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Sen. Joe Manchin, D-West Virginia, makes his way through a crowd of Capitol Hill reporters outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington Sept. 30, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Leah Millis)



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"Baby, I'm coal. My whole family is coal. I was raised as a coal miner's daughter. My husband was a coal miner. It's not like I'm against coal, but I'm in reality. ... We are moving forward, and I like where we're moving to if we could get our politicians to quit holding us back."

For Pamela Garrison, a tri-chair with the West Virginia Poor People's Campaign, the 10-year, $3.5 trillion budget reconciliation bill under consideration in Congress is urgent for her state, which has lost good-paying jobs and people. The proposed bill contains President Joe Biden's first-term agenda for working families with things such as the expanded child tax credit, increased taxes on the wealthy and investments in clean energy development.

Hours after our conversation, Sen. Joe Manchin (D-West Virginia) released yet another statement against the bill.

Manchin has become the latest protagonist in the story of congressional gridlock — as one New Yorker headline put it, "the man who controls the Senate," while party leaders are helpless victims of his obstructionism. This framing obscures an iron rule of political life: All politics is local. He's not strong enough at home to withstand being ostracized in D.C. That is, if Democrats were serious about reining him in.

The reconciliation bill is supported by 81% of West Virginians polled, including 77% of Republicans.

"But the people of West Virginia, we know we have been living in poverty," Garrison told me. "We know we have been losing our coal industry and coal jobs since the acid rain in the '80s. ... We know we haven't been invested in since the '80s. This is the first time that our government has wanted to invest in us."

Organizers believe this legislation could retool the region's economic infrastructure, and in so doing, reverse decades of both ecological and economic decline.

In September, 35 West Virginia-based faith, labor and justice organizations echoed this sentiment, urging Manchin to seize this "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to improve the lives of all West Virginians by creating a stronger, fairer economy that works for all of us — not just those who the system has helped reach the top of the economic ladder."

A coal-fired power-plant is seen along the Ohio River in Moundsville, West Virginia, in this 201

A coal-fired power-plant is seen along the Ohio River in Moundsville, West Virginia, in this 2017 file photo. (CNS/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

Manchin might not be well-liked, but he is well-funded by business interests that oppose the legislation. In a region that has long been subject to state capture by extractive industries, corruption was a recurring theme in my talks with advocates.

Discussing the environmental and economic provisions of the bill, Vivian Stockman, co-executive director of the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC), based in Huntington, West Virginia, noted, "We are all for any provisions that will genuinely help stem the worst impacts of climate change while fostering sustainable, healthy and just livelihoods for people in our region. That's the rub, though, with Congress — in trying to appease your campaign contributors, it can be hard to really help out the people of your home state and, in this case, the entire planet."

This explains, for her, Manchin's aims at investing billions into research and development of far-off technologies that would leave the fossil fuel industry intact rather than investing in communities.

Despite Manchin positioning himself as a bulwark between two extreme parties who have lost touch with "how most people live their lives," his approval rating has declined among his constituents every year since 2019. That year, he registered 49% approval, while it topped out at 44% last October, and this year, only 42% of likely voters approve of the job he is doing. He won reelection in 2018 over his Republican opponent, Patrick Morrisey, by just 3.3 percentage points.

Given his unpopularity, Democrats could use the gulf between the interests of Manchin and his donors and those of his working-class constituents to discipline the senator into compliance. It's not a hard sell: Many of his top donors have shipped jobs overseas, killed workers through negligence and have devastated local

ecologies. Communities do not forget those things.

It's not as if party leaders are above inserting themselves into local politics. Just last year, Speaker Nancy Pelosi stunned observers when she endorsed Rep. Joe Kennedy in his unsuccessful bid to unseat Sen. Ed Markey, who championed the Green New Deal in the Senate.

Indeed, when it comes to protecting its left flank from progressives, the party has been decisive and swift. Take, for example, the 2019 blacklist policy of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the official campaign organization of House Democrats. The mandate, established after Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's upset primary victory over powerful incumbent Joe Crowley, forbade campaigns from contracting with consultants and firms that worked with primary challengers.

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If meddling in West Virginia politics is too extreme for their taste, Senate Democrats could start with basic parliamentary maneuvers. They could remove Manchin from Senate Democratic leadership and his plush committee assignments. Committee appointments are the proverbial "carrot" in congressional politics. They are at once incentives and rewards for effectiveness and loyalty.

It is tough to make the case that he is more than a fictitious obstacle to Democratic policy agenda when he serves as the vice chair of the Policy and Communications Committee. Everyone knew he was a fiscal conservative when he was appointed to the Senate Appropriations Committee, the committee that most impacts U.S. spending policy. Given that fossil fuel companies are among his most generous donors, his chairmanship of the powerful Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee is invaluable.

There's tension here, though: Manchin's bold conservatism is a useful shield for party leadership against criticism for their own unpopular stances. It's a counterweight to the leftward tug of post-Great Recession Democratic politics. The politics that swept Barack Obama into the White House in 2008. The politics that has mobilized millions against the prevailing economic, immigration and criminal legal systems that both parties helped erect. The politics that reintroduced "socialism" into American political discourse as more than a phantom.

It's a delicate balance, expending minimal effort for the priorities of the vulnerable communities that got you elected while keeping them mobilized for the next "most important election of our lives." That's the danger of the rotating list of obstacles Democrats trot out when they hold power: When presented with an immovable object, eventually even the most valiant among us stop pushing.

Stories of the all-powerful conservative obstacle encourages fatalism among the people who can least afford it. This fatalism dampens the democratic spirit. Among those who rarely or never vote, over 30% of respondents said they do not vote because "no matter who wins, nothing will change for people like me." It's the job of elected officials to exhaust every means to prove them wrong.

As Catholics, we hold as sacred the right of the marginalized to full participation in civic life. That is not participation for its own sake, but to secure their interests. Constituents of Senate leaders have an important role to play in this effort. Even though their decisions impact all voters' lives, the voices of people who cannot vote or spend them out of office don't matter. Their constituents should advocate for their senators to discipline Manchin into compliance. Let them know that there will be a cost for their hand-wringing and inaction at the polls.