

Reading:

Three Big Issues Facing the Biden Administration

President-elect Joe Biden, a Democrat, is widely seen as an establishment figure who is not likely to stray too far to the left or right on most issues.

The progressive wing of the Democratic Party, which has had a recent resurgence and loyally supported Biden and his running mate Kamala Harris in the presidential race, is working to push the new administration to the left. They are joined by growing movements, often led by young people of color, to bring about systemic change to address racial and economic injustice and the climate crisis.

Meanwhile, Republican leaders will almost certainly try to block progress on much of Biden's agenda. Their success depends in part on whether Republicans hold onto their slim majority in the Senate over the next two years. (Democrats already have the majority in the House of Representatives.) Which party controls the Senate hinges on the outcome of two runoff elections in Georgia on January 5, 2021.

Even before they won the general election in November, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were working with Congressional leaders and others to develop detailed policy proposals for their administration. Here is a brief summary of where they and others stand on three key issues facing the United States: climate change, healthcare, and racial justice.

Climate change

Over the past four years, President Donald Trump has denied human influence on the climate, encouraged fossil fuel extraction, loosened what few regulations existed to reduce carbon emissions, and withdrawn from the Paris climate agreement, a global plan to address the climate crisis.

During the presidential campaign, President-elect Biden challenged Trump's stance on climate, and promised to make addressing the climate crisis a priority for his administration. However, he refused to endorse the Green New Deal, a comprehensive legislative package supported by progressive Democrats and many climate activists, including growing youth-led groups such as the Sunrise Movement.

The Green New Deal (named after President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, designed to end the Great Depression), is a plan for reducing carbon emissions to zero in ten years – while expanding the social safety net to ensure economic and health security during this climate emergency. The plan calls for a complete transition to renewable energy, as well as transformation of the agriculture, transportation, building, and manufacturing industries. What most distinguishes the Green New Deal is its recognition of the urgency of the looming climate disaster.

During the campaign, Joe Biden's own climate plan called for many of the same goals as the Green New Deal – but with a 30-year timeline and a far lower cost. Nevertheless Biden's website described the Green New Deal as “a crucial framework for meeting the climate challenges we face.”

After he won the Democratic nomination, Biden agreed to form a committee (the Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force) to work out some compromises with advocates of the Green New Deal. After discussions in the Task Force, the Biden team amended their climate change plan. Instead of calling for \$1.7 trillion to

address the climate crisis over over 30 years, the new proposal calls for \$2 trillion over four years. These changes were welcomed by progressive climate activists, but did not satisfy them.

"Joe Biden's climate plan isn't everything, but it isn't nothing at all."
– *Varshini Prakash, Sunrise Movement*

Biden’s climate plan also details specific projects, including: improving the rail system, facilitating energy-efficient housing and urban planning, large-scale investment in clean technologies, protecting communities most impacted by climate disasters and communities currently tied to fossil fuel production, and increased enforcement of air and water standards.

Of course, achieving these goals will be difficult, especially if the Senate remains in Republican hands. The Biden team says it will work to advance this plan through a combination of:

- Executive orders (which do not require Congressional approval)
- International cooperation
- Directing federal projects toward carbon reduction (government buildings for example)
- Regulation (using the power of federal agencies to interpret laws)
- Setting new research priorities
- Passage of specific legislation

The President-elect has named former Secretary of State John Kerry to a new position as “Presidential Envoy on Climate.” Kerry oversaw U.S. negotiations on the global Paris climate accord for Obama administration. He will now represent the United States in international agreements and programs to address the climate crisis. Biden is also expected to create another high level office with responsibility for domestic efforts to fight climate change.

Healthcare

The healthcare system in the United States is famously expensive, yet fails to cover some 27 million Americans. The Obama administration was able to pass legislation, the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, that expanded people's access to private health insurance by providing federal subsidies to allow them to purchase it.

President Trump ran on his promise to overturn Obamacare. During his administration, President Trump and Republicans tried repeatedly, to roll back this legislation, but failed.

Joe Biden has pledged to defend and improve Obamacare. However, the debate over healthcare in the U.S. goes far beyond Obamacare.

For decades, health advocates have been organizing for a more extensive reform of our healthcare system. The reform, known as Medicare for All (M4A), is based on the principle that healthcare is a human right. It is similar to healthcare systems in many countries around the world, from Canada and

France to Taiwan. Under M4A, every American would be covered by universal public health insurance – while medical care itself would continue to be provided by a variety of nonprofit, private, and public hospitals and clinics. M4A would be financed through progressive taxes. Advocates cite studies showing that it would be significantly less expensive and more effective than our current patchwork system of health insurance.

While several presidential candidates initially expressed support for M4A, including Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris, only Bernie Sanders fully endorsed it throughout the campaign. Most of the other candidates, including Joe Biden, supported a model that would build on Obamacare. Biden's plan would retain the private insurance industry, but add a “public option” that would allow people to choose public health insurance. Biden would also increase the tax credit some Americans receive under Obamacare to help them pay for health insurance coverage. Medicare for All advocates say that Biden's public option plan will not address the fundamental flaws in our complex healthcare system and will not make healthcare more affordable overall.

