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First year of the Biden administration

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ABSTRACT: *In just a year into Joe Biden's presidency, we already see that the administration's work is riddled within both its domestic and foreign policy initiatives. The pragmatic and US-centred foreign policy approach of Trump persisted – albeit in a much softer tone, while domestically, the administration is being torn apart by opposing forces of the political spectrum as it pursues grandiose social reforms. Trying to balance between the expectations of the international community and the US' own strategic interests, as well as maintaining the support of both the wider political class and the more progressive elements within the Democratic Party have made Biden's popularity plummet, which jeopardises his legislative power for his remaining – and would-be second – term as well.*

Keywords: Joe Biden, USA, administration, popularity, multilateralism, social reforms, mid-term elections

Joe Biden has been in charge of the White House for more than a year now, enough time to make an impact as President of the United States and let the primary characteristics of his leadership show. After the divisive years of the Trump presidency, America and the rest of the world were expecting Biden to return to a much simpler time, when the country felt united under charismatic and competent leaders. Unfortunately, the times have changed and even if he wanted to, Biden could never become a new Obama, much less a Reagan or other popular figures of the Cold War. Both in domestic and foreign policy areas, the problems we saw before persist, which results in President Biden's falling approval rates and a quite uncertain future for his party.

Domestic policies

A "return to normalcy"?

When President Biden was inaugurated on 20 January 2021, most of the American media establishment celebrated a so-called "return to normalcy" – as opposed to the presidential term of Donald Trump, characterised as chaotic, untraditional and (sometimes wilfully) scandalous. Compared to the Trumpian business-type of leadership, the American public was expecting Biden to continue the legacy of career politicians before Trump in his politics – based on his four decades of experience in policy-making – and, due to his fame of being vice-president to Barack Obama, that he would bring back the reliable formulas and approaches they became used to during those years. In a way, Americans expected the charismatic leadership and rational decision-making of Obama, only under someone with a different name this time.

Nevertheless, Biden is not Obama, nor could he be even if he wanted. The times have changed in four years and the pressure on the Biden administration to carry out large social reforms is greater than anything Obama had to deal with. Apart from the different foreign policy challenges, the prominent rise of identity politics – officially backed by the steadily growing progressive wing of the Democratic Party (DNC) –, the rapidly widening social, economic and ideological cleavages among Americans, and the Covid-19 pandemic on top of that, forced Biden to build up a unique set of domestic policies, which are more leftist and more socialist than those under Obama.

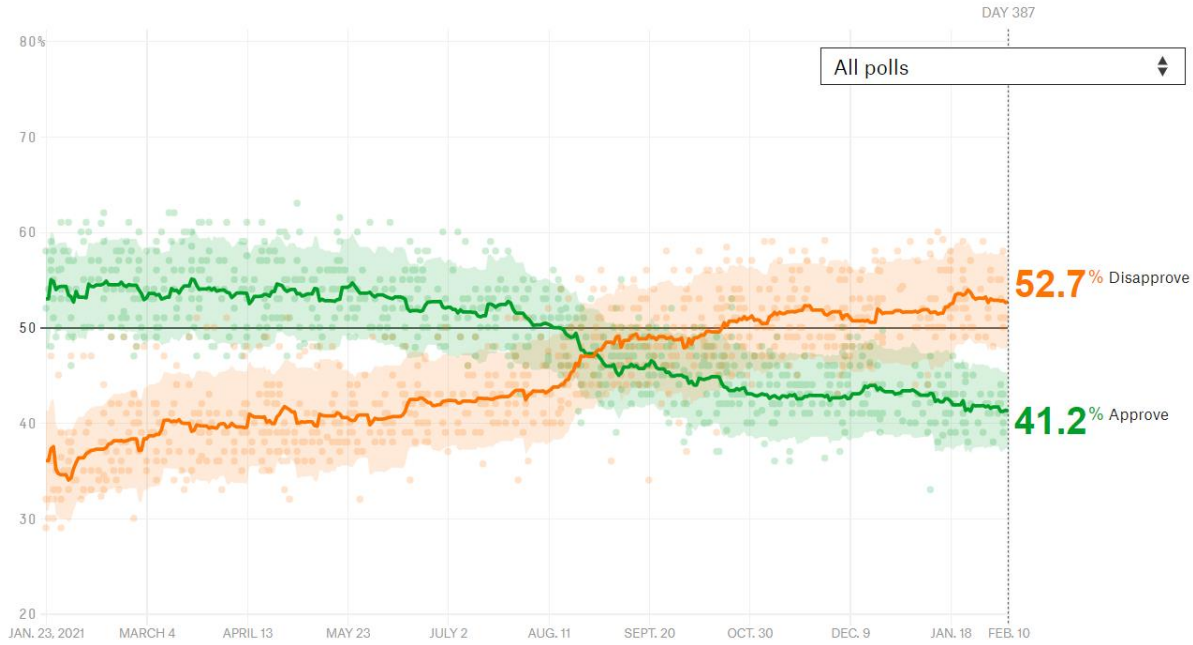
The name of the "game" – as professor Tamás Magyarics put it in a recent podcast[1] - is "extending the welfare state" for it to incorporate much wider areas than before. Much like under Franklin D. Roosevelt, who put forward the *New Deal* (essentially establishing the American welfare state) in the 1930s, President Biden's wide array of planned reforms could be regarded a social and economic *Green New Deal*. It is, in fact, a historical tradition among Democratic presidents to ever expand the certain aspects of the welfare state, but President Biden's massive domestic spendings in this regard are incomparable to others, at least in the post-Cold War decades. For instance, President Obama's new legislations had cost just over $5 trillion over the course of both of his terms combined,[2] while Biden already managed to garner bipartisan support for a giant $1.2 trillion infrastructure bill (heavily investing into public transportation and electric vehicles) passed by the Congress in November,[3] and also announced a $1.75

