

Cozen Currents: The Politics of Moderation



Howard Schweitzer

CEO, Cozen
O'Connor
Public
Strategies

hschweitzer@cozen.com
Phone: (202) 912-4855
Fax: (202) 640-5932

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The Cozen Lens

- President Biden is taking actions to move towards the center of the electorate as he prepares a re-election bid. Underlying this move is a desire to be a palatable alternative to MAGA Republicans as well as to embrace moderate and populist positions.
- At the center of Biden's move to the middle – and the top of the GOP's list of policy priorities – is energy reform.
- Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg was seen as a rising star at the start of President Biden's term, but recent controversies and Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo's own rise have taken some of his shine off.

Biden's Move to the Middle

Everything in Moderation. Incumbent presidents often rediscover their inner centrist when positioning for re-election. In this day and age, that involves channeling one's inner populist as well.

- Moderates win elections. Donald Trump was perceived as more moderate than Hillary Clinton was in 2016. Joe Biden was perceived as more moderate than Trump in 2020. The 2022 midterms showed that moderates more often than not beat extremists.
- Democratic incumbents shift to the middle. President Clinton "triangulated" towards the middle after the 1994 midterms with the help of Republican strategist Dick Morris. President Obama pivoted to the middle after the 2010 midterms in extending the Bush tax cuts and spending reductions. President Biden had a better 2022 midterm than his Democratic predecessors, but he's still taking steps away from the progressive base, including approving a major oil project in Alaska, toughening US-Mexico border policies, and supporting a GOP resolution to overturn a progressive DC crime bill.
- Biden is channeling populism as much as moderation. He's pushing for major tax hikes on corporations and the wealthy, a robust regulatory agenda on antitrust and junk fees, and the continued implementation of industrial policy.

Biden's Shift Towards Palatability. Biden's a perennially underestimated politician. His strength comes not from who he is but who he is not.

- Biden's greatest challenge isn't his ideology but his age. No one can credibly say the 80-year-old Biden is part of the so-called "woke mob." But Republicans are making the argument that Biden, who would be 86 by the end of his second term, is too old, weak, and frail to combat this perceived mob.
- Biden's greatest strength is being palatable. Biden isn't inspiring like Clinton or Obama. Most Democrats don't even want him to run for re-election. Yet he's palatable. Among the 10 percent of voters who "somewhat" disapproved of Biden, a plurality chose Democrats over Republicans in the midterms. Among voters who had an unfavorable view of both Biden and President Trump in 2020, Biden won this group by 17 points.
- Biden's biggest focus is showing the alternative isn't palatable. From the debt ceiling, democratic norms, and access to abortion, Biden is trying to contrast himself with an "extreme MAGA" alternative.

Republican Presidential Candidates Aren't Moderate. While Biden looks towards the center, Republicans are moving further right. But the GOP's structural advantage in the Electoral College gives them more ideological leeway.

- Moderates don't win GOP primaries. According to Gallup, just 22 percent of Republican voters identify as moderates, compared to 36 percent of Democrats, and 47 percent of independents.
- President Trump and Governor Ron DeSantis (R-FL) combined get more than 70 percent of the 2024 primary vote in polling so far. Both are more MAGA than moderate.
- A Republican pivot to the middle may come later, but it may not. The GOP primary could be a grueling fight next year to win over base voters. Would the eventual winner pivot to a general election audience or double down on MAGA? The last two elections had Trump with an Electoral College advantage where he didn't need to win the popular vote to get a majority 270 Electoral Votes.

The Politics of Energy Policy

Maintaining the Biden Coalition. Energy is the apex of President Biden's pivot to the center. He's got progressives to the left of him, kitchen-table voters to the right, and he's working to keep both in line.

