



BIDEN'S OPTIMISM COLLIDES WITH MOUNTING POLITICAL CHALLENGES - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Democrats are going to hold onto the House after November's midterm elections. They will pick up as many as four seats in the Senate, expanding their majority and overcoming internal dissent that has helped stifle their agenda.

As the challenges confronting President Joe Biden intensify, his predictions of a rosy political future for the Democratic Party are growing bolder. The assessments, delivered in speeches, fundraisers and conversations with friends and allies, seem at odds with a country that he acknowledged this week was "really, really down," burdened by a pandemic, surging gas prices and spiking inflation.

Biden's hopeful outlook tracks with a sense of optimism that has coursed through his nearly five-decade career and was at the center of his 2020 presidential campaign, which he said was built around restoring the "soul of America." In a lengthy Oval Office interview with The Associated Press on Thursday, Biden said part of his job as president is to "be confident."

"Because I am confident," he said. "We are better positioned than any country in the world to own the second quarter of the 21st century. That's not hyperbole. That's a fact."

While presidents often try to emphasize the positive, there is a risk in this moment that Biden contributes to a dissonance between Washington and people across the country who are confronting genuine and growing economic pain.

Few of Biden's closest political advisers are as bullish about the party's prospects as the president. In interviews with a half-dozen people in and close to the White House, there is a broad sense that Democrats will lose control of Congress and that many of the party's leading candidates in down-ballot races and contests for governor will be defeated, with Biden unable to offer much help.

The seeming disconnect between Biden's view and the political reality has some in the party worried the White House has not fully grasped just how bad this election year may be for Democrats.

"I don't expect any president to go out and say, 'You know what, 'We're going to lose the next election,'" said Will Marshall, president and founder of the Progressive Policy Institute, which is in regular contact with the White House's policy team. What might serve Biden well instead, Marshall said, would be "a sober sense of, 'Look, we're probably in for a rough night in November and our strategy should be to remind the country what's at stake.'"

The White House is hardly ignoring the problem.

After years in which Democrats have operated in political silos, there is a greater focus on marshaling resources. Jen O'Malley Dillon, Biden's 2020 campaign manager who now serves as one of his deputy chiefs of staff, runs the political team from the West Wing along with Emmy Ruiz, a longtime Texas-based Democratic political consultant.

O'Malley Dillon coordinates strategy among the White House, the Democratic National Committee and an array of outside party groups. Cedric Richmond, a former Louisiana congressman who co-chaired Biden's 2020 campaign and was one of his closest White House advisers, left for a job with the DNC in April. He characterized the move as underscoring the administration's full grasp of the importance of the midterms.

"We understand that you cannot govern if you can't win," Richmond said in an interview. "We are treating it with that sense of urgency."

The president's political message is being honed by Mike Donilon, a longtime Biden aide who is a protector of Biden's public image, and veteran party strategist Anita Dunn, who is returning to the White House for a second stint.

Richmond praised Dunn's political instincts and said he believes she will team with O'Malley Dillion, White House chief of staff Ron Klain and others to promote messaging that many in their own party may underestimate.

"If I had a penny for every time Democrats counted Joe Biden or Kamala Harris out, I'd be independently wealthy," Richmond said.

Biden turned to Dunn during an especially low political moment in February 2020, giving her broad control of his then-cash strapped presidential campaign as it appeared on the brink of collapse after a disastrous fourth-place showing in the Iowa caucus.

Barely a week later, Biden left New Hampshire before its primary polls had even closed, ultimately finishing fifth. But he took second in Nevada, won South Carolina handily and saw the Democratic establishment rally around him at breakneck speed in mere days after that. O'Malley Dillion then joined the campaign and oversaw Biden's general election victory.

A similar reversal of political fortune may be necessary now.

But where White House officials last year harbored hopes that voters could be convinced of Biden's accomplishments and reverse their dismal outlook on the national direction, aides now acknowledge that such an uphill battle is no longer worth fighting. Instead, they have pushed the president to be more open about his own frustrations — particularly on inflation — to show voters that he shares their concerns and to cast Republicans and their policies as obstacles to addressing these issues.

Though he has increasingly expressed anger about inflation, Biden has publicly betrayed few concerns about his party's fortunes this fall, opting instead for relentlessly positivity.

"I think there are at least four seats that are up for grabs that we could pick up in the Senate," the president told a recent gathering of donors in Maryland. "And we're going to keep the House."