trillion social spending bill – dubbed *Build Back Better* (BBB) to reflect his campaign slogan – to create a continental style "safety net" (which includes affordable housing and tuition benefits, and a staggering $555 billion for fighting climate change through tax incentives for renewable energy consumption).[4] This bill is currently waiting for the approval of the House of Representatives with a high chance of passing, mainly because it is an already watered down version of a previous (and unrealistic) $3.5 trillion plan and because it is designed to complement the infrastructure bill (especially with its climate related initiatives).

Additionally, in its general political approach, the Biden administration seems to aim for achieving a Western European (or even Scandinavian) type of social democratic welfare state, which can be seen in its liberal immigration policies, police reforms, educational initiatives and its plans to restructure the entire tax-system – all of these are (mostly) in line with the progressives' numerous social justice movements.

Falling approval rate – why?

President Trump – if based solely on poll numbers – was perhaps the least popular president of the United States. His highly divisive approach to politics and personal matters alike made him quite an unlikeable figure to many on the political right as well. Based on this, we expected President Biden to easily become more popular, simply because he defeated Trump with record number of votes. Nonetheless, less than one year after his inauguration, Biden presents a baffling puzzle: his approval rates (slowly closing on 40% in mid-December) are almost the lowest in history at this point of a presidency – second only to Donald Trump's.[5]

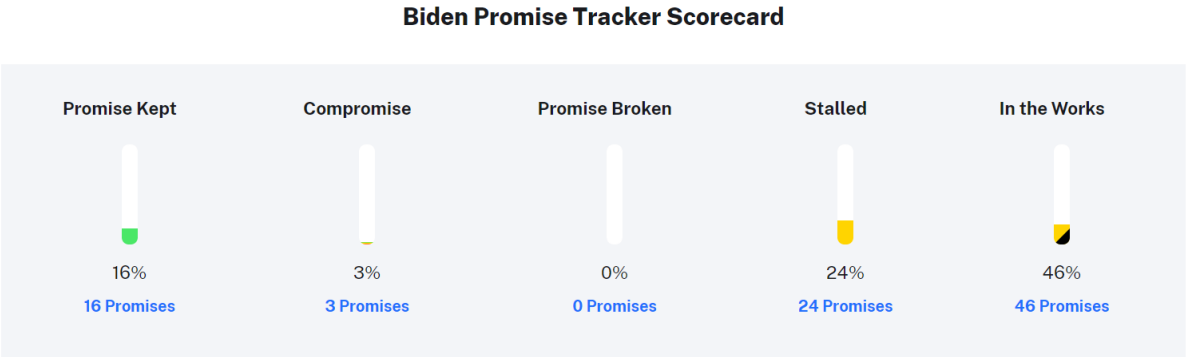


President Biden's approval rate as of 10 February
(*FiveThirtyEight, 2022*)

