

## STATE OF THE UNION

## Among Biden voters, worry over where things are going

BY CLEVE R. WOOTSON JR., DAN SIMMONS, ROSE HANSEN AND BARRY YEOMAN

President Biden is expected to deliver his first formal State of the Union address before a packed joint session of Congress on Tuesday night. But his true audience lies well beyond the halls of the U.S. Capitol, in the divided nation he leads.

With war intensifying in Europe and Biden's domestic agenda stagnating, will the president's assessment of the state of the country match what tens of millions of Americans see and feel when they turn away from the screen? Are their lives better now than a year ago, when Biden vowed to "preserve, protect and defend" a divided, pandemic-ravaged nation? And can he address their worries and fears as Russia attacks Ukraine?

The answers to those questions often reflect the partisan leaning of the people asked. But even among those who — enthusiastically or reluctantly — voted for Joe Biden over Donald Trump, there is growing worry that things are not going as they'd hoped. For similar reasons, party leaders are increasingly concerned about losing their House and Senate majorities in the mid-term elections that are just eight months away.

Biden's approval rating hit a new low this month, according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll released Sunday, with 37 percent approving of his job performance. The president fared better among Democrats, 77 percent of whom approved, but that support has weakened over the past year, down from 90 percent in April and 94 percent in June.

Despite Biden's lofty campaign promises to unite the country, many communities seem more divided than ever. There are fights over vaccines and masks. Race continues to be a wedge — from protests about the teaching of critical race theory to heated disagreements over what, if anything, should be done to root out bias in policing and society. Congress reflects the divided country that elected it, with even Democrats unable to agree on a sweeping social-spending bill.

Still, for Biden's supporters, there are things to celebrate. Last year, Biden signed a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package and a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill, sweeping legislation that promises help for every community in America. Although the pandemic has continued, coronavirus vaccines are widely available, millions have received free rapid tests in the mail, most schools and many workplaces have reopened, and federal officials have eased mask recommendations for the vast majority of the country. And last week Biden nominated Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court, putting her on a path to be the first Black woman on the court in history.

But the past year has also brought disappointments, including an inability to federalize voting rights protections and much-called-for changes to policing. Biden's "Build Back Better" agenda — a massive climate and social spending package — sputtered and now feels forgotten. Only 65 percent of the country is fully vaccinated, which experts say has prolonged the pandemic. A chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan shook Americans' confidence in the president's competence. And now war has broken out in Europe, and the world faces an uncertain future.

In the Milwaukee suburbs, Steve Doering — a 58-year-old cement truck driver and longtime Democrat — feels the division every time he chats with his friends, who he says are all "serious Republicans." There are both quiet disagreements and obscenity-laced arguments. Many of his buddies don't recognize that Biden won the election. Most aren't vaccinated, and Doering says he's the only one who regularly wears a mask. One friend recently gave him a subscription to the Epoch Times, a pro-Trump publication that has circulated misinformation.

"I'm with Biden on the masks and vaccines, in that we should do what the science tells us to do," Doering said, but he concedes that the meandering path out of the pandemic hasn't done much for his side of the political argument.

"Just gives the naysayers a whole lot more ammo," he said. Now, as the United States navigates Russia's war against Ukraine, he has new fears for a leader whom he still supports but can't always defend.

"No one wants to pay six or seven bucks a gallon for gas,"



MELINA MARA/THE WASHINGTON POST

Last year, President Biden declared to Congress: "America is on the move again. Turning peril into possibility. Crisis into opportunity. Setback into strength."



PHOTO PROVIDED BY STEVE DOERING

**Steve Doering, 58, of Wisconsin backs Biden but finds it hard to defend him.**

Doering said. "But I got a feeling that's coming real soon because of the world economy. It's just bolstered my buddy who said, 'Yeah, the first thing that Biden did was shut down the Keystone Pipeline well, and now we're back to being dependent on foreign oil.'" Doering plans to watch Biden's address Tuesday night.

#### 'To me, it's like a ghost year'

Antoine Miller, a 33-year-old IT project manager for a Philadelphia hospital, was optimistic as he set up a vaccine clinic for front-line responders in early 2021. The shots, he hoped, were the first step out of a pandemic that had flooded his hospital with patients, isolated him in his home and made him miss Christmas with his grandmother.

Biden wasn't his first choice, or his second, but Miller voted for him because he wanted Trump out of the White House above all else.

Biden's campaign was based in Philadelphia, and the candidate spent a lot of time in the city. Miller remembers feeling optimistic during the summer of 2020 when Biden took a knee during nearby protests after the death of George Floyd.

But Miller said he finds himself in a rerun of 2020. Few of the changes he had hoped Democrats would usher in — progress against the pandemic, changes to policing, protection of voting rights, student loan relief — have yet to materialize. And the omicron variant meant another Christmas away from his grandma.

He views the president as "someone who has the power and clout and could make tangible changes to the lives of Black people but chooses not to."

Miller has no plans to watch the State of the Union.

"I mean, I can say that I haven't moved on," Miller said of the past year. "Ultimately, I think, things are not progressing in any area. It just feels like there has not really been any progress on anything. To me it's like a ghost year."



DARREN WALLACE

**Antoine Miller, 33, of Philadelphia, feels let down after not seeing enough change.**

#### 'We may not see the real benefits ... until he's gone'

Nearly a year ago, Bonita Green, 61, took notice when Biden proposed a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan that could help "disinvested communities" like hers that she says have long been overlooked by both parties.

Green lives in her childhood home in the Merrick-Moore neighborhood of Durham, N.C., a suburban community of single-story houses built by Black veterans returning from World War II, including her father.

