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One Name for Build Back Better Is ‘Infrastructure-Plus-Plus’

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The sprawling plan needs a label. Here are nine—some not so nice.

Words matter in politics. President Biden has insisted on calling the \$1.9 trillion spending bill that’s nearing enactment a rescue plan, even though a lot of other people, including headline writers, have labeled it stimulus. Now the semantic wars are moving on to the forthcoming Build Back Better plan, which could entail even more spending. How Build Back Better gets labeled could affect perceptions and influence its chances of passage. So—what is this thing? Here are nine potential labels.

1. **Recovery plan.** This is Biden’s preferred label. First the rescue, now the recovery. Both words poll well. And of course, “build back better” itself is a phrase that played well for Biden on the campaign trail. On the other hand, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—“Recovery Act” for short—was highly unpopular with Republicans. So who knows?
2. **Infrastructure bill.** The word “infrastructure” was coined in 1870s France to refer to the foundation for railroad tracks. Over the years people have applied it to more and more things—including this plan. News stories and lawmakers have been calling “build back better” an infrastructure plan, or bill, or measure, even though it includes things that aren’t generally considered infrastructure (and isn’t yet a bill).
3. **Infrastructure-plus.** Michael Mundaca, leader of the national tax department at EY (formerly Ernst & Young), has written that since the plan includes support for manufacturing and innovation, it could be termed “infrastructure-plus.”
4. **Infrastructure-plus-plus.** But even “infrastructure-plus” might not go far enough because the bill will also support caregivers and education and promote racial justice, “so it’s infrastructure-plus-plus,” Mundaca says in an interview. If Democrats try to enact it without Republicans under reconciliation procedures, it could turn into an overstuffed Noah’s Ark for unrelated items that can’t get 60 votes.
5. **Green infrastructure.** “I think it’s very fair to call it a green infrastructure bill” because fighting climate change is at its core, says Kevin DeGood, director of infrastructure policy at the Center for American Progress, a Democratic Party-aligned think tank. As for racial justice, he says it’s not an add-on but an aspect of how infrastructure gets built. More late bus service for second-shift office cleaners, say, rather than a highway through a poor neighborhood.

6. **Green New Deal.** Biden never signed on to that progressive Democratic plan, but conservatives remain suspicious. “Republicans won’t support another Green New Deal disguising itself as a transportation bill,” Representative Sam Graves of Missouri, the senior Republican on the Transportation committee, said March 4.
7. **Kitchen sink bill.** On March 9, House Budget Committee Chairman John Yarmuth of Kentucky told reporters it was a “kitchen sink bill.” Which is kind of harsh coming from someone in Biden’s party.
8. **Spending bill.** Asked to label the plan, Jeffrey Miron, director of economic studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, first offered “the Bail Out the Construction Sector and the Construction Worker Unions bill.” Miron, a senior lecturer in economics at Harvard, then offered “spending bill,” which he argued is a politically neutral label.
9. **Economic recovery package.** “It’s much broader than infrastructure, for sure,” says Robert Mangas, a lobbyist and attorney at the law firm of Greenberg Traurig LLP in Washington. “You could broadly refer to it as ‘the Biden economic recovery package.’” This is pretty much what Biden calls it, of course. And since the president has the loudest megaphone in Washington, it’s a reasonable bet that this will be the label that catches on.