

'It's a tough time': why is Biden one of the most unpopular US presidents?

[Lauren Gambino](#)



Joe Biden addresses a joint session of Congress on 28 April 2021. Photograph: Getty Images

Joe Biden ends his first year in office at a particularly bleak moment for a US president who promised competency and normalcy.

Much of his domestic agenda is stalled on Capitol Hill, impeded by members of his own party. The virus is once again raging out of control: daily infections of Covid-19 have soared to record levels, hospitalizing more Americans than at any previous point during the pandemic. The administration's vaccine-or-testing mandate for large employers was blocked by the supreme court's conservative supermajority. Inflation is at a

nearly 40-year high. Diplomatic talks have so far failed to pull Russia back from the brink of war with Ukraine.

After winning more votes than any presidential candidate in American history, Biden is now – just 12 months later – one of the country's most unpopular presidents.

For months, Biden's approval ratings have languished in the mid to low 40s, with an [average approval rating](#) of 42%. A Quinnipiac poll released last week found him at a dire [33%](#), which the White House has [dismissed](#) as an outlier. Nevertheless, among his [modern predecessors](#), only Donald Trump [fared worse](#) at this point in their presidencies.

The puzzle of Biden's unpopularity has many pieces, pollsters and political analysts say. How much of it is within his control is difficult to say.

Biden came to office with lofty ambitions: he promised to lift the threat of deadly virus and to usher in a new era of responsive governance and bipartisanship in Washington. One year into his presidency, Biden remains confronted by an unabating pandemic, a nation still very much divided and a Republican party that continues to embrace the "big lie" that Donald Trump won the 2020 election.

"Whenever a president disappoints expectations, that's a problem," said Bill Galston, a senior fellow of governance studies at the Brookings Institution who also served as a White House policy adviser to former President Clinton.

Galston said the administration had "not done a good job of managing expectations" around Covid. In July, Biden came just shy of declaring "independence" from the virus, only to be proven wrong by the arrival of the fast-spreading Delta variant.

Now, amid a surge caused by the Omicron variant, the president and his team are recalibrating. Dr Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease specialist, recently said that Omicron would "find just about everybody". Biden recently conceded that eradicating the virus was unlikely, but that it was possible to "control" it.

It is the case for swing voters who believed Biden would govern as a centrist bridge-builder in an age of deep division, Galston continued, and for [Democrats](#) to whom Biden promised an ambitious legislative agenda despite holding wafer-thin margins in Congress.

Sarah Longwell, a prominent anti-Trump Republican strategist, has observed support for the president decline among voters in the focus groups she has convened over the past year. When asked to grade Biden's first year, many voters she spoke to, including Democrats, gave him Cs, Ds and Fs.

The grades, Longwell said, were not a reflection of Biden, who she said many are still "rooting for", but of a shared discontent as the pandemic enters its third year and inflation continues to rise.

"There's an element of it that has nothing to do with Joe Biden," she said. "It's just a tough time."

Asked about Biden's gloomy reviews, the White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, offered a similar explanation.

"People are fatigued across the country. It's impacting how they live, how they work. There are worries about their kids, their ability to experience joyful things in life like concerts and going to restaurants and seeing friends," Psaki said. "We understand that."

"The president knows that the best, most important step he can take is to

continue to fight to get the pandemic under control and also to lower costs for Americans across the country," she added.

Biden's popularity began to slip as the Delta variant of Covid-19 spread across the country, then falling sharply after the US's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, during which 13 service members were killed by a suicide bombing at the Kabul airport.

Though a [majority of Americans](#) favored withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, the desperate scenes from Kabul as the Taliban took control undercut perceptions of Biden as a seasoned foreign policy expert who would restore America's standing on the world stage.

"The way in which we left Afghanistan inflicted a blow on the president's general image of experience and competence, which had a lingering effect," Galston said.

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Historically, voters tend to punish the president's party in the first midterm elections after a new administration takes power. But the defeats tend to be steeper when a president is unpopular.

According to Gallup polling, presidents with job approval ratings below 50% have seen their parties [lose an average of 37 House seats](#) during the midterm elections.

Already Republicans' unexpected strength last year in off-cycle elections in states Biden won by wide margins in 2020 – like Virginia and New Jersey – has delivered a stark warning of a dangerous future to Democrats.

The results suggested that the resistance-driven passion that drove Democratic victories during the Trump era had fizzled. Perhaps most alarming for Democrats was the electorate's deep sense of malaise. Despite

a mass vaccination campaign and trillions of dollars in relief money, voters feel worse now about the state of the pandemic and the economy than they did earlier in Biden's presidency, [according to a CBS News/YouGov survey](#).

Few voters give Biden credit for muscling through a trillion-dollar investment in the nation's infrastructure or passing the American Rescue Plan, which sent checks to most Americans and slashed poverty rates.

"It's an ironic situation where the policies are more popular than the politicians, which is very rare," said Celinda Lake, a veteran Democratic pollster. "Usually it's the other way around."

Further capturing that frustration, [a Gallup poll released on Monday](#) found a dramatic shift in party preference over the last year, swinging from a nine-point Democratic advantage at the beginning of 2021 to a five-point Republican advantage by the end of the year. The change follows the collapse of Biden's presidential approval ratings.

This augurs poorly for Democrats, leaving a narrowing window to deliver on their campaign promises, from Build Back Better to voting rights and immigration reform.

Messy intra-party negotiations over Biden's sprawling climate and social policy bill overshadowed the policy, leaving the public with a shallow understanding of its contents and concern over its cost. The legislation remains in limbo after Senator Joe Manchin, a conservative Democrat from West Virginia, announced he could not support the measure in its current form.

Amid the stalemate over his agenda, Democrats have become disenchanted with Biden.

For months, Democratic lawmakers and activists have been sounding the alarm that the president is losing support among key segments of party's coalition. He is [bleeding](#) support among young voters angry over inaction on climate change, health care and student debt forgiveness. [Hispanic voters](#) have lost confidence in Biden's handling of the pandemic and the economy, a red flag for Democrats after they shifted toward Trump and the Republican party in 2020. And support has been [sliding among](#) Black voters, who were critical to Biden's victory but have been disappointed by the lack of progress on voting rights and police reform.

In an attempt to reset, Biden recently delivered a pair of searing speeches, during which he [implored the Senate](#) to pass federal voting rights legislation and assailed Republicans – or any senator – who stood in the way of siding with Bull Connor and Jefferson Davis.

Many Democrats cheered Biden's rhetorical shift, but some civil rights leaders and voting rights advocates boycotted the speech in Atlanta to express disapproval of what they view as a belated push on an issue that is paramount for their communities and the functioning of democracy itself. In a statement, the president of the NAACP, Derrick Johnson, said it was past time for the administration to "match their words with actions".

Two days later, Biden's efforts to push voting rights protections through Congress [foundered](#) amid Democratic opposition to scrapping the filibuster.

Though not all the variables are within Biden's control, Lake said there is still plenty of time – and opportunities – to improve his standing before the midterms in November. She said the president's newly emboldened tone was a good start, that would help to "energize" Democrats while signalling "strength" to wary independents.

"He's in leadership mode now," she said.

Lorella Praeli, co-president of the progressive group Community Change Action said voters need to see Biden fighting on their behalf.

She urged the president to use every executive tool at his disposal to ease the financial pressures facing millions of Americans, like canceling student debt, as he continues to push for a path forward on Build Back Better, voting rights and immigration reform.

Part of the challenge for Biden, she said, is to convince a demoralized public that "the future is still up for grabs".

"Fight for people, deliver for people and then make sure they know what has happened," she said. "It's really that simple."

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