

# The Biden Administration

Teneo Insights / January 22, 2021



**Kevin Kajiware (KK):** Well, good day, everyone. Thank you for joining today's edition of Teneo Insights. I'm Kevin Kajiware, Co-President of Teneo Political Risk Advisory. Well, whatever timeframe you choose, four years, two and a half months, two weeks even, yesterday's events marked a dramatic departure, a speech focusing on unity, possibility and leveling with the American people, rather than carnage. The majestic tableau of four out of the six living presidents standing together, Vice President Harris and all of the overdue firsts that she represents, even the quotidian holding of a press conference last night, that was marked by polite matter of factness rather than blood sport combat. The effect was jarring, and I think all the more so when you consider all of that was normal just four years ago. And it makes you wonder what four more years would have wrought.

But beyond yesterday's pomp and pageantry, and even welcome if late displays of bipartisanship, I say the sobering reality looms large. 400,000 dead, 200,000 plus new cases per day, millions unemployed still, the U.S. image in the world tarnished, a bitterly divided body politic, and a nation that's exhausted, concerned,

## **Steve Clemons**

Executive Chairman of Editor-at-Large of The Hill  
[steve.clemons@teneo.com](mailto:steve.clemons@teneo.com)

## **Orson Porter**

Teneo Senior Managing Director and Government Affairs Expert  
[orson.porter@teneo.com](mailto:orson.porter@teneo.com)

## **Kevin Kajiware**

Co-President, Political Risk Advisory  
[kevin.kajiware@teneo.com](mailto:kevin.kajiware@teneo.com)

and cynical, and our Capitol, an armored fortress. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have their work cut out for them, for sure.

And here today to help us consider what they're going to do about all of this, I'm joined by two veterans of this call. Steve Clemens is Editor-at-Large at The Hill. Previously he was Editor-at-Large at The Atlantic, where he was also the Editor-in-Chief of Atlantic Live, the magazine's event series. Steve's uniquely respected in the Beltway where he's known for his celebrated blog, The Washington Note. And my colleague, Orson Porter, Teneo's Senior Managing Director. He's the Head of our DC office and Government Affairs Practice. Earlier, he was the U.S. Director of Government and Public Affairs for Nike, and before that served in the White House as Special Assistant to President Bill Clinton.

And just to brag about my colleague a little bit, Orson and his team have been consistent and clear in their calls throughout the election process and its aftermath, and they've helped many of our clients navigate a remarkably challenging period. So, I would say, if you haven't engaged with them directly, you should. If you have any questions for either of my guests today, please use the moderator chat function on your screen, and we'll try to incorporate that into our conversation.

So, gentlemen, here we are at the dawn of a new administration that may prove pivotal really in determining what kind of country America wants to be going forward and the role it's going to play. Now, our purpose here today is to look forward. But Steve, I'd like to hear your perspective on what's transpired since the election and what that means for the new administration. You were here with us last August, so a lifetime ago, but maybe set the table a little bit and give us the context as you see it.

**Steve Clemens (SC):** First of all, great to be with you, Kevin. I love doing these Teneo Insight forums and I'll do anything with Orson Porter. And good to see all of you online. I know many, I want to thank all my second and third cousins in Texas and Oklahoma for joining today. I see you all online. But I want to start by saying that I think we need to be humble in this time of, as we try and analyze and look at what happened, there's a lot that we're not going to know how it plays out. And there are a lot, we don't know where to necessarily draw the line. We saw an assault triggered by the President of the United States on the legislative branch of government. And that hasn't happened for a while.

And a lot of folks, I've been talking to, conservative media as well as media on the left, but a lot of folks are saying, "Hey, not all 74 million people were there assaulting the legislative branch of government." So, we've got to be cautious with how we draw lines and how we depict folks in this time. And I totally agree with that. What I will say is that the election and what happened on that election, which also hasn't received the notice it could, other than the fact that Donald Trump thought there was something amiss, is that the down-ballot races in this race went far more Republican than many expected if Donald Trump was going to lose this election. I wasn't surprised at all. If you look at the polls out there, Donald Trump's likeability was so low, even among Republicans, that it didn't surprise me at all that folks would vote for Joe Biden and then vote down ticket for a disproportionate share of Republicans that came in and did better than expected.

So now we're in a situation which is fascinating, and everybody sees it, where you've got a 50/50 split. I think that Georgia proved to be center of the universe, fascinating earthquake that once Georgia had gone for Joe Biden, I think a lot of groups that had sat on the sidelines for generations, who didn't think

that their vote mattered, who thought that, particularly the black community thought that the cards were stacked against them in that state with Stacey Abrams' leadership, were able to not only replicate what happened in the state going for Joe Biden, but actually draw more people out for a special election than a presidential election. I don't think a lot of people have focused on that extraordinary turnout in Georgia that then sealed the split Senate between Democrats and Republicans, and of course, democratic control.

