

Biden Wants No Part of the Culture War the G.O.P. Loves

The generosity of his \$1.9 trillion relief bill has the added benefit of shifting attention where he wants it.



By Thomas B. Edsall

Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly column from Washington, D.C. on politics, demographics and inequality.

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The Biden administration appears to have adopted a two-pronged strategy to reduce the corrosive impact of hot-button social, cultural and racial issues: first by inundating the electorate with a flood of cash via the \$1.9 trillion Covid relief act and second by refusing to engage fractious issues in public, calculating that deprived of oxygen, their strength will fade.

The sheer magnitude of the funds released by the American Rescue Plan, the White House is gambling, will shift voters' attention away from controversies over Dr. Seuss, who can use which bathroom and critical race theory. So far, the strategy is working.

Biden has a favorability rating of 52.9 to 41.9, according to the Real Clear Politics average of the seven most recent surveys, and a Pew Research poll the first week of March found that a decisive majority of voters, at 70-28 percent, have a positive opinion of the Covid stimulus bill.

According to a rundown by the Center for American Progress of the bill's exceptionally generous provisions, the bill will cut child poverty in half, and a middle-income family of four with one child under age 6 and one child age 6 or above will receive \$8,200 at minimum.

Another example from the center's calculations: A family of four, with the same age breakdown, earning \$75,000 and spending \$5,000 on child care, will receive the \$8,200, plus a \$1,500 child and dependent care tax credit, for a total benefit of \$9,700.

This kind of money will focus attention where the Biden administration wants it.

Crucially, the benefits are universal and, in some cases, families making as much as \$150,000 annually will qualify for substantial payments and tax credits.

In addition, a plurality of the beneficiaries will be white. Of the 39.4 million people at or below poverty in 2019 who qualify for the largest benefits, 17.3 million were white, 8.2 million were Black and 10.2 million were Hispanic, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

The second prong of Biden's strategy is to lower the volume on culture war issues by refusing to engage — on the theory that in politics, silence saps attention — exemplified by the president's two-month long refusal to hold a news conference in which the press, rather than the chief executive, determines what gets talked about.

The strategy of diverting attention from incendiary social issues is spreading.

"Taking their cues from a new president who steadfastly refuses to engage with or react to cultural provocations," Democratic officeholders "have mostly kept their heads down and focused on passing legislation," The Week's Damon Linker wrote in "Will the G.O.P.'s culture war gambit blow up in its face?"

That raises the possibility, Linker continued, that

while Republicans are busy trying to bait Democrats on culture war issues, those Democrats end up winning public opinion in a big way by refusing to play along, changing the subject, and actually making the lives of most Americans concretely better.

Stanley Feldman, a political scientist at Stony Brook University, noted in an email that he thinks that

Biden understands that it's to the Democrats' advantage to lower the volume on the culture wars. The Covid rescue bill is a clear attempt to change political discourse back to economic issues and to provide broad-based, tangible assistance to a large part of the public. Biden signs executive orders on gender but there's little discussion of this.

Biden's approach, Feldman continued, "is clearly putting many conservatives in a difficult position as they try to counter with stories about Dr. Seuss and Mr. Potato Head."

Stanley Greenberg, a Democratic pollster with decades of experience in federal and state elections, is optimistic about Biden's current prospects, but he warned that the administration will have to gain control of immigration: "The border matters," he said, "and Republicans will use images from the border to sear into people's consciousness. It is very important that they" — the Democrats — "are soon seen to be managing the border and immigration."

Biden and other Democrats, in Greenberg's view, should "ignore cancel culture attacks" while making the case "that Democrats are fighting and delivering for the working class and it is Democrats you can trust to have a strong economy."

Biden himself appears willing to tackle the potential political fallout the recent increase in migration might cause. In an interview on Tuesday with ABC News, Biden described his message to potential migrants as: "I can say quite clearly: Don't come over," before adding, "Don't leave your town or city or community." Pew Research reported on March 15 that "The U.S. Border Patrol apprehended nearly 100,000 migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border in February, the 10th consecutive month of increased apprehensions." Earlier this week, the Biden administration directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency to help with managing the surge of unaccompanied minors at the border.

Celinda Lake, president of Lake Research Partners, a Democratic firm, is less worried about the ability of Republicans to once again raise immigration as a wedge issue.

