

Biden's Victory Does Not Guarantee a Progressive Agenda. We Must Fight for It.

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Joe Biden's victory over Donald Trump is monumental. After four years of nonstop cruelty against workers, the poor, people of color, women, LGBTQ folks, immigrants, Muslims, the environment, the climate, and the foreign victims of Trump's bombs, we can breathe a sigh of relief.

But no sooner did Biden win the election, then centrists in the Democratic Party began blaming the left for the loss of seats in the House of Representatives and the failure to decisively regain control of the Senate.

In fact, progressives played a pivotal role in delivering the presidency to Biden and several congressional races to Democrats as well as turning Georgia and Arizona blue. Now progressives must hold Biden's feet to the fire and demand that he govern for the 99 percent and not the 1 percent.

Biden's cabinet selections so far are a mixed bag. His choice for United Nations ambassador has been praised by progressives. But Biden chose a secretary of state who is a strong supporter of U.S. militarism.

Progressives Were Key to Biden's Victory

In a three-hour conference call among House Democrats on November 5, [centrists lambasted their progressive colleagues](#) for embracing socialism, Medicare for All, and supporting calls to defund the police. Rep. Abigail Spanberger (D-Virginia), a former CIA officer, [reportedly declared](#), "We have to commit to not saying the words 'defund the police' ever again. We need to not ever use the words 'socialist' or 'socialism' ever again. It does matter, and we have lost good members because of that."

Likewise, House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, who has taken [more money from the pharmaceutical industry in the past decade](#) than any other member of Congress, [reportedly said](#) if "we are going to run on Medicare for All, defund the police, socialized medicine, we're not going to win."

The protests against white supremacy led by Black Lives Matter activists and demands to defund the police, however, [brought Black Americans to the polls](#) in cities that were critical to Biden's victory.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-New York) told *CNN's* Jake Tapper she wasn't aware of any candidate who campaigned on socialism or defunding the police, but "these were largely slogans or demands from activist groups that we saw in the largest uprising in American history around police brutality."

Ocasio-Cortez said she offered her help to “every single swing state Democrat” and all but five refused her assistance. The five who accepted her offer were victorious or are on a path to victory. And every one who rejected her help is losing.

Moreover, every single Democrat who supported Medicare for All [won reelection](#), Ocasio-Cortez noted. Progressive Representatives Ilhan Omar (D-Minnesota) and Rashida Tlaib (D-Michigan) [were instrumental in delivering Minnesota and Michigan](#), respectively, for Biden. Candidates endorsed by the [Democratic Socialists of America won 26 out of the 30 races](#) they entered.

“It turns out that supporting universal health care during a pandemic and enacting major investments in renewable energy as we face the existential threat to our planet from climate change is not just good public policy. It also is good politics,” Bernie Sanders [wrote](#) on November 11.

When he addressed the country as president-elect, [Biden attributed his victory](#) to “the broadest and most diverse coalition in history.” Indeed, “youth turnout was through the roof, and we’re probably looking at, when all the ballots are tallied, the highest youth vote turnout ever,” said NextGen America’s executive director, Ben Wessel. Young people of color supported Biden overwhelmingly and their votes were decisive in many races, [according to an analysis](#) by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University.

Many on the left were not keen on Biden because he supported the Iraq war, played a key role in the 1994 crime bill that led to mass incarceration, and refused to oppose fracking and back universal health care. They didn’t enthusiastically back Biden but rather voted against Trump’s escalating fascism.

Biden Must Be Pushed to Embrace Progressive Policies

Trump could not have been defeated but for the activism of progressives and grassroots organizing, [Norman Solomon wrote](#) at *Common Dreams*. “Now, on vital issues—climate, healthcare, income inequality, militarism, the prison-industrial complex, corporate power and so much more—it’s time to engage with the battle that must happen inside the Democratic Party.” Solomon advocates “a combative approach toward corporate Democrats.”

In a [November 10 memo to the Democratic Party](#), New Deal Strategies, Justice Democrats, Sunrise Movement, and Data for Progress wrote, “Scapegoating progressives and Black activists for their demands and messaging is not the lesson to be learned here. It was their organizing efforts, energy and calls for change needed in their communities that drove up voter turnout.”

The four progressive organizations warned that abandoning “our core progressive base agenda” will lead to the loss of the House majority in the 2022 midterm elections and the Democratic Party will not gain ground in the Senate. “We cannot let Republican narratives drive our party away from Democrats’ core base of support: young people, Black, Brown, working class, and social movements who are the present and future of the party.”

They urged linking racial and economic justice, noting that a “progressive message framing racism as a divide-and-conquer class weapon” polled effectively before the election. The

memo also advocated investment in mobilizing the base, including organized labor and allied progressive organizations, and driving an economic message that resonates with all working people.

[A recent New York Times poll](#) found that 3 in 5 respondents support Medicare for All, 2 in 3 favor a wealth tax, and even more support free college tuition. [National exit polls](#) revealed that 53 percent of Americans want a national health care option “in which all Americans would get their insurance from a single government plan.” Sixty-six percent of voters think climate change is a serious problem and 52 percent consider climate change a “severe threat” that must be an “immediate priority” for Congress and the president. And a study in late September by the *Guardian* and Vice Media Group demonstrated that 8 out of 10 Democrats and 41 percent of Republicans supported the Green New Deal.

[Exit polls](#) also showed that 57 percent of voters support Black Lives Matter. Seventy-one percent said that racism is either one of the most important issues or the most important issue we face today. Fifty-three percent believe that Black people are treated unfairly by the criminal legal system.