So, we're in a very new world, there's that Hamilton line, "The world turned upside down." Well, the world turned a quarter way. I think that there's still a lot of challenges out there. There are still bubbles where people see that their aspirations are driven by very different things. There's no consensus in the country right now about where it needs to go. There continue to be these filter bubbles where people see and read things that are completely alien to their neighbors, depending on their political perspectives. But I think right now we're in a moment for a reset. Joe Biden, I thought did an extraordinary job in his inaugural speech. And then of course, Amanda Gorman, oh, my god. What an incredible moment to put wings on Joe Biden's speech. It was uplifting. It's a great moment. It's time for a reset.

And I think that we'll have to see how the 74 million people respond. But there's going to be some X percentage of them that are going to give Joe Biden an opportunity to hear them, to talk to them, to meet them where they are. And Biden is going to have to try to deemphasize these big meta issues of what's going on in this nation that doesn't impact people's lives, and really try to impact where people are on COVID, on their rents, on their job situation, on the economic impact, on the tensions in the nation, and trying to affect people's real lives. And I think that's what the Biden team is trying to do now. So, I'll shush up there, but those are the quick pieces I see.

**KK: So, let's get to the brass tacks then a little bit, Orson. While the Senate confirmed Avril Haines as the Director of National Intelligence last night, beyond that, none of the positions requiring Senate confirmation have yet gone through. That's a recent historical low and I would say another product of the recent turmoil. Meanwhile, President Biden swore in a thousand plus officials not requiring confirmation last night and signed 17 executive actions. So, set aside even the first hundred days here, how is the first week or so going to play out in your view?**

**Orson Porter (OP):** Absolutely. Well, thanks for having me on, Kevin, and thanks for the kudos. As my grandmother would say, taking too much credit will put you in debt. So, I will not do that. But to answer your question directly, I think there are a lot of things to take into account. One is how Biden came into office, the ongoing discussion of the impeachment, but probably the most important thing that I think level sets or wipes away the concern of not having or just having one Cabinet member is COVID. You saw the swearing in yesterday was done virtually, which is the first time ever. So, you have to ask yourself, even if a lot of these Cabinet members were there, what would be the difference? Most of the federal government is working from home. Most of the decisions are being made virtually. And I got to think that the folks that he has in the acting positions with the deputy secretaries and the staffs that are being put in place, as you saw with signing the large amount of executive orders, that was a record amount of executive orders in the first half an hour he walked into the Oval Office.

So, I don't think there will be any major delay in moving things forward in DC. I think there may be a delay on how this community and others may connect into Washington, but all that means nothing if this administration can't get their arms around the COVID discussion. They made a proclamation that they will have

vaccinated 100 million people in 100 days. And I think the American public are going to hold them to that. All of the things said during the campaign have been washed away as people often said of President Trump, "You're speaking as though you're not in charge, but you are." The Biden team is in charge. And I think people, particularly through these winter months, will have a very short honeymoon with this administration if they do not address the major issue, which is COVID.

And I think you have to give kudos to this administration. I think they used the transition fairly well to speak to and the daily briefings they did in the transition. And lo and behold, I hear Dr. Fauci is presenting this evening in the daily briefing. And today, look for the president in the Oval Office to talk about their COVID plan, and more importantly, talk about ways to use the Defense Production Act and other means or tools that he may have. But they know it doesn't matter about any other Cabinet members or anything they do if they don't get their arms around this COVID pandemic.

**KK: Yeah. I think that's absolutely clear. And news reports this morning are coming out that are a bit concerning that they are essentially inheriting no real vaccination plan. We've seen the disarray, particularly on the final mile of vaccine distribution just in the last few weeks, but it sounds like they're almost back at square one on that front. So, it's clear that controlling the pandemic and therefore managing the economy within that context are the immediate priorities under the overall umbrella of priorities that President Biden has articulated, climate change, inequality, and restoring the U.S.'s role as a responsible leader on the world stage. But Steve, talk to us about the administration's priorities and how you see those actually being manifested in policy going forward within this overall umbrella that Orson's talking about.**

**SC:** Yeah. I think Orson framed it brilliantly and correctly. I would say the following. The administration is doing a couple of things right on the forefront, which is, I call it not just a reset, but this feels like whiplash in the sense that every major initiative, the Muslim ban, building the wall, rolling back Arctic national wildlife, oil and gas leases, Keystone pipeline, you go down the line of the big marquee moments of the Trump administration that were put into place by executive order, and I want to talk about executive orders in a second, but Joe Biden has either stopped funding or reversed those measures coming out of the shoot here and has done it in mass. And they prepared for this. They've come in. So, there is a moment where Donald Trump's agenda is being wiped off the face of the planet in the sense that that's what they're doing with all the non-legislative assertive things he did by executive order on environment, on population. That's before you get to COVID. So that's Part One.

