

*Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority*

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## **CAN JOE BIDEN HOLD THE DEMOCRATS TOGETHER?**

**TO TACKLE THE COUNTRY'S INTERWOVEN CRISES,  
HE WILL NEED A GRAND BARGAIN BETWEEN HIS PARTY'S LEFT AND CENTER**

BY  
RUY TEIXEIRA  
IN

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## CAN JOE BIDEN HOLD THE DEMOCRATS TOGETHER?

By RUY TEIXEIRA

Since the New Deal, Democrats have struggled to hold together the eclectic elements of their coalition. Under President Franklin Roosevelt, who forged the party as we know it, the bedrock of Democratic support was the white working class, the “solid South” and Black Americans. But that alliance proved unstable. It came apart in the 1960s as the party struggled to incorporate the voters and demands of a range of new social movements—on civil rights, Vietnam, women’s liberation and the environment. Barack Obama’s victory in 2008 gave Democrats hope that they were forming a new coalition, perhaps one even more durable than its New Deal predecessor. President Obama brought together the rising, 21st-century constituencies of nonwhite voters—Black, Hispanic, Asian—as well as younger voters, educated urban whites and even a solid portion of the white working class.

But it proved difficult to maintain the enthusiasm of Mr. Obama’s first, barrier-shattering election among the Democrats’ rising constituencies, and the white working class resumed its march toward the Republican Party, culminating in Donald Trump’s win in 2016. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by some three million people, but her coalition was a shadow of Mr. Obama’s: strong yet somewhat diminished support among nonwhite voters, the younger generation and educated white voters, alongside a catastrophic performance among the white working class and seniors.

The moral of the story is that a successful Democratic coalition cannot rely just on the votes of the party’s rising constituencies; it also needs serious backing from non-college-educated whites and other less supportive voter groups. The party seems to have absorbed that lesson. As things now stand, the Democratic Party led by Joe Biden and Kamala Harris seems likely to have a very good election. If that happens, the Biden coalition will present a new face of the Democratic Party, marching to take back the White House and perhaps the Senate with the backing of not just the usual demographic suspects but also relatively large numbers of moderate suburban whites, older voters and blue-collar white workers.

My analysis of data from the bipartisan States of Change project and the nonpartisan Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape survey (of 6,000 new respondents a week) indicates that seniors and working class whites have had particularly large shifts toward the Democrats in recent months; Mr. Biden has cut Mrs. Clinton’s fatal 30-point deficit among non-college-educated whites by more than half, and elderly voters have gone from being a strongly negative group for the Democrats to one with a solid Democratic advantage. If Mr. Biden wins convincingly, he will probably owe it to these voters, not to the so-called rising American electorate of growth demographics.

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The Biden coalition includes some strongly left-leaning groups that aren't likely to see things this way. These forces consider themselves the vanguard of a new Democratic Party quite different from Mr. Biden's comparatively staid liberal meliorism. Take Cori Bush, a social-justice activist and nurse who recently defeated William Lacy Clay, a 10-term member of Congress from St. Louis, in the Democratic primary. "We've been dismissed as an impossible fringe movement," Ms. Bush said in her victory speech. "But now, we are a multiracial, multiethnic, multigenerational, mass movement united in demanding change, in demanding accountability, in demanding that our police, our government, our country recognize that Black lives do indeed matter."

"You know what Donald Trump is more afraid of than anything else? A Black man with power."

— Jamaal Bowman

Similarly, in New York, educator Jamaal Bowman recently defeated Rep. Eliot Engel, a 16-term incumbent and the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, in a Democratic primary including parts of the Bronx and some New York suburbs. Mr. Bowman was boosted by the Justice Democrats, a national group that backs insurgent candidates. In his primary night speech, he said, "You know what Donald Trump is more afraid of than anything else? A Black man with power."

As such new leaders join Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and her congressional "Squad," they are likely to pose a core question for their party: Can the broad Biden coalition stay together, or are the Democrats just renting some new voters—suburban moderates, seniors and working class whites—to get rid of President Trump? It isn't hard to see the potential fault lines. Mr. Biden represents the sort of inclusive, big-tent Democratic Party that might accommodate more moderate voters by avoiding an agenda that is too aggressive or "woke" for their comfort.

In the primaries, Mr. Biden was repeatedly pushed by his more left-leaning rivals, including Sen. Bernie Sanders and Sen. Elizabeth Warren, to endorse a range of radical policy options: "Medicare for All" reforms that would eliminate private health insurance; a Green New Deal with an aggressive timeline for eliminating fossil fuels; decriminalizing all migration over the border with Mexico; abolishing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement; promising reparations to the descendants of Black slaves; and much more. He refused. When activists called to "defund the police" after George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police in May, Mr. Biden quickly made clear that he didn't endorse their demand. Indeed, his criminal-justice plans include a proposal to increase funding for community policing.

Biden's plans are both large-scale and broadly popular...

Mr. Biden's governing program—known as "Build Back Better"—is quite progressive compared with what Mr. Obama and Mrs. Clinton proposed as candidates. The former vice president plans to use government actively to confront America's ongoing crises, including the pandemic and the economic collapse, even as he cleaves to the center of public opinion. His plans are both large-scale and broadly popular, including a coordinated federal response to the pandemic

that offers free Covid-19 tests and related medical care, a public option for health care, lowering the age of Medicare eligibility and a multipronged approach to police reform. He also promises massive relief for hard-hit communities and a major push to help the unemployed, including a national job corps to help with Covid-19 contact tracing and other public-health tasks and major spending on infrastructure and clean energy.

But the wing of the party inspired by Mr. Sanders and Ms. Ocasio-Cortez may well not be satisfied with this. For now, an uneasy peace reigns—in part because of Mr. Biden’s savvy inclusion of Mr. Sanders’s supporters in campaign task forces and in larger measure because of the shared, intense focus of all wings of the party on beating Mr. Trump.