- Biden won in 2020 by not being former President Trump. His voters were a coalition of labor union members and environmentalists; Gen Zers and minivan-driving suburbanites. These voters don't always align on energy policies.
- Gas prices are a powerful influence on presidents. Biden went from placing a moratorium on fossil fuel leases on federal land to tapping the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in the face of rising prices. The Biden administration just last week approved the Willow oil project in Alaska.
- Biden's progressive base is pulling him the other way. Democrats are more likely to believe in climate change and support the (often-expensive) measures necessary to counteract it. Young voters — the ones who lean blue the most and are the least likely to turn out — are much more motivated by the environment and global warming than older (but more reliable) voters.

Energy Policy is Popular on the Right Too. Energy is also *the* Republican policy priority this Congress and they're wasting no time.

- A poll of Republican Study Committee members found "energy independence" ranked far and away the most important priority among many. They've given their energy bill the coveted H.R. 1 status because they smell blood on inflation and high prices.
- The bill would scale-back environmental and clean water reviews, reduce fees on methane, and eliminate the \$27 billion Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund that was a centerpiece of the Inflation Reduction Act. The current plan is to place it on the House floor later this month.

Is Compromise Possible? The GOP proposal is partially symbolic and base pleasing. It's also a starting offer.

- Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) declared the bill dead on arrival, and it is. There aren't nearly enough Senate Democrats willing to so significantly strip away environmental protections.
- That being said, Democrats want reform too. Per Axios, only five percent of federal dollars from the Inflation Reduction Act, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the CHIPS and Science Act have been spent to date. The economic, environmental, and political success of these bills depends on getting shovels in the ground as much as getting them to the president's desk in the first place.
- Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) has been yearning to get permitting reform done. The realistic compromise (if one ever comes) is likely to look a lot like his proposals at the end of last year. Everybody wants reform, but it remains to be seen if Republicans are willing to give him a win in an election year, with his seat as the top target.

Is Gina Raimondo the New Pete Buttigieg?

Mayor Pete Hits Potholes. When Pete Buttigieg was announced as President Biden's nominee to be secretary of Transportation, it was seen by many as a path to higher political office.

- 2023 is off to a challenging start for Buttigieg, beginning with the holiday travel issues stemming from Southwest Airlines technical bugs. This has been compounded in recent weeks by the East Palestine, OH train derailment.
- Republicans have seized upon these issues and attacked Buttigieg. Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT) said that Buttigieg was “not ready for the responsibilities” and Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) wrote on Twitter, “He was never remotely qualified for this role.” Implied in these GOP attacks is that Buttigieg received his Cabinet position more due to his political profile rather than having the necessary skills.

Commerce is the New Treasury. Despite historically being a sleepier part of the executive branch, the Commerce Department has found a renewed importance under the Biden administration, propelling Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo into the spotlight.

- Much of the rise of the Commerce Department can be attributed to its key role in implementing President Biden’s China strategy. The department touches nearly all facets of the White House’s “invest, align, and compete” approach by managing the CHIPS program, co-leading the negotiations on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and overseeing the entity list and export controls.
- The emphasis on China alone though does not explain Commerce’s increasing status and some of the credit is due to Raimondo herself and the traits she brings to the job. Not only has she developed a reputation as a tireless worker and has fully embraced the issues she has been given the lead on, but she is seen as one of the more pro-business members of the administration. This has allowed her to become an important voice in sanding down the edges of regulations pushed by national security hawks in the administration.

Not Home Yet. While Raimondo seems to be trending higher than Buttigieg right now, there are still tasks both will have to navigate that could reverse this, especially with how short memories in Washington are.

- Raimondo is about to embark on her biggest project to date with the oversight and management of the CHIPS semiconductor subsidies program. This effort is just getting underway with Commerce releasing its first notice of funding opportunity at the end of last month. Given the high profile of this work, small mistakes or delays could be magnified.
 - Buttigieg is responsible for a similarly large program with implementation of several elements from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Much of this work will only be realized in the long term, but successfully maneuvering through the early stages could be a step toward changing the narrative around him. The tangible nature of these projects also makes them easy political triumphs to demonstrate to voters the ways in which he can help improve their lives.
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