

# [***Milkshakes, smoothies and soul food: How Biden hopes a return to retail politics will pay off in November***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B4P-SG61-DY7V-G019-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** By Kevin Liptak and MJ Lee, CNN

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**Body**

Washington (CNN) &#8212; A black and white [*milkshake in Raleigh*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/18/politics/biden-north-carolina-2024/index.html). A mango smoothie [*outside Allentown*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/12/politics/joe-biden-bidenomics-pennsylvania/index.html). Soul food in [*Charleston*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/08/politics/biden-south-carolina-black-voters-2024/index.html).

Back on the [*campaign*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/12/politics/trump-biden-2024-campaign/index.html) trail, President Joe Biden is sidling up to take-out counters, introducing himself to restaurant workers and slipping into booths as he searches for votes, a return to retail ***politics*** his aides hope can help break through stubborn disapproval figures, questions about his record and persistent concerns about his age.

The theory: The more people who see and connect with Biden up close and in person, the more who will be convinced he deserves another [*four years in office.*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/21/politics/biden-campaign-strategy/index.html)

It's not exactly a revolutionary tactic - politicians have been "dropping in" to diners, pizzerias and all manner of local eateries for decades (the "drop-ins" are almost always carefully planned, even for candidates who aren't sitting presidents).

Still, some Biden allies say they have been pushing for the president to make a quick return to retail ***politics***, believing pressing-the-flesh is where he can demonstrate some of his best attributes - like finding connections and understanding people's problems - while diminishing some of his worst, like a propensity for long-windedness.

As the new year begins, the shift in style has been apparent as Biden's team explores new ways of putting the president among people. Until Friday, the president had yet to hold a single public event at the White House in 2024, choosing to spend less time in the East Room speaking from behind a podium and more time in battleground states ordering milkshakes.

Biden campaign advisers say there is simply no substitute for traditional, retail ***politics***, such as visiting diners and coffee shops, shaking hands and taking selfies, and - particularly for this president with the famous ice-cream sweet tooth - drop-ins at local ice cream parlors.

"We know the president's secret weapon is connecting with people, and we are spending this time right now trying new ways to reach and connect Americans to the president's agenda," said Rob Flaherty, Biden's deputy campaign manager.

As the president seeks a second term, those brief opportunities to mingle with potential voters are particularly important, say advisers, who believe family and friends are often more effective communicators than the campaign or traditional media, and the one-on-one encounters can have a deeper impact than campaign speeches or news articles.

Advisers say this kind of relational organizing is expected to be an especially significant part of the Biden reelection effort.

On Thursday, after delivering an official speech in Raleigh, North Carolina, about expanding high-speed internet to rural communities, Biden dropped by the fast-food chain Cook Out for a frozen treat.

"The governor was bragging about your place," he told a few workers waiting for him outside. "He said you have the best shakes in North Carolina."

After collecting a black and white shake - "triple thick," he explained to nearby reporters - Biden drove onward to a private home, where his campaign said he was sitting down with a family for a "kitchen table conversation" about their lives and experiences.

Reporters weren't allowed inside, but the discussion - which included an educator who'd seen a significant amount of student debt forgiven under Biden's efforts - appeared destined to feature in future campaign materials.

A week earlier in Pennsylvania, Biden dispensed with a speech altogether, going straight to a stretch of small businesses to highlight his administration's record in supporting new ventures.

The president spent more than an hour going from a running store to a bike shop to a coffee house, speaking with the proprietors for lengthy stretches about their experiences during the pandemic and afterward. The White House quickly turned material from the visit into [*content*](https://twitter.com/POTUS/status/1747764756654551314) for the president's social media accounts and aides promoted local news coverage of the stop.

The president's advisers believe there's no better advocate for Biden than the man himself, but some acknowledge privately that the regular format of his events - typically a speech from behind a podium, often with many of the same lines woven in - haven't always broken through or amplified his best features.

Chief among the traits his team hopes to showcase is Biden's ability to connect with individuals on a human level - the "regular Joe" backslapping that largely formed Biden's political persona for decades.

When he traveled outside Allentown, Pennsylvania, Biden acknowledged his efforts so far haven't done enough to break through with voters - even as the economy steadily improves.

"If you notice, they're feeling much better about how the economy is doing. What we haven't done is letting them know exactly who got it changed," he said.

Senior advisers to the president acknowledge the White House spent a huge amount of time in the final quarter of 2023 on the war that broke out in Israel on October 7, and that the overwhelming and intense focus on the conflict prevented the White House from stacking Biden's schedule with more political travel and engagements.

Speaking to Democratic donors in December, Biden himself estimated he'd been spending 75% of his days dealing with foreign leaders and traveling the world.

But as the Israel-Hamas war transitions into a lower-intensity stage - at least in the hopes of US officials - both West Wing advisers and campaign officials are hopeful that Biden will be free to have a heavier campaign schedule heading into the first few months of the election year.

Biden's team say he derives energy from meeting "real" people in "real" settings, providing a mental boost after hours spent meeting advisers in the Oval Office or Situation Room.

As one senior campaign official put it simply, the reelection operation would much prefer that Biden be out and about talking about, for example, junk fees - part of an effort to lower costs for consumers that the administration is trying to highlight ahead of the election - than the two wars that broke out under Biden's watch in Israel and Ukraine.

And if he can talk about lowering costs in a diner or scoop shop, all the better.

By Kevin Liptak and MJ Lee, CNN

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