There are several factors that can explain this phenomenon, and all of them are needed to properly address the issue. First, there is the peculiarly difficult historical situation where Joe Biden had to become president, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and all of its accompanying – social and economic – hardships. The American public, already in lockdown for the better part of a year, expected the new administration to come up with effective and quick solutions to counter the pandemic (as one of the DNC's main campaign points was Trump's mismanagement of the crisis). Instead, the lockdowns continued amid the gradual worsening of the Covid situation, the global supply-chain crisis spread to the US and now America and rest of the world is getting ready for inflation rates unseen in decades.[6] For these, President Biden should hardly take any blame, since he took charge of the country in the middle of the crisis. Yet, there are other factors, which do fall under the responsibility of the current administration.

For one, it is the unrealistic campaign promises. It is customary, of course, for candidates to over-promise themselves during any political campaign, but this is an understatement in the case of the 2020 elections. The highly demanding domestic situation coupled with the Democratic Party's profound compulsiveness to defeat President Trump resulted in an unprecedented number of unrealistic promises, which

– quite understandably – tend to over-burden the incumbent administration. Based on PolitiFact's *Promise Tracker*, which analyses the completion of the hundred most important commitments made by then-candidate Biden, the president has only realized sixteen of them so far and has made some steps towards completing another forty-six – with no guarantees of actually getting them done. Furthermore, the keystone promises of his campaign – such as the $15/hour minimum wage, the complete ban on semi-automatic weapons, or the cancellation of all student loan debts – are not even on the horizon yet.[7]

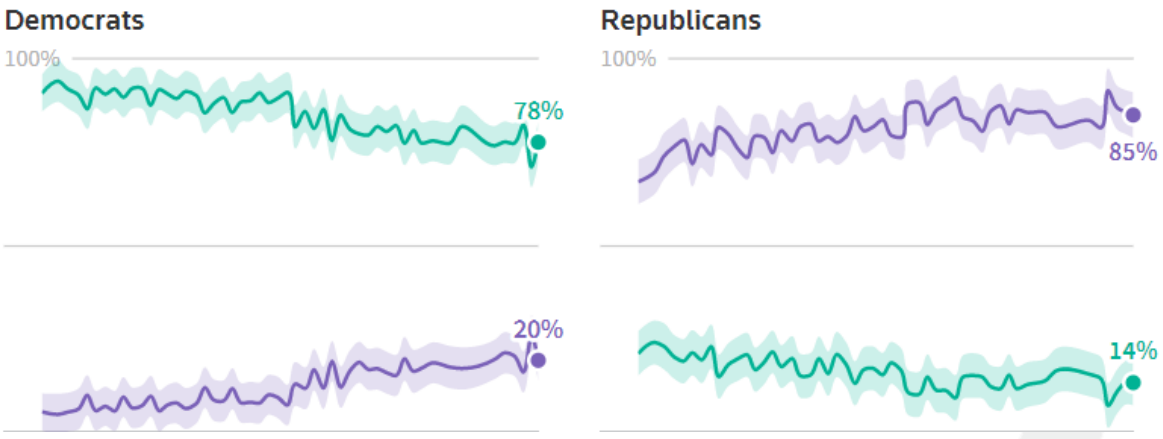


President Biden's Promise Tracker Scorecard, 100 most important campaign promises, as of 10 February (*PolitiFact, 2022*)

Improbably high expectations rarely go well with the actual realities of politics, and this is certainly the case with the Biden administration. During the campaign he was able to connect with all sides and factions within his party and its voter base, but he struggles to do so from the White House. For one, the moderate Democrats and the few independents in the Congress would like him to follow a more centrist and pragmatic approach and not to cave in for the demands of identity politics, while the progressives feel he is too conservative. The very fact, that the six representatives also known as "The Squad" – who form the core of the progressive wing within the House – voted against the historic infrastructure bill because it was not liberal enough, is quite telling.[8] It is clear that Biden is being torn apart between these opposite forces: in order to pass extensive reforms, he needs the support of moderates (and even Republicans), but in doing so he angers the most vocal group of his initial supporters.