Part Two, as Orson said, COVID is everything. And I think one of the interesting challenges that every president has to make, and I'm going to make a friendly critique of President Obama who came in, if you remember, 12 years ago, amidst the 2008, 2009 financial crisis. And you come down to a moment where you make a decision, as I think Obama did. Do you save New York and the heart attack it's having, and bailout the financial industry and many of those firms that had been complicit in the subprime crisis? Or do you go, and you find measures to robustly help the person on the street and Main Street? And I think that they're in that same situation right now is they're dealing with COVID. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, there are big players out in COVID, and the Operation Warp Speed and the Trump administration had spent eons of dollars on various things. But as I was on the phone last night with Jeff Zients and various members of the president's COVID advisory team, which is coming together and being formally appointed today.



And listening to them, there was a lot of money, a lot of positioning, not a lot of organization, not a lot of strategy, not a discussion of the last mile, not a discussion of where were we weak and strong in terms of production. That's why today they're going to be talking about using the Defense Production Act across the various need items and the various vital points of distribution, looking at not just vaccines, but PPE for which there continued to be perceived shortages. And so, I think that what I'm seeing is the Biden team has to decide whether it is meek or whether it is bull. It has to decide whether this is a time to be Roosevelt and rewire the social contract with communities that have been hardest hit by this COVID crisis.

And that's why while we talk about vaccines and we talk about reaching out to people, they are simultaneously extending the moratorium on renter evictions until the end of March. They're asking for up to \$10,000 worth of student loan debt to be wiped out and to have a suspension on payment of principal and interest on student loans until the end of September. And plus looking at how do they go and prioritize communities of color and other vulnerable communities in America in the vaccine distribution rollout. So, all of those elements are part of the priority of their team and where they want to go.

**KK: So I want to pick up on something you just said there, Steve, with regards to going bold, in a sense, because Orson yesterday was all about the traditional peaceful transfer of power and we saw the bipartisan display of comity, but here's the reality, right? I mean, there's certain things that the president can do by executive action that Steve has already enumerated. But ultimately, if you're going to go bold, it requires legislative participation. And the House is more narrowly split than before. The Senate is as close as it gets. So how do you see the legislative agenda gearing up? It seems that Biden wants to start with**

**stuff with broad, popular support and force Republicans to publicly say no, but how do you see it? I mean, especially, to kind of go to what Steve was alluding to, on the fiscal front and doing more for the American worker or doing more for small businesses and the like, and they've gotten the help from the Fed Chairman Jerome Powell that's essentially indicated rates are not going up anytime in the near future. So how much cooperation can they expect out of Congress at this point?**

**OP:** Let me start off by saying the magic number of 656 days until the midterm elections. Let me say that again. 656 days to the next midterm elections, where you'll have 20 Republican senators on the ballot, where you'll have some very key Senate races in swing states like Georgia, Pennsylvania, Florida, Wisconsin, Arizona. So here we go again. And when we do this call this time next year, it'll be all about that. So, I think the legislative window is relatively short because of the margin. I think that, as you rightly said and Steve said, the responsibility to go bold, particularly on this COVID bill, would be the wise thing to do and then to follow that up in a bipartisan manner on an infrastructure bill or a jobs bill would be the right move. Moving forward on immigration or energy policy maybe a bit harder, but as we move into the next year, things will get a lot harder to get done.

What I do like, and what I've seen is that the first thing Biden did before he did anything yesterday is he went to church with Mitch McConnell, Minority Leader now, McCarthy, as well as his Democratic colleagues. And then of course, today or tomorrow, he's going to be hosting a meeting with all of those figures in the Oval Office, which never happened, or rarely happened during the Trump administration. And even through the crisis of COVID, I think President Trump and Nancy Pelosi, might have met one or two times in the last year and a half in person.

Biden is a creature of DC, served in DC for nearly four decades or more, has been in the White House. He knows that, as I said, that number 656 days is a short window. And if he doesn't build some bipartisan energy around "How do we get our arms around this COVID bill and, more importantly, put people back to work," then he knows that everything else becomes much more difficult. So, a home run on whatever they do related to COVID, and I think they would be lucky legislatively to hit a couple of singles or maybe a double. But after the summer or fall of this year, I think things get a lot more complicated because both sides are looking at how. More importantly, they're not going to want to give any big wins to the Biden team. And everyone's looking at that alarm clock, force the midterm elections on it, how do we take back the House or the Senate?

**SC:** Kevin, can I pick on something that Orson says really important. Of all the calls that I've been on now with the Biden team, one of the things they keep emphasizing is getting people back to work, getting our health guardrails in place, getting this stuff down so people can get back to work. And get kids into schools, particularly K through eighth grade. They are looking at it as a huge priority because they connect it to the economy. Now if you go out as I do and you swim in some of the conservative chat rooms and TikTok, and look at some of the conservatives on Twitter that are still allowed to be on Twitter, you know, you look in they are obsessed with getting kids back in schools.

