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The Daily 202: Biden faces classic ambassador pressures

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Welcome to [The Daily 202 newsletter](#)! Today, we look at how President Biden's big campaign donors may be mustering to secure ambassadorships. But don't miss the latest on Biden's economic rescue package. Sometimes local or regional news is national news in disguise, so send me your most interesting published items from outside the Beltway. [And tell your friends to sign up here.](#)

It's a uniquely American practice with bipartisan lineage: Presidents rewarding big donors with plum ambassadorships in glittering global capitals like London, Paris, Rome, or Tokyo.

And it is — or should be — uniquely embarrassing. It has produced the soap opera producer deemed qualified to serve in Hungary partly because she spoke “conversational Spanish,” and the former Los Angeles Dodgers co-owner pronounced worthy of the top posting in Paris in part because she wrote a cookbook. There was also the hotel magnate described as a “counterintelligence risk” with an “abominable lack of knowledge” about his posting.

All won Senate confirmation. Call them ambassadorors.

Then-Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden pauses during a virtual grass-roots fundraiser at the Hotel DuPont in Wilmington, Del., last August. (Carolyn Kaster/AP)

President Biden's first three weeks in office have been anything but traditional, as he grapples with the coronavirus pandemic and the attendant economic crisis, to say nothing of Donald Trump's second impeachment trial. The biggest challenges remain, but **some political players are now advocating a return to the comforting normal of pay-for-play process.**

As my colleagues Matt Viser and Anne Gearan noted yesterday:

“It is a sweepstakes that comes along every four or eight years — intense jockeying in public and private as the well-heeled and well-connected seek coveted positions that come with lavish housing, a staff of chefs and an expectation that the U.S. envoy will put the digs to use for parties.”

Things look a little different this time around. During the Democratic primaries, Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) promised not to give any ambassadorships to rich donors. And Biden promised no one would get a job “based on anything they contributed.”

The major French daily Le Monde recently criticized the Trump era's record, highlighting the case of dermatologist Jeffrey Gunter. He was the ambassador to Iceland who reportedly went through seven deputies in two years and caused a stir when he sought special permission to carry a firearm, among other unusual requests tied to unspecified threats to his security. The small country is safe enough that police don't regularly carry guns.

“If he wants to change the face of America, Mr. Biden and his secretary of state, Tony Blinken, who knows Europe so well, can start by nominating ambassadors who are normal, serious, and competent,” Le Monde said.

Of Trump's other picks, the State Department's inspector general found in August 2020 that Robert “Woody” Johnson, the New York Jets owner picked to be ambassador to London, “sometimes made inappropriate or insensitive comments on topics generally considered Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO)-sensitive, such as religion, sex, or color.”

The State Department ultimately declined to look further into the matter after Johnson denied the report.

I have followed the ethical rules and requirements of my office at all times. These false claims of insensitive remarks about race and gender are totally inconsistent with my longstanding record and values.

And Johnson also reportedly raised the possibility of steering the British Open golf tournament to Trump's Turnberry resort in Scotland.

Kelly Knight Craft, who served first as Trump's envoy to Canada and then as ambassador to the United Nations, was in the United States for roughly seven months of her two years in Ottawa.

Johnson and Richard Grenell, Trump's ambassador to Germany, irked their hosts with political stances seen as being at odds with traditional ambassadorial neutrality. The former made bullish comments about Brexit, the latter declared he hoped to “empower other conservatives throughout Europe.”

“This practice of political appointees is the best and the worst, because it depends on whom you bring in,” Gerard Araud, a longtime senior French diplomat who retired after service as ambassador to the United States, said in an interview.

By all accounts, Caroline Kennedy did a good job as ambassador to Japan. Charles Rivkin went from being executive producer of “Yo Gabba Gabba” to a highly regarded stint as ambassador to France. He was so highly regarded that Rivkin later won Senate confirmation by a lopsided 92-6 vote to be assistant secretary of state for economic and business affairs.

Political appointees “can bring in new ideas, fresh air in a bureaucracy that can be rather heavy,” Araud said.

They also come in with the implicit message they have the ear of the president “which would not be the case with a bureaucrat.” And those with business backgrounds tend to get a warmer welcome from the local business community, he said.