Public trust behind President Biden, therefore, has been steadily eroding over the course of the last year. The Americans no longer trust that the administration will solve the Covid-19 crisis, ease the economic hardships or even deliver its campaign promises. The increased public spending has driven certain taxes to all-time high,

which further alienates large groups of people. The embarrassing Afghanistan debacle showed that Biden lacks competence in foreign policy matters as well (more on that later), while his personal appearances during public speeches testify to little to no political charisma, not that most politicians of his age would overperform him in this regard (Biden being the oldest president ever to enter into office). Moreover, the very thing he was heralded to solve – the internal division of the American public – is still very much there and the ideological cleavage even seems to grow deeper by the day. For instance, his approval rate among Democrat voters is still 78%, while his popularity among Republicans stands at a mere 14%,[9] which – at a 64 points difference – is an almost unprecedented divide.



President Biden's approval rate per voter base, as of 10 February
(*Reuters, 2022*)

This phenomenon also signals that American politics entered into a phase of severe polarisation and the divisions are present, regardless of the person of the president. If this cleavage was Trump's fault, then Biden is hardly less divisive than he was, nonetheless it seems that this was rather a pre-existing condition (which contributed to the election of Donald Trump, and not vice versa), something that both presidents – and likely many more to come – simply have to deal with.

Foreign policies

Multilateralism is back – or is it?

President Trump's foreign political approach could be best characterised by being consistently bilateral, pragmatic and transactional in nature – rejecting the core tenets

of multilateralism altogether. This uncommon attitude undoubtedly resulted in a wide range of benefits when it came to negotiating with individual partners without the restrictions of international organisational structures, although it did also bring about the deterioration of the US' relationship with its allies – especially in Europe. Trump's withdrawals from the *Paris Agreement*, the *Iran Nuclear Deal* (JCPOA), the *World Health Organization* (WHO) or the *Trans-Pacific Partnership* were met with loud non-partisan criticism both within and outside the US, and the world expected Joe Biden to make a 180 degree turn and reinstate America's previous position as "global policeman" in line with the principles of the *responsibility to protect* (R2P) and multilateralism in general.[10]

To some extent, this much anticipated turn did happen in terms of multilateralism, as Joe Biden re-joined the Paris Climate Accord and the WHO fairly early into his presidency, while he continuously reaffirmed the US' allies of his commitment to them. The administration also showed its aspiration to regain its former prestige as "leader of the free world" by holding an enormous international summit on the challenges of democracy in early December.[11]

On the other hand, Biden still seems to keep some sort of distance from partners and allies, in a much more pragmatic way than Obama did. The issue of equal burden sharing in case of NATO defence spending, for instance, has not disappeared from the table as Trump left the office, and continues to drive a wedge between the US and the – primarily – Western European members reluctant to pay their share. Furthermore, several other issues burden Biden's relationship with Europe – such as the blindsiding of France with the AUKUS partnership, the unilateral decision to withdraw from Afghanistan or the continuing opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project of Germany and Russia. Similarly, perhaps based on the comprehension of its ineffectiveness by the Trump administration, Biden is yet to re-join the JCPOA. The administration's intentions are clear on revitalising the organisation – eventually, but it will take further negotiations to adjust it to the current situation. The European partners, however, fear that if Biden does not move soon enough, the Nuclear Deal will simply become obsolete and unviable to hold on to.[12]

Generally, we also see that there is a decreasing willingness to support American commitments abroad, both among policy makers and the wider public.[13] During the

past decades, R2P – as a guiding principle in foreign policy making – has been more or less taken seriously by both Democrat and Republican administrations, however the global situations are subject to constant change and first Trump, then Biden both understood that it is no longer a viable path for the US. *Pax Americana* has been over for quite some time now, and – in the coming era of multipolar power structure – the US can no longer afford to intervene where and when it pleases. Furthermore, large factions of both parties' voter base now reject interventionalism altogether, saying that Washington should focus on domestic issues rather than spending much needed resources abroad. The DNC's progressive wing is the most vocal in this respect, frequently calling for decreased defence spending and the scraping or the downgrading of existing commitments.[14]

Therefore, we can say that President Biden does represent a return to more multilateral foreign politics, but at the same time his approach is a more pragmatic and cautious one compared to that of Obama, for instance. Trump's willingness to assert power in policy matters of upmost importance for realising long-term American interests without concerns for US allies still lingers on and will likely to continue and manifest in a wide range of issues.

