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Joe Biden

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About this Person

Born: November 20, 1942 in Scranton, Pennsylvania, United States
Nationality: American
Occupation: Vice president (Government)
Other Names: Biden, Joseph Robinette, Jr.; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.
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Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election to become the 46th president-elect of the United States. He previously served as the vice president of the United States with Democratic president Barack Obama for two terms, from 2009 to 2017. In Biden's earlier political career in the 1970s, he gained a reputation as an outspoken and candid U.S. senator. He later ran for president in the 1988 and 2008 races, dropping out of each one. Democratic presidential nominee Obama chose Biden as his running mate in the 2008 campaign, and the pair won the subsequent election. Biden was sworn in as the forty-seventh vice president of the United States in 2009 and was reelected with Obama in 2012. As Obama's term wound down, rumors existed that Biden would make a bid for the 2016 presidency. However, in May of 2015, he suffered a personal tragedy when his son Beau died of brain cancer. Although Biden declined to run for the White House in 2016, he threw his hat into the ring in 2019 for the 2020 presidential election. After a major victory on Super Tuesday in March of 2020, Biden went on to become the Democratic nominee for president. With vote counts extending several days beyond the Nov. 3 election night, he became the first challenger to defeat an incumbent first-term president in almost 30 years.

Early Life and Education

Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. was born on November 20, 1942, son of a working-class family in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The family moved to suburban Wilmington, Delaware, where he played rugby and football. Childhood friend Marty Londergan told *Esquire* in 1982 that when he and Biden played football together, Biden was such a fierce competitor that he often got into on-field fights. "The guy just wanted to win too much," Londergan observed.

Biden enrolled at the University of Delaware, where he played safety on the football team. In the classroom, he depended less on hard study than on his native intelligence and glib wit. "He had a talent for getting it done when it had to get done," college roommate and future law partner David Walsh told the *Wilmington News Journal*. During spring break of his junior year, Biden met Syracuse University student Neilia Hunter. He quit football before his senior year to spend more time with her, and after graduating in 1965, he enrolled in Syracuse University Law School. The two married in 1966 and two years later moved to Delaware, where Biden opened a law practice. He quickly became prominent in Wilmington by defending the accused in the toughest criminal cases.

Political Career

Biden, who registered as a political independent in 1970, was asked to run for the New Castle County Council by Delaware Republicans impressed with his legal oratory skills. He eventually decided to run as a Democrat. Although the district was 65 percent Republican, Biden won by a large margin. The next day, he began planning his U.S. Senate campaign. In 1972, at age 29, Biden challenged J. Caleb Boggs, 63, a two-term senator who had held office in Delaware for 26 years. No other Democrat wanted to challenge the popular Boggs, who was said to have known every state resident on a first-name basis and sent cards to every Delaware family at Christmas. When the unknown Biden entered the race, people saw him as a sacrificial lamb. He expected the race to cost \$80,000 and obtained a second mortgage on his home for the first \$20,000. "We had trouble getting money from the regular Democratic sources because none of them wanted to invest in what looked like a losing campaign," his sister, Valerie Biden Saunders, told *Good Housekeeping*.

But Biden gained recognition by meeting voters in six coffee klatches a day throughout the state and by deploying battalions of high school students to pass out leaflets. He argued that Boggs was a do-nothing senator who would prefer to retire. His tenacity impressed donors, and money began to pour in to the campaign. In the end, the campaign spent \$300,000, the most for a statewide campaign in Delaware at that time.

On election night, Biden took Boggs' seemingly safe seat by 3,162 votes. "Upstairs in his suite," *Esquire* reported, "Joe Biden took the concession call from Boggs and then began to cry. 'I didn't want to hurt him,' he said. 'I didn't want to do that.'" At 29, Biden was the youngest senator ever popularly elected and the fourth-youngest ever chosen to serve at the time. His political future shone so brightly that *Time* mentioned him as a presidential possibility before he even arrived in Washington.

