

Migrants

'Balancing act'

Can Biden find 'right' immigration balance

WASHINGTON, Nov 27, (AP): Democrats wielded demands to fix the nation's broken immigration system as a cudgel against Republicans in the 2020 campaign. Elect us, went the argument, and we'll stop the cruel treatment of migrants at the border, and put in place lasting and humane policies that work.

A year into Joe Biden's presidency, though, action on the issue has been hard to find and there is growing consternation privately among some in the party that the Biden administration can't find the right balance on immigration.

Publicly, it's another story. Most Washington lawmakers are largely holding their tongues, unwilling to criticize their leader on a polarizing topic that has created divisions within the party - especially as concerns mount over whether Democrats can hold on to power come next year.

It's a hard balancing act to pull off, said Douglas Rivlin, spokesman for America's Voice, an immigration reform group. Especially when Republicans are unrelenting in their negativity toward the president, even a little friendly fire can be a challenge.

"It's hard but they've got to do it," he said. "They're going to face voters next year, all the people on the Hill. Biden isn't, they are. And they have to be clear they're pushing Biden to be the Democratic president we elected, rather than being scared of the issues because the politics are difficult."

Democrats have pointed to the recent House approval of a huge spending bill backed by the White House that would allow for expanded work permits and some other, less ambitious immigration provisions. When Biden took office, he promised a pathway to U.S. citizenship for millions of people in the country illegally. Democrats say the measures in the spending bill are enough to show the party won't shy away from the immigration issue during next year's midterms.

Fault

"I don't see it as the fault of the president per se or ... these challenges that we're facing today, solely falling on the shoulders of the president," said Democratic Rep. Veronica Escobar, who represents a district in El Paso, Texas, across the border from Juarez, Mexico. "It is a collective obligation that we have and I think Democrats have solutions and we need to lean in on them."

Her Democratic colleague, Rep. Joaquin Castro, from San Antonio, ducked a question when asked if House members in swing districts will be forced to run away from Biden in 2022, saying "I'm going to wait on political discussions."

But Castro added that the party had done as much as it could do on immigration this session, given Senate rules that have prevented larger legislation on the issue from advancing with the required minimum of 60 votes in that chamber.

"Right now, Democrats have control of the White House, the Senate and the House and we have pushed as hard as we can with the number that we have in the chambers to get protections from deportation, workplace permits, driver's licenses, travel abilities," Castro said.

Former Democratic Rep. Beto O'Rourke, who recently announced he'd run for Texas governor, has been one of a few Democrats to put the border front and center, heading almost immediately to the U.S.-Mexico border after he announced he was running, where he suggested the White House is doing its party no favors.

"It's clear that Biden could be doing a better job at the border," O'Rourke said during an interview with KTVT TV in Dallas-Fort Worth. "It is not enough of a priority."

Like most top Democrats, O'Rourke will have to counter the narrative pushed by Republicans that an increase in the number of people crossing the border illegally this year has reached "crisis" levels. Incumbent Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's campaign accused O'Rourke of supporting Biden's "open borders" policies and financed billboards along the border featuring O'Rourke's face morphing into that of the president.

Nick Rathod, Rourke's campaign manager, sees "neglect, I think by Democrats across the board, not just the Biden administration, in engaging in an authentic manner in those communities" along the border.



Biden

President blames COVID-19

Biden sees common culprit for country's woes

Amid debate, some states update migrant term

WASHINGTON, Nov 27, (AP): Inflation is soaring, businesses are struggling to hire and President Joe Biden's poll numbers have been in free-fall. The White House sees a common culprit for it all: COVID-19.

Biden's team views the pandemic as the root cause of both the nation's malaise and his own political woes. Finally controlling COVID-19, the White House believes, is the skeleton key to rejuvenating the country and reviving Biden's own standing.

But the coronavirus challenge has proved to be vexing for the White House, with last summer's premature claims of victory swamped by the more transmissible delta variant, stubborn millions of Americans unvaccinated and lingering economic effects from the pandemic's darkest days.

All of that as yet another variant of the virus, omicron, emerged overseas. It is worrying public health officials, leading to new travel bans and panicking markets as scientists race to understand how dangerous it may be.

Although the economy has actually been coming back, there are multiple signs that COVID-19 will leave its scars even if the pandemic fades.

For now, in the administration's view, an intransigent minority that is resisting vaccination is spoiling the recovery for the rest of the country - forcing masks on the vaccinated and contributing to lingering anxiousness everywhere you look.

Message

Asked why Americans aren't getting the message that the economy is improving, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said this past week: "We're still in the middle of fighting a pandemic and people are sick and tired of that. We are, too."

The state of affairs, she said, affects everything from how people feel about sending their kids out the door to the price for a gallon of gas.

The administration views vaccination mandates as critical, not only to preventing avoidable illness and death but to safeguarding the economic recovery - and salvaging

AUSTIN, Nov 27, (AP): Luz Rivas remembers seeing the word on her mother's residency card as a child: "alien."

In the stark terms of the government, it signaled her mother was not yet a citizen of the U.S. But to her young daughter, the word had a more personal meaning. Even though they were going through the naturalization process, it meant the family did not belong.

"I want other children of immigrants, like me, to not feel the same way I did, that my family did, when we saw the word 'alien'," said Rivas, now an assemblywoman in the California Legislature.

The Democratic lawmaker sought to retire the term and this year authored a bill - since signed into law - that replaces the use of "alien" in state statutes with other terms such as "noncitizen" or "im-

migrant." Her effort was inspired by a similar shift earlier this year by the Biden administration.

Immigrants and immigrant-rights groups say the term, especially when combined with "illegal," is dehumanizing and can have a harmful effect on immigration policy.

