

# United States: If Joe Biden Moves Left, You Can Thank the Left

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**Joe Biden has issued a raft of executive orders that are surprisingly progressive. But we know who to thank: the organized left, which has helped transform US politics.**

## Policy Liberalism

Joe Biden, to put it mildly, is an unlikely standard-bearer for a transformative policy agenda. He is deeply implicated in much of what is wrong with America and the world today: cheerfully working with segregationists in the 1970s, becoming an architect of crime legislation that led to mass incarceration, and a champion of the war in Iraq, which has killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians as well as thousands of American soldiers. You can read about this depressingly conservative public figure in my Jacobin colleague Branko Marcetic's fine book about *Biden, Yesterday's Man* (Verso, 2020).

It's worth asking, then, why, given this history, does Biden's incoming agenda so far seem surprisingly decent? Some of it is explained by the damage done to our critical faculties over the last four years; admittedly, his predecessor, an aspiring dictator beloved by fascists around the globe, set a low bar. But that's not the whole story.

Yesterday, his first day in office, Biden signed a raft of executive orders. Some of these were actions that any Democrat would have taken but are still worth noting as they're crucial to human survival: he signed a mask mandate covering all federal properties, rejoined the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization, and restored the capacity of the federal government to address the pandemic in a coordinated fashion.

He also stopped Trump's anti-intellectual 1776 Commission and put the "Dreamers" back on a path to permanent citizenship. Other executive orders represent a welcome step away from the Trump administration's barbaric and bigoted assault on the international working class, but might have taken longer or been overlooked in a different political moment: ending the "Muslim ban" (travel restrictions from certain Muslim majority countries), restarting visa applications from those countries, moving to reunite families separated at the border, adding protections against racial discrimination, stopping border wall construction, and counting noncitizens in the Census again.

Yet some of Biden's executive orders — even on this first day — went further, embodying a more decisive departure from bipartisan Reaganomics than we might have expected. He stopped the Keystone Pipeline, revoked oil and gas permits in all national wildlife monuments, extended eviction and foreclosure moratoriums, paused student loan payments, and froze Trump's environmentally destructive last-minute regulatory actions.

His announced legislative agenda, too, departs from the austerity that many of us would have expected from him a year ago. Any Democrat — we hope — would reject the anti-scientific macho buffoonery surrounding Trump's pandemic response and attempt at least a half-assed economic

stimulus to address the recession.

But Biden is proposing to spend real money on those urgent crises. He is asking Congress for \$1.9 trillion, to get everyone vaccinated as quickly as possible, fund relief for struggling American households, help schools reopen safely, help state governments meet vital public needs, and increase the minimum wage to \$15. He has appointed Janet Yellen to the Treasury, not some venture capitalist deficit hawk. Biden has indicated a willingness to tax the rich. He says he wants to expand access to health care.

Biden has also put unprecedented emphasis on climate change, even in the midst of other crises most voters might find more urgent, appointing a team of climate experts to his White House staff, and setting a goal to decarbonize the electricity system in fifteen years, surprising both the fossil fuel industry and the climate activists.

Biden's plans are not the same as Bernie Sanders's social democratic agenda. He isn't pushing for Medicare for All, the full Green New Deal, or free college. Sanders would be calling for canceling rent and student debt — the latter for good. Yet in a twist unimaginable one year ago, Joe Biden is, for the moment, looking like a good liberal.

This long-endangered species tends to flourish when its habitat includes two historical conditions at once: dire crises and robust social movements. Without the Great Depression and World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt probably might now be remembered mostly as a well-spoken WASP with an unusually socially conscious and unconventional wife.

Can you imagine Joe Biden without the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, the recession, this summer's massive street uprisings against racist police brutality, or Bernie Sanders's two presidential campaigns and their sequelae (the emergence of new democratic socialist politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Cori Bush, and Jamaal Bowman, the new prominence of social democratic priorities like health care and housing, and the growth in organized left activism)?

Of course, you can! We're all too familiar with that Joe Biden.

The best strategy for the Left is not to ignore the emergence of this new Biden, nor to insist that the old one has gone away for good. Instead, we should claim credit for the good liberal now visiting the White House and create the conditions to ensure that he does everything he says, and much more. This is especially true on climate, an issue where there is so little time to waste, and so much potential for action.

We on the Left always seem more intelligent and realistic to our comrades when we roll our eyes and dismiss the possibility of extracting anything from the national Democrats, when we ignore the nuances and just call our opponents neoliberals as if nothing unusual is happening. But we need to acknowledge the Left's victories and dramatic global crises that have produced the present incarnation of Biden.

To give up on pressuring this administration would be a mistake; we need to demand that Biden keep his promises, while also explaining why our world needs more than good liberalism. We also need to guard against the greatest danger of good liberalism: if history is any guide, a Biden foreign policy could be viciously anti-socialist and murderously interventionist.

Above all, we need to build socialist, left, and worker power from the ground up, focusing on local and state government and on our workplaces. That's the only way we can ensure that future generations will be able to expect better than Joe Biden, liberal edition. We cannot allow this complicated and chaotic moment to go to waste.

About the Author

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• Jacobin. 01.21.2021:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/01/joe-biden-administration-liberalism-policy>

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