

United States: Biden Signs Debt Ceiling Bill, But Working People and Poor Pay for It

Monday 12 June 2023, by [LA BOTZ Dan](#) (Date first published: 4 June 2023).

President Joe Biden, with no fanfare, signed the bill on June 3 that raises the U.S. debt ceiling and averts default, but at the cost of programs that help working class and poor people and protect the environment. The bill, which linked the debt ceiling to the federal budget, passed both houses with bipartisan majorities, the Senate voting 63 to 36 and the House voting 314 to 117. Rightwing Republicans, such as those in the Freedom Caucus, and leftwing Democrats in the Progressive Caucus voted against it. The rightwing Republicans wanted deeper cuts, while Progressive sought to defend social programs.

Biden demonstrated that he could reach a bipartisan compromise working with House Speaker Republican Kevin McCarthy. McCarthy also enhanced his reputation, proving that he could lead the Republican House and pass legislation without his extreme rightwing. The passage of the bill suggests Biden's presidential campaign will hew to the center and draw the left behind him in his wake.

Senator Bernie Sanders, veteran leader of the progressives, voted against the bill writing to his supporters, "At a time when this country is rapidly moving toward Oligarchy, with more wealth and income inequality than we've ever experienced, I could not in good conscience vote for a bill that cuts programs for the most vulnerable while refusing to ask billionaires to pay a penny more in taxes. Wall Street and corporate interests may be enthusiastic about this bill, but I believe it moves us in exactly the wrong direction."

And he criticized the bill for its failure to deal with climate change. "At a time when climate change is an existential threat to our country and the entire world I could not, in good conscience, vote for a bill that makes it easier for fossil fuel companies to pollute and destroy the planet by fast-tracking the disastrous Mountain Valley Pipeline. When the future of the world is literally at stake, we must have the courage to stand up to the fossil fuel industry and tell them, and the politicians they sponsor, that the future of the planet is more important than their short-term profits."

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a member of the Progressive Caucus that opposed the bill, said, "Work requirements. Cuts to programs. I would never - I would never - vote for that." Yet, she commented revealingly, Democrats had to provide some votes for the bill to prevent a default that could lead to a catastrophic economic crisis, though others like herself needed to hold Republicans' feet to the fire by voting against the bill. She said that while she opposes the deal, "we're going to work as a team to make sure that we prevent default."

As the debt ceiling issue has indicated, Biden is a moderate who seeks a centrist political position, which requires keeping his left opposition in line. The bipartisan vote for the debt ceiling bill linked to the budget was a victory for Biden's centrist politics. He declined to invoke the Fourteenth Amendment which would have allowed him to raise the ceiling without a congressional vote, as the progressives had suggested. Instead, he negotiated with the Republicans and made concessions in

the form of modest cuts in social and environmental programs. Once they were sure that Biden had enough bi-partisan votes, some Progressives symbolically voted against. Progressives could vote against the bill as a matter of principle, a symbolic vote, but their votes had no political impact.

Biden can now argue that he can work with Republicans to overcome divided government, that he can bring the country together. All of this suggests that in this coming presidential election, whatever their reservations, the progressives, though they will demand improvements in social programs, will end up backing Biden and working for his reelection. He can count on them. The political system remains in place, and appears to be stronger than before.

4 June 2023

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