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Opinions

Biden is showing that governing from the middle is possible

With the Schumer-Manchin deal, the evidence is piling up that compromise and progress are possible. Democrats are starting to look like the big-tent party.



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President Biden on Thursday.

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Is it possible that, despite all the partisan noise and expert disbelief, Joe Biden is actually managing to do something he promised during his campaign: govern from the center?

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from the center?

The evidence is piling up. If the compromise hammered out on Wednesday between Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) passes, it will be the [largest investment](#) in climate change ever made by the federal government while also being the largest [deficit reduction](#) package in a decade.

The deal comes on top of the [Chips and Science Act](#), which will make massive investments in basic research and critical technologies. That followed the first [bipartisan gun control](#) legislation passed in a generation. And that was preceded by a trillion-dollar [infrastructure bill](#) that had been one of Donald Trump's signature campaign [promises](#).

Governing from the center in today's world looks a lot different than it did in the past. When Congress came together in the 1980s and '90s to pass big bipartisan bills saving [Social Security](#), reforming [taxes](#), helping Americans with [disabilities](#) and reducing [air pollution](#), the authors of the bills were often lionized in the media and within their own parties.

Today, the incentive in Congress is to never compromise. Holding out against the other party, which is regarded not as the opposition but as the enemy, is a badge of honor. That is what allows you to fundraise from the most radical elements on your side of the spectrum. One big bipartisan effort to address immigration reform stalled in the early 2000s, viciously attacked by the extremes of both parties.

The [Dream Act](#) was [supported](#) by two of the most ideologically opposed senators, Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah), who were also good friends. They were among the oldest members of the Senate and perhaps embodied an old way of governing that was out of tune with the changing times. The [Gingrich revolution](#) of the 1990s had changed the Republican Party, and soon Washington itself. Compromise was considered a sellout, even treasonous.

In trying to revive that old model of governing, Biden is fighting against the tide. But surprisingly, in small but significant ways, he is winning. If more bipartisan bills get passed and if legislators don't get punished for working across party lines — even get rewarded for it — that might begin to shift some of the incentives and reduce the toxicity in Washington. For Democrats, there is a real potential upside here. They are better positioned than Republicans to become a big-tent party. As a notable [Brookings study](#) showed, in 2020, “Biden's victory came from the suburbs,” and those voters are presumably more moderate and centrist than, say, the Democrats' [base](#). Suburban voters seem to be increasingly turned off by Republican positions on issues such as [abortion](#) and [guns](#). In the wake of the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the [generic congressional ballot](#) has moved from favoring Republicans to being essentially a tie.

Being a big-tent party is hard. It does mean holding coalitions together, including people with whom you profoundly disagree. But in a large, diverse country of more than [330 million](#) people, it is the only way to gain working majorities. Some of the greatest Democratic accomplishments have taken place in that spirit.

Franklin D. Roosevelt deferred action on civil rights so that he could pass the [New Deal](#). Lyndon B. Johnson enlisted the segregationist South to support much of his Great Society legislation. Bill Clinton had to govern mostly with a Republican-controlled Congress. And when Barack Obama had congressional majorities, he chose to prioritize universal health care over many other important social issues, including same-sex marriage.

Sometimes, compromise can lead to better outcomes. For example, the immigration bill was, in my view, a better plan than either party would have independently passed because both sides have legitimate concerns and valid arguments that got represented.

Some of Manchin's arguments in the past year have similarly been credible. He has [argued](#), for example, against making bills look affordable by shoving in lots of programs but funding them for just a year, in the hope that they will be extended annually. On climate, his [view](#) that we should not choke off fossil fuels before we have enough green technologies at scale to replace them might be self-serving for the senator from West Virginia but it also happens to be an accurate read of where we are today.

More important, please remember that Manchin represents a state that Trump won by about [40 points](#) in 2020. The wonder is surely that he is willing to go as far as he has already. Think of him as a litmus test. If Democrats can keep Manchin with them, by definition they are building a big tent, one that could encompass a majority of Americans.

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