

International

Democrats seek to elevate Biden, Harris at unique online confab

Biden campaigning to unify a nation ravaged by political and racial turmoil

MILWAUKEE, United States: US Democrats kick off an unprecedented political experiment beginning tomorrow, an all-virtual national convention that nominates Joe Biden as their White House candidate to battle Donald Trump in the heat of a deadly pandemic.

With his vice presidential pick Kamala Harris, the first woman of color on a major US presidential ticket, Biden is campaigning to unify a nation ravaged by political and racial turmoil, voter suppression concerns and profound anxiety over the devastating coronavirus crisis. But the running mates will deliver their message, aiming to inspire the Democratic base while luring frustrated Republicans, under unique circumstances: a four-day Democratic National Convention conducted entirely online.

No huzzahs, backroom dealings or balloon drops on ecstatic crowds and candidates, hallmark elements of US political conventions. Instead, organizers are retooling to conduct business online, like drafting the party platform and coordinating scores of presentations and speeches from mid-day tomorrow.

Wednesday evening will spotlight Harris, a 55-year-old US senator and former prosecutor who is the daughter of Indian and Jamaican immigrants. Biden has promoted her story as the American Dream.

Online nomination

The four-day affair culminates Thursday night with political moderate Biden, a former vice president and three-decade Senate veteran, being nominated by state delegates casting their votes online.

Masks on street but not at work? Consistency urged

PARIS: Faced with an upsurge in coronavirus cases and alarm over images of summer crowds packing onto streets and beaches, some European governments have mandated masks even in open-air public places. But with many virus clusters sprouting behind closed doors in offices and other workplaces where face covering rules are less clear, experts have questioned if policies are focusing on the wrong target.

In recent days several European countries have toughened their advice on masks, with France and Belgium widening their regulations to include certain outdoor settings. Brussels residents are now required to wear masks in all public spaces, and all spaces to which the public has access.

In France, dozens of towns and cities-including Paris-have made face coverings mandatory in markets and busy streets. The country's Ministry of Health has said it was a "gesture of common sense" to wear one in crowded public places, while the head of France's science council, Jean-Francois Delfray, has said they should be "essential" on packed streets and at seaside resorts.

However with little evidence that there is a high risk of transmission in outdoor settings, some experts have questioned whether the measures are misplaced. "Outside, there is such a mixing of air that you do not have a sufficient viral concentration to be infectious," said Martin Blachier, of the consulting company Public Health Expertise.

He called the measure a "psychological gamble" that could push people to gather indoors, where he said the risk of contamination is far higher. — AFP

Trump visits ill brother at NY hospital

NEW YORK: US President Donald Trump on Friday visited his younger brother Robert at a hospital in New York, where he is being treated for an undisclosed illness. The US leader, who was wearing a face mask upon arriving at New York-Presbyterian Hospital, entered through a back door and stayed about 45 minutes, according to an AFP reporter covering the trip. US media reports say the president's brother is seriously ill, although there were no details. Trump, who was stopping in New York on the way to his golf club in nearby Bedminster, New Jersey for the weekend, told reporters only that "he's having a hard time."

While far less famous than his older brother, Robert Trump has long been an integral part of the family real estate empire and is fiercely loyal to the president. Robert Trump unsuccessfully went to court to try and get an injunction preventing publication of a book by his niece Mary Trump, called "Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man."

The book, which paints Donald Trump as the product of a "toxic" family was a "disgrace," Robert Trump said. Although a temporary restraining order was applied, a judge lifted this in July, allowing publication. At a press conference, President Trump called his brother "wonderful" and said they have "had a great relationship for a long time, from day one." — AFP

He then delivers his acceptance speech from his home state of Delaware. The convention had been scheduled for Milwaukee, in critical swing state Wisconsin, and the cancellation is a brutal blow for the Midwestern city which had spent millions of dollars preparing to host the high-profile event.

Downtown streets were largely empty on Friday, with residents lamenting what could have been.

