

[nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)

# On the Economy, Biden Struggles to Convince Voters of His Success

*Reid J. Epstein*

10–13 minutes

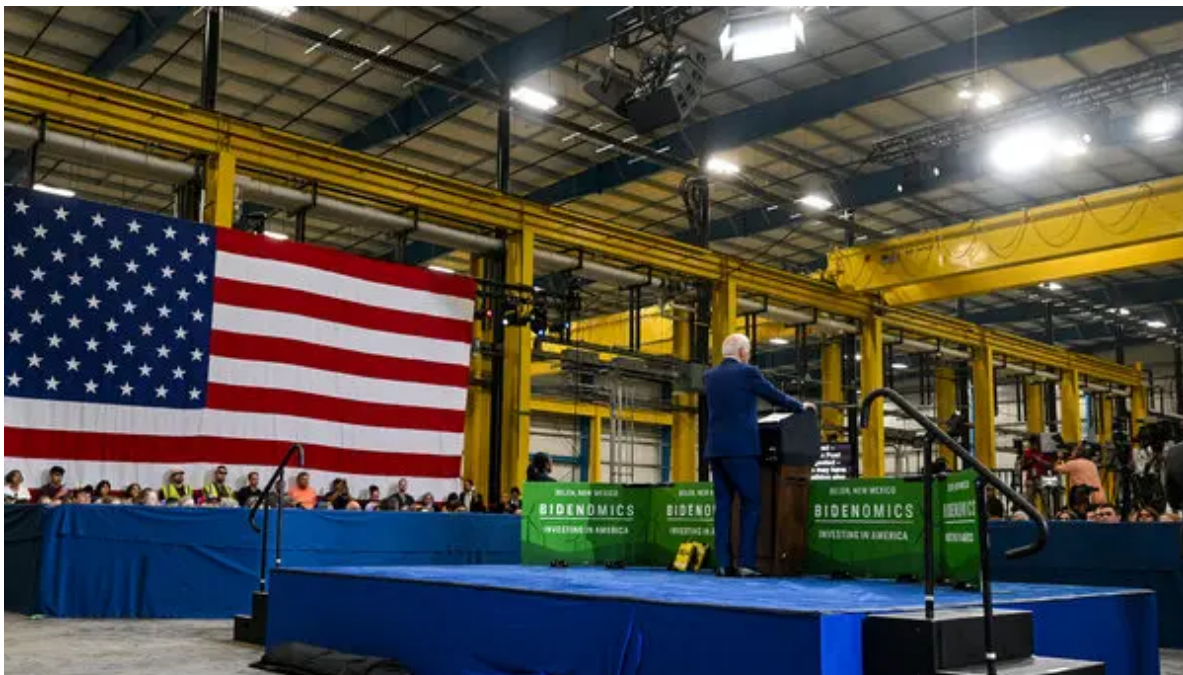
---

Advertisement

[SKIP ADVERTISEMENT](#)

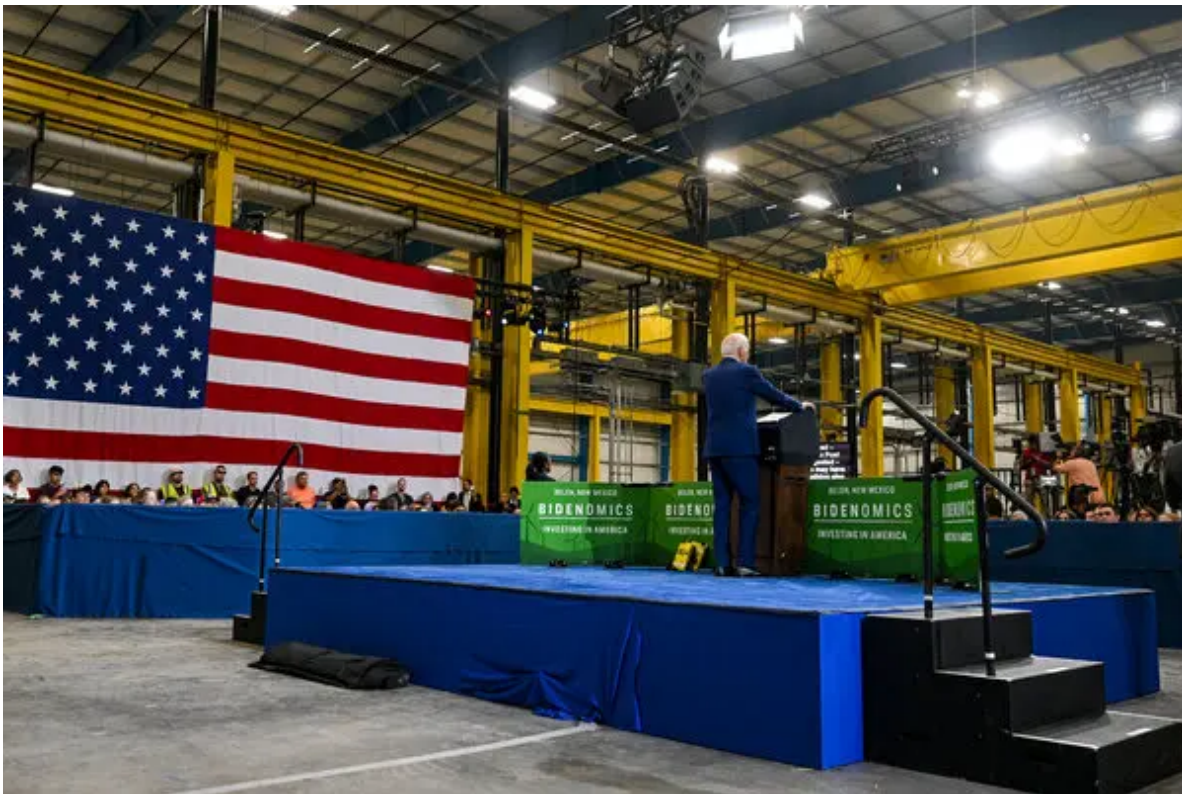
## Biden Struggles to Make ‘Bidenomics’ a Plus, Not a Minus