Suffered a Tragedy

On December 18, 1972, not long after his election victory, tragedy struck. Biden's wife and three children were returning from shopping for a Christmas tree, when on a highway west of Wilmington, their station wagon was hit by a hay truck. The car was thrown over an embankment, killing Neilia Biden and infant daughter Naomi. Biden's two sons--Beau and Hunt--were hospitalized with serious injuries.

Biden called Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield and told him he wanted to give up his seat. "They can always get another senator," he said, "but my boys can't get another father." Mansfield convinced Biden to stay and gave him several prestigious committee assignments. In January of 1973, Biden was sworn into office in his sons' hospital room, where he had lived for a month.

Biden then went to Washington, but--raising his two sons alone--he decided to commute daily from Delaware, an 80-minute trip each way. Some said Biden's commuting hurt his effectiveness as a senator. "It's a club here," Senator Fritz Hollings (D-South Carolina) told the *Washingtonian* in 1985. "The atmosphere of club is missing with Joe. You never really get to know the others unless you go on a trip or to parties with them." Biden conceded that might be true, but he told the *Washingtonian*, "Family has always been the beginning, the middle and the end with me." He had gone to Washington with no interest in making friends among his Senate colleagues. "There used to be great senators here who made a difference, men like Daniel Webster and Henry Clay," he told *Good Housekeeping* in 1975. "But not anymore. There are still a few guys you can trust and respect but there is not much greatness here anymore." In that same article, Biden lived up to his reputation as an enfant terrible. "Why should I be here just to be one of 100 guys who vote?" he said. "I want to be one of those guys who change people's minds."

During a 1975 Judiciary Committee hearing, Biden interrupted himself in mid-sentence to say, "I obviously don't know what the hell I'm talking about." Such statements earned him a reputation for unblushing candor. "He's candid--maybe to a fault," Senator Bill Cohen (R-Maine) told the *Washingtonian*. Senator Hollings, a sort of foster father to Biden, told the *Washingtonian*, "Joe gets worked up. Some people think he gets too candid sometimes, but that's a mark of his generation. Better his short fuse than no fuse at all."

Mansfield placed Biden on several plum Senate panels, including the steering, judiciary, foreign relations, budget, and intelligence committees. He became friendly with Senate leaders Hubert Humphrey and Edward Kennedy. In the late 1970s, he was President Jimmy Carter's chief Senate salesman on the SALT II treaty. Colleagues considered him a lively debater, quick on his feet and nimble with his questions. But some saw him as a senator who wouldn't do the grunt work, was not always prepared or interested, and thought making a speech was enough. Senator Gary Hart (D-Colorado), a potential competitor for the 1988 presidential nomination, called Biden "a buzz saw, all noise and bite."

"Joe just didn't give a damn," brother Jim Biden told *Esquire* in 1982. "He didn't give a damn about anything. [Sons] Beau and Hunt were the sole exceptions." Biden admitted he felt disoriented during his first term. "I viewed the Senate as a way station," he told *National Journal*. "I was going to serve my time and get out."

Focused on Career

That feeling changed in 1977, when Biden met Jill Jacobs, who was finishing college in Delaware. They married that year and had a daughter in 1981. Biden's new wife gave him stability at home, he said, and helped him to pursue his career without feeling that he was abandoning his family.

In 1978 Biden was reelected to the Senate with 58 percent of the vote. Much of his support came from his position as the Senate's leader in opposing busing for school integration. In the mid-70s, Biden successfully proposed an amendment to prevent the Department of Health, Education and Welfare from ordering school districts to institute busing. Two years later, he proposed a bill that failed by two votes on the Senate floor to restrict court-ordered busing. "Is it racist because people don't want to send their kid instead of across the street to a school six miles away?" he asked on the Senate floor.

