

POLITICS

Biden's Executive Orders Signal Collision Course With GOP

President Biden has taken more than two dozen executive actions designed to reverse Trump administration policies and enact longstanding liberal priorities. Republicans say the moves undermine his push for national unity.

By Alex Leary, Kate Davidson and Andrew Restuccia

WASHINGTON—President Biden signed an executive order Friday designed to swiftly deliver more relief to low-income families and unemployed workers, capping a series of actions taken in his first three days in office aimed at reversing Trump administration policies and enacting liberal priorities.

The orders, more than two dozen, have focused on such areas as the environment, workers and unions, as well as an increased government role in the economy. They come as the White House seeks to persuade skeptical Republican senators to back its \$1.9 trillion coronavirus legislation.

Some GOP lawmakers say the initiatives undermine Mr. Biden's push for bipartisan deal making and national unity, a major theme of his inaugural address. At the same time, while his early policy efforts have been broadly cheered by Democrats, some progressives are urging him to go further, reflecting the president's challenge of balancing pressures from both parties.

Mr. Biden's order Friday directed agencies across the government to take immediate steps to enhance federal benefits, such as expanding food assistance, improving distribution of stimulus checks and clarifying that workers may refuse jobs with unsafe working conditions and still qualify for unemployment benefits.

"This cannot be who we are as a country," the president said as he signed the orders in the White House's State Dining Room. "We cannot—will not—let people go hungry." Touting the coronavirus relief plan he is pressing Congress to approve, he cited what he called a once-in-a-century public-health crisis that has hurt American families and said the coronavirus death toll could rise to more than 600,000. "The bottom line is this: We're in a national emergency," he said. "We need to act like we're in a national emergency." Since taking office Wednesday, Mr. Biden has moved to

reverse some of former President Donald Trump's highest-profile policy initiatives by overturning a travel ban on several majority-Muslim and other countries, revoking a permit for the Keystone XL oil pipeline and rejoining the Paris climate accord. Those orders also lay the groundwork for what Mr. Biden says will be his administration's focus: boosting economic growth, dealing with the pandemic, and increasing government spending on programs designed to assist Americans hard hit by the pandemic-induced recession.

“We must use every tool in our toolbox, including executive orders tailor-made to quickly undo some of the most egregious policies the previous administration implemented, to address the multiple crises we face,” Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) said Wednesday in support of Mr. Biden's thrust. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) was among those who accused Mr. Biden of contradicting his rhetoric on bipartisanship by catering to a progressive agenda with those actions. “There is plenty of time for President Biden to remember that he does not owe his election to the far left,” he said in a speech Thursday. Other Republicans echoed Mr. McConnell. “President Biden is talking like a centrist...but he's governing like someone from the far left,” Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.), a potential 2024 presidential candidate, said Friday. “He has issued more executive fiats than anyone in such a short period of time—more than Obama, more than Trump.”

By Friday, Mr. Biden had issued at least 29 executive orders and actions. In contrast, then-President Barack Obama issued five and Mr. Trump issued one in

their first three days in office.

Every modern president has relied heavily on executive powers to implement their agendas. Mr. Trump, for example, used executive orders to impose wide-ranging immigration restrictions and speed up the environmental review of infrastructure projects. White House officials said Mr. Biden's calls for unity weren't meant to suggest he would set aside his policy priorities to please Republicans.

Some of Mr. Biden's actions, such as stopping construction of the border wall, ending a travel ban from several majority-Muslim and African countries and rejoining the World Health Organization, were in reaction to Trump administration policies, White House officials said, rather than representing longstanding progressive aims. But other measures—such as addressing racial inequality and boosting worker protections—are long-sought Democratic priorities. Mr. Biden, who served nearly four decades in the Senate, has been counting on his experience and relationships with Republicans, including Mr. McConnell, to move an agenda he says will benefit all Americans.

Several GOP lawmakers say his \$1.9 trillion Covid relief package is too costly and contains provisions that aren't directly related to the pandemic, such as a call for raising the hourly minimum wage to \$15.

“I suspect the whole package is a nonstarter, but it's got plenty of starters in it,” Sen. Roy Blunt (R., Mo.) said Thursday. “We're ready to look at what it takes to move forward, as effectively and quickly as we can, on vaccine

distribution” and other issues, he said.

Mr. Biden’s proposed immigration overhaul was similarly met with immediate GOP opposition, partly because it includes a pathway to citizenship for millions of undocumented residents. The issue has confounded the last three presidents, and Biden’s measure stands little chance of passage in a closely divided Congress.

Some Democrats want Mr. Biden to use the party’s newfound advantage to push the Covid-19 aid package through using a budget maneuver called reconciliation, which allows legislation tied to the budget to pass the Senate with a simple majority rather than the higher threshold of 60 votes required to advance most bills. The White House signaled Wednesday that it is open to such a move—a sign, Republicans are expected to say, that the president’s calls for bipartisanship were hollow. “His clear preference is to move forward with a bipartisan bill,” White House press secretary Jen Psaki said. “There’s no question about it. But we’re also not going to take tools off the table for how the House and Senate can get this done.” The following day, she emphasized the preference for a bipartisan agreement and said many of Mr. Biden’s actions have broad appeal.

“Is unemployment insurance only an issue that Democrats in the country want? Do only Democrats want their kids to go back to schools? Do only Democrats want vaccines to be distributed across the country? We feel that that package—he feels that package is designed for bipartisan support,” Ms. Psaki said of Mr. Biden’s coronavirus-relief proposal.

On the left, outside groups have raised concerns about some of Mr. Biden's picks for key jobs, pointing to nominees' tied to Wall Street and industry. When Mr. Biden moved to extend a pause on student-loan payments, liberals said he should go further. Tweeted Rep.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D., N.Y.):

“OK now let's cancel them.”

Others point out that the president is simply implementing the promises he made during the campaign, and that Mr. Biden's critics should be patient.

“Nothing he has done so far has been a surprise,” said Mo Elleithee, executive director of Georgetown University's Institute of Politics and Public Service and a former top Democratic National Committee official, adding that the Covid-19 emergency is ideal for bipartisanship. “I hear a lot of members out there who a few weeks ago refused to even acknowledge his election now attacking him for not being unifying,” he said.

The Biden Agenda

Executive Orders to Boost Covid-19 Relief, Worker Protections

Intelligence Agencies to Focus on Domestic Extremism

Senate Confirms Austin as Defense Secretary

Panel Backs Yellen for Treasury Chief

Bid to Boost Vaccine Supply Through Defense Production Act

Write to Alex Leary at alex.leary@wsj.com, Kate Davidson at kate.davidson@wsj.com and Andrew

Restuccia at
Andrew.Restuccia@wsj.com