If Democrats capture both the White House and the Senate, the activist left will claim a good deal of credit. That may embolden them to pressure Mr. Biden, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Sen. Chuck Schumer and other Democratic leaders to move significantly to the left of the current Biden program, perhaps reviving the sort of ideas that Mr. Biden declined to endorse in the primaries. Mr. Biden may be hoping that his selection of Ms. Harris, a Black woman who was one of his primary rivals, as his running mate will insulate him from such left-wing pressure, but given Ms. Harris’s comparatively moderate profile, that seems doubtful. As president, he would either have to try to reshape the Democratic Party in ways that could unnerve the relatively centrist new voters who helped put him in office, or risk a bloody intraparty fight that might undermine his ability to pass urgently needed legislation.

Could a Biden administration avoid such a clash? Can Mr. Biden find a way to keep all the factions of his coalition reasonably united once Mr. Trump is out of the way?

Perhaps, but it won’t be easy. Mr. Biden will need to forge a grand bargain among his party’s wings—one that recognizes the need to keep most of Mr. Biden’s new voters on board while moving forward on a generally progressive program. For the Sanders/Warren/Squad faction, that will mean accepting that some signature issues like defunding the police are off the agenda. For the Biden wing, it will mean accepting somewhat bolder changes than they would otherwise be comfortable with and a continuing effort to remain attentive to the needs of the Democrats’ most loyal constituencies.

Some are optimistic that such a grand bargain can be struck. Jared Bernstein, chief economist for Mr. Biden when he was vice president and now a key economic adviser to the Biden campaign, argues that “the Biden coalition basically wants to get to the same place. What differs is how fast they get there, either step-by-step or leapfrogging.” He notes that this “broad coalition wants universal coverage, affordable health care and child care, higher-quality jobs, useful trade policy vs. damaging trade policy, a path toward clean energy that creates good jobs along the way, more progressive tax policy, less inequality, stronger worker bargaining power [and] racial justice.”

Can the new left can accept the sort of “step-by-step” path that Mr. Biden will undoubtedly favor.

This approach could work, if the new left can accept the sort of “step-by-step” path that Mr. Biden will undoubtedly favor. But what if the left wing won’t? Activists who aren’t long on patience could campaign to move immediately toward Medicare for All, pass a Green New Deal, defund the police or fund slavery reparations. Such campaigns could be a huge problem early in a Biden administration.



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A President Biden will almost certainly face a raging pandemic and a staggering economy. Mr. Trump's inability to solve these problems is what forged the Biden coalition in the first place. Being an effective president and tackling these crises will be job one for Mr. Biden.

He knows this, which explains his ambitious "Build Back Better" plans. Mr. Biden thinks that large-scale, liberal, activist government will be the key to getting the country back on its feet. He will have to produce and produce fast. As Michael Tomasky, editor of the liberal journal *Democracy*, notes, the victorious Democrats' biggest problem would probably be "letting themselves get stuck in gridlock and passing nothing of consequence, dispiriting their own voters."

The remedy? Unite Democrats to push comprehensive, ambitious legislation swiftly onto Mr. Biden's desk. Call it the FDR approach. The incoming administration's rescue package could well move toward many of the goals Mr. Bernstein cites, but the priority would remain tackling the nation's intertwined crises.

That may cause grumbling. Michael Kazin, a history professor at Georgetown and an editor of the leftist magazine *Dissent*, notes, "The Democrats still have to figure out how to craft (and pass) policies that have appeal to nearly all groups in their coalition, while assuring Blacks, Latinos, LGBT folks and others that they and their demands are respected and pursued. This has been a problem for the Democrats since the 1960s."

Beyond those constituencies sits another that may be even more influential. "If Democrats come in with big majorities, the suburban, college-educated, liberal wing of the party is in the driver's seat," says Patrick Ruffini, a co-founder of the Republican polling firm Echelon Insights. "That's true even if Biden improves the party's standing among white working class voters. Trump's defeat will be seen as the ultimate victory for the 'Resistance,' which grew as an upscale, mostly white movement in the suburbs."

Mr. Ruffini argues that suburban liberals punch above their electoral weight in the Democratic Party, much like free-market conservatives in the GOP. "That's who the donors and activists are, and it's who drives policy," he says. "That means uncompromising liberal stances on social and cultural issues."

Inflexibly leftist stances on, say, reparations or defunding the police could crack the unity that Mr. Biden's Democrats will need to pull the country out of its hole—to actually "build back better." "Unless more robust economic growth resumes, Democrats will struggle to maintain unity as they make tough decisions about tax and budget priorities," says the pollster Guy Molyneux of Hart Research Associates. Mr. Biden will surely remember the early years of the Obama administration, when the failure to produce a rapid recovery from the 2008-09 financial crisis fueled mounting opposition to the Democrats' legislative agenda—and a wipeout in the 2010 midterms.

Could that history repeat? Harvard economist Larry Summers, a longtime adviser to Democratic presidents, is worried. "Once again, big picture, the risks of doing too little far outweigh the risks of doing too much," he says. "This time, the hole is even bigger than it was in 2009, but I'm not sure that lesson has been learned." And the pandemic makes the challenge even starker.

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In this hour of crisis, the party should be able to unite around a grand bargain: leftist support for solving immediate problems, and liberal support for a long-term plan to advance other progressive priorities. Only shoring up the Biden coalition can produce inspiring governance that will improve—and save—Americans' lives. Letting the coalition fall apart will probably lead to another surge of illiberal populism and more division and dysfunction, rather than the era of progressive political domination that Democrats now see as tantalizingly at hand.