Such stands created a confusing image of Biden. For every liberal act--opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the 1970s and El Salvador in the 1980s, grilling of the CIA over covert espionage--there was an equal and opposite conservative act--opposing busing, aiming to cut off federal funds for abortion, and beefing up the defense budget. Yet by 1984, Biden ranked fifth in how often he had voted in opposition to President Ronald Reagan, according to *Congressional Quarterly*. Two years later, the Democratic Party recaptured control of the Senate, elevating Biden to the post of chairman of the powerful Judiciary Committee. He came to be regarded as an expert on criminal justice and foreign policy. In 1983 he cosponsored a comprehensive anticrime bill criticized by some as anti-liberal. He was a Senate leader on such issues as the MX missile, arms control, Lebanon, U.S.-Soviet relations, and civil rights.

Made a Failed Bid for Presidency

That record, plus Biden's oratorical skills and attractive demeanor, spurred talk as early as 1983 that he would make a run for the presidency. He backed away from a 1984 run and was easily reelected to the Senate. In 1987 he ran for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination, but his candidacy was wounded when an opponent's campaign released a videotape showing Biden using, without credit, parts of speeches originally delivered by British politician Neil Kinnock. He dropped out of the race in September of 1987, saying he wanted to focus on chairing Senate hearings over a controversial Supreme Court nominee.

President Reagan had nominated arch-conservative judge Robert Bork to the Supreme Court. As Judiciary Committee chairman, Biden presided over Bork's contentious Senate confirmation hearings, and he also led the opposition to his nomination. The Senate rejected Bork in the fall of 1987. That battle helped make Biden well known to the American public, as did a second debate over a Supreme Court nominee. In 1991, when Clarence Thomas was nominated for the court, Biden's committee heard dramatic testimony from Anita Hill, a former employee of Thomas's who accused him of sexual harassment. As Thomas defended himself before the committee, the conflict gripped the nation's attention. The Senate voted narrowly to confirm Thomas.

In early 1988, Biden collapsed in a hotel in Rochester, New York, from an aneurysm. He underwent emergency surgery, suffered a second aneurysm later that year, and had another surgery performed. When he returned to his Senate work later that year, he dedicated himself to developing experience in foreign policy. He eventually became chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Biden met with top Middle East leaders to discuss the war on terrorism and conflicts in the Middle East. In 2002 he voted to authorize war with Iraq, a decision he later regretted. He later became strongly critical of President George W. Bush's Iraq policy. In 2004 Biden, addressing the Democratic National Convention in Boston, said history would judge the administration of Bush "harshly for the mistakes it has made."

Another Bid for the Presidency

Twenty years after his first run for president, Biden made another attempt, announcing his candidacy in January of 2007. He performed well in the Democratic presidential candidates' many debates. In a debate in Philadelphia in October of 2007, he mocked Republican presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani for dwelling on terrorism as a campaign issue. "There's only three things he mentions in a sentence: a noun and a verb and 9/11," Biden complained (according to Elisabeth Bumiller of the *New York Times*).

After winning 1 percent of the vote in the first contest of the campaign, the January 3, 2008, Iowa caucus, Biden pulled out of the race. However, he had improved his political reputation by running and displaying his seasoned knowledge of foreign policy. Political observers speculated that if a Democrat won the White House, Biden might be a leading contender for a cabinet position, possibly secretary of state.

But Barack Obama, who won the Democratic nomination for president that June, had even bigger plans for Biden. On August 23, 2008, Obama announced he had chosen Biden as his vice presidential running mate. Biden was viewed as a shrewd choice, given his years of political experience, including deep knowledge of foreign policy and in national security issues, which helped offset the Illinois senator's youth.

During his acceptance speech at the convention, Biden criticized Obama's Republican opponent, U.S. senator John McCain, who had served in the Senate with Biden for decades. Like Obama, Biden derided McCain for supporting Bush on the Iraq war. "Again and again," he said (according to John M. Broder of the *New York Times*), "on the most important national security issues of our time, John McCain was wrong, and Barack Obama was proven right." Biden attempted to undercut the political appeal of McCain's history as a Navy pilot and prisoner of war in Vietnam. "These times require more than a good soldier," Biden said (according to Broder). "They require a wise leader."

