

Biden faces growing pressure to quit race as Democrats question fitness

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Online Desk :

United States President Joe Biden is facing growing pressure from within his party to prove he is physically and mentally fit for office, with a Democratic lawmaker publicly calling on him to end his re-election bid for the first time.

Biden's candidacy has been under a cloud since a disastrous debate performance against Republican challenger Donald Trump that saw the 81-year-old Democrat stumble over his words and lose his train of thought.

On Tuesday, Lloyd Doggett, a House representative from Texas, became the first member of his party to publicly call on Biden to quit the race.

"I represent the heart of a congressional district once represented by Lyndon Johnson. Under very different circumstances, he made the painful decision to withdraw," Doggett said in his statement.

"President Biden should do the same."

Marie Gluesenkamp Perez, a House representative from Washington state, stopped short of calling Biden to withdraw but said she believed Thursday's debate performance would cost him the election in November.

"We all saw what we saw, you can't undo that, and the truth, I think, is that Biden is going to lose to Trump. I know that's difficult, but I think the damage has been done by that debate," Perez said in an interview with the KATU news channel in Portland, Oregon.

Jared Golden, a House representative from Maine, also said he believed that Trump would win and he was "OK with that".

"Lots of Democrats are panicking about whether President Joe Biden should step down as the party's nominee," Golden said in an opinion piece published in The Bangor Daily News.

"Biden's poor performance in the debate was not a surprise."

Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Representative Jim Clyburn also added their voices to those scrutinising Biden's condition, saying it was legitimate to raise concerns about his health following the debate.

"I think it's a legitimate question to say, is this an episode or is this a condition? And so, when people ask that question, it's completely legitimate – of both candidates," Pelosi said in an interview with MSNBC.

A Pelosi spokesperson told The New York Times after the interview that she had "full confidence" in Biden and planned to attend his inauguration.

While Democratic insiders have been privately raising concerns about Biden's fitness with media outlets for days, the public comments intensify pressure on the president to assuage doubts about his electability, which have dominated headlines despite efforts at damage control by the White House and Democrat stalwarts such as former Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton.

The White House said on Tuesday that Biden would hold a series of meetings and appearances in the coming days to quash concerns about his fitness, including a news conference and his first sit-down television interview in a month.

On Wednesday, Biden is set to meet Democratic governors as members of his team scramble to shore up support within the party.

While acknowledging that Biden performed poorly at the debate, his camp has rebuffed suggestions that he should step aside and dismissed claims that he has dementia or is otherwise cognitively impaired.

The White House press secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre, told a media briefing that Biden was sick with a cold during the debate and had “a bad night”.

“We really truly want to turn the page on this,” Jean-Pierre told reporters.

“We really want to be able to get out there and speak directly to the American people.”

During a fundraising event later on Tuesday, Biden blamed his poor performance on back-to-back trips to France and Italy, although he spent the week leading up to the debate behind closed doors at presidential retreat Camp David.

“I wasn’t very smart. I decided to travel around the world a couple of times,” Biden said.

Biden added that he did not listen to his advisers about his travel schedule and joked that he “almost fell asleep on stage” during the debate.

In a CNN poll published after the debate, three-quarters of registered voters said Democrats would have a better chance at winning the election with someone other than Biden on the ticket.

Voters also favoured Trump over Biden, 49 percent to 43 percent.

Vice President Kamala Harris did moderately better, gaining the support of 45 percent of voters compared with Trump’s 47 percent.

Other Democrats floated as potential replacements, including California Governor Gavin Newsom and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, trailed Trump by similar margins as Biden.

Despite the Biden camp’s efforts to portray his debate showing as a one-off, his faltering appearance was only the latest in a series of incidents to raise questions about his age, a longstanding concern among voters.

In an ABC News/Ipsos poll released in February, 86 percent respondents said Biden was too old to serve another term as president.

Harris on Tuesday pushed back on the suggestion that Biden should step aside.

“Look, Joe Biden is our nominee. We beat Trump once and we’re going to beat him again, period,” she said in an interview with CBS News.