"Immigration is way down on voters' list of concerns," she said. "With Covid and the economy voters don't think that immigration is a serious concern."

In the case of growing fears of a surge of immigrants seeking entry on the border with Mexico, Lake continued,

There is not a crisis. There is a problem that has emerged because of mismanagement and uniquely flawed policies under Trump. What is needed is a road map to citizenship and reasonable, workable policies with leadership that returns to American values and workable policies.

Because of this, Lake argued,

the most important strategy for Democrats is keep focused on vaccines, jobs, wages and small businesses. Voters will measure success by how much their families and communities are helped. Voters will ask in 2022 what did Democrats deliver.

Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard, argues that liberals and Democrats should take a more aggressive strategy to counter expected Republican attacks in the 2022 and 2024 elections. His focus is less on politicians than on the activities of liberals generally.

If you seek to lessen the intensity of the culture wars, the question, Pinker contends, "is how to climb back down."

Taking a lesson, interestingly, from nuclear arms control, Pinker cites a tactic "called GRIT: Graduated Reciprocation in Tension-Reduction," in which

one side makes a small unilateral concession with a public invitation that it be reciprocated. Some concession on one side — admitting that the other side may have a point, or that they be mistaken but not evil, could set off a virtuous circle.

In effect, Pinker is proposing that liberals and Democrats take the initiative to neutralize what Lilliana Mason, a political scientist at the University of Maryland, describes as the damage resulting from the declining number of people holding "crosscutting" stands on key issues.

In her 2016 paper "A Cross-Cutting Calm: How Social Sorting Drives Affective Polarization," Mason explains that

As long as the social divisions in society are crosscutting, partisans of opposing parties are still able to generally get along. However, once these cleavages begin to align along a single dimension, partisan conflict is expected to increase substantially. The crosscutting divisions work to moderate political rancor.

In other words, when significant numbers of voters and elected officials hold what in our contemporary alignment are ideologically contradictory views — pro-abortion rights and anti-affirmative action, for example, or pro-immigration and anti-gay marriage — the less they see the opposition party as an enemy. Conversely, as voters and politicians "sort" into ideologically consistent camps (anti-tax, anti-abortion, anti-welfare, anti-affirmative action, antisocial spending, pro-defense, anti-immigration, on one side) the more they will see the opposition as their enemy and will refuse to cooperate with or even tolerate them.

Mason cited a study that followed the same voters in the 1990s and

found that those individuals whose level of partisan-ideological sorting had increased during the course of the panel were far angrier after sorting than they had been before sorting.

Put another way, Mason writes,

When a single person went through a process of aligning their partisan and ideological identities, they came out the other end angrier than they entered, but no more policy extreme.

Shanto Iyengar, a political scientist at Stanford, writing with four colleagues, described the process by which partisan hostility escalates in a 2019 paper, "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States."

"Several features of the contemporary environment have exacerbated partisans' proclivity to divide the world into a liked in-group

(one's own party) and a disliked out-group (the opposing party)," Iyengar et al. write:

As partisan and ideological identities became increasingly aligned, other salient social identities, including race and religion, also converged with partisanship. White evangelicals, for instance, are Overwhelmingly Republican today, and African Americans overwhelmingly identify as Democrats. This decline of crosscutting identities is at the root of affective polarization.

The focus of the Biden administration on economic issues is, in part, a strategy to apply crosscutting pressures on white working class voters who have moved to the Republican Party.

While culturally conservative, many of these voters remain liberal on economic policy, suggesting that a Democrat who lowers the temperature on cultural issues while stressing an expansion of economic benefits could make inroads with this constituency. Even small inroads would provide huge political dividends.

In this context, one of the things Biden has going for him is the likelihood of strong economic growth in the near future. Neil Irwin reported in *The Times* on March 13, in "17 Reasons to Let the Economic Optimism Begin" that

Things are also primed for a boom time in the executive suite. C.E.O. confidence is at a 17-year high, and near-record stock market valuations imply that companies have access to very cheap capital Crises spur innovation.

Ben Casselman, writing on Feb. 21 in *The Times*, was decidedly optimistic:

Economists have begun to talk of something stronger: a supercharged rebound that brings down unemployment, drives up wages and may foster years of stronger growth.