If Republicans continue to hold the Senate, they are likely to try to block any expansion of Obamacare – or of public health insurance. However, activists, along with progressive legislators (including the newly expanded “squad”) will continue to organize and push legislation to advance Medicare for All.

Racial Justice

The presidential campaign coincided with a growing national movement to challenge racial injustice in this country and change our system of policing. The movement, which began as a reaction to police violence against African-Americans, loosely grouped under the name “Black Lives Matter,” has grown to include hundreds of organizations, millions of activists, other communities of color as well as many white allies, and a portion of the Democratic Party. The central demand of “stop killing us” has expanded as well, to include all aspects of law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and the prison system. The movement has helped spur a national reckoning on race that has Americans examining and reexamining our history, systems, and culture.

“Defund the Police” has become the rallying cry for those who want to stop police violence and challenge the current criminal justice system. “Defund the Police,” though defined differently by its many supporters, generally means a radical shift in law enforcement priorities. Instead of treating such societal problems as mental illness, drug addiction, homelessness, and poverty-induced crimes as police issues, activists are demanding that counselors, social workers, and medical teams intervene to provide help.

Proponents say that such intervention not only saves lives but helps people get back on their feet. For them, “defund the police” does not mean ending protection of communities, but instead rebuilding communities, healing families, and reducing crime by helping people in need. It is a radical proposition because it is an attempt to get at the root of a problem. According to the Movement for Black Lives, defunding the police means, among other things: “well-funded schools, good living-wage jobs, affordable housing, and health and human resources.” It also means: “shifting massive spending on police that do not keep us safe and reinvesting it in a shared vision of community safety that actually works.”

However, many politicians have chosen to interpret “defund the police” as a call to eliminate policing.

"While I do not believe federal dollars should go to police departments violating people's rights or turning to violence as the first resort, I do not support defunding police." –*Joe Biden*

Joe Biden won the presidency with the massive support of the Black community (almost 90 percent of Black voters cast their ballots for Biden rather than Trump). His campaign platform on race, the Biden Plan to Build Back Better by Advancing Racial Equity Across the American Economy, includes a range of proposals to improve the lives of African-Americans, including:

- aid for minority-owned businesses
- incentives for job creation
- aid for distressed communities
- ending discriminatory practices in lending and zoning
- student debt relief
- end college tuition for low-income families
- support for HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities)
- direct clean energy funds to disadvantaged communities.

The Biden plan includes measures to end discriminatory sentencing, lack of representation of people who have been charged with a crime, over-incarceration, and calls for ending the federal death penalty.

When it comes to juvenile justice, Biden proposes to:

- Invest \$1 billion per year to encourage states to provide adequate legal representation for juveniles and erase their criminal records
- Divert juvenile offenders to alternative programs and use the prisons for community services
- End incarceration of minors for truancy, alcohol use, and curfew violations
- End the “school to prison pipeline” by focusing on prevention and doubling the number of psychologists, counselors, and social workers in schools

Despite the massive Black Lives Matter marches and demonstrations over the past year – likely the [largest protests](#) in U.S. history – the Biden plan has little to say on the matter. The plan does call for initiatives to partner health and social work professionals with police. These service providers would train officers in dealing with people in emotional distress or who are battling addiction.

Biden would also return to the Obama-era practice of using Justice Department “consent decrees” (or agreements) to address systemic police misconduct in specific cities. These decrees have been used in only the most obvious or outrageous circumstances of system police abuse.

Many of the reforms in Biden’s “Racial Equity” and “Commitment to Justice” plans are not explicitly directed toward people of color. They are designed to help lower-income families and communities, both of which are disproportionately African-American or Latinx or Native American.

What Can Be Done?

During the Obama administration, a Republican Senate managed to block many of the Democrats’ initiatives. If the Senate remains in Republican hands, the Biden administration is likely to be blocked as well – though Biden and Harris have signaled that they will seek common ground where they can.

Presidents do not legislate. However, they do wield enormous (and growing) power to act on their own, without specific legislation. Biden’s plan contains numerous actions that are within his power. Presidents can effectively negotiate, bully, trade, persuade and incentivize to achieve some of their highest priority goals.

They also have the increasing power of “executive orders”—unilateral acts that often drift into the gray areas between the executive and legislative powers delineated in the Constitution. Additionally, presidents have broad discretion in their control of federal agencies. They appoint the heads of agencies and determine their priorities.

Grassroots movements including Black Lives Matter, the Sunrise Movement, and all the organizations supporting Medicare for All, will be pushing Biden to keep – and improve on – his campaign promises. He will be judged not only on his appointments and his capacity to move the levers in the areas where he has direct control, but on how well he uses his power to push for change.

In your small group, discuss one of the following:

1. What is the impact of this issue (and proposed solutions) on young people?
2. What would you do about this issue if you were President?
3. What (or who) are the biggest obstacles to significant change on this issue?
4. How could ordinary people push for significant change on this issue?

Summarize the results of your discussion and decide on one or two people to present the findings.

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