The Issues and Promises

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Celebrate, Then Meet the Challenges

In the time of the coronavirus pandemic — its surges in positive testing and hospitalization and more than 350,000 deaths — the inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States will be different. While maintaining rituals, new expressions using technology will celebrate one of the hallmarks of a democracy.

The activities in this resource guide focus on the governing that takes place after the campaigns and inaugural day celebration. In the presidential address, the president will highlight the philosophy of government and policies that will guide the next four years, will inspire and indicate goals to be accomplished. Then the work of governing begins.

Think Like a Reporter activity brings together research, knowledge of the duties of the executive and legislative branches, information gathering skills and composition in journalistic style. Students will delve into the issues of this time. They will get acquainted with how an idea about policy becomes an action that addresses a problem or need through the departments of the Cabinet in concert with the Congress.

The press, citizens and the world will look to see how the new administration meets the challenges.
Inauguration Celebration in a Pandemic

The Presidential Inaugural Committee is responsible for planning and executing details of inauguration ceremonies and events. In 2021 the committee faces maintaining the historic nature of the inauguration while keeping social distances, honoring those lost to COVID-19 in the past year and inspiring service across the country.

Rituals of the inauguration of a U.S. president

The U.S. Constitution prescribes the 35 words of the oath. The other elements of the inauguration have been established through practice and expectation every four years.

- Oath of office taken at 12:00 p.m. on January 20 since the 20th Amendment. Since Washington took the oath, with his hand on a bible, the swearing in has been done in public. Washington added, “So help me God” after taking the required oath of office.

- Members of Congress and family are present — When George Washington took the oath both houses of Congress were present in Federal Hall in NYC.

- Presidential address — The lengths of the address have varied, but every president has delivered an address after taking the oath of office.

- Parade — in 1805 when Jefferson rode on horseback from the Capitol to the White House, the parade tradition began. As the White House Historical Association stated, “selection of parade participants is a traditional way for a president to make a statement about his beliefs, as Abraham Lincoln did in 1865 by inviting Africa Americans to march for the first time.”

- Dance and balls — George Washington danced the minuet; James and Dolley Madison attended the first official inaugural ball.

After 1800, the inaugural planners added new elements to the ceremony:
- The chief justice of the Supreme Court swears in the president (1801)
- Receptions held in the White House after the inaugural ceremony (1809)
- Oath-taking at the East Front of the Capitol to allow more people to witness the ceremony (1817)
- The president and president-elect ride to the Capitol together on inauguration morning (1837)

Turn the spotlight on local heroes and communities

“Modern inaugural festivities reflect not only the president they honor,” according to the White House Historical Association, “but also the desire of many Americans to celebrate our nation’s rich history and the transfer of presidential power.”

The 2020 inauguration requires changes. The Biden Presidential Inaugural Committee committed to following the same pandemic guidelines of wearing masks and observing social distance as Biden and Kamala Harris observed campaigning. Coronavirus super spreaders such as a Mall full of people and a parade down Pennsylvania Avenue with crowds lining the route have to be reimagined. One goal is to turn the spotlight on local heroes and communities.

If you were a member of the Biden Presidential Inaugural Committee what would you recommend to keep Americans safe, to observe a hallmark of democracy with its rituals, to celebrate the occasion and to meet goals?
The promises Joe Biden made as a candidate fall roughly into two categories: those easy to carry out in his first days in the Oval Office, and those that will be exceedingly difficult no matter how long he tries. Many of President Donald Trump’s initiatives were accomplished by executive order, meaning Biden can undo them with the stroke of a pen. Fighting the pandemic and stimulating the economy are big, immediate challenges. Biden’s bolder ideas face uphill battles in a closely divided U.S. Senate. Here's a partial tally of his goals.
Climate and Energy

Biden would reshape how America powers itself in the name of fighting global warming, an epic conversion requiring a $2 trillion down payment over his four-year term. It would surely be a heavy lift to get through Congress, even if he argues that it’s a good way to stimulate the economy. Biden’s climate agenda drives his approach to energy issues. He has vowed to ban new oil and gas permits on public land and water. Many planned oil, gas and mining ventures — even those on private land — face heightened risk of rejection or longer approval times.

- Rejoin the Paris Agreement on global warming. Trump withdrew the U.S. from this pact, through which almost 200 countries have pledged limits on emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.
- Kill the Keystone XL pipeline, the TC Energy Corp. project proposed to ferry 830,000 barrels of crude daily from Alberta, Canada, to Nebraska.
- Make the U.S. electricity system carbon-free by 2035, meaning if there are any emissions, they will be captured. That will require much more solar and wind power and a revamp of the electrical grid. Coal and natural gas still produce more than 60% of U.S. electricity.
- Make the U.S. economy reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. This promise relies on tougher fuel-efficiency standards accelerating the adoption of electric vehicles. To make them run, Biden would install 500,000 public charging outlets.

Immigration

Trump redirected billions of dollars to upgrade barriers on the U.S.-Mexico border, made it harder to gain asylum in the U.S. and barred immigration by citizens of 12 countries. Biden calls immigration “an irrefutable source of our strength” and can tweak policy on his own. But his more ambitious plans would require the approval of Congress, which hasn’t passed a major immigration law since 1986.

- Undo Trump’s country-specific immigration bans, restrictions on asylum-seekers and expansion of the public-charge rule, which denies legal-resident status to immigrants deemed likely to need government assistance for things such as food.
- Stop spending on the U.S.-Mexico border wall and direct funds instead toward higher-tech border enforcement.
- Raise to 125,000 the number of refugees allowed into the U.S. in 2021. That’s up from Trump’s cap of 18,000 in 2020, and from the target of 110,000 for 2016, the year before Trump became president.
- Increase the number of employment-based visas beyond the current annual cap of 140,000.
- Restore protections blocking deportation of 660,000 undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children, a group known as Dreamers.
- Create a pathway to citizenship for the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S.

Taxes

Biden would raise taxes on several fronts to finance his domestic agenda but says only people earning $400,000 or more would pay a higher amount. His best chance to implement his tax-hike plan would likely be if Democrats win big in the 2022 congressional midterm elections.

- Raise the top federal income tax rate to 39.6%, where it was before Trump and congressional Republicans cut it to 37% starting in 2018. This top rate would apply to income beyond $400,000 (more for married couples filing jointly).
- Raise the corporate tax rate to 28%. Trump and congressional Republicans slashed it to 21% from 35%.
- Impose a minimum annual tax on U.S. companies equal to 15% of profits reported to investors to prevent companies from using legal tax breaks to reduce their tax bill below that level.
- Enact a payroll tax of 12.4% on income earned above $400,000 to boost the solvency of the Social Security system and expand benefits. Currently, only wages up to $137,700 are taxed to fund the Social Security program.
- Tax capital gains as ordinary income, which would almost double the current 20% rate on stock trades and real estate deals for people earning more than $1 million a year. This would effectively eliminate the so-called carried interest tax break enjoyed by private equity managers.

Guns

As a senator, Biden had a hand in adopting mandatory background checks for gun sales, which exist to this day, and a ban on certain semiautomatic weapons, which expired in 2004. The gun rights lobby, despite recent turmoil in its ranks, remains a potent political force.

- Create federal grants to encourage more states to enact “red flag” laws allowing family members or police to ask a court to temporarily remove firearms from people exhibiting violent behavior.
- Require more FBI criminal background checks. Biden would stop exempting private sales unless the transaction is between close family members. He also wants to allow the government 10 days, up from three, for the checks to be carried out.
- Resurrect the semiautomatic weapons ban and another on high-capacity magazines. This time, Biden says, manufacturers wouldn’t be allowed to skirt the law “by making minor changes that don’t limit the weapon’s lethality,” as was commonly done to undermine the effectiveness of the ban from 1994 to 2004.
Health Care

Roughly 20 million Americans have health insurance through the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. The measure became law in 2010 without the support of any Republicans in Congress. The Trump administration eliminated a financial penalty for noncompliance and cut funding for programs that help sign people up. Biden says he would protect what remains of the law, and expand it.

- Eliminate the earnings cap on Obamacare tax credits that subsidize the purchase of health insurance. The cap currently limits the benefit to those making up to 400% of the federal poverty level.
- Lower the eligibility age for Medicare, government health insurance for the elderly, to 60 from 65.
- Offer a “public option” insurance plan run by the federal government that Americans could consider alongside private plans.

Foreign Relations

Biden sees the U.S. “at the head of the table, leading the world to address the most urgent global challenges.” Under Trump, the U.S. retreated from its historic leadership role, creating a vacuum that China tried to fill. Biden vowed to recommit the U.S. to multinational institutions, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

- Revive the 2015 multinational deal intended to limit Iran’s nuclear work in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. Trump scorned it as one-sided. Biden says the U.S. would rejoin if Iran returns to compliance with its terms.
- Re-evaluate Trump’s tariffs on Chinese goods. Biden said he would work with U.S. allies, with the goal of exerting “collective leverage” to force China to change its economic practices.
- Get input from labor and environmental groups in any trade negotiations. This would include any potential revival of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which proceeded without the U.S. (and with a new name) after Trump withdrew in 2017.
- Extend existing civil rights laws to ban discrimination in employment, housing and other areas against LGBTQ Americans.
- Give the 21 million Americans who work for the federal government and state governments the right to unionize, which currently exists only in some states.
- More than double the federal minimum wage in stages to $15 by 2026, up from $7.25, where it was set in 2009.
- Spend $50 billion in his first year to repair roads, highways and bridges.

Tariffs and Trade

Don’t expect a swift reversal of Trump’s “America First” policy. Biden pledged on his campaign website, “There is no going back to business as usual on trade.”

- Forgive up to $10,000 in student loan debt per American. This appears to be something Biden could do on his own, though it would be expensive -- $390 billion, by one measure.
- Raise Social Security benefits for people over the age of 78, for those with low income and for widows and widowers.
- Guarantee 12 weeks of paid leave from work for new parents or those caring for an ill family member. An employee on leave would get two-thirds of his or her pay, up to $4,000. The bill Biden supports would fund this by increasing the payroll tax paid by employers and workers.
- Make two years of community college tuition-free for all, and all public colleges and universities tuition-free for students whose family incomes are below $125,000.

Other Domestic Policies

Biden’s promised union members he’d be the “strongest labor president you’ve ever had.” While serving as vice president, he got out ahead of President Barack Obama in publicly supporting same-sex marriage.

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Think Like a Reporter | The Issues and Promises

Whether running for class president, governor of a state or president of the United States, candidates make promises. They identify needs, evaluate potential for change and define approaches to create a better community. Once elected to office, their work begins to fulfill the promises.

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris ran a campaign focused on policy and plans. Some of their goals can be put in place in the first weeks; most will require leadership of the Cabinet, consideration and cooperation within Congress, and coordination with state governors and officials.

As a reporter you have a beat area. Yours is the White House, including the executive departments that make up the Biden Cabinet. It is your job to know the issues, the people, the meetings and the actions taking place.

Know What Has Been Done
Even before the oath of office has been taken, some promises can be fulfilled. Below are some areas for you to research. What has been done to fulfill these promises?

Promises Completed During the Transition
• Nominate executive department secretaries and attorney general to reflect America’s diversity
• Create a coronavirus task force

Get Background Before Establishing Your Beat
Before you select a specific policy area and promise, practice your research skills to get more information about these two promises. To be accurate in your reporting and to give context, reporters need to understand the background and positions taken on issues.

Reversing Trump Administration Positions
• Reenter Paris climate accord
• Rejoin World Health Organization

On some issues all sides agree that quality of life, safety and survival depend on getting them right. They may not agree on the specific details for accomplishing the goal, but they are ready to work together. Review these four issues. What is the problem to overcome? What does the Biden administration propose? How long does it take for bi-partisan support and action?

Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Provide context.

Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public’s business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all.

