

How a Biden-Harris Administration Would Handle the COVID-19 Pandemic Differently

The detailed plan by the Biden presidential campaign to fight the COVID-19 pandemic relies on science, agency cooperation, and increased funding. Getty Images

The COVID-19 plan laid out by Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden differs greatly from the policies of the Trump administration.

The Biden plan calls for a science-based approach to protocols, such as mask-wearing and COVID-19 testing.

It also calls for increased funding for necessary protective materials for healthcare workers and patients.

All data and statistics are based on publicly available data at the time of publication. Some information may be out of date. Visit our coronavirus hub and follow our live updates page for the most recent information on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden announced last week that his vice presidential running mate is California Sen. Kamala Harris — and along with that their plan to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic should they be elected to office.

It starts with wearing a mask.

“Every single American should be wearing a mask when they’re outside for the next 3 months at a minimum,” Biden said following an Aug. 13 briefing on the pandemic. “Every governor should mandate mandatory mask-wearing. The estimates by the experts are it will save over 40,000 lives in the next 3 months — 40,000 lives if people act responsibly.”

There’s broad scientific consensus that mask-wearing is a crucial component to slowing the spread of COVID-19. That includes the guidance Trusted Source from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

A recent Associated Press poll showed that 3 in 4 people in the United States support a national mask mandate.

Biden’s comments represent a sharp differentiator from the Trump administration, which has shied away from advising state governors to enforce a mask mandate, and only inconsistently required masks in the halls of the White House itself.

In his comments, Biden spoke of mask-wearing in terms of the common good.

“It’s not about your rights. It’s about your responsibilities as an American,” he said.

“Wearing a mask will give the life of a clerk in your local store or your letter carrier, your child’s teacher. It will increase their prospects of not contracting the virus.”

[name removed] reached out to both the Biden and Trump campaigns for comment on this story but didn’t receive a response from either side.

Letting science lead

Digging deeper into Biden's team's plans to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and reopen the country reveals a science-focused approach.

That includes not only recommended policies such as the mask mandate but the development of a national contact tracing network that promises to hire 100,000 workers.

The plan also lists funding increases for manufacturing and distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) for doctors and essential workers.

It also calls for increased funding and protection for workers who get sick.

Finally, it mentions "science-based treatments and vaccines."

The latter is perhaps a reference to President Trump's vocal support of the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19, despite there being no strong scientific evidence supporting the use of the medication.

"As a campaign document this is extraordinarily detailed," said Dan Mendelson, the founder of healthcare consultancy firm Avalere Health and the former associate director for health at the Office of Management and Budget in the Clinton White House.

"Philosophically, it says, 'All right, we're going to look at this through the lens of science, we are going to acknowledge what's going on, and we're going to resource it as much as necessary so that then the economy can get back on track,'" he said.

"COVID-19 is the most fundamental issue going into this election," Mendelson told [name removed].

"COVID has become a lens into all of the different other policy aspects of the campaign, whether it's for housing or environmental issues — and that's what happens when there's a crisis and everyone is focused on one issue," he said. "There is a range of allied issues that are important that are linked to the crisis and need to be dealt with."

Supplying material aid

Addressing some of those allied issues, the Biden team's plan calls for direct material support for both frontline workers and patients as well as people who need additional support to get back to their lives amid the pandemic.

That starts with using the full weight of the federal Defense Production Act to manufacture and distribute the full range of PPE, including additional masks, gloves, and face shields.

“The Biden-Harris plan addresses insufficient PPE supplies — a national disgrace that is preventable,” Deborah D. Gordon, MBA, a former chief marketing officer of a Medicaid health plan and author of “The Health Care Consumer’s Manifesto: How to Get the Most for Your Money,” told [name removed].

“Doctors in my personal network are buying their own supplies to be sure they have protection, much like we let teachers buy their own classroom supplies, except the stakes for doctors are life and death.

“That doctors had to start their own organization to organize supplies — GetUsPPE.org — is ridiculous. I believe they thought it would be temporary until the federal government got their act together and, many months later, their efforts are still needed,” Gordon said.

Beyond PPE are a set of promises in the Biden plan that might have seemed radical prepandemic.

Those include guaranteed premium pay for healthcare workers and emergency leave paid for by the federal government “for anyone who gets COVID-19 or needs to care for a loved one who has it.”

It also includes free housing for healthcare workers to quarantine as well as funding for child care providers and schools to get the adequate PPE, alter classrooms, and upgrade technology, including broadband internet.

In addition, the Biden plan also proposes a \$200-a-month increase to Social Security payments and a 15 percent boost to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Perhaps most significantly, the former vice president promises free testing and treatment for those with COVID-19 as well as paid-for COBRA coverage for workers who’ve lost their jobs during the pandemic.

That’s hardly Medicare for All, but it’s still a far cry from a candidate who in March 2020 told his primary opponent, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, that the pandemic “has nothing to do with copays.”

More centralization of efforts

Overall, the Biden-Harris plan differs from the current White House approach with an emphasis on using the full muscle of the federal government and strong interagency coordination to tamp down the pandemic.

That includes not only production coordination but the creation of a national pandemic dashboard to track COVID-19 hot spots, a nationwide vaccination campaign, and the creation of an Emerging Infectious Disease Clinical Trial Network to reduce competition for resources in the scientific community.

That centralization strategy is part of the shared DNA of countries that have already successfully contained COVID-19, including Vietnam and New Zealand.

“Other democracies around the world, like Taiwan, New Zealand, and Germany, are successfully containing COVID-19 by building trust in government to take appropriate steps to contain this contagious disease and balancing liberties with personal responsibility to ensure our safety and health,” Dr. Richard Pan, a Democratic state senator from California, told [name removed].

“America must have the will to meet this same challenge if we want our children to attend school, businesses to reopen, and jobs to return,” he said.

But all of these proposals aren’t without their challenges, Mendelson said, who has experience coordinating multiple large government agencies at the Office of Management and Budget.

“This is going to require a very large and sustained interagency coordination process because it touches on everything. It’s gonna require a long-term systems interagency coordination process. While not easy, that’s perhaps a necessary corrective for the United States to wrap its arms around COVID-19 as well as future disasters.

“I think one of the things that will come out of this which is a positive is the fact that public health engagement has been shipped out from the federal government to the states. And the fact is we live in one country, and we don’t have borders at state lines,” Mendelson said.

“I think coming out of this, there will be a realization that we need to have a much more well-organized and well-funded federal infrastructure dealing with pandemics, because this will not be the last one,” he added.