

Invisible man? Amid pandemic, Biden sidelined by omnipresent Trump

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Donald Trump wearing a suit and tie: US President Donald Trump's bully pulpit has been even more pronounced during the coronavirus pandemic, as his likely Democratic rival in the November 2020 election, Joe Biden, is isolated at home instead of out on the campaign trail

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The appearance by US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders in Ann Arbor, Michigan on March 8, 2020 was the nation's last mass campaign rally before the coronavirus pandemic forced an end to large gatherings

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One month on from historically reclaiming Democratic presidential frontrunner status, Joe Biden is in physical and political isolation, basement-bound and largely unheard as Donald Trump commands Americans' attention with his coronavirus response.

It has been an awkward sidelining of an extraordinary comeback story.

After nearly self-imploding in the first three state contests in February, former vice president Biden turned his campaign around, winning the lion's share of the next 25 primaries to become the presumptive nominee over his rival Bernie Sanders.

Suddenly, Biden is struggling for attention during what would normally be a critical, high-profile point in a campaign.

In a situation unheard of in modern American politics, several states have postponed their primaries, mass rallies are paused and all in-person campaigning has ground to a halt.

Coronavirus is the inescapable news headline, and the president's megaphone during this ongoing tragedy -- 215,417 US cases and more than 5,000 deaths -- is impossible to eclipse.

"Crises are fundamentally presidential moments, and given that, Biden just doesn't have the capacity to truly break in," Josh Pacek, a University of Michigan professor and expert on political communication, told AFP by phone about the campaign ahead.

Trump, of course, is taking full advantage.

Daily White House briefings with him and his coronavirus task force now often roll past 90 minutes, with Trump spending significant chunks of time on his personal and administrative achievements.

Biden, by contrast, is broadcasting from his basement, clamoring for air time even while acknowledging he is a former insider with no knowledge of current operations or access to internal administration reports.

He accuses Trump of being "very slow to act" on coronavirus mitigation and downplaying the gravity of the crisis for weeks.

US networks are giving 77-year-old Biden some exposure, and he strives to present himself as a leader with greater presidential bearing than Trump.

But even if Wisconsin defies mounting criticism and holds its primary on April 7 as scheduled, Biden would be deprived of his greatest political assets: his warm, empathetic manner and a blue-collar "here's-the-deal" delivery during face-to-face contact with voters.

"It doesn't worry me," Biden told CNN Tuesday about the campaign moving online.

"I'm sitting in my basement, there's a television studio set up down here," he said. "That's just going to have to do."

Trump, meanwhile, has dominated the airwaves. His job approval rating, underwater for years, has ticked up in the past 10 days, a common phenomenon for US presidents in the grips of a crisis.

But Pacek said the "rally 'round the flag effect" for Trump will be fleeting.

"That fades, every single time, every war," Pacek said.

He pointed to George Bush's job approval skyrocketing to 89 percent in early 1991 during the Gulf War. The Republican lost re-election 20 months later.

By comparison, Trump's approval climbing only past 50 percent during an all-hands-on-deck emergency "portends somewhat poorly" for the president.

- **'Hard to spin'** -

David Parker, head of Montana State University's political science department, says Biden's inability to win public attention now is not a problem.