

Democrats hatch secret pay-for-it plan in bid for unity on spending dreams

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Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, joined from left by Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, updates reporters on Democratic efforts to pass President Joe Biden's "Build Back Better" agenda, at the Capitol in Washington, Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021. | J. Scott Applewhite/AP Photo

Democratic leaders are racing to project momentum on turbulent negotiations over President Joe Biden's social spending plans as Congress hurtles toward critical deadlines next week.

So far, though, those last-ditch efforts to tout unity are only fueling more confusion.

Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) and Senate Majority Leader [Chuck Schumer](#) on Thursday delivered a cryptic announcement that they had agreed to "a framework" of options to pay for their social spending ambitions, raising questions in all corners of the party about precisely who had signed off, on what and for how much.

"The White House, the House and the Senate have reached agreement on a framework that will pay for any final negotiation," Schumer told reporters Thursday.

"It's not about a price tag, it's about values," Pelosi added.

The speaker went on to note that not all of the options within the framework could be used: "At the same time, we're finalizing on the outlay side, so if we need more, if we need less, that will impact the choices we make."

House Democrats are planning to mark up the massive package on Saturday, according to Budget Chair [John Yarmuth](#) (D-Ky.).

The remarks from Democratic leaders came after they emerged from a meeting Thursday morning with Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, White House adviser Brian Deese and Congress' top tax writers. But Democratic leaders were notably mum on the details, refusing to say whether that spate of financing ideas will allow them to move forward next week with either their [up-to-\\$3.5 trillion social spending package](#) or the [bipartisan infrastructure plan](#), which House leaders will be forced to vote on Monday or inflame the clash among their own.

Pelosi and Schumer's vague announcement underscores the urgency by Biden and his Hill allies to show some signs of life in the frenetic scramble to revive his legislative agenda, after little visible progress from [the president's half-day summit with key lawmakers](#) Wednesday. Even with next week's vote looming, Democrats' path forward is still murky at best, with moderates and progressives locked in a public standoff over Biden's two spending priorities.

While Pelosi and Schumer cheered what they saw as progress, other Democrats privately panned the announcement, saying it was little more than an effort by leadership to demonstrate momentum without real substance behind it, particularly without the buy-in from key centrists.

A Democratic aide characterized the agreement as a menu of financing options the White House can present to moderates as a way to pay for the multitrillion-dollar spending package the majority party is trying to enact to expand social programs like Medicare, child care subsidies and education assistance.

The White House is hoping to meet with a group of moderate Democrats later Thursday to further discuss the funding framework but nothing had been officially scheduled as of lunchtime, according to multiple Hill sources.

On Thursday, it was unclear even how widespread the financing agreement is or how much information individual members received about it. Aides for both top moderate Democrats and progressive lawmakers said they were not aware of the discussions.

One Democratic aide said the agreement is “more of a sign of unity than substantive,” an effort to make sure the Biden agenda doesn't fall apart completely.

And some moderates made clear they weren't consulted at all. An aide to Sen. [Kyrsten Sinema](#) (D-Ariz.), a key party to any final deal, said of Schumer's announcement: “Unclear what he is referring to. We have seen nothing and have not signed off on anything.”

Late last month, [the House voted to slate the Sept. 27 deadline](#) for bringing the bipartisan infrastructure plan to the floor. Majority party leaders accepted the pressure point as a concession to moderate Democrats, who were threatening to block the chamber from moving forward with the separate party-line spending plan.

Now approaching that trigger point on Monday, the party is still grasping for consensus on the \$3.5 trillion bill — a misalignment that could foil Biden's “two-track” scheme for advancing the larger spending package alongside the bipartisan infrastructure deal.

Democratic leaders are hoping the narrower list, culled from a broader selection of potential funding sources floated by Senate Finance Chair [Ron Wyden](#) (D-Ore.) and House Ways and Means Chair [Richard Neal](#) (D-Mass.), can be used to squeeze some specifics out of centrists.

“We went through important issues to deal with, particularly, tax fairness,” Wyden said of the meeting with Democratic leaders and Yellen. “It went right to the heart of what we need in terms of tax fairness in America.”

So far, powerful moderates including Sinema and Sen. [Joe Manchin](#) (D-W.Va.) have complained about the overall price tag of the social spending plan but have refused to publicly say what topline they would support.

Even though Democrats are planning to pass their spending bill under special rules that allow them to sidestep the filibuster, they still need all 50 Democrats to sign off, meaning Manchin and Sinema are the ultimate arbiters of whatever framework top Democrats are touting as progress.

Senate Budget Chair [Bernie Sanders](#) (I-Vt.) said Democrats could “pay for this whole thing and absolutely make sure” they follow through on Biden’s promise to not increase taxes on families making under \$400,000 a year.

“The truth is, it is not hard to come up with approaches to do away with the tax cap and to demand that the wealthy and large corporations pay their fair share of taxes,” Sanders said Thursday. “You could do a lot more than \$3.5 trillion.”

Burgess Everett and Marianne LeVine contributed to this report.

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