Wages are up, inflation has slowed and the White House has a new slogan. Still, President Biden’s poor marks on the economy are making Democrats worried.





Despite presiding over what is by all indicators a strong economy, President Joe Biden is still struggling to convince most of the country of the strength of his economic stewardship. Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times



### [Reid J. Epstein](#)

Reid J. Epstein covers President Biden's re-election campaign.

When a chant slamming President Biden spread from a NASCAR race to T-shirts and bumper stickers [across red America](#) two years ago, the White House pulled off perhaps its savviest messaging feat to date. Biden aides and allies repackaged the “Let’s Go Brandon” insult and [morphed it into “Dark Brandon,”](#) a celebratory meme casting Mr. Biden as some sort of omnipotent mastermind.

Now, the White House and the Biden campaign is several weeks into another appropriation play — but it isn’t going nearly as well.

Aides in July announced that the president would run for re-election on the virtues of “Bidenomics,” proudly reclaiming the right’s derisive term for Mr. Biden’s economic policies.

The gambit does not appear to be working yet. Even as Mr. Biden presides over what is by all indicators a strong economy — one on track to dodge the recession many had feared — he is still struggling to convince most of the country of the strength of his economic stewardship. Wages are up, inflation has slowed, but credit to the president remains in short supply.

Polling last month from the Democratic organization Navigator found that 25 percent of Americans support Mr. Biden’s major actions, such as the Inflation Reduction Act, but still think the president is doing a poor job handling the economy. It’s a group that tends to be disproportionately younger than 40 and is more likely to be Black or Latino — voters critical to Democratic victories.

“This is the thing that’s vexing all Democrats,” said Patrick Gaspard, the president of the Center for American Progress.

Democratic economists, pollsters and officials have a variety of explanations for why voters don’t credit Mr. Biden for the economy. Inflation [remains elevated](#), and interest rates have made home buying difficult. There is also evidence that voters’ views on the economy are shaped as much by their political views as by personal experiences.

And then there is the regular refrain that people don’t know about Mr. Biden’s successes. Even Mr. Biden’s supporters say that he and his administration have been too reluctant to promote their record and ineffective when they do.

“I’ve never seen this big of a disconnect between how the economy is actually doing and key polling results about what people think is going on,” said Heidi Shierholz, president of the Economic Policy Institute, a left-leaning think tank in Washington.

Mr. Biden on Friday attempted another victory lap in a White House speech celebrating the latest jobs report, which found no sign of an imminent recession and a slight increase in the unemployment rate as more people sought work. He credited the heart of his economic plan, including investment in infrastructure, semiconductor manufacturing and climate-related industries along with caps on the price of insulin medication.

Bidenomics, Mr. Biden said, “is about investing in America and investing in Americans.”

Image



Mr. Biden said his economic plan was to credit for the latest jobs report, which found no sign of an imminent recession and a slight



increase in the unemployment rate as more people sought work. Credit... Kent Nishimura for The New York Times



The term Bidenomics emerged as a pejorative in conservative media and has been widely adopted by Mr. Biden’s rivals. “One of the most important issues of the campaign will be who can rescue our country from the burning wreckage of Bidenomics,” former President Donald J. Trump said in a recent video, “which shall henceforth be defined as inflation, taxation submission and failure.”

Sign up for the Tilt newsletter, for Times subscribers only. Nate Cohn, The Times’s chief political analyst, makes sense of the latest political data.

Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida offered his definition at a recent campaign stop in Rock Rapids, Iowa. “Bidenomics is basically: You have a lower standard of living so he can pursue the left’s ideological agenda,” he said.

Behind the rhetoric, there is some debate over whether the economy will be the driving force it has been in past presidential elections. Some Democrats argue that their party's resilience in last year's midterm elections showed that the fight over abortion rights and Mr. Trump's influence over Republicans can trounce more kitchen-table concerns.

The White House argues that Democrats' strong showing last year is a sign the Mr. Biden's electoral performance isn't strictly tied to the economy.