So sometimes people ask me, "How is Joe Biden going to connect and solve it?" This is one of these sort of subterranean elements of getting people back to work, getting kids back in schools, where there's the possibility, again, that Joe Biden is going to be able to seduce some of those who opposed him by moving that into a top position. So, I just want to give echo to something Orson said.

**KK:** Although it's interesting to note, New York made the heroic effort of getting the country's largest school districts to reopen for this academic year. And because, even though we had flattened the curve pretty dramatically, but because the pandemic's still raging, only about 30% or so of families opted to send their kids back to school. In other words, no matter if you open the schools or not, if you open restaurants and businesses or not, while the pandemic rages, many people are going to self-opt out of participating in those things until they feel safe with their families.

**SC:** No doubt that's right. Yeah.

**KK:** Yeah. And so just going back to Orson, I just want to touch base here on the bottom line of what you're saying, you brought up the number 656 days. I'll bring up another number, which is a half a million, which is now the death toll, though it is expected I guess by the end of February or so on the pace that we're going. So, you can't have economic recovery until you have flattened this curve out, which means we're not really talking about stimulus here. We're talking about survival in terms of fiscal legislation. So are you saying, I understand, and I don't want to give big wins necessarily to the Biden administration. We saw how tough this was during the lame duck period to even get anything through. But are you saying they will step up here or is there going to be this rediscovery of fiscal hawkishness that will prevent a big number from going through?

**OP:** Well, I think both sides will give each side a honeymoon of sorts, particularly through the lens of COVID. I think what Steve said is brilliant, related to getting kids back to school, and more importantly, getting people back to work and through the lens of what the Biden team is mostly union workers back. And that's why you're hearing tying into the Buy America

discussions, etc. So, through the lens of COVID, I think anything is possible. And I think that is the magnet that brings a bipartisan spirit that hasn't been seen before in DC. But once they get through COVID and once we turn the corner, then I think things will get a little bit more difficult in having that kumbaya moment in DC.

**KK: Meanwhile, Steve, another thing standing in the way of the kumbaya moment, at some point, Speaker Pelosi needs to send the article of impeachment to the Senate for trial. Now it's unprecedented to have a second trial. It's unprecedented to have a trial for a president who's already left office. I'm sure that in many ways, many people want this to just go away. At the same time, the events of January 6th and what led up to that simply cannot be ignored. How do you see this playing out? And how costly will this be in terms of precious legislative time that Orson has said the clock is already ticking on? And how constantly in terms of whatever bi-partisan honeymoon comity that there is?**

**SC:** Look, at the risk that online, there are former parliamentarians of the Senate. I used to work in the Senate. I used to feel like I knew how the Senate worked, but there are so many little odd twists and turns of what can happen. But my experience is that once those articles go over, that they are privileged and take priority over all other Senate business. What we've been seeing play out in the press coverage of this is a way to create, whether business or various forms of different named sessions that you can create two tracks so that Biden's agenda, that Biden's nominations, that various other bits of important business of getting the government up and running, which he does not want to have stalled right now.

As you said, they've done more executive orders. And again, why are they doing these executive orders? Because Donald Trump did

executive orders and Barack Obama actually set the precedent of doing major executive orders. This is unusual for those of us who look at how law is set into place, but nonetheless, we're in executive order land and they're front loading so much of what they're doing now, but there are going to be other elements, particularly the spending dimensions of this they're going to have to pass. So, they need appointments and they need money, and those you can't do by executive order.

And so, I think there is going to be a trial. There are going to be people who try to raise their brand by saying, "This is unprecedented. It shouldn't happen." Tom Cotton is doing that right now. We'll see what Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz do. And whether they play the large roles they have up to now, because I think they're paying a price for their previous roles. But I think that they're going to try to get this impeachment thing done, processed fast, and not be lagged. We were talking earlier with Orson, who said they could do it on a Friday, Saturday, Sunday, get it done and do a three-day deal and get it over.

And I suspect that's where the Biden people want this to go, though they don't have total control either because I think right now the question is making someone and making President Trump pay a price for an insurrection sparked by him and targeted at the U.S. Capitol, that it's hard to shove under the rug the fact that people died and that there is alleged evidence that there was sort of a search and capture and kill element among some of those that were up there. I'm not saying that that was the entire party, but I am saying that that happened in this country. And no matter what of those people who want to kind of complain, "Well, that doesn't sound like unity to me," you have to blow the whistle and have people pay consequences for some of what happened if they're complicit. And so, I think this is going to be something that takes some time, but I think everyone right now on the Biden side of the

equation, and I imagine some Republicans feel that way as well, don't want this to become a month long effort.