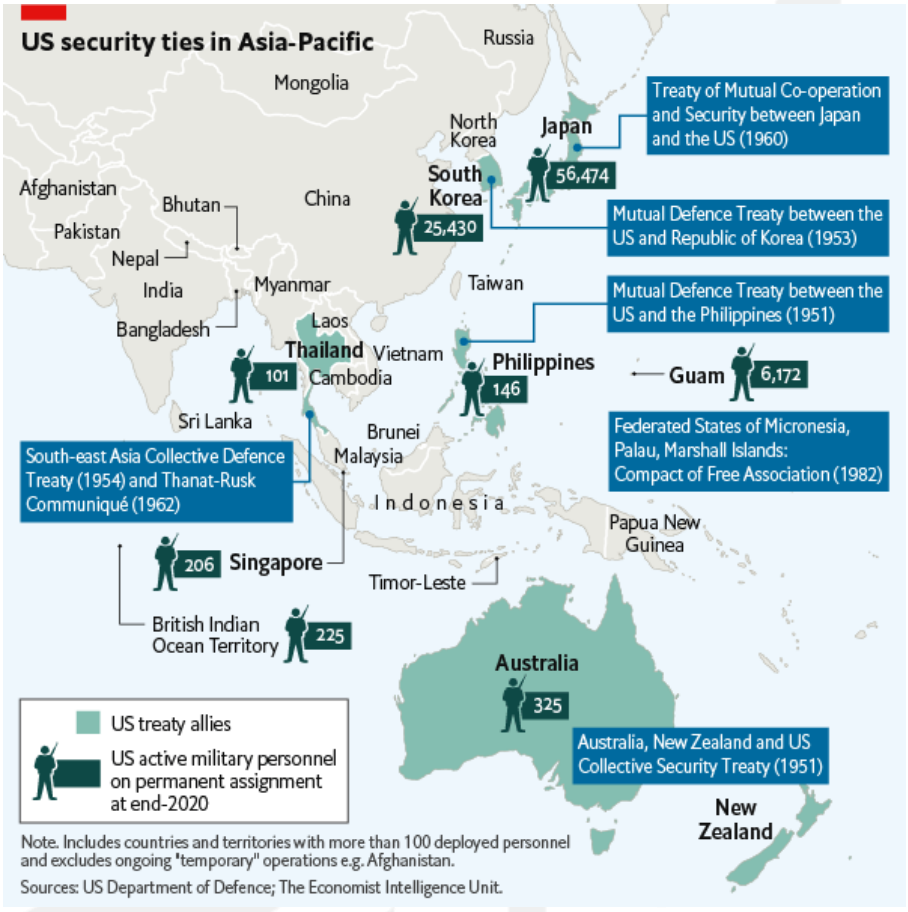
Geopolitics of the 2020s

As I mentioned above, *Pax Americana* – along with R2P and Washington's "global policeman" status – is gone. Looking at global trends and synergies, it is clear that we are witnessing a wide dispersion of power, with multiple regional actors (such as the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) emerging rapidly as power centres shift from west to east and from north to south.[15] Russia no longer poses such a challenge as the Soviet Union once did (with a GDP equal to South European countries'), nonetheless its military power and influence in its neighbourhood (Eastern Europe, Transcaucasia, Central Asia) is still formidable. China, on the other hand stepped up as a serious challenger to American hegemony in the last decade or so, and its – both economic and military – power will continue to grow considerably for the foreseeable future. Other regional powerhouses, such as Brazil, India, Japan, Korea, and to some extent Iran, Pakistan and Nigeria are also expected to become global geopolitical players in the coming decades which will further contribute to the erosion of American dominance.

If we look at certain regions, the geopolitical shifts become even more apparent. For instance, during the last two presidencies – and especially in Biden's, the Middle East has been steadily losing its importance for the US. Washington's foreign policy focus began to shift from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific under President Obama, and by now we are approaching the final stage of this process. Iraq and Syria have been practically abandoned under Trump, and Biden has finally withdrawn from Afghanistan – albeit in a quite disastrous manner. Nonetheless, the withdrawal did happen and – in addition to Biden's reluctancy to re-join the Iran Nuclear Deal and the further decreasing presence in Syria and Iraq – it signals that the Middle East will soon play no more special part in American geostrategic thinking than other regions in the world.[16]

Instead, the geopolitical pivot of the 2020s will undoubtedly be the Indo-Pacific which is clearly shown by – among other signs – the establishment of AUKUS, the new strategic cooperation of the Anglosphere designed to complement the already existing alliance networks of the region (such as the *Quad* or the *Five Eyes*) with high-end military innovation to further the US agenda of Chinese containment.

