

## AMERICAN OPINION

# The 1970s bad economic news haunts Biden

By St. Louis Post-Dispatch  
Editorial Board

U.S. gross domestic product shrank 1.4% in the first quarter at the same time inflation continued to soar. For older Americans, that combination conjures memories of 1970s stagflation, a nightmarish combination of double-digit inflation, double-digit interest rates, soaring gasoline prices and persistently high unemployment. The entire economic mess got dumped on President Jimmy Carter's lap after the 1976 election, even though it was neither his fault nor the fault of his predecessors, Gerald Ford and Richard Nixon.

Sometimes, global economic forces converge just like weather systems to create a perfect storm, and woe to the president who gets caught in it. The timing of the current storm couldn't be worse for President Joe Biden as he tries to minimize the damage Democrats are bracing for in this year's midterm elections. Republicans can be expected to rub Biden's nose in bad economic data, but voters would be wise to study up on the facts rather than rely on political spin.

Biden inherited an economy still in pandemic shutdown mode. Manufacturers abroad, like here, had sent workers home and curtailed production to halt the spread of the coronavirus. Consumer spending plummeted. Manufacturers sold off inventories to meet whatever demand there was. Fuel prices had plummeted because motorists also were staying home.

Suddenly, vaccines allowed Americans to return to work, the highways and the stores just as Biden was settling into the White House. A surge in demand for everything crashed against a production and cargo-transportation bottleneck. Americans returned to their cars just as domestic and foreign oil producers opted to restrict output. Pump prices skyrocketed.

Thus, inflation. The decline in gross domestic product — in sharp contrast to the 6.9% increase in the first quarter of 2021 — reflects a decline in car sales because carmakers still can't get the raw materials and microchips they need. Manufacturers, having reduced their inventories, now are struggling to meet consumer demand. So their sales are dropping.

Thus, stagnation. Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Carter grappled for years with the combination of a global economic contraction, two punishing Middle East oil embargoes, tens of thousands of troops returning from Vietnam and too few jobs to employ them. Biden, just like Carter and Nixon, also faced significant public blowback from military debacles abroad: Nixon's messy Vietnam pullout, Carter's failed bid to rescue American hostages in Iran and Biden's botched Afghanistan withdrawal.

There's no easy way for presidents to spin bad economic news other than to make clear that there is a bright side — such as Biden's reminder Thursday that unemployment rates haven't been this low since 1970 — and to remind the public that presidents in free-market economies have minimal powers to halt inflation or force economic growth. But a one-term presidency and midterm pain awaits any leader who tries to shrug off these factors or ignore the strains faced by American consumers (and voters).

This American Opinion editorial is the opinion of the editorial board of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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# Iowa caucuses play a crucial role in elections

By Rachel Paine Caufield  
Chicago Tribune

The Democratic National Committee is debating a significant change to its nominating calendar, one that would presumably disallow Iowa's current first-in-the-nation caucus. This change will solve nothing and weaken the party's nomination system.

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The party nomination process that leads to the selection of a presidential nominee is not an election. It is a party selection process. The goal is to find the best candidate to win the general election.

I am a transplant to Iowa. Before my arrival, like most Americans who live outside the state, I viewed Iowa's caucus system with skepticism. Having now spent more than two decades in the state, I appreciate the unique value Iowa adds to the presidential nomination process.

The most prominent criticism of the Iowa caucuses is that Iowa is not demographically representative of the Democratic Party. That's true. But it has never stopped Iowans from supporting diverse candidates. Jesse Jackson, Barack Obama and Kamala Harris (and Republicans Alan Keyes and Herman Cain) had greater support in Iowa than they initially garnered in national polls. Iowans came out to support the first woman to win a major party nomination in 2016 and a gay candidate in 2020.

In fact, research has found that Iowa's Democratic caucusgoers are ideologically representative of Democrats nationally. As a Midwestern state with significant post-industrial rural areas, Iowa voters also share the concerns of states that have recently decided the general election — Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania. Prioritizing the interests of voters in these areas helps the Democrats select candidates who can win.

The DNC proposal would allow states to petition to become one of the first four contests, with priority given to those states that conduct primaries. The proposal may be borne of good intentions, but it would only exacerbate the worst aspects of American presidential campaigns. The election will become longer, more expensive, more media-driven and less personal, favoring establishment candidates who are well-known and well-funded.