**KK: Do you guys anticipate that there will be or that there should be any consequences for members of Congress who supported the line that the election was stolen? Or is that purely something to be dealt with in 656 days' time in the midterm elections?**

**OP:** I mean, you saw the corporate response on reviewing or pausing, in some cases even deleting contributions, which in DC on K Street is a big deal, on Main Street may not mean much. But I think your point is right, Kevin, in that elections matter. And we'll see what happens. One thing I would highlight on the impeachment thing where I think both sides are concerned was yesterday, you had a really awful day here in DC and there wasn't a whole lot of discussion about Trump other than him departing that morning. When this impeachment trial begins, I think it's going to give him another opportunity to be on the news, in the news, and not only for the Biden team it takes away the microphone, but it will do the same for McConnell and the Republicans. And my team in DC hear me say this once a day, but media drives policy. And if Trump is caring, if the impeachment travels beyond three days and it becomes a full week or so, giving him that megaphone, again only will empower him with his base. And I don't think that's what either side is looking to do is to give him another opportunity to be a part of the cycle here in DC, particularly through the lens of media.

**KK: Orson, you just brought up the corporate response to some of these members of Congress. And I just want to stick with corporate America for a moment here, because with every new administration, corporate America needs to recalibrate its approach to how it deals with that administration. And I know**

**you and your team have been advising companies throughout the interregnum, but here we are, new administration is underway. So what are you advising and have norms been shattered at all, or is all really ultimately noise, and we adjust to the new personalities and priorities, but ultimately things sort of return to normal in terms of the cadence of interacting with the administration and how they engage the Biden administration directly, and frankly, more broadly in terms of how they're signaling their intentions?**

**OP:** That's a great question. Steve, feel free to jump in on this. I've been telling folks that figuring out the Biden administration is pretty easy, not very complicated in that we know what the four filters are that they care about, which is COVID, clean energy, labor, and social justice. And I tell clients that if you cannot figure out a way to plug into those four pillars, you need to come up with a plan. And if you don't have a way to plug into those four filters, then you're really putting yourself at a competitive disadvantage on even being considered for an audience when administration is solely focused on how to address this pandemic.

So, on the clean energy side, you saw four or five or six executive orders related to that. Labor, I think it was really telling to see the statue behind the president's desk, which was Cesar Chavez, which tells you immediately that he knows how important the labor community is to him, and you will definitely hear, as I mentioned earlier, a lot of talk about the Buy America programs, and more importantly, the impact that labor community will have on trade in general. And then social justice, everything they do, I think, mandated through the agencies will have a filter of how are we improving our backyards in our communities?

So, clients need to figure out ways to have programs that support those things. The easy lay-up things that people should be considering



if they haven't already done is, as soon as a Cabinet member is confirmed, sending a handwritten note is a smart thing to do, as well as commending the President or the Vice President for their speeches or their election in general. The other thing is once Mitch McConnell and Schumer come up with a plan, there may be some new committee chairs. Be certain that you do the same on a handwritten note to a committee chair, if you need to have outreach to congressional leaders.

And then more importantly, as we've seen that has really kind of changed DC, and I think Trump was a big part of that was really embracing social media. I saw a lot of CEOs send notes out about breaking the glass ceiling yesterday or commending the administration for their rejoining the Paris Climate Accords. But when you think through the lens of social justice, February is Black History Month, I will boldly predict that the administration will spend a lot of time on social justice in Black History Month. And you have a few weeks now to come up with a plan, but if you really want to plug in and get intention with this administration, you should really be thinking about those dates, but more importantly, filter your activities or your outreach around the four pillars that I mentioned. COVID, energy/environment, labor and social justice.

**SC:** I agree 100,000% with everything Orson said. The only thing I would add, I've been talking to Ernie Moniz, the former Secretary of Energy, about an idea that he's been floating out there of an energy jobs coalition that fits what Orson is talking about, that would look at green energy in the country, look at grids, look at the whole. It's part infrastructure, but it's part Works Progress Administration jobs plan to get people back to work during a time of crisis. And what I like and find interesting about what Orson just said is this administration has a lot to do, and what they're going to need to do is to fill in platitudes with detail and substance and plans and strategy. And I think that to the

degree that industry and corporations can come in with ideas and tweaks on these things that make them more practical and real, as opposed to ideological positioning, they will be welcome. And it's a good way to kind of create bridges.

**KK:** Steve, Orson made a statement a few minutes ago, "Media drives policy." So, I want to take advantage of the fact that you're a member of the media, and you're here, and ask you a little bit about this. But before we get to the general media, I want to focus on social media for one second, because a few weeks ago when Twitter and Facebook, essentially, and others cut President Trump off, there was amongst a sizeable portion of population, a 'it's about time' kind of a reaction, or 'it should have happened a long time ago' type of reaction. But very shortly thereafter, there was the hangover of, wait a minute, a couple of senior executives at a couple of companies un-elected and un-accountable had the power to essentially silence the most powerful position in the world. Now, obviously that was because a president opted to not use traditional means of communication, but nonetheless, it was a remarkable exercise of power.

