

How Joe Biden is Defusing Tensions With the Left



Sen. Bernie Sanders and former Vice President Joe Biden, before a Democratic presidential primary debate in Charleston, S.C. on Feb. 25, 2020. Matt Rourke—AP

BY CHARLOTTE ALTER

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The summer of 2016 was a rough time for the Democratic Party. Hillary Clinton's supporters were angry that Bernie Sanders had taken so long to concede the primary. Sanders supporters were angry that Clinton seemed dismissive of Sanders' movement. It was a summer of seething, culminating in a Democratic convention marked by a dramatic walkout by Sanders delegates.

Four years later, Joe Biden wants to avoid a repeat. Ever since he stopped Sanders's momentum and won the primary, Biden has offered a series of

symbolic olive branches to the progressive left, from a friendly endorsement video with Sanders to adopting some of Elizabeth Warren's ideas. The left flank of the party appears increasingly united behind Biden: 87% of voters who said Sanders was their first choice now say they plan to vote for Biden, while only 4% say they won't, according to a New York Times/Siena poll. Among Warren voters, the count was 96-0.

Biden's biggest gesture towards Sanders base was convening a series of task forces, staffed with experts appointed by the Biden and Sanders camps, to make recommendations for the official Democratic platform. From a policy perspective, these recommendations don't mean much: they would need to be accepted by the Biden campaign and adopted by Democratic Party delegates, then either passed by Congress or implemented by a Biden White House before they actually become a reality. But the unity task forces represent a shrewd political move, one that seems to have helped unite the progressive movement behind the moderate nominee, built bridges between the party's two most powerful factions, and neutralized most of Biden's opposition coming from the left.

The six task forces—on climate, health care, immigration, education, the economy, and criminal-justice reform—met for weeks to negotiate policies to recommend to the Biden campaign and the Democratic Party, which were released Wednesday. The positions would represent a shift to the left for Biden on several major issues, but nothing close to a full embrace of the Sanders progressive agenda. Yet progressives in the party say the effort alone has soothed resentments on the left and encouraged many progressive activists to hold their fire—at least until after the election.

"You look at the way that the Clinton team treated a lot of Bernie supporters, there was no outreach: It was, 'We beat you, shut up and get in line,'" says Abdul El-Sayed, a Sanders surrogate who ran for governor of Michigan in 2018. "There's a real humility to the Biden camp in saying, 'Let's take ideas from both camps and make our Democratic platform better.'"

Most of the recommendations split the difference between Sanders' positions and Biden's, while avoiding progressive buzzwords like "Medicare for All" and "Defund the Police" that have become activist slogans. For example, the climate task force, co-chaired by former Secretary of State John Kerry and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, recommended the creation of a climate corps to

employ young workers to conserve public lands and deliver clean energy and set ambitious new goals for achieving net-zero emissions. It would create an environmental justice fund to invest in low-income communities of color harmed by **legacy pollution**. But it stopped short of calling for a **Green New Deal**. And just a day after the recommendations were released, **Biden** said in a **TV interview** in **Pennsylvania** that “fracking’s not going to be on the chopping block.”

Meanwhile, the health care task force recommended a strengthened public option that would automatically **enroll** low-income Americans, and proposed giving **Medicare** the ability to negotiate drug costs for all Americans, but stopped short of calling for Medicare for All. The education task force recommended **free pre-K** for all three-and-four year olds, as well as tuition-free public college for families making less than \$125,000 a year. But it didn’t go as far as **Sanders’** plans for universal childcare or free college.

“We weren’t able to **magically** transform **Joe Biden** into **Bernie Sanders**,” says **Analilia Mejia**, former National Political Director for the **Sanders** campaign who helped **oversee** the task forces. “However, on multiple issues that will deeply impact working-class people, people across this country, there was great movement.”

Four progressives who participated in the task force process, all **ardent Sanders** supporters, said they came away impressed with the **Biden** campaign and more committed to helping him win. Several said they were surprised to find common ground with more established figures from the **Biden** wing of the task forces.

“I was really encouraged by how clear they were about their **advocacy**,” says **Varshini Prakash**, a leader of the Sunrise Movement and one of the **Sanders** appointees to the environmental task force, said of **Biden’s** environmental allies. “I wasn’t expecting how many of the **Biden** task force members would also be on a similar page.”

“Despite all the **hype**, we weren’t **far apart** at all when it really came down to putting together a good environmental plan,” echoes **Rep. Don McEachin**, one of **Biden’s** appointees to the climate task force.

The differences, Prakash said, were mostly in scale and specifics: she wanted the task force to put harder numbers on the number of climate jobs it would create or the amount it would invest, and she wanted more detail on how to stop burning fossil fuel. Prakash said she was also heartened by the personal outreach of many of the Biden team's climate appointees. She said that Kerry made a point of making sure she felt included, and even called her privately to make sure she felt she was being heard.

Top Sanders allies say the task forces were a smart way to include progressive leaders still nursing resentments from Sanders' loss. "I am obviously not a fan of the VP's agenda, but this is a very smart move by him, to have an open hand and not get frustrated when people disagree," says one high-ranking former staffer on Sanders' 2020 campaign. "It's disarming, compared to what we faced in '16."

Still, the Sanders adviser says, if Biden is elected and it's time to decide on personnel and priorities, "it's going to be a slugfest." Or, as Prakash puts it: "The day after he gets elected is the day we go even harder on what we want them to do."

—With reporting by Lissandra Villa

WRITE TO CHARLOTTE ALTER AT CHARLOTTE.ALTER@TIME.COM.

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