"By all metrics, his economic record has improved since then," said Andrew Bates, a White House spokesman.

How Times reporters cover politics. Times journalists may vote, but they are not allowed to endorse or campaign for candidates or political causes. That includes participating in rallies and donating money to a candidate or cause.

Still, nearly all of Mr. Biden's campaign [advertising](#) this year sells his economic record. The ads — which don't use the term Bidenomics — cast the president's policies as a work in progress. "All of the things that Biden fought to get passed helped the middle class," a cement mason from Milwaukee says in [an ad the campaign released last week](#).

"It's no secret that a lot of Americans are struggling with the cost of living, and that's a reality that shapes their views about the economy more broadly," said Geoff Garin, a pollster who conducts surveys for the Democratic National Committee.

Explaining why Mr. Biden's policies will help, Mr. Garin said, "is what campaigns are for."

This summer Mr. Biden has promoted “Bidenomics” at events around the country, often speaking in factories or with labor groups. Even some in friendly audiences of local Democratic leaders and supporters questioned whether his emphasis would resonate with the coalition that elected him in 2020.

“Is Bidenomics the right thing to sell?” Mayor Katie Rosenberg of Wausau, Wis., said after seeing Mr. Biden speak in Milwaukee last month. “I just keep thinking, why aren’t they just doing Build Back Better still? That was a really good slogan. Bidenomics is just an effort to capitalize on the negativity around him.”

Build Back Better, the mix of economic, climate and social policy that Mr. Biden ran on in 2020, was a bumper-sticker-length encapsulation of Mr. Biden’s ambitions as president. Significant elements became law, but the branding exercise failed, doomed in part by rising inflation.

Image



Mr. Biden's "Build Back Better" slogan was a bumper-sticker-length encapsulation of his ambitions as president. Credit... Hannah Yoon for The New York Times



Democrats rebranded their climate legislation as the Inflation Reduction Act, even though the bill had little to do with inflation. Even Mr. Biden recently said that he regretted the name, suggesting that it promised something the bill was not devised to deliver.

Though the rate of inflation has slowed, it remains the chief drag on Mr. Biden's economic approval ratings, said Joanne Hsu, the director of Surveys of Consumers at the University of Michigan.

"We track people who have heard negative news about inflation," Dr. Hsu said. "Over the past year, that number has been much higher than in the 1970s and '80s, when inflation was so much worse."

One theme of Mr. Biden's aides, advisers and allies is to plead for



time. The economy will get better, more people will hear and understand what Bidenomics means and credit will accrue to the president, they say.

“The public more and more is going to be seeing low unemployment and will continue to get more bullish on the economy,” said Representative Robert Garcia of California, a member of the Biden campaign’s national advisory board. “But I also understand it’s very hard for people now. We just can’t expect overnight for people to feel better about the economy.”

For most Americans, their views on the economy are directly tied to their partisan leanings — a phenomenon that is particularly acute for Republicans. In 2016, before Mr. Trump took office, just 18 percent of Republicans rated the economy excellent or good, according [to a Pew Research survey](#). By February 2020, just before the pandemic shut down public life in America, 81 percent of Republicans said the economy was excellent or good.

An Associated Press/NORC Center for Public Affairs Research [poll last month](#) found just 8 percent of Republicans, along with 65 percent of Democrats, approved of Mr. Biden’s handling of the economy.

Mr. Biden’s sympathizers say part of his problem on the economy is an unwillingness to promote its bright spots out of fear of seeming insensitive to Americans struggling with higher prices. Mr. Trump had no such restraint, describing the economy as the best in history and the envy of the world. Using “Bidenomics” as a framework lets the president take ownership of the economy, but it doesn’t exactly tell voters that the economy is great.

“Trump chose people who were probably less experienced in

terms of making policy, but some of them are quite good about talking up the president,” said Ben Harris, a former top Treasury official in the Biden administration who played a leading role in outlining the Build Back Better agenda during the 2020 campaign. “Biden’s taken a more modest and humble approach, and there’s a chance that’s come back to haunt him.”

Jason Furman, who served as chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers in the Obama administration, said there was a regular debate in that White House about how much to sell the public on the idea that the economy was improving even if people didn’t feel in their own lives.

Now he said it was difficult for the Biden administration to take victory laps over slowing inflation because wages haven’t kept pace, leaving a typical worker about \$2,000 behind compared with before the pandemic.

“The way to think about that is people were in an incredibly deep hole because of inflation and we’re still not all the way out of that hole,” Mr. Furman said. “The fact that you protected people in the bad times means the good times don’t feel as good.”

Nicholas Nehamas contributed reporting from Rock Rapids, Iowa.

[Reid J. Epstein](#) covers campaigns and elections from Washington.

Before joining The Times in 2019, he worked at The Wall Street Journal, Politico, Newsday and The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

[More about Reid J. Epstein](#)

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 3, 2023, Section A, Page 18 of the New York edition with the headline: Biden Struggles to Sway Voters on the Economy. [Order Reprints](#) |

[Today’s Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

Advertisement

[SKIP ADVERTISEMENT](#)