**How do you see that kind of playing out? And was it a jarring enough occurrence that Congress is going to be compelled to act at some point here?**

**SC:** Well, look, I think Congress is going to act, and it's not going to act in a headway on way on just the element of censorship or free speech on Twitter. But some things came out, as you just laid out quite nicely. Various measures of the spread of mistruths and lies in the U.S. market show that there was a 73% drop in essentially the propagation of conspiracy theories, lies, mistruths once Donald Trump was shut down. It's a remarkable echo chamber that he had created that went out. And so, you look at that and say, "Wow, well, they

figured out what they needed to do to kind of get a healthier ecosystem there.” At the same time, as you said, there are a lot of complexities in that. Is the power to censor anyone, but on top of that the truth remains that Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin and the Supreme Leader of Iran all have their Twitter accounts, despite the outrageous things here.

So, I think that there is going to be a focus on these kinds of questions, connected to a battle which has got to get solved. When Europe set up its GDPR on privacy rights and on essentially what the social contract is between social media, government regulation, and consumers in Europe, California did the same thing with a privacy standard. So, I think the broad side of social media connected to privacy regulations, that whole is going to be connected together in a broad discussion. And there has largely been bipartisan understanding that something had to be done and that it needs to be on the priority of the new Congress. There's no consensus at all on what should be done. But I guess that's the nature of our political system.

People right now are astounded by the power of the tech companies. I think they're uncomfortable that Josh Hawley is going to have the next big book attacking big tech. And, so it's one of these things where one of the dimensions we haven't talked about is the degree to which, I've been looking at the Joe Manchins, the centrists, in both parties that are possibly going to be able to move things along. But you've got Bernie Sanders and Josh Hawley that agree on a lot more than some of the folks in the center agree. So, when it comes to these questions of power, large corporations, and censorship, it's going to be on the docket, but I don't know which way it'll go, but it will definitely not sit untouched.

**KK: And is there any sense in the traditional media world having to balance what will probably be, in a certain sense, a little bit**

**more of a boring administration, if we can refer to them, and I mean that in a good way. But that media it's not just the New York Times and the Washington Post and The Hill and Politico and Axios all competing with each other. They're also competing against much more fragmented outlets and outlets that are ostensibly real news but aren't like RT or the self-disclosures of political figures themselves via social media. I mean, media played a role in enabling all of this in a sense. Is there a reckoning here? Do you anticipate any kind of a change or how do you see the media role evolving?**

**SC:** Look, it's a big question. I see media continuing to fragment, to evolve, to be different. Look, I'm not one, I mean, I believe that the big flagship enterprises, you can look at them at the New York Times, the New Yorker, The Atlantic, The Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post largely did an excellent job, but also, as a blogger, as an early political blogger in the mid-2000s, I used to want to compete with them because I found them homogenized, lazy, left a lot of stuff on the cutting room floor. I think the standard has risen, but competition in media is a good thing. It is a good thing to have many, many different sources, but we need to have a higher standard ourselves where we don't allow the media to become the story so much, which I think did happen a lot during the Trump administration, all of the hurt feelings about Trump calling folks fake news and whatnot.

But look, I think in the end, my belief is that fragmented media, a competitive media is a good thing, but let me just rob everyone of an illusion. We need to be very careful of saying that the Biden camp is going to be a boring camp or that there's going to be a natural and easy, and I saw Susan Glasser's great piece that this is all going to go back to normal and we're going to hear truth and fact. I'm not so sure. I have a lot of respect for the Biden team, but I remember the Obama administration with

David Axelrod, Robert Gibbs, Valerie Jarrett, Rahm Emmanuel. They were considered to be the four horsemen. They were rewarding media that wrote nice things about them and they were blocking media that were not writing nice things about them.

Ed Luce wrote a piece about this in the Financial Times that almost no one touched until I said, "Why isn't anybody commenting about this?" That all four of these individuals at that time had done things where they were clearly rewarding and giving access to those that were stroking their egos and blocking those that weren't. And so, we need to see how the Biden team operates. We need to see whether they give access to the people calling them out on things or who are skeptical because it's our job to be dispassionate and objectively distant in our writing and reporting. And I worry a little bit about the depictions of this new love affair, after two days of the Biden administration and things getting back to normal.

I don't welcome that because I want to make sure that we remain as dispassionately objective in reporting about Biden as we would on anyone. I think the question that you get into is are there some media that are corrupt, that are seduced by power and privilege and access, and we need to call that out as well. So, I know that's a bit long-winded. I feel strongly on this issue of making sure that everyone knows that our job is to be as objectively distant and fair in our reporting about Biden as we were, as at least part of us were, on Trump and Obama.