"I thought it was good for the city, everybody did," Dan, who provided only his first name because he works in law enforcement, said of the convention plans. With the economy shedding millions of jobs during the pandemic, Biden will tout his \$700 billion "Build Back Better" plan that would invest in new technologies and create some five million new jobs, an aggressive challenge to Trump on economic policy.

Organizers have promised an energized "convention across America," despite the potential online awkwardness. "In just three days, we will kick off a Democratic National Convention that will look and feel very different than past conventions," acknowledged DNC program executive Stephanie Cutter.

Participants will highlight "Donald Trump's failed leadership and the promise of what we can and should be with Joe Biden as president."

Trump jets in

The party has invited its luminaries, from former president Barack Obama and wife Michelle, who earned keynote speaking slots on Wednesday and Monday respectively, to Hillary and Bill Clinton and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo.

Trump losing ground among retirees in must-win Florida

MIAMI: Jim Farr is a staunch 77-year-old Republican in the sunny southern state of Florida, which lures retirees from all over America—a powerful political bloc. As the country's presidential election draws nearer, Farr dislikes the idea of voting for a Democrat. But the idea of giving President Donald Trump another term irks him even more. Farr, who lives in Kissimmee in the central part of the state, is a devout Christian who considers abortion akin to "murdering babies" and believes in what he calls compassionate capitalism. He says it is not the Republican party that has lost a supporter—the president has.

"He does not seem to care for truth. Truth is very important to me. He does not check facts," said Farr, who is disappointed with the man he voted for in 2016. Add what Farr sees as Trump's me-first agenda, blinding pride that blocks him from listening to advisers and his awful handling of the coronavirus pandemic? The Floridian said those issues mean he will probably do the once-unthinkable: vote for Democrat Joe Biden in November.

"He seems to be an acceptable person," said Farr. Farr is not alone: There are signs that more and



WILMINGTON: Democratic presidential nominee, former US Vice President Joe Biden, and vice presidential running mate, US Senator Kamala Harris, sign required documents for receiving the Democratic nomination for President and Vice President, in Wilmington, Delaware, on Friday. — AFP

Several senators who challenged Biden for the nomination will also speak, including Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Keen to avoid the divisions that cuffed the party in 2016 when Hillary Clinton's supporters clashed with those backing Sanders, Team Biden has taken care to invite the progressive wing to help formulate the party plat-

form. Rising progressive stars will have their turn on the virtual stage, including popular 30-year-old congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Speaking tomorrow will be former Ohio governor John Kasich—a Republican, representing those in his party who have abandoned the controversial president. — AFP



Elections in Florida are famously hard to predict and tend to be decided by very thin margins that keep the rest of the country on tenterhooks. — AFP

more retirees in this must-win state who voted for Trump in 2016 are considering dumping him in the upcoming election. Polls give Biden a slight edge over Trump among older voters, but that lead could be fragile—just three points in a Quinnipiac survey released on July 23.

"There is smoke that suggests some folks could turn to Biden. Particularly around his handling of COVID-19," said Michael Binder, a professor of political science at the University of North Florida.

That's a big problem for Trump—older voters are the demographic that gave him the win in Florida in the last election. In 2016, 57 percent of Florida voters over age 65 cast their ballots for Trump. The other snag for the president is that his staunchest followers in Florida are the ones hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic.



Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro arrives during ceremonies to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery during his visit to Washington in Arlington, Virginia, US in this file photo. — Reuters

Bolsonaro's popularity surges

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro received the best approval rating of his term Friday, boosted by his popularity among recipients of coronavirus stimulus payments despite the carnage the pandemic has caused in Brazil. The far-right leader's approval rating surged five points from June, to 37 percent, while his disapproval rating plunged 10 points to 34 percent, the leading polling firm Datafolha reported. It was the first time since April 2019, four months into his presidency, that Bolsonaro's approval rating outstripped his disapproval rating in the Datafolha poll.

