

The Trailer: Biden invites the left in

By [David Weigel](#)

In this edition: Biden's offer to the left, good news for Republicans from California, and a good poll for the president that's also a bad poll for the president.

You only get one chance to name a “-gate” after a politician, so you've got to make it count. This is The Trailer.

The Democratic primary had been over for weeks when Varshini Prakash, the 26-year-old president of the Sunrise Movement, first got the offer. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and former vice president Joe Biden had agreed to create “unity task forces,” one of them focused entirely on climate change. Would Prakash, who helped popularize the Green New Deal, want to join?

She had to think about it.

“We sort of conferred with movement leaders, and with [New York Rep.] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's team,” Prakash said in an interview. “We wanted to move in lockstep. And in more recent interviews and conversations, I'd seen Biden step up the way that he talks about the climate crisis.”

Prakash and Ocasio-Cortez both decided to [join the climate group](#), one of six announced Tuesday. At the exact moment that the Trump campaign is launching new ads that portray Biden as a dangerous left-winger, the Democrat's campaign was putting prominent left-wing activists into new roles, with a one-month mandate to meet and help shape his policies. Biden, who [had ignored](#) many activists' litmus tests and won anyway, had decided to invite some into the tent. The conventional wisdom of presidential politics, that candidates move toward the base in the primary and move away in the general, had been torn up over a marathon of Zoom calls.

“What has to happen is coming up with policies that people can get excited about, and believe in,” said Faiz Shakir, Sanders's campaign manager, who helped hammer out the working groups and their invitees. “This is not a knock on him, but Joe Biden did not win the nomination with a robust policy platform. There was a sense of comfort and security about him, as someone who sat in that seat next to Barack Obama. So he's got of room now to flesh out his agenda.”

For the second time, Sanders has lost a presidential primary but retained a role in shaping the platform of a party he declines to join. In 2016, that meant campaigning through June to get an influential bloc of

delegates at the national convention. This year, it has led to a tentative delegate deal with Biden — party rules will strip Sanders of some delegates without one — and an elevated role for left-wing activists who did not support him.

If Prakash was skeptical, some activists were downright scornful. In his first column for the socialist magazine *Jacobin*, former Sanders adviser David Sirota [mocked](#) the task force rollout as “an SNL skit,” pure performance by a candidate whose real preferences were revealed over decades of votes. Biden could endorse the message bills already introduced by left-wing members of Congress, on everything from housing guarantees to Medicare-for-all. Instead, as Sirota saw it, he had set up some committees.

“They are a mix of party dinosaurs, corporate zombies and some terrific progressive voices,” Sirota wrote of the group members, “and we are asked to earnestly evaluate and applaud the complexion of the task forces, as if they are a genuine endeavor. As if they are something truly real.”

The task forces do give Biden's allies more clout; each has five members picked by Biden and three picked by Sanders. The climate task force exists alongside groups on criminal justice restructuring, immigration, health care, education and the economy. Some of those mandates overlap, and the absence of a foreign policy group was the first thing both sides disagreed on.

Yet just as the 2016 platform committee included some Clinton allies who agreed partially with Sanders, the new task forces often give majorities to people who had disagreed with Biden. Five members of the health-care group support Medicare-for-all: the bill's House author, Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.); Medicare-for-all caucus member Rep. Robin L. Kelly (D-Ill.); SEIU President Mary Kay Henry; and former gubernatorial candidates Don Berwick and Abdul El-Sayed. A sixth member, Sherry Glied, supports an Australia-style universal Medicaid system. Advocacy for Biden's own primary position — that Medicare-for-all would be too expensive and undermine the gains of the Obama years — is shunted to the margins.

“There's one argument that if you're not going to get the whole enchilada, you should just keep pushing from the outside,” said El-Sayed, who lost the Democratic primary for governor in Michigan in 2018 to now-Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. “But the argument that's persuasive to me is that personnel is policy. And we need progressives at the table pushing on the decisions that are being made. Because you can and should do both.”

Membership on any pre-election committee does not, of course, mean a role in the next administration. Chris Christie [found that out](#) the hard way in 2016, managing a transition team for the Trump campaign only to have it taken away after the election. For much of the Democratic primary, climate hawks pointed to Biden's donors from the energy industry to argue that he could not deliver on a real green agenda, and for the past few weeks, critics have [denounced the role](#) of former treasury secretary Larry Summers, who

is blamed on the left for curtailing the 2009 stimulus bill and hobbling the Obama presidency. (Summers, in the loop of Biden advisers, was not added to any group.)

But many on the left agreed with Shakir: Biden simply did not come to the nomination with an entrenched circle of advisers or a do-or-die policy agenda. The candidate often referred to himself as a “bridge” between a Trump cleanup effort and the Democratic Party's future, to be determined later. One of the Sanders picks for the economy group was Stephanie Kelton, an advocate of “[modern monetary theory](#),” which posits that government spending and deficits don't matter to a country that controls its own currency. Summers had called that “voodoo.”

Sanders's 2016 team felt, he said, “that the Clinton folks operated with a bit of a grudge, a little bit of a chip on their shoulder, and were not always excited to negotiate with Bernie's team,” Shakir said, and there was tension. “That was not present whatsoever between us and the Biden campaign.”

Republicans reacted to all of it with amazement. The Republican National Committee called Biden a “bannerman for the socialist agenda,” thanks to the role he found for Ocasio-Cortez. After dispatching her wing of the party, complicating a Republican plan to use her against down-ballot Democrats, Biden had given Ocasio-Cortez an official campaign role.

Biden did so at a time when he led the president in an average of polls and ran behind recent Democratic nominees only with young voters and some nonwhite voters: the people these issue groups are designed to bring back in, some of whom voted for third parties in 2016. Howie Hawkins, the favorite to win the Green Party's presidential nomination, said that the Biden campaign was a natural outgrowth of what happened to the “Green New Deal” itself — from a specific effort to remake the economy and end the use of fossil fuels to a pleasant-sounding brand name.

“Look at the Sanders campaign and all the effort they put into getting changes to the Democratic platform in 2016,” Hawkins said, arguing that leftists would not actually get anything from Biden.

Activists did worry about being co-opted, then ignored, if they took this deal. But it was the best one they were being offered. The same day that Prakash's name appeared on the working group list, she [published an essay](#) on Medium that ran through her concerns, from Biden's donors to whether the candidate had taken a sexual misconduct allegation seriously enough. She was not “confident” that Biden would act on her advice. What she knew was that a group that once chanted “no middle ground” on climate, a rebuke of an anonymous Biden adviser's 2019 comments, would be in an even weaker position if Biden lost.

“When we say we have 10 years to completely transform our society and economy to stop climate change, we mean it,” Prakash wrote. “We cannot afford another four years of Donald Trump pushing us backward.”