

Is there any room left for progressives in Biden's cabinet?

Blog post by Associate Ben Bassett, 15 December 2020

Although less than half of President-elect Joe Biden's cabinet has been announced, progressives are already becoming impatient. "Joe Biden's Cabinet Is a Lost Cause for the Left" reads the headline of a recent article in the *New Republic*, a liberal-leaning magazine. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), a prominent progressive, has criticised Biden's choices as lacking a cohesive vision, while others have lamented the perceived lack of progressive ideology and track record among Biden's appointees. Some worry Biden is returning to the moderate comfort zone developed over his 37-year career in the US Senate.

While Biden's picks so far (see table below) reflect an administration focused on governing from the centre, there are still several key positions to be filled - and progressives may yet have their day. Posts at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Labour and Education are all more pertinent to advancing the progressive agenda than, say, the Secretary of Defense or Homeland Security. If Biden nominates progressives to any of these positions, there are still ample opportunities for a liberal agenda under the incoming administration.

Biden's cabinet nominees, key advisers as of 14 December	
Name	Position
Ron Klain	Chief of Staff
Susan Rice	White House Domestic Policy Council
Tony Blinken	Secretary of State
Janet Yellen	Secretary of the Treasury
Alejandro Mayorkas	Secretary of Homeland Security
Lloyd Austin	Secretary of Defense
Xavier Becerra	Secretary of Health and Human Services

Marcia Fudge	Secretary of Housing and Urban Development
Tom Vilsack	Secretary of Agriculture
Denis McDonough	Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Katherine Tai	US Trade Representative

The first real showcase of progressive disappointment in Biden’s nominations emerged following Biden’s choice of Ohio Rep. Marcia Fudge for Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Progressives had hoped that Biden would have nominated Fudge, who has been a strong advocate for agricultural issues and strong support for nutrition assistance and worker protections at meatpacking plants, for the Secretary of Agriculture. Instead, Fudge is slated to run a lower-profile department in a sector in which she has far less experience. Biden’s decision coupled with his choice of Tom Vilsack - a moderate who was President Obama’s Secretary of Agriculture for eight years and currently leads a dairy industry trade group - to run the department again has dimmed progressives’ hopes for a major evolution in agricultural policy.

Of the EPA, Labour and Education briefs, Biden’s choice for the Administrator of the EPA is perhaps the most important of the three, as progressives understand that their lofty climate agenda stands little chance of passing through Congress. A progressive at the head of the EPA would not only reverse the myriad of environmental rollbacks that have occurred under the Trump administration, but also enact a robust regulatory agenda that could include advocating for a federal cap-and-trade program for greenhouse gas emissions and higher auto emission and clean air standards. Turning to Labour Secretary, a progressive would push pro-union policies, ensuring strong worker’s rights protections at the expense of big businesses and corporations. Reviving rules that were killed under the Trump administration such as the Fiduciary Rule, an Obama-era Labour Department proposal to increase the accountability of retail investment advisors to their clients, would become likely as well. A progressive Education Secretary would be a strong supporter of teachers’ unions and an advocate for public schools. Progressives are already pressuring Biden to cancel substantial amounts of student loan debt and installing a progressive as Education Secretary would be critical to achieving this goal.

Given the complicated makeup of Congress, Biden may use the Vacancies Act to install individuals who may be thought of as too liberal to be approved by a Republican-controlled Senate (the Vacancies Act allows officials who have already been confirmed by the Senate for another position to serve in an acting capacity for up to 210 days). This move could be considered for agencies like the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFBP), an important body for progressives who are eager to enact far stricter regulations on the financial services industry. It is unlikely Biden would attempt to use the Vacancies Act for a major Cabinet appointment.

If Biden’s choices for EPA, Labour and Education are moderates, this would firmly indicate Biden’s return to establishment Democrat politics. However, Biden may well move to the left with one (or

more) of his big remaining cabinet nods - or try to populate lesser roles with progressives by doing an end-run around the nomination process by moving confirmed officials into new roles. If he is successful in doing any of this, his administration may have more of a liberal bent than many now expect.