The strong numbers came despite the fact that the new coronavirus has killed more than 105,000 people in Brazil—the second-highest death toll worldwide, after the United States—and fueled the loss of 8.9 million jobs last quarter. Known as the "Tropical Trump," Bolsonaro is a divisive figure, condemned as racist, sexist, homophobic and dictatorial by his critics, but adored as a "Messiah"—his

middle name—by his base. His presidency has been marked by a constant string of controversies, most recently his handling of the pandemic. Even after catching the virus himself last month, putting him in quarantine for three weeks, Bolsonaro, 65, continues to downplay COVID-19.

He regularly rails against economically painful lockdown measures. Instead, he trumpets the unproven drug hydroxychloroquine as a treatment.

Other recent polls have also found Bolsonaro has rebounding popularity and a strong chance at re-election in 2022. Datafolha found he was performing well among poor Brazilians who have been receiving monthly stimulus payments of 600 reals (about \$110) to offset the economic pain of the pandemic. The former army captain had an approval rating of 42 percent among stimulus payment recipients. In Brazil's poorest region, the northeast, typically a bastion for the left-wing opposition, his disapproval rating fell 17 points from June, to 35 percent. His approval rating there rose six points, to 33 percent.

Datafolha carried out the poll on August 11 and 12 via phone interviews with 2,065 respondents. The margin of error was two percentage points. — AFP

Around 20.5 percent of Florida's 21 million people are age 65 or older. Historically, it has had a higher proportion of elderly residents than any other US state. In Florida, of the more than 8,700 people who have died of COVID-19, 83 percent were above age 65, according to the state health department. Farr said that when Trump gives himself sky-high grades for his handling of the once-in-a-century health crisis—which he is widely accused of botching—"it would be a joke if it were funny. But it isn't." "He does not give a feeling of having a coherent plan," said Farr.

The pandemic changed Florida

Randy Pestana, an expert in electoral politics at Florida International University, said of the turn toward Biden among older Floridians, "I genuinely do believe it's a trend." And he said the pandemic is a factor. "If you look at older voters who are most vulnerable to COVID impacts health-wise, they're starting to see that the response has not been good and now their economy is not doing good, their retirement is not doing good," said Pestana. "And oh, by the way, their health is really at risk," he added.

"A lot of Republicans that voted for Trump are just sick of it. They're tired. Every day is something new, every day is another tweet," said Pestana. US Congressman Ted Deutch, a Democrat who represents a Florida district with one of the heaviest concentrations of retirees, told AFP that "for every issue that seniors care about, Donald Trump's policies have been disastrous." — AFP

Scranton cheers hometown hero Biden on to the White House

SCRANTON, US: In a small sandwich shop in Scranton, Pennsylvania, customers crowd in with a life-size cardboard cut-out of Joe Biden, the Democratic presidential challenger who was born in the city and visited the shop as a child. "He used to come up here when he was a little kid," says Tom Owens, the owner of Hank's Hoagies. The place had a different name then—it was reportedly called Simmy's, and it sold penny candy to a young Biden and his friends—but decades later he has not forgotten his way there, as he proved with a visit in October last year.

"We love when he comes in. He's a great guy. When you meet him... it's kind of like you knew him all your life," says Owens. "He just makes you feel comfortable. Good man."

Hank's Hoagies is a bit like the Joe Biden Museum. Along with the cardboard effigy, a poster from his first presidential campaign in 1988 — sits above the entrance to a spartan kitchen, while old photographs of him rest by the window.

The store is surfing on Biden's local popularity, in a city where residents plant his campaign signs proudly in their gardens.

And he, in turn, is banking on his hometown ties to help him add Pennsylvania to his tally on election night against Donald Trump. Born in 1942 in Scranton, Biden left at age 10 for Delaware, nearly seven decades ago. But on his visits back, he says, it "really is good to be home."

"It's presumptuous to me to say 'home', I know—but you know Scranton, when you're a kid, no matter how long you lived here, climbs in your heart and occupies you," he said at the rally in the city in October last year. His most recent pilgrimage to his childhood home, with its grey walls and black shutters, was crammed in during a campaign-trail visit last month. The 77-year-old, black mask on his face, came to greet the house's current owner. In front of Biden's old grade school, a photographer and two older men with grey hair and checkered shirts are chatting. — AFP