

As Biden Faces a Political Crisis, His Party Looks On in Alarm

Democrats fear that if the pandemic or the situation in Afghanistan continues to worsen, their party may lose the confidence of the moderate swing voters who lifted it to victory in 2020.



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With President Biden facing a political crisis that has shaken his standing in his party, Democrats across the country are increasingly worried about their ability to maintain power in Washington, as his administration struggles to defend its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and stanch a resurgent pandemic that appeared to be waning only weeks ago.

While Americans watched devastating scenes of mayhem at the Kabul airport and ascendant Taliban forces last week, the steady drumbeat of bipartisan criticism left many Democrats frustrated and dismayed at a White House they viewed as having fumbled the end of the country's longest war on multiple fronts.

On Capitol Hill, lawmakers announced congressional investigations into the administration's handling of the withdrawal, as a handful of Democratic lawmakers weighed whether calling for the resignation of Mr. Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, would help the president "reset the narrative," according to a Democratic House member, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

The harrowing images appalled even the president's staunchest supporters, many of whom — like a majority of the American public — support the decision to remove American troops from Afghanistan. But some of them worry the execution of the withdrawal has undermined Mr. Biden's central campaign promise to restore a steady hand to governance, particularly on issues of national security.

Interviews with more than 40 Democrats, lawmakers, strategists and party officials show a White House at a pivot point. If the virus continues to worsen or the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates further, many of the president's allies fear he will lose the confidence of the moderate swing voters who lifted his party to victory in 2020. Already, Democrats in battleground districts have been sounding alarms that the party needs to become more aggressive with their messaging, particularly on the economy and the efforts to combat the surge in coronavirus cases fueled by the highly contagious Delta variant.

There are plenty of other reasons for Democrats to be worried: Historically, the president's party loses seats in the midterm elections and the Republican advantage in redistricting has only increased those odds.

For many establishment Democrats, the Taliban's rapid seizure of Afghanistan was the first time during Mr. Biden's administration that they found themselves creating any daylight between themselves and the president.

"I consider Afghanistan a bone-headed mistake, unforced error," said David Walters, a former Oklahoma governor who is now a member of the Democratic National Committee's executive committee. "There is no real excuse. This was morally and politically a disaster and just bad policy."

Yet, so far, most of the party has walked a fine line between expressing dismay at the current situation while not publicly denouncing the White House's role in it.

"Afghanistan definitely has entered the conversation in a big way. We've done six or seven town halls in the last week and Afghanistan has come up in all of them," said State Senator Jeff Jackson of North Carolina, an Army veteran who fought in Kandahar and is now running for the U.S. Senate. "It's pretty clear there are concerns. They've seen the images we've all seen."

Still, when asked about the administration's responsibility for the evacuation of Afghans who risked their lives to support U.S. troops, Mr. Jackson offered a tempered critique.

"It should have been a much higher priority for the current administration," he said.

On a conference call on Friday organized by the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington, four House members who served in the military — two Democrats and two Republicans — tried to tamp down the political recriminations, but their frustrations peeked through. Representative Kai Kahele, Democrat of Hawaii, acknowledged that the "optics" could not "get any worse than an entire

airfield of Afghans running around a taxiing C-17, having that aircraft take off and have Afghans fall to their deaths.”



Representative Kai Kahele, Democrat of Hawaii, is a combat veteran who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Kelsey Walling/Hawaii Tribune-Herald, via Associated Press

Whether that kind of restraint will hold remains a major question for the White House. Administration officials believe that the public remains on their side, with polling showing firm support for the withdrawal, and that any political fallout from the current crisis will fade long before the midterm elections. But Republicans are salivating over what they see as an opportunity to push a broader narrative of a weak and incompetent White House, furthering the caricature of Mr. Biden as a bystander in his own administration.

“Democrats are universally satisfied with their president. They think he’s kept his promises and they blame Republican obstruction for anything that he hasn’t gotten,” said Frank Luntz, a Republican pollster who recently consulted with the White House on its pandemic response. “That said, there’s a certain point when Democrats will begin to question whether he’s got the right stuff.”

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Mr. Biden has offered a defiant defense of both his decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and his handling of the resurgence of the virus. After a campaign that promised bipartisan comity and a desire to extend a hand across the aisle, Mr. Biden has begun blaming Republican governors, some of whom have banned mask mandates in their states, for prolonging the pandemic and threatening the safe return to in-person schooling.

He has attributed the swift collapse of the government in Kabul and tumultuous scenes at the airport there to the refusal of Afghanistan’s military to fight in the face of the Taliban advance. On Friday, Mr. Biden offered his most extensive remarks about the situation in a news conference, a tacit acknowledgment by the administration that its earlier response had failed to assuage concerns.

“I made the decision,” he said, while acknowledging that the United States received conflicting information before the operation about how quickly Afghanistan’s government might fall. “I took the consensus opinion.”

Mr. Biden’s response was a sharp departure for a politician who spent decades stressing the importance of human rights while cultivating a folksy, feel-your-pain persona.