In contrast, money and name recognition are less of an advantage in Iowa's caucus system. Campaigns must win over advocates who will be their spokespeople on caucus night. This is not achieved through stump

speeches.

Instead, for candidates to compete in a caucus, interacting with voters is an essential skill. Candidates must answer questions from voters at town halls, kitchen tables, diners, church potlucks and manufacturing plants. Time and effort are more important than money. Candidates with smaller bank accounts and less name recognition can compete in the Iowa caucuses if they have a strong message and work ethic.

Another disadvantage of a primary is that candidates can win by building support in the most populated areas and ignoring voters in sparsely populated areas. That does not serve the best interests of the Democratic Party. Democrats need to sway voters outside of cities to win a general election. To be successful, the party must nominate candidates who also appeal to some rural, exurban and suburban voters.

Caucuses distribute voting power more evenly geographically. Successful candidates in Iowa cannot focus solely on the state's most populated areas. They must build a strong network of supporters in farming communities, industrial towns, and cities.

For these reasons, a caucus is superior to a primary in narrowing the early pool of candidates to those who can win a general election. Iowa's unique advantage above all other states is decades of experience in running a caucus system. Iowa has well-established county-level parties in each of its 99 counties. These county parties are the ground-level organizations that provide the events and forums for candidates to meet voters. Iowa county-level party organizers are enthusiastic, experienced volunteers who cannot be easily replicated.

For these reasons, the Iowa caucuses allow for an even playing field where a little-known candidate without a big bank account can gather momentum. A wide range of ideologies and interests can be brought to bear on the selection of a Democratic nominee capable of winning the general election.

Furthermore, the Iowa caucuses remain one of the last places where people gather together with others to discuss political issues. It can seem chaotic or inefficient (it certainly can be), but we need spaces where we meet face to face to hash out political disagreements in a structured and productive way. In an atomized, polarized, distracting and distrustful political environment, the Iowa precinct caucuses offer a rare moment when people come together to make decisions about the future of our democracy. That's special and worth preserving.

The 2020 Democratic caucus debacle was not representative of the long legacy of the Iowa caucuses. Rather than continue to undermine the state's unique contribution to the nomination process, the DNC should work alongside the Iowa Democratic Party to fix those problems and guarantee that changes can be implemented successfully.

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# Elon Musk is right about free speech

In announcing the deal to buy Twitter, Elon Musk said in a statement: "Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated."

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Which makes him — subject, of course, to government oversight — the king of the town square.

And it raises two questions: First, what will Musk allow and, more importantly, not allow, in his town square?

Second, what will government regulators, here and around the world, do about it?

Technically, the First Amendment only applies to the government, not to Elon Musk. But there is a doctrine in the law that says if private parties are responsible for a public forum, they are subject to the same limits on discriminating against speech as the government would be. Musk seems ready to take on that role, seeing the First Amendment as a shield. But it does not provide the absolute protection that current law does.

Under current law, internet platforms like Twitter aren't responsible for what users post, meaning they can't be sued for libel, defamation, incitement, complicity to commit crimes, conspiracy, aiding and abetting violence, selling phony handbags, child porn, drug sales and the like. But there is growing support, including most recently from President Barack Obama, for repealing that law, which would leave the courts looking over the shoulders of the digital kings in a virtually standardless world, importing all the uncertainties of libel and defamation law, not to mention incitement, complicity, conspiracy and even racketeering as they do.

You see, calling yourself a free speech absolutist as Musk has done doesn't answer the question of what you do about speech that involves or incites harmful conduct. There is no place where free speech is absolute. The Supreme Court has, painstakingly at times and with obvious frustration at others sought to develop various hierarchies of speech, which raise as many questions as answers.

Of course, that some lines are difficult to draw does not mean the easy ones shouldn't be drawn. There are many easy ones, frighteningly so. Free speech is one of a set of values that encompasses an agenda of liberty and freedom.

The first resort, and it is not a bad one, is to process and transparency. When we can't figure out what to decide, we can always focus on who does the deciding and ensure that they are both visible and accountable. Musk can advance the free speech debate by making clear how and why decisions are made.

But process only takes you so far. Decisions must still be made. All other things are never equal. Every balance involves weighing what matters most before you start balancing.

In making these decisions, in responding to Congress and the courts, Musk will inevitably be at the center of a new body of law — an evolving international common law for free speech in the metaverse's town square. It is a challenge as great as any leader faces.

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