The veteran diplomat underlined that **political appointees need to know how to use the symbolic powers of office** — notably whom to invite to the ambassadorial residence, and when

— and develop a good rapport with the deputy chief of mission, the senior career diplomat who frequently runs the show.

“They should say ‘I’m not going to do State Department work. I have a number two, they will interact with the foreign ministry. They know the technical issues. **I’m going to focus on one or two political issues that are really important, but I’m going to let my deputy manage the bilateral relationship,**” Araud said.

When it comes to picking ambassadors, Biden isn’t signaling any urgency. While other Trump political appointees are out, the former vice president asked the envoy to Russia, John Sullivan, to stay on. That was part of a successful push to renew the “New START” arms treaty with Moscow.

The Obama administration let it be known in January 2009 that he would pick Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, a former top military commander in Afghanistan, to be ambassador to Kabul. But it would be months before other nominations rolled to the Senate.

“There has not been a conversation with the president at this point about who he would like to name for any ambassadorship roles,” White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Friday. “That may be tough news to hear for people who are interested in ambassadorship roles.”

What’s happening now

At least 12 people are dead in four states from the effects of a record-shattering cold snap. Americans from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border were pummeled by a historic winter storm over the weekend, Andrew Freedman, Jason Samenow and Matthew Cappucci report. The storm knocked out power to more than 4 million households in Texas, raising questions about the strength of the state’s power grid. Authorities warned that the outages could continue for several days and people turned to unsafe means to heat their homes. In Houston, a woman and a girl died from carbon monoxide poisoning after a car was left running in a garage to keep them warm, police said.

Arctic air also engulfed the Midwest and severe thunderstorms extended into Kentucky, Tennessee and the Carolinas. A 10-year-old boy died after falling through ice near Millington, Tenn., and a tornado associated with the storm system struck in North Carolina overnight, killing at least three and injuring 10.

Rep. Bennie G. Thompson (D-Miss.), chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, is suing ex-president Trump and his lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, along with two extremist groups for inciting the Jan. 6 Capitol riot, Spencer S. Hsu reports this morning. Thompson argues in a federal lawsuit that Trump and Giuliani’s false statements the 2020 election was stolen “fomented a raid that violated the Ku Klux Klan Act, an 1871 law enacted after the Civil War to bar violent interference in Congress’s constitutional duties.”

Former senator David Perdue, the Georgia Republican who lost his reelection bid to Democrat Jon Ossoff in a January runoff, has filed campaign paperwork to run again, Colby Itkowitz reports. If Perdue runs next year, he would face Sen. Raphael G. Warnock (D-Ga.), who ran to fill the remaining two years of Republican Sen. Johnny Isakson’s seat. The matchup between Perdue and Warnock would be telling for Georgia’s new status as a swing

state. In the January runoff, Perdue narrowly lost to Ossoff, while Warnock won more decisively over incumbent Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R).

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Lunchtime reads from The Post

- **“North Korea tried to steal Pfizer coronavirus vaccine information, South says,”** by Simon Denyer: “It was not clear when the Pfizer hack occurred or if it was successful. ... The statement by South Korean officials is the latest accusation against North Korean hackers for attempting to steal vaccine technology, highlighting Pyongyang’s alleged ongoing campaign to obtain sensitive information through nefarious means and its growing cyber capabilities.”
- **“Pizzagate’s violent legacy,”** by Michael Miller: “Pizzagate was an early warning of how misinformation can lead to violence, said Joan Donovan, a scholar of media manipulation, social movements and extremism. ‘The big difference between 2016 and Pizzagate and QAnon [now] isn’t the themes ... it’s the scale,’ said Donovan.”