On October 2, 2008, Biden debated Sarah Palin, the Republican candidate for vice president, in St. Louis, Missouri. Rather than challenge Palin directly, Biden used the platform to attack McCain, portraying the Republican presidential candidate's response to the Wall Street financial crisis as out of touch and erratic. Biden defended his ticket's plan to withdraw combat troops from Iraq within sixteen months, arguing that McCain and Palin did not have a plan to end the war.

Role as Vice President

After a spirited campaign, the Obama-Biden ticket won the November election. Biden won his Senate race in Delaware as well, and did not resign from the Senate seat until shortly before he was sworn in as vice president in January of 2009. As vice president, Biden planned on reinventing the office after his predecessor, Dick Cheney, turned it into an extremely powerful position. Biden did not want to be a "do nothing" vice president either, but he worked to strike a balance that would allow him to be active but subordinate to Obama. In his first few months in office, for example, Biden was put in charge of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, traveled to Georgia in Eurasia to pledge American support in the face of Russian threats, and tried to garner international support for an escalated war in Afghanistan.

Biden's expertise in foreign relations played a large role in his vice presidential duties. In September of 2009, he made a surprise visit to Baghdad, Iraq, where he met with Iraqi officials and U.S. soldiers. Biden traveled to Iraq eight more times in two years, including a trip in December of 2011 to mark the end of the war.

In March of 2010, Biden embarked on a Middle East trip to meet with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. According to CNN, Biden, speaking with Israeli president Shimon Peres during the trip, commented that he had been a friend of Israel's since his first visit to the

country as a 29-year-old senator. In early 2011, Biden traveled to Afghanistan as Obama considered drawing back military forces in the area. Biden, who believed the president should greatly reduce the number of troops in the country, was said to have influence on the president's eventual decision to draw down the number of troops in the region. The vice president also supported the administration's efforts to strengthen relations in Asia Pacific, and he traveled to China, Japan, and Mongolia in 2011. In February of 2012, Biden met with China's then vice president, Xi Jinping, to discuss a number of key commercial and trade issues between the two countries.

Biden also played a domestic role in the Obama administration, particularly dealing with the economy and clean energy alternatives. Biden and Obama hosted a meeting at the White House in July of 2010 that included former president Bill Clinton and various business leaders to discuss cooperation between the public and private sectors in creating new jobs and more opportunities for investments in clean energy initiatives. In August of 2011, Biden spoke at the National Clean Energy Summit in Nevada, where he noted that the United States must lead the way in clean cars, solar arrays, and wind turbines. "If we don't lead in clean energy, we'll follow. I'd hate to see us replace the importing of foreign oil with the importing of foreign technology," he is quoted as saying in *Forbes*. Biden was key in implementing the stimulus package, known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, to help rebuild the American economy, and he served as chair of the administration's Middle Class Task Force, a White House initiative to build a strong middle class in America.

Second Term as Vice President

Biden was sworn in for a second term as vice president after Obama was reelected in November of 2012. After the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December of 2012, in which 26 people--including 20 children--were killed, Obama assigned Biden to a task force aimed at reforming gun control laws. Some of the proposed provisions included a ban on semiautomatic weapons, background checks, and increased security at schools. However, the ban on certain automatic weapons and increased background checks failed to pass Congress.

In January of 2014, Biden and his team proposed that states be given the ability to provide the National Instant Criminal Background Check System with mental health information about gun purchasers. The proposal, Biden said, would prevent firearms from being sold to those mentally unfit to carry them. At the same time, Biden and Obama publicly urged Congress to reconsider the background check legislation.

