



Biden gun and police policies threaten Democrats' 2022 midterm prospects

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With violent crime on the rise in cities across the country, President Biden is attempting another high-wire act with a renewed push for gun control measures that could embolden his critics on the right and dismay and divide his own party ahead of the critical 2022 midterm elections.

Biden's focus on gun crimes could provide fodder for Second Amendment advocates who have accused him of attacking legal gun ownership and for Republican lawmakers who have argued that Democratic calls to "defund the police" are most responsible for the crime wave. GOP strategists employed that tactic to great effect in down-ballot races during the 2020 election cycle.

The president also risks alienating progressives wary that his tactics will undercut their push for law enforcement reform, deepening party divisions at a time when Democratic control of Congress is in jeopardy. While many progressive Democrats have called for sweeping budget cuts for police, Biden's plan encourages cities to use COVID-19 relief funds to hire more officers, among other measures.

The politically fraught climate ahead of an expected spike in crime this summer creates a "major vulnerability" for Biden and Democrats in general heading into the 2022 midterms, according to Whit Ayers, a prominent Republican political consultant and founder of North Star Opinion Research.

"One of the most potent criticisms over the last 40 years of Democrats is that they're soft on crime and reluctant to crack down on crime," Ayers said. "This surge and the forces on the far-left talking about defunding the police feed into the suspicion that Democrats are simply not serious about combating crime."

Unveiled last month at a speech alongside Attorney General Merrick Garland, Biden's anti-crime plan included a "zero tolerance" policy for federally licensed gun dealers who violate laws, a call for increased funding for the ATF, and the creation of "strike forces" to combat interstate weapons trafficking. The president noted that states and cities can use \$350 billion in collective funding from the "American Rescue Plan" to hire officers, pay for overtime or invest in technology aimed at curbing gun violence.

Some of Biden's remarks, such as his declaration that it was "not a time to turn our backs on law enforcement," likely were aimed to address criticism from the right. But Second Amendment advocates seized on the gun control measures included in Biden's anti-crime plan, accusing the president of misrepresenting the crime wave's root cause.

"Reasonable gun control measures like background checks could conceivably ward off some of the mass shootings we've experienced recently, but they will do nothing to thwart the crime wave plaguing our cities in recent months," Ayers added. "That surge in crime is a result of demonizing the police in the wake of the George Floyd killing."

Recent polls indicate mounting concern among American voters about the crime surge. More than 73% of Americans think crime is on the rise nationally compared to one year ago, according to the results of a Fox News poll conducted in late May. Seventy-two percent of respondents said they had either a great deal or a fair amount of trust and confidence in the police.

Crime is "one of the top issues and I think Democrats ignore it at their peril," said Trevor Burrus, a research fellow at the Cato Institute's Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies. "I think it has a bunch of complex causes. The thing is, American voters are fairly straightforward in the things that they care about."

Across 34 U.S. cities, the homicide rate surged 24% in the first quarter of 2021, with 193 more murders than in the same three-month period one year earlier, according to a report from the National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice.

The crime wave dominated New York City's Democratic mayoral primary, where moderate candidates, including the expected winner, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, campaigned on a pledge to prioritize public safety.

Some top Democrats, including members of the Biden administration, have already begun efforts to deflect GOP efforts at painting the Democratic Party as the party of "defund the police." The most notable case came during a White House briefing, when Biden press secretary Jen Psaki declared Republicans had defunded the police by failing to support the American Rescue Plan, because within the \$1.9 trillion in funding they mostly opposed was money for the police.

"The bottom line of this is, part of this proposal is directing more funding to the police," said Christopher Devine, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Dayton. "That helps to protect him against some of the charges from Republicans, but it also risks upsetting some of his supporters or maybe people who were willing to vote for him but weren't entirely thrilled with him."

But the Democratic Party may need prominent progressives, such as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., to adjust their rhetoric as well, according to Kevin Walling, a Democratic campaign strategist and former Biden campaign surrogate.

Further calls to cut police budgets could damage the Democratic Party's efforts to retain control of Congress, especially if crime rates continue to surge.

"The Squad and AOC and others need to recalibrate their messaging, perhaps, too, because you can only say so much about reimagining the police and things like that when people are at home seeing these upticks in crime, when people are fearful, in many areas, to go out on the street," Walling said. "I think you saw the president tackling this issue head-on."