

The People Who Said Biden Isn't Smart Are Looking a Bit Dumb
John F. Harris - Politico

President Joseph Biden is striding out of summer 2022 in better position in almost every respect than when he slumped into it three months ago. Many in the political class, who had been consigning him to the electoral equivalent of hospice care, are squinting to find a root cause.



Biden is now belatedly passing the Rickey test — smart and lucky are re-enforcing each other, as shown in recent polls. © Andrew Harnik/AP Photo

The old saw that it is better to be lucky than smart is partly true. Among the events that have helped Biden make the case for himself and his party, even as they were mostly or entirely out of his control, are the Supreme Court's decision revoking abortion rights, the global retreat of gas prices from their peaks earlier in the year, and former President Donald Trump's mounting legal problems and flailing response to them. Even recent legislative successes seemed powered by Democratic brokers on Capitol Hill rather than by the president's engagement.

But let's remember another sturdy maxim. "Good luck is what is left over after intelligence and effort have combined at their best," said baseball legend Branch Rickey. "Luck is the residue of design."

In the opening phase of his presidency, Biden often seemed to be acting without any credible strategic design — the opposite of smart. To the extent he had a theory of the case, it amounted to, We will swiftly pass a bunch of big stuff and people will like it and the Trump era will quickly fade away. All three assumptions proved wobbly.

Biden is now belatedly passing the Rickey test — smart and lucky are re-enforcing each other, [as shown in recent polls](#). In particular, there are five strategic insights that were missing from his early presidency on clear display in his recent revival.

1. Biden stopped being so intimidated by the ideological divisions of his party.

In his early days in office, Biden and team fretted constantly that they would “lose the left” if he was not ambitious enough in his proposals. The \$369 billion in spending to address climate change, as well additional money to lower drug prices and other social goals, in the recently enacted Inflation Reduction Act, is a small fraction of what activists were once demanding. By the time it won Biden’s signature, the measure was praised as historic and the old complaints were barely audible.

At the same time, many in the party’s centrist wing believe that \$10 billion to eliminate student debt is poor policy and poor politics. It took Biden a while to decide what to do. But, after early howling from critics, there is growing evidence that the step was received warmly by the young and lower-middle class minority voters he was especially targeting — and scant sign it is going to be a major adverse factor for Democrats in swing districts.

The lesson: Within wide boundaries, a strong president should have the power to define the party’s ideology based on his own needs and preferences. There’s no reason to timidly navigate around aggrieved factions.

2. Divide the opposition — by at least feigning respect.

Most Democrats do not believe there is any longer a meaningful distinction between the “Trump wing” of the GOP and the party as a whole, minus a few outliers. What’s more, most of Biden’s party — surely most of his own staff — is nearly as contemptuous of Republicans who loathe Trump but enable him out of fear or the desire for conservative judges as they are of Trump himself.

That’s why it was notable how strongly Biden emphasized in his well-received speech at Independence Hall last week that he does still draw a distinction between “MAGA Republicans” and the GOP as a whole.

“I want to be very clear up front: Not every Republican, not even the majority of Republicans, are MAGA Republicans. Not every Republican embraces their extreme ideology. I know because I’ve been able to work with these mainstream Republicans.”

No, Biden is not really that naïve. He doesn’t think in a viscerally partisan climate he will actually pull some Republicans to his side. But he does know that he can more effectively exploit GOP divisions with that kind of rhetoric, while direct attacks would unite the opposition. Recent polls also show that independents who took flight from Biden and Democrats are now returning.

3. Don’t just call out extremism — harness it.

Biden’s original theory was that his success would steadily make Trump irrelevant. His new and more plausible theory is that Trump’s continued relevance will drive Biden’s success, or at a minimum make voters more forgiving of his shortcomings. Calling out Trump’s efforts to discredit the results of a legitimate election is not primarily a political move. It was Biden’s obligation as president and every conscientious public official should join him.

But Biden did not stop there. He pivoted quickly to tie Trump’s demagoguery to the conservative agenda broadly. His obvious aim was to frame his own policies —

support for abortion rights, infrastructure and health care spending, and gun control — as self-evidently in the mainstream.

This was the same approach other presidents have deployed — such as Bill Clinton in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing — to use extremism as a foil. This approach doesn't require strategic genius. But it does requires strategic discipline, to appear presidential, not partisan, even while advancing partisan objectives.

4. Don't be the negotiator in chief.

What did Biden actually do to pass the energy and health care package as a replacement for the failed Build Back Better plan? Wasn't that Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer doing the heavy lifting with the once-recalcitrant Joe Manchin? You didn't read many stories of Biden grabbing people LBJ-style by the lapels. Same for modest gun control legislation passed in late June.

But the person who signs a bill into law is never a marginal player. Biden's refusal earlier this year to assail Manchin when many Democrats were foaming with anger at him was a critical factor in an eventual deal. Biden's earlier efforts to actually cut the details of deals himself didn't prove successful, and along the way was an effective demotion from commander in chief to legislator.

5. The competency campaign must be waged every day.

Americans don't expect presidents to be omnipotent. But they do expect them to be engaged and commanding. The August 2021 pullout from Afghanistan thrashed Biden's political standing less because of his policy aims than because of the accurate perception that events were out of control in ways that Biden should have anticipated. Key to his improving — though still low — approval ratings surely must be the greater surefootedness Biden has shown in assembling a Western alliance to help Ukraine resist the Russian agenda.

On gas prices, Biden couldn't control global markets as they sent prices soaring, and he doesn't really deserve much credit for their recent easing. But his release of Strategic Petroleum Reserves did demonstrate to Americans feeling oppressed by inflation that he was using his power on their behalf. In his opening phase as president, a career legislator sometimes struggled to remember that a presidency can be defined by these daily snapshots.

Does this picture of Biden's revival exaggerate the strategic coherence of a process that in practice was more haphazard? Probably it does. Will much of his momentum dissipate if Republicans succeed in taking back both chambers of Congress in two months? Undoubtedly. Is it a mystery why it took an uncommonly experienced White House staff — filled with veterans of the last two Democratic administrations — so long to organize around a strategy? Emphatically.

For the moment, however, Biden is looking smarter than many of the people who said he wasn't smart enough for the job.