Give Joe a Break

Talking about compromise is smart.

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Joe Biden keeps talking about his desire to reach across the aisle and work with Republicans. “With Trump gone, you're going to begin to see things change,” he has said.

And Biden’s liberal critics keep making fun of him for this argument, calling it naïve and delusional. They point out that Republican leaders have demonstrated many times over that they won’t compromise with Democrats — on climate change, health care and many other issues.

They're right about that history. But I’m not so sure that they are right to criticize Biden for saying he wants to work with Republicans.

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In doing so, critics take Biden literally, rather than recognizing that he may be engaging in a bit of political theater. Many voters, after all, remain enamored of the idea of compromise.

In a recent USA Today/Suffolk University poll, “the most frequent suggestion from voters by far was for official Washington to resolve to stop squabbling and work across party lines.” In an NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll, 63 percent of Americans said they wanted elected officials who compromised with people with whom they disagree, while only 31 percent reported preferring politicians who stuck to their positions. Gallup has found a similar gap.

So it’s good politics to praise the value of compromise. As Vox's Jane Coaston has argued on “The Weeds” podcast, Biden is effectively invoking the political style, if not the actual governing agenda, of centrism. “It’s not so much that he is appealing to centrism,” Coaston said. “He’s appealing to the idea of centrism, and the idea of centrism is very popular.”

Plus, Biden is hardly the only Democratic candidate engaging in wishful thinking. Bernie Sanders's claim that a “political revolution” will force Republicans to accept some of his ideas is also fanciful, as the political scientist Jonathan Bernstein points out. “Telling polite fictions is good politics,” Bernstein writes in Bloomberg Opinion.

Whoever the next Democratic president is, he or she will need a strategy for dealing with Republican intransigence. But publicly ruling out the idea of compromise, almost a year and a half before the next election, doesn’t count as a strategy. All good politicians engage in a mix of realism and aspiration.
Even if Biden’s stance is mostly for show, he should be quizzed about how he would get things done in the face of Republican obstruction, The Washington Post’s Greg Sargent writes: “He should be pressed to explain how he’d govern alongside the GOP — what he’d advocate procedurally, or how he’d win Republicans over on, say, immigration when they appear all in with Trump’s nativism.”

Polls show that many Americans oppose specific compromises — on issues like immigration and health care — even as they like the concept of compromise in theory, as CNN’s Grace Sparks has pointed out. That’s another reason vague praise of bipartisanship may not create any long-term problems for a politician.

Michael Tomasky, in The Daily Beast, has the smartest criticism I’ve read of Biden’s paeans to bipartisanship: “We all know that part of him believes this. And when prominent Democrats talk this way, it just makes it harder to convince the remaining open-minded and politically uncommitted people of the truth.”

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