The groups recalled in their November 10 memo how controversial the statement “Black Lives Matter” was in 2014 and the way Democrats resisted too close an association with Colin Kaepernick and Black athletes who kneeled during the national anthem. But after the public lynching of George Floyd, a majority of Americans said they supported Black Lives Matter. Indeed, the organizations wrote, “the Black youth leading the Black Lives Matter movement have turned their power in the streets into votes and have helped secure Biden’s victory in key cities.”

Black Lives Matter activists told *The New York Times* on November 10 that [they sent a letter to Biden seeking a role in the transition process](#) but had not received a response.

Biden’s Administration Must Adopt Popular, Not Corporate, Policies

If Democrats are to retake leadership of the Senate, both Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff must win their runoff elections in Georgia. It was the monumental organizing by Stacey Abrams and other progressives over a decade that caused Georgia to vote Democratic. Now there is a tremendous mobilization effort underway to elect the two Democrats on January 5.

But even if Democrats are unable to reclaim control of the Senate, Biden can use executive orders to undo some of Trump’s worst actions and take other bold steps to move the country in a progressive direction.

Biden has already committed that he will reinstate DACA, reenter the Paris Climate Accord, end the Muslim Ban and rejoin the World Health Organization. [As Elizabeth Warren argued](#) in a November 11 op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Biden should take the offensive on Day One and cancel billions of dollars in student loan debt, lower drug prices for key pharmaceuticals, issue enforceable OSHA health and safety standards for the COVID-19 pandemic to protect essential workers, raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour for all federal contractors, declare the climate crisis a national emergency to marshal resources to fight that battle, establish a Racial and Ethnic Disparities Task Force to collect data and address racial disparities in funding for the pandemic, and prioritize enforceable anti-monopoly policies. Biden must also revoke Trump’s unconscionable asylum policies and support progressive

immigration reform.

It is essential that Biden not capitulate to Mitch McConnell's right-wing agenda and take independent action to implement a progressive program. Biden can use the [Vacancies Act](#) and the Presidential Adjournment Clause of the Constitution to make appointments that don't require Senate approval.

The warning signs of a hawkish Biden administration are all too evident. "An eye-popping array of corporate consultants, war profiteers, and national security hawks have been appointed by President-elect Joe Biden to agency review teams that will set the agenda for his administration," [Kevin Gosztola wrote at The Grayzone](#). "A substantial percentage of them worked in the United States government when Barack Obama was president."

Biden Must End the Wars and Punishing Sanctions

The antiwar movement, which helped end the Vietnam War, prevented large-scale U.S. imperial wars until George W. Bush invaded Iraq in 2003. Unfortunately, Barack Obama and Trump both bought into Bush's "war on terror" and continued his illegal and deadly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and mounted drone and bombing attacks in multiple countries.

Biden's choice for secretary of state is worrisome as the nation's chief diplomat should favor diplomacy over militarism. Tony Blinken was Obama's deputy national security adviser. He was instrumental in formulating Biden's support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Blinken recently said that Biden "[would not tie military assistance to Israel to any political decisions that it makes, period, full stop.](#)"

But Biden's selection for ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who was Obama's assistant secretary of state for African Affairs, [looks more promising](#).

Michèle Flournoy, Obama's top policy official in the Pentagon, is a prospective Biden pick for secretary of defense. She advocated a preemptive strike on Iraq in 2002, and helped lead the escalation of the Afghan war and [the illegal humanitarian and political disasters in Syria and Libya](#) during the Obama administration.

Susan Rice, Obama's national security adviser, will likely be appointed to a cabinet position. Rice argued for attacking Iraq without a Security Council resolution in 2002 and engineered [Obama's disastrous policy of regime change in Libya](#). In 2014, she [defended](#) Israel's illegal slaughter in Gaza.

Biden has already promised to end U.S. support for the tragic war in Yemen. He should also restore humanitarian aid to Yemen and urge Saudi Arabia to negotiate an end to that conflict. It is essential that we pressure Biden to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. forces. In addition, Biden must reverse Trump's escalation of the war in Syria and urge all parties to engage in diplomacy.

We must also push Biden to end U.S. military aid to regimes that commit gross violations of human rights, as required by the Leahy Law. And he must comply with the Arms Export Control Act, which forbids the export of weapons that are not solely used for legitimate self-defense. These regimes include Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Israel. Although [Biden has pledged his undying loyalty to Israel](#), in spite of its illegal occupation of Palestinian lands and egregious human rights violations, he should be pressured to restore financial assistance to the Palestinians and reimburse them for the aid Trump withheld

during his regime.

Biden must end the illegal punishing [sanctions](#) (unilateral coercive measures) against Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Syria and Cuba. He should restore Obama's steps toward normalization of relations between the U.S. and Cuba, and support South Korea's diplomatic efforts for a "permanent peace regime" in Korea.

In addition, Biden must rejoin the Iran nuclear deal and end the saber-rattling against that country. He should halt the arms race — both conventional and nuclear — with Russia and China, renew the new START treaty with Russia, and rejoin the nuclear treaties from which Trump has withdrawn. And Biden must urge the Senate to consent to ratification of the new UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Biden should also end U.S. sanctions and threats against the International Criminal Court and cooperate with its investigations.

Finally, Biden must reduce the enormous U.S. military budget which enriches defense contractors and enables the commission of U.S. imperial wars that kill innocent people, create massive refugee crises and make us less safe.

This is a tall order and Biden will only respond to overwhelming popular pressure to pursue a progressive agenda. As history has demonstrated, the executive and congressional branches submit most effectively to mass organizing efforts. "The New Deal of the 1930s owed less to Democratic politicians than to workers' disruption of their workplaces," [Kevin Young wrote at Truthout](#). It was [those struggles](#) that gave us the Social Security Act of 1935 and unemployment insurance. Likewise, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the result of the massive civil rights movement.

We have our work cut out for us. Let us begin.

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