Meighan Stone, an expert on women's rights and foreign policy with the Council on Foreign Relations, said Democratic women spent years hearing about the plight of Afghan women and many were disappointed in what they saw as Mr. Biden's callous response in this moment of crisis.

"It's been deeply disappointing to see the lack of empathy communicated," said Ms. Stone, who also sits on the board of Indivisible, a national network of local liberal groups. "There's a profound disconnect between President Biden's remarks and the images women are seeing on TV and social media of Afghan women and girls in need."

Strategists in both parties caution that the midterm elections are still more than a year away, leaving far from certain the long-term political effect of both the Delta variant and Afghanistan on Democrats' narrow control of the Senate and House.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

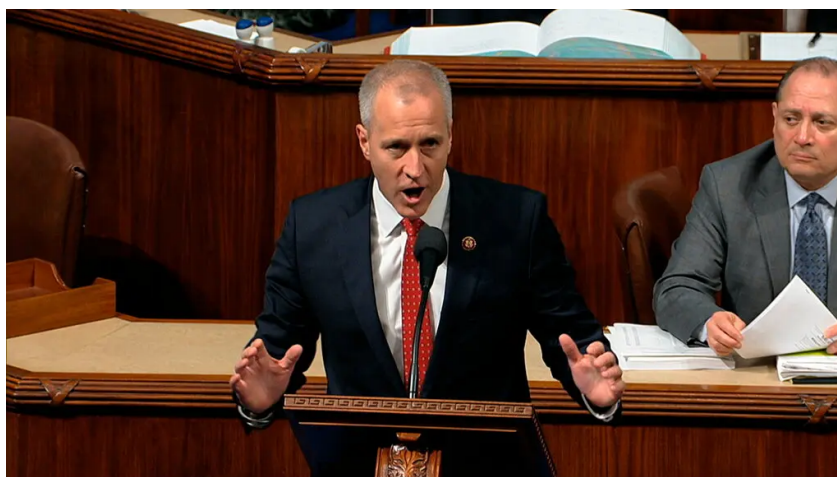
Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Yet, even before Afghanistan, there were signs of uneasiness among Democrats. Representatives Cheri Bustos of Illinois and Ron Kind of Wisconsin, two of the seven House Democrats representing districts President Donald J. Trump carried in 2020, are not seeking re-election. Mr. Kind's announcement came this month, just weeks after Mr. Biden appeared with him at an event in his western Wisconsin district.

As Mr. Trump has faded from public view, Democrats have lost one of their party's most powerful motivators. Unlike at the start of the Trump administration, when energized Democrats protested, organized and donated in droves, the early months of Mr. Biden's term have not been marked by the same kind of political frenzy to advocate a progressive agenda.

Polling conducted last month by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee found generic Republicans ahead in areas approximating what are expected to be battleground districts, once new lines are drawn. Representative Sean Patrick Maloney of New York, the committee's chairman, said Democrats needed to be more forceful in articulating their message of effective governance.

"What the research says is the most important thing is to tackle the tough problems that the country needs us to fix, to pass the president's agenda and to stay together and make sure people know what we're doing," Mr. Maloney said.



Representative Sean Patrick Maloney, Democrat of New York and the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said Democrats needed to be more forceful in articulating their message of effective governance. House Television, via Associated Press

Many Democrats, including Mr. Maloney, believe the election will largely be fought over a pandemic version of kitchen table issues: public health, school openings and household economics. They argue that their best chance of retaining power in Congress is by promoting accomplishments like the coronavirus relief bill, as well as passing bipartisan infrastructure legislation and an expansive \$3.5 trillion social policy package.

“The core challenge the Democrats are facing is really on the delivery of a message that life is almost back to normal,” said Dan Sena, a Democratic strategist who oversaw the committee’s strategy to win the House in 2018.

Republicans see a totally different set of issues driving voters, mostly focused on cultural threats: security at the border, inflation, school curriculums and race. Painting Mr. Biden as incapable of responding to — or even recognizing — what Republicans describe as a dangerous new landscape is central to their argument.

Sarah Longwell, a moderate Republican strategist who backed Mr. Biden last year, conducts regular focus groups of voters who backed Mr. Trump in 2016 and then Mr. Biden in 2020. She has seen a shift in recent weeks from voters being optimistic about the Biden administration to sharing grievances about it, she said.

“There’s a narrative setting in among these types of voters who feel that he is governing too far left,” she said. “Some of the more basic competence things they were hoping for aren’t materializing as much as they’d like.”

The Democratic concerns come as Mr. Biden’s popularity has eroded. His average approval rating dipped below 50 percent last week for the first time since taking office, as views of his handling of the pandemic have grown more negative over the summer.

White House officials and allies believe the public blames Republicans for the resurgence in cases, citing polls that show vaccinated Americans pointing fingers at the unvaccinated for the spike.

Democrats in some of the hardest hit areas of the country disagree. “The reality is, you break it, you buy it,” said Samantha Hope Herring, a Democratic National Committee member from the Florida Panhandle. “President Biden has this pandemic in his hands and regardless of the cause of disinformation, he gets to own that.”

Jonathan Weisman contributed reporting.