**KK: Yeah, that's a totally fair point. Thanks for that. Orson, one could argue that the ascension of Joe Biden in this moment of profound polarization in the country, means that the winner is actually those who hate polarization the most, those are in the center. But it seems to me that there's a reckoning coming in both the Republican party and the Democratic party. And how do**

**you see that playing out? We have 656 days as you say to the midterm elections, but how much of these internal battles is going to play out in this first 100 plus days of the Biden administration and how will that impact the agenda?**

**OP:** Yeah, it's a great question. I think, I'm sure you're going to roll your eyes, Kevin, when I say this, but thinking of my home state of Wisconsin and Milwaukee in particular, all people want are results. All people want to do is see action. And people want to feel as though their taxes mean something and their government is responsible. And they're tired, absolutely tired, and in many ways that's why Trump was elected, of seeing the partisan breaks of DC.

So to answer your question, if the Biden team is able to be bold in a bipartisan way and completely turn the corner on COVID and get kids back in school, make certain that doctors and first responders have all of the PPE products they need, the economy starts to pick up not just on Wall Street but on Main Street, then I think there's unlimited possibilities of both sides taking credit and rebuilding, retooling their parties towards the upcoming presidential election.

But if DC continues to be a place where the only thing you can do, and you saw it yesterday and I think it's a hold-over from Trump, rightly or wrongly, is issue executive orders that are limited in scope, but great, as I said earlier, media drives policy, great for media, then it puts us right back where we were. So, a month from now, if the only thing Biden is talking about is rolling out more executive orders, it's no good for anyone.

But if we're able, these congressional leaders are supposedly meeting in the Oval Office in a couple of days to do something big and bold, and they can go back to their constituents and say, "You know, we heard you, we acted, and hold us responsible on Election Day and

we'll do our jobs," then I think you'll have an honest discussion on how people feel about the various parties.

But right now, I think everyone, even though we had a record amount of turnout, a lot of that turnout was built on passion, not necessarily results.

**KK: Now you've been keeping many of our clients abreast of all of the names that have been added to this administration, both at the highest levels and all the way down into staffing positions and the like. And, Steve, I know you know many of these people. Maybe the two of you could talk a little bit about the administration that is coming together.**

**I know that it's been hailed as the most diverse in history. But when you look through the narrow lens of any individual member, there's always some griping that a particular position is not diverse enough. But obviously, the other notable element of this is how many people have worked with President Biden for so long and know him very well.**

**It appears that this is not a team of rivals. This is a team that has been put together that knows how to execute the vision of the chief executive. Is that a fair assessment? How do you see them all working together? Is this going to be a very smooth operation or are there rivalries that we should be more aware of?**

**SC:** Well, there are some subterranean rivalries, but I think that's not the purpose here. The purpose is, as you laid out, to create a team that can move fast, work together, knows the terrain. I think the first thing that hits, there's a couple of exceptions. Lloyd Austin is an exception. John Kerry who just sent a note out this morning that his new Twitter handle is

@ClimateEnvoy for his new role, which he's come into position today.

There are very few, I don't know what to call it. I don't mean this derisively, but showboaters, big, big names. Usually when presidents come in, we think about President Obama appointing Hillary Clinton to State or George W. Bush bringing Colin Powell into State, you do have the exception of Pete Buttigieg is the only one I can think of right now whom he ran against who got a Cabinet position. But essentially on the whole, particularly in the national security space, which I cover a lot, these are staff members of Joe Biden who were staff members for ages.

So, it is the rise of staffers and empowerment of staffers who know the detail, who know the terrain, who know the structure. And they're not out there secretly harboring a presidential hunt down the road or trying to position or showboat in various ways. So, I think that is the very interesting thing. Really the one, big, flamboyant choice was John Kerry who he knows.

And I think on the world stage right now, because this is going to be a time when global affairs matter, but this administration is going to be so consumed with trying to get the house in order inside America, that it's going to go to Brussels and give NATO a big bear hug. It's going to try to reassure allies. But those people who want to see a big foreign policy and big international agenda, I think are going to be disappointed on the forefront. And the way they're going to want to define America's return to global affairs is by rejoining the World Health Organization, which it is doing as of today, and the Paris Climate Accords.

So, you're right that it's a different kind of administration, and both not only at the principal level, but at the deputy's level, you have people that fill that same bill. So, the bench is going to



be deep of all of those people who know what it means when Joe Biden lifts his eyebrow or twitches his finger. They're going to know which way to run. And that's unusual.