The steady diminution of Donald Trump's presence is a godsend for Biden (and not just Biden). As *Politico* reported on March 14, "Trump was supposed to be a political Godzilla in exile. Instead, he's adrift."

Robert D. Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard and the author of "The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again," argues that the "curve is ripe for change in the United States."

In an interview with *Salon*, Putnam observed that the Biden administration,

is proving to be just what the doctor ordered for a shaken country, focused explicitly on "we," not "I." It's not just Biden's well-known empathy for people in pain, nor his equally well-known propensity to work across the aisle, but also his ability to adapt to changed political circumstances.

His 36 years in the Senate and eight years as vice president have given Biden and his inner circle — Steve Ricchetti, Mike Donilon, Ron Klain, Valerie Biden Owens, Bruce Reed, Anita Dunn, Bob Bauer, Ted Kaufman, Gene Sperling and others — an ingrained familiarity with the rhythms of the legislative process.

While Biden "tried to work with Republicans on the Hill — and polls show that the public believes he was sincere in that effort — he also proved able to act on his own when the GOP party leaders blew him off," Putnam told *Salon*. "His rising poll numbers show that he's got most of the public, including many Republican voters, on his side."

It would clearly be to Biden's advantage to lessen polarization. As Stanley Feldman of *Stony Brook* put it by email:

Right now, polarization is helping the Republican Party. Their traditional base of older, White, Christian voters is slowly shrinking. Portraying liberals and Democrats as a threat to people's values or even as evil provides a way of attracting voters on cultural issues who might otherwise consider voting Democratic for economic reasons.

Francis Fukuyama, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Freeman Spogli Institute, describes how embedded polarization has become in his 2018 *Journal of Politics* essay "30 Years of World Politics: What Has Changed?" Fukuyama writes:

In the twentieth century, politics was characterized by an ideological divide between a left and a right defined largely in economic terms, with the former demanding greater socioeconomic equality and a redistributive state, while the latter favored individual freedom and strong economic growth.

Now, he continues, "the axis is shifting toward a politics based on identity," a shift based on "the feelings of humans that they possess an inner worth or dignity which the society around them is failing to recognize." This process has, in turn, "led to a reordering of left and right in the developed democracies."

In the last century, Fukuyama writes, the left "promoted the interests of the broad working class" while the left today "is more likely to champion specific identity groups such as racial minorities, immigrants, women, people with disabilities, sexual minorities, Indigenous peoples, and so forth."

As parties of the left "drift away from the old working class," members of that class have moved "toward newer populist forces."

A parallel process has been taking place on the right, Fukuyama writes, where traditional support of free markets and individual rights is being displaced by an ethos

that emphasizes a traditional kind of ethnically based national identity and by worries that ‘our country’ is being taken over by a cabal of immigrants, foreign competitors, and elites who are complicit in the theft.”

Fukuyama makes an important point:

Social media are perfectly suited to facilitate this decomposition of society. They permit like-minded individuals to find one another, not just in their own nations but around the world, while simultaneously shutting out criticism and disagreement. On the left, sexual politics and ‘intersectionality’ have led to the proliferation of distinct and sometimes mutually hostile identities, while on the right we have discovered the existence of communities such as ‘incels’ (involuntarily celibate males) and of new vocabularies and symbols by which white nationalists can identify one another.

Fukuyama summarizes his conclusion:

Today, there are two opposite trends in the world: The first is social fragmentation and its concomitant, the decline of the authority of mediating institutions, primarily in established democracies. The second is the rise of new centralized hierarchies in authoritarian states.

For legitimate democracies to survive, he continues, will require “rebuilding the legitimate authority of the institutions of liberal democracy, while resisting those powers that aspire to make nondemocratic institutions central.”

The Biden administration is clearly intent on initiating this rebuilding project. A few lines in Biden’s Inaugural Address that were mostly passed over at the time seem to have grown in significance and may grow more still: “Much to repair. Much to restore. Much to heal. Much to build.”

For the moment Biden has achieved respite from the chaos of the Trump years. The enactment of the American Rescue Plan was a major first step in the implementation of the Biden agenda. But the hurdles Fukuyama and others cite, and the persistence of a still powerful Republican Party — riddled with pathologies, determined to draw blood — suggest that the road ahead will be rough.

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