That same month, Obama appointed Biden co-chair of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. In its first report, the group recommended that the problem be identified and measured; that bystanders, particularly men, be made part of the solution in preventing sexual assault; and that there be an effective response from the college or university--that is, schools should have a policy, trained officials, and a disciplinary system in place to deal with sexual assault cases. "No more turning a blind eye or pretending it doesn't exist," said Biden. "We need to give victims the support they need--like a confidential place to go--and we need to bring the perpetrators to justice."

In early 2014, Biden said in an interview with CNN that though he had not decided whether he would run for president in the 2016 election, he did not rule out the possibility. Later that year, he told CBS News that he couldn't think of a good reason not to run but would decide by the summer of 2015. Biden traveled to numerous states in late 2014 and into 2015, delivering speeches on Obama's economics and plans for infrastructure improvement. The media noted that Biden's schedule suggested a possible 2016 run, as he was visiting what would become key voting states in the election.

In April of 2015, former first lady and secretary of state Hillary Clinton announced her bid for the Democratic nomination in the 2016 presidential election. A month later, Biden suffered a personal tragedy when his son Beau died of brain cancer. After weeks of delaying his decision, Biden announced he would not seek office.

Sought Presidency

In 2019, after much speculation, Biden announced he would run for president in 2020 against incumbent Republican President Donald Trump. His campaign platform included support for women's abortion rights, though as a practicing Catholic he was personally opposed to abortion; support of transgender Americans to serve in the military; support for free college education and universal kindergarten and pre-K; universal background checks for guns; and higher taxes on wealthy Americans with tax relief for the middle class. Biden faced a deep bench for the Democratic nomination, including Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. During the first set of Democratic candidate debates, Biden was confronted by an unexpected foe: Senator Kamala Harris. While they were on friendly terms in general, Harris lobbed an attack on Biden over his position on school busing during the June of 2019 debate. Biden had opposed federally mandated busing to integrate schools.

Throughout the early months of his campaign, Biden consistently polled lower than several of his opponents, and he ended up placing fourth in the Iowa Caucuses behind Sanders and Warren. His campaign made a major comeback in March of 2020 when he won ten states in the Super Tuesday primary elections. The wins put him in the overall lead among candidates, and several of his opponents including Warren dropped out of the race shortly after. In April, Sanders suspended his campaign, making Biden the presumptive nominee. Sanders and Warren both went on to endorse Biden. Biden was also formally endorsed by former President Barack Obama.

After a major victory on Super Tuesday in March of 2020, Biden went on to become the Democratic nominee for president. With vote counts extending several days beyond the Nov. 3 election night, Biden was named the winner, becoming the first challenger to defeat an incumbent first-term president in almost 30 years. The win made Biden the oldest president in American history, a title previously held by Ronald Reagan.

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Full name, Joseph Robinette Biden Jr.; born November 20, 1942, in Scranton, Pennsylvania; son of Joseph (a car salesman) and Jean Biden; married Neilia Hunter, 1966 (died, 1972); married Jill Tracy Jacobs (a teacher), June 17, 1977; children: (with Neilia Biden) Joseph Robinette III ("Beau") (died, 2015), Robert ("Hunt") Hunter, Naomi Christina (died, 1972), (with Jill Biden) Ashley Blazer. **Education:** University of Delaware, BA, 1965; Syracuse University Law School, JD, 1968. **Politics:** Democrat **Religion:** Roman Catholic.

CAREER:

Admitted to Bar of the state of Delaware, 1968; practiced law as a defense attorney on criminal cases in Wilmington, Delaware, 1968-70; elected to the New Castle, Delaware, County Council, 1970, served, 1971-73; elected to the U.S. Senate from the state of Delaware, 1972, served 1973-2009; chairman of Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2001-02; elected vice president, 2008; took office, 2009; reelected vice president in 2012; took office, 2013; announced campaign for president of the United States, 2019; won presidential election, 2020.

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Crescent of Pakistan, 2008; Golden Medal of Freedom, Kosovo, 2009.

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