**KK: Yeah. Orson, what are your thoughts on this?**

**OP:** No, I think what Steve has said is exactly right. It's power to the staffer per se. I think clients and people listening would be smart to get to know the agency's chief of staffs, who's making decisions at the Cabinet level. And the previous administration for the most part, DC was focused on the West Wing, particularly the Oval Office and the chief of staff, that has been completely turned on its head. I think with the Biden team and staffers will do their job and staff, and there will be a reporting process.

So, things will go back to maybe the way they were 15, 20 years ago in that when you met with a Cabinet member, it really meant something. And they report into the White House for a decision. So, staffers, everyone that he has put in a powerful position, has held a role as a staffer and knows how the operation works. I think you'll see a lot of things, as you saw yesterday.

Just imagine the fact that they were sworn in two hours and he was in the Oval Office signing executive orders. That's great, but that's really good staff work. And that tells me that people who have been in the White House knew what they were doing, and they pressed play immediately. And I think you'll see that throughout this administration.

**KK: So, Steve, you're our guest, so I want to give you the last word here. You brought up a moment ago for the first time on this call, actually, foreign policy. And I think that reflects the fact that, pick your metaphor, doctor heal thyself and those who live in glass houses shouldn't cast stones, is a critical element of re-establishing U.S.**

**credibility in the world. And obviously, the Blinkens and Sullivans of the world suggest the imperative on the president's part to rebuild the alliances and the like.**

**But give us your sense of the U.S. position in the world and your concern that it's going to take some time to re-establish that credibility, even though we are instantly rejoining Paris, we're instantly rejoining the World Health Organization. We're going to join COVAX etc. But this is a huge moment of opportunity for China and other revisionist and revanchist powers. And it's a huge moment of burden in a sense for Europe and the other allies.**

**SC:** Oh, it's such a big question in the last couple of minutes, but I'll try and hit a couple of headlines. Look, I think the world doesn't trust America right now. I think America, the mystique of America's superpower status in the world, was sheared off by things, not just because of Donald Trump, the Iraq invasion and the aftermath, forever wars, the lack of theming strategy. But I think the biggest thing is that both the 2008, 2009 financial crisis, which made it very hard for Secretary of Treasury Tim Geithner to go tell other countries how to run their economies, well, what we just went through with an assault on the legislative branch and the dispute about our election, is going to make it very tough for other countries to cooperate.

She said that she'd gone to Georgia and tried to tell President Saakashvili to leave office after he had lost an election. And they convinced him, based on America's commitment to the peaceful transfer of power, which we achieved, but through a fight.

I think we're in a tough situation and it's not going to snap back. That what the administration has to do is it has to find causes, right? Global health and climate are going to be two of them, but they're low-hanging fruit.

They're going to be other causes in the world that we're going to need to go arm-in-arm with allies in helping to solve. Finding out what those great purposes are going to be. And through that, to try to assure our allies that we are there with them in their dark days.

And we're going to be tested. A lot of people think it's being tested by China, as you just mentioned, Iran, North Korea, rogue states. We're going to be tested by allies who don't trust their relationship with us. And yes, those are going to move their agendas right now because of the period about America's willingness to be engaged in global problem-solving because of the perception that a big chunk of America is exhausted. Generations of Americans, military families, many of whom supported Donald Trump, felt they fought the Cold War and China won, and they're pissed off about it.

So, I think that the gamble here is not doing national security in a conventional way. What has to happen both abroad and at home is that explanation of America's robust engagement in global affairs matters for our allies, but also delivers returns to regular people in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, or wherever they may be. And that there is a connection between what we're doing abroad that helps Americans in their welfare and their future. And I think that linkage right now is weak. I think Jake Sullivan knows it. I think Tony Blinken knows it. I think Avril Haines knows it. And there's a distrust of us that needs to be turned around that's not going to snap back right away. It's going to take a lot of work.

**KK: Well, you're right. It is a big subject. These are all big subjects. We've only started to scratch the surface and we're going to have to readdress them as we go forward. Because as the remarkable poet, Amanda Gorman, put it yesterday, "Somehow we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished."**

**So, with that, gentlemen, I want to thank you for your time today, Steve Clemons and Orson Porter. We'll be back in two weeks on February 4th. If you have questions for either of these guys, please don't hesitate to reach out to your contacts at Teneo or at [teneoinsights@teneo.com](mailto:teneoinsights@teneo.com).**

**SC:** Thank you.

**KK: Have a great day and all the best for the weekend.**



**Teneo is the global CEO advisory firm.**

Working exclusively with the CEOs and senior executives of the world's leading companies, Teneo provides strategic counsel across their full range of key objectives and issues. Our clients include a significant number of the Fortune 100 and FTSE 100, as well as other global corporations.

Integrating the disciplines of strategic communications, investor relations, digital advisory, diversity & inclusion, management consulting, physical & cyber risk advisory, financial advisory, corporate governance advisory, political risk advisory, and talent advisory, Teneo solves for the most complex business challenges and opportunities.

[teneo.com](https://teneo.com)