The neighborhood sits at the edge of the city, surrounded by metal fabricators, tire dealers, scrapyards, a solar farm and a major highway. The main thoroughfare is a rural-style two-lane road without sidewalks or shoulders. There are no traffic lights, crosswalks or design features to slow drivers, who Green said crash with regularity.

"They're just not like little dust-ups," she said. "There was one car that went head-on, T-boned a tree in a neighbor's yard, and they had to call out the Jaws of Life to cut him out."

It's a clear example of America's infrastructure needs, so when Green learned that Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and Vice President Harris planned to visit Charlotte, two hours away, to promote the plan, she said, she filled out a Web form calling Buttigieg's attention to Durham. Buttigieg, she said, did not respond.

Green, who heads her neighborhood association, watched the debate over the infrastructure bill with anger and frustration. As Republicans tried to shrink it and liberal Democrats tried to tie it to a concurrent social spending agreement, she wondered why Congress couldn't just approve a plan that was so evidently needed.

"Why can't a thing just be a thing?" she said. "Why does everybody have to try to roll other stuff underneath the bill?"

The final plan, passed in November, is \$1.2 trillion, just over

half the original size. Green is not ready to celebrate. "It could be a good thing," she said. "Let's see what happens, because there are always those that are looking to redirect the funding."

Green acknowledges that it's still early in the Biden administration — too soon to gauge the effect he'll have on communities like hers. She plans to watch his address on Tuesday night.

"I understand your first year you're in office, you spend it more cleaning up ... from the last administration," she said. "We may not see the real benefits of Biden being in office until he's gone."

Green's attention this weekend turned to the "very frightening situation" unfolding in Ukraine. She was glad to see the United States and its allies impose heavy sanctions on Russia, but she thinks that the strongest actions will need to come from European nations and maybe China.

"On one hand, you want some nation to go in physically and help support the people," she said. "But then, on the other hand ... nobody wants a World War III. Nobody wants to be drawn into that."

What scares her most is what she has been hearing from some Republicans, including Trump.

"I'm most fearful of support of Putin in this country, and the support of authoritarianism in this country, and how that movement is continuing to grow," she said. "That's the scariest thing of all, is how that movement is being encouraged in this country."

#### Trump 'was dividing the country and still is'

When assessing the Biden administration's progress over the past year, Paola Mejia, an accountant for a title company in suburban Chicago, automatically goes to numbers.

There's the price of her favorite grapefruit juice at Whole Foods: up \$1.04. The gas for the 30-minute commute to work has jumped by about 50 cents a gallon.

"It's not necessarily because of them," the 30-year-old said about

Biden and Harris. "But I did notice a shift in prices when it comes to, you know, food and gas since he's been in office."

Mejia chose Biden because she thought he'd change the temperature in Washington after four years of Trump, who she said "was dividing the country and still is." Mejia, who is of Mexican descent, was turned off by Trump's tone toward people like her, and she applauds Biden for softening the rhetoric about immigrants.

"I obviously voted for him because we need to change in this country," she said. "I don't regret my vote. I just feel like it could be doing a little better to help us middle-class people."

She has mixed feelings on how Biden has tried to pull the nation out of the pandemic. She got vaccinated but disagrees with Biden's push to mandate the vaccine in certain workplaces and require masking in public places, because "I don't think you should force anybody," she said.

Mejia supports U.S. involvement in Ukraine, including deployment of troops.

"We cannot sit back and watch Russia invade Ukraine and harm innocent civilians," she said. "The U.S. has the resources to fight and stop Putin's invasion."

She didn't realize that the State of the Union is on Tuesday but now plans to watch. She's hopeful the next year will bring more relief and change than the past year.

"We're just gonna have to, I guess, have faith and trust that they keep their word and, you know, move forward," she said.

#### 'We came out the other side ... better off'

When Ray Hammon looks out the window of the brewery he co-owns in Colorado City, Ariz., he sees a tourist-dependent community accelerating out of a pandemic — but few people willing to give the president any credit.

His brewery closed for five months in the early days of the pandemic in 2020, something he worried would mean the death of

his business. But the brewery recovered and business was even robust last summer, as more people traveled to this town of 5,000 that sits between the Grand Canyon and Zion National Park. He credits a Small Business Association loan and a pandemic response spearheaded by Biden.

"As the vaccines rolled out, we started to see tourism come back," said Hammon, who plans to watch Biden's address. "People had trepidation about traveling when transmission rates were high. As people got vaccinated and boosted, they were more confident that they could go out without getting sick. ... We came out the other side of that whole deal better off."

His city has a new coffee shop, a new winery and two new chain restaurants. A grocery store and a health clinic are two other recent additions, meaning residents don't have to drive 30 miles on a two-lane highway to get food and medicine. Thanks to \$2.5 million in funding for infrastructure projects from Biden's American Rescue Plan Act, the city is exploring sites for a new well.

Still, Hammon said, "the vast majority of people in my community have no idea it's going on or who's responsible for it. How many Republicans in the Senate voted for ARPA? The answer, I believe, is zero."

Hammon said that hasn't stopped Republicans — including his local member of Congress, Paul A. Gosar — from taking credit for the region's successes.

Behind the taps, Hammon is not particularly vocal about those points. In Arizona's Mohave County, Republicans outnumber Democrats 3 to 1. Trump flags fly everywhere. And pointing out the partisan flaws in customers' logic isn't necessarily a recipe for success in his rebooted business.

"I just see the potential for it to be a wedge between people in my personal conversations," he said, "so I try to steer away from that."

Emily Guskin contributed to this report.