Moreover, the Biden administration has shown clear interest to strengthen the US' individual security pacts with Indo-Pacific regional powers, such as Japan, South Korea, India, the Philippines and Thailand, while also revisiting the issues of its defence



Primary US allies in the Indo-Pacific (*EIU*, 2021)

commitment towards Taiwan, even if the actual promise of American intervention in case of a possible invasion from the mainland remains veiled under “strategic ambiguity”.[17]

Bringing Australia into this network through AUKUS further strengthens the strategy of encircling China with not only willing but capable allies, which heavily resembles the geostrategic principles of containment against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Also, the fact that AUKUS was created by blindsiding France – scraping its submarine deal with Canberra – further signals the Indo-Pacific’s importance, where Europe – now only a junior partner – will have to follow Washington’s lead.[18]

Regarding Europe, we also need to note that Biden and the Democrats generally favour integrationist tendencies within the EU, as they primarily look at the bloc through a strategic lens. In order to increase Europe’s economic influence globally, and its strategic capabilities against Russia, for instance, Washington supports any further steps towards federalisation. Therefore, despite needing them as a strategic line of defence, Biden will always have issues with the sovereigntists in Central Europe. Ideological differences between V4 countries and the Democrats also play a role in today’s colder relationship (compared to Trump), but the primary divide is strategic. The EU has lost its edge as a global player and America will continue to regard it as a minor partner as long as more centralisation does not happen. [19]

Future prospects

Challenges of the DNC ahead of the 2022 mid-term elections

In less than a year, in November 2022, the Democratic party will have to face the Republicans in the mid-term elections. The DNC currently has a majority in the lower chamber of Congress, the House of Representatives (by 8 seats), while the upper chamber, the Senate is split in half (with the two independents counted as Democrats based on their voting history). This means that the left holds only a slight majority in the parliament and, theoretically, it could be easily overturned in the mid-terms.

Furthermore, historically speaking, the mid-terms (when all seats in the House and one third of the seats in the Senate are up to election) do not favour the incumbent party, especially during the president’s first term. For instance, during the mid-term elections

of 2018, the Republican Party (GOP) lost 40 representatives under President Trump. During Obama's first term in 2010, the Democrats lost 63 representatives, and under Clinton in 1994 they lost 52. Bush, on the other hand was able to even strengthen his position in the House during the 2002 mid-terms when the Republicans gained an additional eight seats in the House and two in the Senate,[20] but we have to note that it happened only a year after 9/11 which gave his administration an unprecedented public support in recent history. Bush's victory therefore is just an exception to the rule, which only happened three times since the 1930s.

The reason for this phenomenon is two-fold. First, there is a basic sentiment of apathy surrounding the mid-term elections, because since the presidential seat is not up to election, voters are less interested in participating in the electoral process, usually resulting in a 30% to 40% lower turnout than during presidential elections. The second reason is that voters who are dissatisfied with the incumbent administration (mostly the voters of the opposition party) are more easily mobilised and are more likely to vote than those who are content with the current leadership.[21]

It is not unrealistic, therefore, to expect the Democratic Party to lose both chambers of the Congress in less than a year, especially given the fact that the Biden administration currently sports a particularly low approval rate. Other signs, such as the outcomes of recent gubernatorial elections in Virginia (where the Republican candidate, Glenn Youngkin won the race even though it rarely happened in the last half century) and in New Jersey (where the GOP's candidate did not secure the governorship of the liberal state, yet came closer to it than any others in recent decades), are also present and fill the Republicans with hope regarding 2022. Based on the historical patterns, the Republican Party might start 2023 with majority by 30 to 50 representatives in the House and by five to ten in the Senate, which translates to much greater legislative power than what the Democrats now enjoy.

If that was to happen, the Biden administration would become what is known as a "sitting duck": unable to pass major legislations and reforms due to his party being in opposition in the Congress, and the only way the administration can continue to build its legacy would be through executive orders – as exclusive privilege of the sitting president – but legislations passed without the Congress tend not to live long, since the next president can overthrow them just as easily. This would further decrease the

chances of winning a second term for Biden in 2024, which means that the upcoming mid-terms will be of paramount importance to both parties, more so than on previous occasions.