... and beyond

- **“What the fear of China is doing to American science,”** by the Atlantic's Rory Truex: “The concern of many U.S. policy makers is that Beijing is using so-called non-traditional intelligence collectors — students, faculty, and other researchers — to steal secrets from American labs and gain a competitive edge.”
- **“Ban on new foreign workers left U.S. jobs unfilled, even in covid downturn,”** by the WSJ's Alicia Caldwell: “Unemployed American workers weren’t interested in jobs typically held by foreign hires at the lower and seasonal end of the job market, and [Trump administration policies that drastically reduced work visas] didn’t help those unqualified for specialized jobs at the higher end, according to Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.”
- **“McConnell backs Ky. Bill ensuring GOP successor if he leaves office,”** by WFPL’s Ryland Barton: “[Kentucky] Senate Bill 228 would be a big change from how Kentucky governors currently fill senate vacancies — picking whomever they want. Instead, the governor would have to pick a replacement from a list of three nominees selected by the state party of the departing senator.”
- **“When religion was present — and notably absent — at the impeachment trial,”** by the Religion News Service’s Jack Jenkins: “It was Democrats who appeared most eager to utilize faith-infused arguments, signaling a resurgence of religious rhetoric among liberals.”

The first 100 days

Biden wants Washington — and the U.S. — to concentrate again on the coronavirus pandemic.

- Biden will today participate in a nationally televised town hall focused on the pandemic and its economic fallout in a move to bring attention back to the crisis, [John Wagner reports](#).

- The town hall, which will be held in Milwaukee, is Biden's first official travel outside the D.C. region as president. He will likely face questions about his efforts to push a \$1.9 trillion relief bill through Congress and his plans to reopen schools.
- This morning, the Biden administration announced a three-month extension of a ban on home foreclosures for federally backed mortgages and the expansion of a mortgage relief program. The White House also extended the enrollment window to request a mortgage payment forbearance until June 30. That program was scheduled to end in March.

The \$1.9 trillion relief bill is back in the congressional spotlight.

- Democrats are preparing to push their relief package through a few final procedural hoops before an expected floor vote next week in the House. Lawmakers face a mid-March deadline when enhanced unemployment benefits will expire if Congress doesn't act in time, Erica Werner reports.
- Nine House committees passed their individual portions of the bill last week, with Democrats fighting back GOP attempts to alter it with dozens of amendments targeting everything from abortion to the minimum wage to the Keystone XL pipeline. House passage of the bill looks likely.
- Bigger fights await in the Senate, where Democrats can't afford to lose a single vote. Two moderate Democrats – Joe Manchin (W.Va.) and Kyrsten Sinema (Ariz.) – have indicated that they oppose a hike to the federal \$15 minimum wage, which is in the package, and Biden himself has said that the wage increase may not make it into the final bill.

The Biden administration and Democratic leaders will this week unveil an immigration bill.

- The proposal, known as the “U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021,” will include an earned pathway to citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants and expand the refugee resettlement program, NBC News reports. Other protections being considered in the bill include asylum processing in home countries for minors and expanded benefits for DREAMers. Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) is leading the legislative push in the Senate.

Invisible gases are seeping into the atmosphere from grocery stores. The administration wants to change that.

- Nearly every supermarket in America has a network of pipes that transports compress refrigerants that keep perishable goods cold, Juliet Eilperin and Desmond Butler report. These chemicals often escape through cracks or systems that were not properly installed, polluting the atmosphere. The Biden administration sees eliminating these chemicals from the nation's refrigerators as the low-hanging fruit in its broader effort to rein in climate pollutants.
- The EPA issued a public call for companies to report production and import data on these chemicals, though an undercover investigation by the advocacy group Environmental Investigation Agency found some supermarkets are leaking these refrigerants at an even higher rate than assumed by regulators.

Biden has already set a presidential routine.

- Unlike his most recent predecessors, both of which were night owls, Biden is an early-to-bed type, [CNN reports](#). He still carries a brown leather briefcase into the office and starts taking calls and meetings in the Oval Office at 9 a.m. He has continued a tradition of reading letters from Americans and is usually back home by 7 p.m.

Quote of the day

“I’ve been sick for the last 330 days. I force myself to keep track because otherwise time doesn’t move,” Kaitlin Denis, a coronavirus long hauler, [told](#) Eli Saslow. “I used to go to sleep thinking: Tomorrow. Tomorrow I’ll start to feel better. I don’t really do that as much anymore. I’m trying to come to terms with the fact that this virus isn’t something I’m about to get over.”

Impeachment trial fallout

Mitch McConnell says the acquittal vindicated the Constitution, not Trump.