The word became a focal point of debate in several states earlier this year as the number of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border swelled and led to fierce backlash against Biden administration policies by Republican governors and lawmakers.

Lawmakers in at least seven states considered eliminating use of "alien" and "illegal" in state statutes this year and replacing them with descriptions such as "undocumented" and "noncitizen," ac-

ording to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Only two states, California and Colorado, actually made the change.

"I want all Californians that are contributing to our society, that are small business owners, that work hard, to feel that they are part of California communities," Rivas said of the reason behind her legislation.

State Sen. Julie Gonzales, who co-sponsored the new Colorado law, said during a legislative committee hearing that words such as "illegal" were "dehumanizing and derogatory" when applied to immigrants. Gonzales said the legislation aimed to remove the only place in Colorado statute where "illegal alien" was used to describe people living in the U.S. illegally.

Biden's political position.

"We have the tools to accelerate the path out of this pandemic widely available," White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients told a coronavirus briefing. While he ruled out large-scale lockdowns like the United States experienced in 2020 and like those popping up again across Europe, Zients renewed the administration's appeals for more Americans to get their shots.

But on Friday, the discovery of the new variant in southern Africa had much of the world acting to shut down travel from the region and contain a threat that the World Health Organization suggested could be worse than the ravaging waves from delta.

Inside the White House and among allies of the president, there has been frustration for weeks over the slow government action to approve booster shots for all adults. The regulatory process, they fear, contributed to misinformation and confusion around the

boosters and means the nation isn't optimally protected for the holiday season.

Biden on Friday appealed for unvaccinated Americans to be "responsible" and get the shot and for those eligible for a booster to get that, too. "That is the minimum that everyone should be doing. ... We always talk about whether this is about freedom, but I think it's a patriotic responsibility to do that."

Still, for all the hand-wringing over Biden's sagging standing with Americans, Democrats say a turnaround may be within reach.

Feeling

"From Trump to Biden, people have gone from feeling like it's mourning again in America to feeling on the cusp of morning again in America," said party strategist Jesse Ferguson.

"Getting past the pandemic unlocks the door for the economy, for our way of life and

for people feeling less divided," he added.

To Biden's critics, though, it's a stretch to blame all the nation's problems on COVID-19 or to think that containing the virus will solve them.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, in fact, puts the blame for high prices on Biden's big pandemic relief package, saying recently: "There is no question what is keeping working Americans awake at night. Inflation. The runaway prices and unpredictability that Democrats' policies have fueled."

The lingering effects of the virus have taken a toll on the president's approval ratings, even if his handling of the virus has been seen as a relative strength.

In an October AP-NORC poll, 54% of Americans said they approved of Biden's job on the pandemic. That was somewhat higher than his approval rating overall and much higher than approval on his handling of the economy, at 48% and 41%, respectively.

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Economic Update

NBAK Economic Research Department | 27 November 2021

Consumer sector

Kuwait: Record spending in October, driving broader economic recovery

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Highlights

- Consumers spent a record KD2.55 billion in October (+24% y/y), supported by the debt repayment holiday and strong consumer loans.
- Optimism about work and economic prospects was close to a two-year high in September, motivated in part by a substantial reduction in the number of positive coronavirus cases in Kuwait.
- The spending outlook will be shaped by economic gains, including in terms of private sector job creation, higher oil prices and continued successful virus containment.

The consumer sector continues to be the backbone of the economic recovery in Kuwait, fueled by a combination of easing mobility restrictions, a high vaccine penetration rate, and the government's loan repayment holiday for nationals. Indeed, consumer spending hit record levels in October and has been growing at double-digit rates ever since the public emerged from lockdown in the summer of 2020. However, growth has decelerated from highs recorded earlier in the year due to the fading of annual base effects. Near-term prospects continue to look solid, given the expected gradual broadening of the economic recovery, low Covid infection rates and high oil prices, which are supporting confidence. At the same time, spending growth may start to ease back to more normal levels as we go into next year, and as loan installment payments are restarted. There are also downside risks from factors such as possible further virus waves, lower oil prices, sluggish jobs growth and higher consumer prices eroding household incomes.

Spending growth is recovering well

Consumer spending grew by 24% y/y (+0.6% m/m) to KD2.55 billion in October. (Chart 1.) This is the strongest rate of growth since June and the highest monthly spending level ever. On a year-to-date cumulative basis, spending is almost 39% higher than over the same period last year. Highlighting the strong recovery, it is worth noting that the rise in consumer activity came even while more spending was diverted abroad following the loosening of travel restrictions in the summer. The online spending channel continues to gain in popularity, growing by 58% y/y in October to account for almost 39% of all Knet transactions (May 2020 was higher at 48%, though this was during full curfew and therefore under atypical conditions).

Consumer sentiment continues to improve

Meanwhile, consumer sentiment, as measured by ARA's Consumer Confidence Index, continued its upward trend in September, rising to 107 from 103 in August. (Chart 2.) This is the highest level since October 2019, and owes much to the reduction in positive coronavirus cases to the low levels last seen in March 2020, the first full month of the pandemic, and to optimism about the economic environment amid rising oil prices.

Chart 1: Total spending (Knet IPoS & POS, Kpay & ATM) (N/y/y)

However, the index also revealed consumer concerns about the rising cost of retail products. Unlike most index subcomponents that showed a positive trend, the Purchase of Durable Goods Index sharply decreased from 102 in August to 88 in September. This could be partly explained by the rise in travel costs (especially flights) and the increase in related expenditures during the summer; these factors may have forced consumers to reduce or postpone spending on durable goods. The latest official consumer price index data shows the 'durable goods'

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