What the Democratic voters will need this year (in order to mitigate the possibly disastrous effects of the mid-terms) is a clear message of competence paired with strong, unambiguous rhetoric – none of which can be easily associated with Biden right now. Major foreign policy success is unlikely to happen in this timeframe, while the economic consequences of the pandemic will likely worsen. In any case, Biden will have a hard time defending his party's control over the Congress, which – without a truly remarkable feat, such as eradicating Covid-19, for instance – becomes less probable to happen every passing day.

Even though 2024 is still too far away to draw up accurate predictions, there are some signs that we can make assumptions on regarding the next general election as well. For instance, it seems that Joe Biden will go down in history as a one-term president, and the Democratic Party is planning accordingly. Although the White House's official statement assured the voters that Biden has *"every intention of running for reelection"*,[22] he will be 82 at the end of his term, and based on his already low popularity, he is probably not the best vehicle for the DNC's ambitions going forward. Moreover, by defeating Trump (as the least risky candidate of 2020), he fulfilled his purpose and the party will need a younger and fresher face if it wants to keep its increasingly progressive voter base. CNN's recent editorial also hinted that the party has already started testing the water, by listing eleven Democrats – including Vice President Kamala Harris, State Secretary Pete Buttigieg and Senator Elizabeth Warren – who could replace Biden in case he *"decides not to run".*[23]

Conclusions

Joe Biden's presidency so far, regardless of the expectations, can not and does not constitute a so-called "return to normalcy" as predicted before his inauguration. In domestic policies, Biden proves to be more liberal than Obama ever was, while his foreign policy approaches resemble Trump's in many ways. The challenges awaiting

the administration would give a hard time to any sitting president, and Biden may not be among the few who could steer America out of this current storm unscathed.

Biden's domestic policies are based on his *Build Back Better* platform and *Green New Deal* initiative, which cover a broad range of economic and social reforms that would eventually expand every aspect of the American welfare state significantly. So far, the two most important flagship legislations of these programmes are the enormous infrastructure bill (modernising public transportation and investing into EVs), which has already passed in Congress, and the social spending bill (affordable housing, tuition, more equitable tax-system and incentives to fight climate change), which – after multiple revisions – is expected to be accepted in early 2022. These legislations, however, are extremely expensive and the Democrats need – at least partial – bipartisan support behind them. Even though the social safety net planned to put in place by the second bill seems – by an American standard – more liberal and socialist than any previous one, some compromises had to be made in order to gain wider congressional approval, which in turn anger the progressive wing of the DNC causing a rift within the party. While balancing between the centre and the far left, the administration inevitably falls short of meeting both factions' expectations, which – among other factors – caused Biden's popularity to plummet to almost record low levels.

Foreign policy-wise, the Biden administration did return to multilateralism - compared to Trump's aggressively bilateral approaches – to a certain degree, however it is reluctant to re-join every previous organisation (such as the JCPOA) and does not seem to continue the traditions of interventionalism and R2P either. Biden instead follows the footsteps of his Republican predecessor in an attempt to end the "endless wars" in the Middle East, however he paid a huge price for pulling out of Afghanistan seemingly prematurely. He also keeps up the pressure on European partners in regards to equal burden sharing in NATO, while reminding them of their decreasing role in global geopolitical structures (for example, through the blindsiding of France). Most importantly, Biden has been steadily upgrading the strategic policies of containment against China in the Indo-Pacific, building up a vast network of individual alliances complemented by strengthened military, intelligence and innovation pacts. Even though the international situation is still very different than that of the late 1940s,

the Biden administration is clearly getting ready for another Cold War scenario, this time with China.

Lastly, after examining the current political structure of the US Congress and historical mid-term election results, it is clear that the DNC does not stand a great chance of keeping the House of Representatives come November 2022, and Biden could easily end up being a “sitting duck” in the second half of his term if the GOP wins over both chambers. This will further decrease his chances of passing trademark legislations, and in turn his popularity could plummet even lower. In any case, the way things look like for President Biden as of now, he is unlikely to serve a second term, which may also be according to the long-time interests of the Democratic Party.

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