- “There is no question former President Trump bears moral responsibility,” in the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) [said](#) in a Wall Street Journal op-ed. “I was as outraged as any member of Congress. But senators take our own oaths. Our job wasn’t to find some way, any way, to inflict a punishment. The Senate’s first and foundational duty was to protect the Constitution.”
- McConnell, who voted to acquit the ex-president, said he doesn’t begrudge his Senate colleagues who voted to convict. He said after intense study of the Constitution’s Article II, Section 4, he decided impeachment and conviction are limited to those currently in offices.
- In an apparent response to critics who blame him for delaying the Senate trial until after Trump was out of office, McConnell writes that speeding through “due process” would have “ignited a constitutional crisis.”
- He then shifted blame to Democrats, saying, “this selective disregard for rules and norms is a civic disease that is spreading through the political left. Senate Democrats relished the legislative filibuster and used it frequently when they were the minority party. Now only two of them pledge to respect it.”

Three out of four Republicans want to see Trump play a big role in the GOP.

- A new Quinnipiac University Poll [found](#) Trump still enjoys vast support among members of his party, including 87 percent of Republicans who say he should be allowed to hold elected office in the future.
- Overall, 60 percent of Americans say they do not want to see Trump play a prominent role in the GOP, with 55 percent of all Americans saying Trump should not be allowed to hold elected office in the future.

Republicans are now coming after some of the senators who voted to impeach and convict.

- The family of Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-Ill.) bashed him for voting to impeach Trump in a letter, [Katie Shepherd reports](#). “We are thoroughly disgusted with you!!” Kinzinger’s

relatives wrote in a two-page note. “And, oh, by the way, we are calling for your removal from office.” Kinzinger’s family decried his decision as a disappointment “to us and to God.” Kinzinger has already been censured by Republicans in his home district.

- The North Carolina GOP Central Committee voted unanimously to censure Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.) over his vote to convict Trump. “It is truly a sad day for North Carolina Republicans,” Burr said in response. ([Fox News](#))
- Some Utah Republicans want to censure Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah) for his vote to convict. The motion, which is circulating on social media, accuses Romney of being a “deep state” agent and of misrepresenting himself as a Republican when he ran for office. The Utah GOP’s top leaders, however, are not behind the effort and the party noted both of the state’s senators — Romney and Sen. Mike Lee, who voted to acquit — have been criticized for their decisions. ([Salt Lake Tribune](#))
- Pennsylvania Republicans are signaling they will condemn Pat Toomey (R-Pa.) for voting to convict Trump. Party insiders told the Philadelphia Inquirer the state GOP chairman is calling a meeting to discuss a potential censure of Toomey, who is retiring in 2022. And county parties across the state have already begun censuring the senator.

From a state county GOP chair:

Actual quote from a PA GOP official, explaining why Sen. Toomey should be censured: “We did not send him there to vote his conscience. We did not send him there to ‘do the right thing’ or whatever”

Some lawmakers said former president Donald Trump’s political future was over on Feb. 14, one day after the Senate acquitted him for the second time in a year. (JM Rieger/The Washington Post)

Hot on the left

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) accepted some blame in his administration’s lack of transparency over the scope of coronavirus-related deaths in nursing homes, [the New York Times reports](#). Still, he denied a cover-up. “There was a delay,” was all Cuomo would admit to.

Hot on the right

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis’s (R) handling of the pandemic, which drew national scorn for his reluctance to listen to science and set restrictive measures, is now pushing him into the GOP’s “top tier,” [Politico reports](#). DeSantis, who often clashes with the media, has become a conservative darling, elevating his profile to the point where some Republican advisers and pollsters think he could make a good case for a 2024 presidential run.

State government job losses in 2020, visualized

This week in Washington

Biden will head to Milwaukee this evening, where he will participate in a CNN town hall. The president will visit Kalamazoo, Mich., to tour a Pfizer manufacturing site on Thursday, and on

Friday he will virtually meet with members of the G7 to discuss the battle against covid-19.

The Senate Small Business and Entrepreneurship Committee will tomorrow consider the nomination of **Isabella Casillas** to lead the Small Business Administration.

In closing

John Oliver is back, and he warned about the next pandemic: