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Infrastructure bill: Biden, nearly grasping victory, may still have to compromise | Opinion

Carl Golden Special to the USA TODAY Network

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The largest government-sponsored public works program since the New Deal of the 1930s — a \$4.5 trillion two-bill package to address the nation's crumbling infrastructure — lies tantalizingly within President Joe Biden's grasp, a signature accomplishment for his seven-month-old presidency.

It is, though, more than roads and bridges — far more.

If the package reaches his desk, it will validate Biden's career-long conviction that negotiation, compromise when necessary and good faith efforts to achieve elusive bipartisanship are no longer pipe dreams fraught with polarization and insurmountable ideological divisions.

Standing in the way of such a monumental achievement, however, is a cadre of a dozen or so House Democrats, far left self-styled progressives who've threatened to either vote against or withhold their votes for the package out of a collective pique that it is short of their demands.

Unless their minds are changed by the administration or the Congressional leadership, they stand ready, if not eager, to destroy the entire effort.

House Democrats have exceedingly little room to maneuver — four defectors would doom the program — or to reach accommodations to permit a negative vote so long as it doesn't impact the outcome.

While 19 Senate Republicans, including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, supported the bipartisan \$1 trillion program, they are expected to put up unanimous opposition to the \$3.5 trillion Administration proposal, forcing Democrats to invoke a reconciliation process which permits approval with a simple majority of 50 votes (the tiebreaker provided by the vice president) rather than the 60-vote threshold to head off a filibuster.

This is a contest the president cannot afford to lose — a test of wills from which he cannot flinch.

Biden's administration has gone all in on the infrastructure program. He has thrown the weight and prestige of his office behind it and has personally taken part in negotiating sessions to reach agreement on its many components and the cost.

He even took the unusual step of standing in the White House driveway surrounded by the 10-member bipartisan coalition to announce an agreement had been reached. He appeared to agree that the two bills should be tied together but quickly backed off any potential veto threat if they were not.

Whatever political capital he's accrued — reaching back to his pre-presidency career in the Senate and vice president's office — has been shoved into the middle of the table.

A defeat engineered by members of his own party would be devastating.

Op-ed continues below video.

Not only would it deny him a monumental achievement, one his party's congressional candidates can campaign on next year but would deal a mortal blow to his governing philosophy of bipartisan cooperation as the most effective path to problem solving.

Why, for instance, would Republicans as the minority party be receptive to across the aisle advances only to see the end result brought crashing down by a group of breakaway Democrats?

Many Republicans are understandably wary of offending their partisan base by casting a vote to hand a legislative victory to Biden. They will certainly not do so if they're convinced Democrats will ultimately sink the idea, consigning them to the worst of both worlds.

More perspective: Infrastructure equals jobs, growth, competitive edge and better lives for millions

New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, putative leader of the progressive bloc, has been vocal in her criticism of the bipartisan bill and warned that she and her like-minded colleagues are sufficiently strong to “tank” the bill in the House unless the Senate passed the significantly larger administration bill.

For months, Ocasio-Cortez and the progressives have filled their Twitter accounts and media interviews with sharp criticisms of the bipartisan effort. They urged Democrats to abandon

the proposal fell far short of the dollar amount they felt necessary to fund a wide array of programs.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi, feeling the pressure, warned that she would not schedule a vote on the bipartisan proposal unless it was accompanied by the more expansive and expensive proposal.

She dug in deeper on her position, even in the face of a group of moderate House Democrats who urged a vote on the bipartisan program as a demonstration of support for the president and, equally as significant, to bask in the accomplishment during their campaigns.

The outlook in the Senate, however, is dicey, at best. Needing all 50 Democrats to sign on became somewhat problematic when West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin and Arizona Sen. Krysten Sinema expressed misgivings about the \$3.5 trillion cost.

Without the unanimous support — not a sure thing at this stage — the bill will fail, leaving a thoroughly embarrassed president holding an empty bag.

Moreover, if the progressives follow through on the threat to “tank” the bipartisan bill in the House in the absence of Senate approval of the more ambitious plan, the entire effort will collapse and provide Republicans with a political gift opportunity to question the ability of the Administration and Democrats in Congress to govern.

It would also embolden the progressive faction to work its will on other Administration initiatives with which it disagrees by simply bloc voting in the negative unless their demands were met.

The pressure is clearly on Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer to deliver; Pelosi to tame the maverick progressives and Schumer to bring into the fold those Democrats nervous over the multi-trillion-dollar cost at a time when the economy seems to be recovering but risks a slowdown with the surge in COVID-19 cases and the possibility of a lockdown.

With the House due back in session this month and final Senate action tentatively set for September, Biden can spy the finish line from his vantage point. Reaching it will require his full participation and a willingness to possibly back away from the overall cost.

Victory, though, is victory.

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