News

A traveler in Los Angeles pulls his rolling luggage behind him Aug. 10 as he walks toward a tr

A traveler in Los Angeles pulls his rolling luggage behind him Aug. 10 as he walks toward a train platform at Union Station. The $1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure includes $66 billion in new funding for passenger and freight rail. It also includes money to rebuild deteriorating roads and bridges and fund new climate change and broadband initiatives. (CNS/Reuters/Bing Guan)



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The bipartisan infrastructure bill passed the Senate this week by the remarkable margin of 69-30, handing President Joe Biden a really big win. What is more, the infrastructure bill is a win at several levels, all of which will help the Democrats as they head into next year's midterm elections.

First and foremost, the bill contains good policy. A trillion dollars is a lot of money and it will translate into a lot of jobs, with good paying, construction jobs at the top of the list. And the targeted spending will help the country cope with a variety of problems.

The $73 billion to improve the electric grid and power infrastructure is much needed, as we saw in the Texas power outage earlier this year. The $50 billion for water

storage in Western states is money well spent as the photos of Lake Powell and Lake Mead hitting historic lows demonstrate. The $65 billion for broadband improvements will mean a great deal to those of us who live in rural America, where every time it is windy or it rains you are likely to lose your connection three or four times an hour.

Second, the bill redeems a promise Biden made on the campaign trail to try to work together with Republicans whenever possible. Most voters are not Democrats or Republicans, but Independents, and they do not understand why it is so hard for members of Congress to work together on issues like infrastructure that they both claim to care about. After all, former President Donald Trump promised an infrastructure bill but couldn't get one passed even when his party controlled both chambers of Congress.

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To be sure, a bill is not good because it is bipartisan, but the bipartisan stamp of approval helps convince voters that government can still work for the common good. And it is especially convincing to those critical Independent voters.

Third, the fact that 19 Republican senators, including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, voted for the bill delivers a big black eye to Trump. He has tried to make the party his own from his lair at Mar-a-Lago, endorsing candidates in Republican primaries who have been most obsequious to him and summoning leading pols from D.C. to his manse to kiss the ring and get their marching orders. The former president threatened to withhold his endorsement from any senator who voted for the bill, but 19 of them choose good policy, and the good politics that go with it — which they calculate will mean more for their reelection prospects than Trump's rants.

In advance of the vote, some progressive and especially environmental activists bemoaned the bipartisan bill. In late June, the Sunrise Movement rallied outside the White House, demanding $10 trillion in new spending to combat climate change. Several members of the Progressive Caucus in the House addressed the crowd. According to The Nation, among the signs being waved was one that read "Biden You Coward Fight For Us." Nice.

Also clueless. In politics, when the president of the United States invests time and energy in getting a bill passed, and he wins, his political capital goes up. If the effort fails, he has less political capital. Progressives who worried that passage of the bipartisan bill made passage of the larger $3.5 trillion "Build Back Better" bill less likely misunderstood the basic rules of political capital.

Indeed, with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's leadership, the larger bill passed its first hurdle in the Senate in the wee hours of the next morning! That bill has more hoops to clear. It contains more controversial elements and a much larger price tag. But it would have been dead if the Senate had rejected the bipartisan measure.

Democratic leaders need to learn to tune out the progressive "Amen" chorus. Shortly after the Senate vote on the bipartisan bill, MSNBC host Joy Reid launched an attack on Democratic Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, one of the key negotiators of the bipartisan bill. Sinema needs to win reelection next year in a state that could not be more magenta. Reid – and most progressives on Twitter and elsewhere – complain about her and about West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin. Apparently, the critics do not realize that the voters of those states aren't likely to vote for a woke liberal anytime soon.

The anti-Manchin brigade will grow especially loud in coming days after he joined Republicans in renewing the Hyde Amendment, which bars the use of federal funds for elective abortions. This will anger the well-funded pro-choice lobby but, as I have been pointing out for more than two years, research by political scientist Lee Drutman demonstrates convincingly that the path to becoming a majority party lies with those voters who are liberal on economic issues and moderate to conservative on social issues.

The biggest reason the infrastructure bill's passage matters is because it will help restore the citizenry's confidence in government to get something done. The political genius of McConnell's obstructionism during the Obama years and now is that when government fails to successfully address a problem, when it fails to act, that failure does not diminish the GOP brand. Ever since Ronald Reagan quipped that the scariest nine words in the English language are "I am from the government and I am here to help," anti-government rhetoric has been the most defining feature of Republican politics.

Now, and for the next few years, people will drive on better roads and safer bridges. They will find it easier to charge their electric cars. Mass transit will be more extensive and more reliable in our cities, and high-speed internet will become more reliable in smaller towns. In short, across America, people will see government working to improve the quality of their lives. And that is how the Democratic Party can become the governing party.

On Capitol Hill, as Congress turns to the larger "human infrastructure" bill, the joke will be on the Republicans again. Most Americans support affordable child care. Most Americans want the government to take steps to protect our civilization from climate change. Most Americans like the idea of making the wealthiest Americans pay for such improvements. Biden will have gotten a big thumbs up for bipartisanship and also distinguished the party he leads for the popularity of its distinctive proposals. If the president can hold the Democrats together on most issues, most of the time, the ugly, libertarian legacy of Reagan, to say nothing of Trump's impersonation of Mussolini, will be consigned to history as an ugly chapter in American life.