

## **Joe Biden could get boost by back-to-back 2020 departures**

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**Washington:** Joe Biden isn't a presidential candidate yet. But with two key rivals already getting out of the way, the former vice president has more space to court voters who could help him claim the Democratic nomination.

Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown said Thursday he wouldn't run for president, following an announcement earlier this week from former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg that he would also sit out 2020.

Both men have vastly different political profiles. Brown has deep connections to blue-collar, union-friendly voters in the Midwest while Bloomberg saw his path to the nomination run through centrists uncomfortable with the party's move to the left. But together, their decisions could give Biden a greater opportunity to appeal to the middle-America voters who sided with President Donald Trump in 2016 and could be crucial to Democratic hopes of winning back the White House.

"I think it certainly creates a whole new constituency for the vice president that might have been split otherwise," California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who has vowed to support Biden if he runs, said soon after Brown's announcement. "So, that's good."

Chris Coons, elected in 2010 to fill the Delaware Senate seat Biden occupied for 36 years, said Brown's decision not to run "absolutely" strengthened the former vice president's case. Brown "comes from and connects to the heartland in a remarkable way. He's a real guy," Coons said, likening his appeal to Biden's.

Bloomberg's aides said their internal polling suggested his path to the Democratic nomination was narrow, particularly if Biden who shares some of Bloomberg's moderate positions decides to run. Brown, in contrast, denied that the former vice president had any effect on his choice to opt out of the primary.

"His getting in or out had zero impact on this," the 66-year-old senator said of Biden. Brown told reporters that he and Biden talk "from time to time" but had last connected before his Senate re-election win in November, "when he was in Ohio campaigning with me or for me."

Biden spokesman Bill Russo declined to comment on either Bloomberg or Brown's decisions against running in 2020. Of course, if Brown had sought the presidency, he would have faced a steep challenge in climbing ahead from the back of the pack in a field with a dozen candidates already declared.

Biden and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders consistently lead in early surveys of the 2020 Democratic field, and former Texas Rep. Beto O'Rourke could shake up the race if he decides to run. Brown's departure also provides a possible boost to Sanders, given their shared distaste for free-trade deals and vocal criticism of Wall Street.

Although Brown leans further left on policy than Bloomberg or Biden especially when it comes to trade the senator and former vice president have a parallel appeal to working-class voters who fled their party for Trump.

Biden's ties to his hardscrabble hometown of Scranton, Pennsylvania, have made him a compelling messenger for the plight of blue-collar workers whose jobs and livelihoods remain under threat by globalization and outsourcing. His role in an Obama administration that poured billions of dollars into rescuing the U.S. auto industry from the 2008 financial crisis also gives him a unique opportunity to connect with Midwestern voters.

"It's a mantle that is open to be grabbed by people who are willing to talk to these voters in an authentic way, in sharing their frustrations," said Tom Russell, a Wisconsin-based Democratic strategist who aided the party's successful effort to topple GOP Gov. Scott Walker in 2018.

"Biden has a history of being able to do that," Russell said, though he added that Brown's absence from the race creates potential advantages for O'Rourke, who has elements of the more centrist profile that Biden and Bloomberg would bring, as well as for Sanders. Brown "was Bernie without some of the Bernie baggage," Russell said.

Still, Biden will have to confront several vulnerabilities. He is famously prone to gaffes and angered some in the LGBT community last week when he called Vice President Mike Pence a "decent guy."

The decades in public life that he often portrays as an asset also carries challenges. The Washington Post, for instance, reported on Thursday that Biden opposed bussing children in the mid-1970s as schools sought to further integrate classrooms. Russo said Biden is a longtime civil rights advocate who supports equal housing, education and job opportunities. But such comments from decades ago could seem tone-deaf in a Democratic primary heralded for its historic diversity.

Ultimately, Democrats are weighing how to keep their grip on progressives without alienating Midwestern voters. Ohio Democratic Party Chairman David Pepper said Brown has proved that it's possible by winning over some voters in his battleground home state in 2018 who backed Trump in 2016.

"Any candidate can succeed in Ohio if they are focused on the right issues, and if they come across as someone who will fight for the everyday Ohio worker," Pepper said. "Certainly, Joe Biden is somebody I think would have a very good chance of beating Trump in Ohio. But I'm quick to say I don't think other candidates couldn't do the same thing."

- AP