute because it prevents him from filing as a Republican against party favorite Jim Banks, a U.S. Representative. The 2021 law bars primary ballot access unless a candidate's two most recent primary votes match the party they wish to represent — a measure that Marion County Superior Judge Patrick J. Dietrick ruled was unconstitutional in December.

The ruling and injunction was a win for Rust, who wouldn't qualify for the ballot because of the two-primary rule. Banks and Rust are seeking to succeed U.S. Sen. Mike Braun, also a Republican, who is pursuing the governor's office in the 2024 cycle. But the Indiana GOP — filing in support of defendants Secretary of State Diego Morales, the Indiana Election Commission and Jackson County Republican Party Chair Amanda Lowery — said the law poses a “modest test” that “weeds out candidates who are not actually affiliated with the party.” “Political parties have a constitutional right to determine their own membership and limit the candidates appearing on their primary ballots based on that membership; the State has an interest in safeguarding that right. The Committee has a substantial interest in enforcing and upholding a law that protects its right to freedom of expressive association and promotes election integrity,” the party's filing said.

Trump, Clinton on Epstein docs

WASHINGTON - Former Presidents Bill Clinton and Donald Trump are mentioned in newly unsealed Jeffrey Epstein-related court documents, but they are not accused of any wrongdoing involving the disgraced sex trafficking financier ([USA Today](#)). Clinton, who sometimes flew aboard Epstein's private plane, is listed repeatedly in the documents. He was the topic of an argument over the credibility of a witness who said she saw the former president when he was a guest of Epstein. Trump's name appears in a document in which Epstein is quoted as saying he would invite the then-real estate mogul to join him at a casino. In another document, a witness said she was never asked to engage in sexual relations with Trump. The unsealed documents also list prominent individuals who have denied accusations against them, including Prince Andrew of Great Britain.