Biden meant Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, with potential longer shots in North Carolina or Florida possibly representing No. 4. Some aides admit that assessment is too optimistic. They say the president is simply seeking to fire up his base with such predictions. One openly laughed when asked if it was possible that Democrats could pick up four Senate seats.

The party's chances of maintaining House control may be bleaker. Still, Tim Persico, executive director of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which is charged with defending the party's narrow majority, said Biden remains an asset.

"We love when the president is speaking to the country," Persico said. "There'll always be frustrations. I totally get that. But I think he's his own best messenger."

Biden has traveled more since last fall, promoting a \$1 trillion public works package that became law in November, including visiting competitive territory in Minnesota, Virginia, Wisconsin, Michigan and New Hampshire. During a trip to Democratic Rep. Cindy Axne's Iowa swing district, the president declared, "My name is Joe Biden. I work for Congresswoman Axne."

But Bernie Sanders, the last challenger eliminated as Biden clinched the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, is making his own Iowa trip this weekend to rally striking workers at construction and agriculture equipment plants.

The 80-year-old Vermont senator has not ruled out a third presidential bid in 2024 should Biden not seek reelection. That has revived questions about whether Biden, 79, might opt not to run — speculation that has persisted despite the White House political operation gearing up for the midterms and beyond.

"I do think a lot of folks in the Democratic Party, rightfully, are concerned about what's going to happen in 2024. That doesn't have to be mal intent," said Linn County Supervisor Stacey Walker, whose district includes Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and who was a high-profile Sanders supporter during the last campaign. "I think folks are putting the question to the Democratic Party, 'Is Joe Biden going to run again? Is he not going to run again?'"

Walker noted that other Democrats who could seek the White House in 2024 if Biden does not, including Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, joined Sanders in signing a letter supporting 1,000-plus plant workers who have been striking for better pay and benefits for more than a month.

"It is responsible, I think, for those folks within the Democratic Party, who have the profile, who have the infrastructure, to make sure it's all still in good working condition should they have to dust off the playbook," Walker said.

Asked if Biden was running again in 2024, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the president has responded to such queries repeatedly and "his answer has been pretty simple, which is, yes, he's running for reelection."

The more immediate question of Biden's midterm appeal could be even trickier. He campaigned for Democrat Terry McAuliffe in Virginia last November, after winning the state easily in 2020. McAuliffe lost by 2 percentage points, a potentially bad omen for the 16 governorships Democrats are defending this fall.

"We know there are going to be national headwinds, there always are," Stacey Abrams, the Democratic candidate for governor in Georgia, said recently. But she insisted she would be happy to campaign with Biden or top members of his administration: "I welcome anyone willing to lift Georgia up, to come to Georgia and help me get it done."

That was a departure from Democrat Beto O'Rourke, running for governor in Texas, who told reporters, "I'm not interested in any national politician — anyone outside of Texas — coming into this state to help decide the outcome of this race."

Biden political advisers say a possible Supreme Court ruling overturning the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, as well as recent mass shootings spurring renewed debate over gun violence, could give Democrats two issues that could energize voters. But they also acknowledge that one or both might help party candidates clinch already close races — not remake the political landscape nationwide.

In the meantime, Biden's overall approval rating hit a new low of 39% last month. Even among his own party, just 33% of respondents said the country is headed in the right direction, down from 49% in April. The president's approval rating among Democrats stood at 73%, falling sharply from last year, when Biden's Democratic approval rating never slipped below 82%.

White House political advisers are already playing down the possibility that some of the party's most vulnerable candidates may carve out identities distinct from the president's. As a former senator, Biden understands such maneuvers, they say.

The White House also notes that the president and his party are in far better shape now than before the 2010 midterms, when a tea party wave saw Republicans win back Congress. Since taking office, Biden's political team has invested significantly in the DNC and state parties, and all sides are cooperating.



The DNC says it has never been larger, with 450 staff members on state party payrolls, or sported a more robust ground operation. It also raised \$213 million so far, a midterm record. But DNC Chair Jaime Harrison nonetheless appeared to be trying to head off concerns donors' contributions might be going to waste, saying, "We're not promoting it all over the place."

"When you're in the Super Bowl, do you think the coach puts all their plays up on Twitter, and says, 'Here's what we're going to run?'" Harrison said at a Los Angeles fundraiser with Biden last weekend. "No. We don't put all of our stuff out there."

He said the group is building out an operation "to make sure that, when those close elections happen November, we win them."