

Democratic Showdown: Kamala vs. Manchin

Spoken in Tulsa on the 100th anniversary of the racial atrocity there, Joe Biden belatedly turned to the issue of voting rights, to explain why he is having such difficulty winning passage of the party's priority legislation.
By Pat Buchanan
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"I hear all the folks on TV saying, 'Why doesn't Biden get this done?'"

"Well, because Biden only has a majority of, effectively, four votes in the House and a tie in the Senate, with two members of the Senate who vote more with my Republican friends."

Biden was referring to Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

"But we're not giving up," Biden hastily added.

"Earlier this year, the House of Representatives passed For the People Act to protect our democracy. The Senate will take it up later this month, and I'm going to fight like heck with every tool at my disposal for its passage.

"To signify the importance of our efforts, today I'm asking Vice President Harris to help ... lead them. ... With her leadership and your support, we're going to overcome again, I promise you. But it's going to take a hell of a lot of work."

Thus did Biden designate Kamala Harris as his field commander in winning Senate passage of a voting rights bill that would cancel out many GOP victories in state legislatures in enacting voting reforms.

Sunday, Harris, who is also Biden's point person on the border crisis, will be in Guatemala to learn what causes Latin American peoples of color to leave the land they were born in and travel 1,000 miles for a chance to live, work and raise their families in a nation established by and for white supremacists.

But when she returns, Harris will face a showdown -- with Joe Manchin.

For Manchin, who has the decisive Democratic vote in the Senate, not only opposes elements of the Democrats' voting rights bill. He has declared that ending the Senate filibuster would "be to destroy our government," and he will never cast a vote to kill it.

In April, Manchin was emphatic in The Washington Post, "There is no circumstance in which I will vote to eliminate or weaken the filibuster."

Yet, as long as that filibuster exists, 60 Senate votes are needed to pass major legislation. And if the filibuster is not eliminated, Democratic voting rights proposals don't have a snowball's chance of being enacted.

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Thus, in publicly handing Harris the portfolio on both the Democrats' voting rights bill and border crisis, Biden may have set up his vice president for a great fall and a major humiliation. Yet, Harris is said to have asked Biden for the assignment.

As for Manchin, he is sitting in the catbird seat in the Democratic Party. He holds the whip hand over both Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Biden. For if the West Virginian refuses to bend or break on the filibuster, then not only will the voting rights bill fail in the Senate, so, too, could gun control, D.C. statehood, climate change, and immigration legislation.

All could suffer the same fate as the Jan. 6 Commission.

The Washington Post reports Senate staffers are saying that there is "panic" in the Democratic caucus that Manchin will stand his ground and refuse to kill the filibuster, no matter the pressure the party puts on him.

Recognition by the White House of the leverage Manchin and Sinema wield was evident in press secretary Jen Psaki's effort to soften Biden's crack about "the two members of the Senate who vote more with my Republican friends."

Psaki brushed aside any suggestion that Biden was being caustic about the two senators saying, "I don't think he was intending to convey anything other than a little bit of commentary on TV punditry."

But the issues and stakes involved are becoming evident to everyone.

A coalition of progressive groups, on Thursday, called on Schumer to hold a Senate vote to kill the filibuster. More than 100 groups sent a letter to the majority leader arguing that the Republican senators who blocked a bill to create a commission to probe the Jan. 6 Capitol attack showed, "it is clearer than ever that the filibuster needs to be eliminated."

The groups added: "We call on you and the Senate Democratic caucus to eliminate the filibuster as a weapon that Sen. McConnell can use to block efforts to defend and strengthen our democracy and make our government work for the American people."

If Joe Manchin holds his ground this June, he will prevail, the filibuster will survive, the For the People Act will die a deserved death, and Joe will become legend in West Virginia.

And if Manchin stands his ground, the big loser is Kamala Harris.