— From the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics
Think Like a Reporter | The Issues and Promises continued

Bi-Partisan Support for Initiatives
• COVID-19 vaccine supply, distribution and inoculation plan
• COVID-19 and variants control
• Reopening of businesses
• Improvement of infrastructure

Establish Your Beat and Report
Continue to follow the administration’s work on its promises for their first 100 days in office. Begin by selecting the policy area and the Biden promise you will cover.

POLICY AREA
These areas were often addressed on the campaign trail and are prominent in the first 100 days’ goals. Select one of them for your beat area focus.
• Criminal justice
• Economy
• Education
• Environment
• Equality
• Foreign policy
• Health
• Immigration

PROMISE
What has Biden and Harris promised on the campaign trail in this policy arena? Look on their transition website and in the archives of newspapers and broadcasts to find what they said.

PEOPLE
These are the individuals who head the departments, work on the White House staff, or head Congressional committees that affect movement on this issue. Compile a list of contacts.
• Look for press coverage, press releases, committee hearings, and White House meetings.
• Could you set up a virtual interview with your local member of Congress to discuss this issue?
• Does this issue directly influence the people in your community? Who could you interview to localize the issue?

ACTION
What steps have been taken to fulfill the promise?
• In the first week in office
• In the first month in office
• In the first 100 days

REPORT
Write a minimum of three news articles.
Report on action taken in the first week, the first month and the first 100 days.
Republicans plan a voting crackdown
GOP lawmakers want to make it harder to vote simply to help their party win.

“Millions of Georgians,” declared the Georgia Senate Republican majority, have “raised deep and heartfelt concerns that state law has been violated and our elections process abused.” The vote in Michigan was “dysfunctional,” said a prominent state Republican lawmaker.

“In November, we witnessed an extreme amount of irregularities,” said a Pennsylvania Republican legislator.

While the facts show that the November presidential election was clean and secure — and that there were no irregularities that could have moved the needle in any of these swing states — the myth that the vote was awash with fraud has taken hold among Republicans. “We will fix this,” the Georgia Republicans ominously promised. Fix what? Democracy?

While many Republican state lawmakers may feel they need to say these things because their constituents believe President Trump’s lies about voter fraud, it is also the case that perpetuating the lies is politically useful for them. USA Today reports that state legislators across the country have called for election “reforms” that would make it harder to vote, in response to a nonexistent election-fraud crisis they have cooked up. Depressing turnout, especially among populations that, say, lack photo ID or prefer to mail in their ballots, could tilt the playing field in favor of Republican candidates.

Before Nov. 3, many Republicans favored mail-in voting, but now, after its presidential candidate lost, the party is shifting. In response to the covid-19 pandemic, almost half of voters cast ballots by mail, and these mail ballots broke heavily for President-elect Joe Biden. So the Georgia Republicans are calling to repeal a law allowing voters to obtain absentee ballots without an excuse, and they want to ban ballot dropboxes that many voters use to ensure their ballots do not get delayed or lost in the mail. A similar movement is brewing among Pennsylvania Republicans, with the bill that would end no-excuse absentee voting sponsored by a GOP lawmaker who had previously voted to allow it.

Republicans in other states, such as Michigan and Texas, are calling for voter roll purges; such purges can remove some people who have moved or died, but they also can complicate voting for people who should still be allowed to vote in a particular area. Texas Republicans are also considering a bill that would prohibit local officials from sending voters absentee ballot applications unless they request them, even though Texas is already one of the hardest states in which to cast a ballot. Wisconsin Republicans are con-
templating measures to make the state’s already-demanding mail-in voting procedures even more burdensome.

Some of these proposals may sound reasonable when unexamined or in isolation — but none of them responds to an authentic need. U.S. elections are not prone to the fraud that these plans would seek to curb, but the restrictions would without doubt make it harder to cast ballots. It is, moreover, easy to get lost in the details of these proposals while losing sight of the big picture: Republicans want it to be harder to vote, either because they believe Mr. Trump’s lies about fraud or because they seek to game the rules to prevent Democratic voters from casting ballots. For many, the motivation may be a combination of both factors. Even under the kindest reading — that GOP lawmakers are recklessly uninformed about the election system’s strengths and weaknesses — the coming wave of Republican voter suppression measures is wrong. ■

— January 4, 2021