

Senate hopefuls use frustration with Manchin to woo Democratic voters

By Dan Merica, CNN December 22, 2021

The moderate Democrat's announcement on Sunday that he would be a no vote on Biden's sweeping economic and social spending package has lit a fire under those Democrats who hope to be his colleagues.

"Manchin's current decision is an egregious betrayal of working people," said Pennsylvania state Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta, a Democrat running in a crowded primary for his state's open Senate seat in 2022. "It proves how important it is for us to elect working people who know in their bones what it means when government works or doesn't."

'A recipe for absolute destruction': Democrats scramble to avoid electoral blowback after Manchin halts Biden agenda

Kenyatta, who has close ties to Biden after endorsing him early in the 2020 presidential primary, said Manchin's decision shows "why it is so crucial that we win this seat and have a true majority."

Manchin told Senate Democrats on a caucus call Tuesday night that he would keep talking but has issues with the current bill, according to a source familiar with the matter. And Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer reiterated to his caucus he wants to have a vote on the legislation in the new year, according to a source briefed on the matter.

But after weeks of negotiations between Biden and Manchin, the West Virginia senator had told Fox News on Sunday that he "cannot vote to continue with this piece of legislation." Because of the evenly divided Senate -- and the fact that no Republicans have backed the Build Back Better plan -- Manchin's announcement dealt a stinging blow to the Biden administration's signature economic package, enraging Democrats and frustrating some of Manchin's colleagues. Republicans are already preparing to use the Build Back Better plan against Democrats -- whether it passes or not -- charging them with reckless spending at a time when inflation is rising.

But Democrats in Washington have also sought to use Manchin's decision to spur their base to support the party's Senate candidates in 2022 -- previewing how those candidates may run against Manchin's influence.

"Bottom line... a 50/50 senate ain't cutting it folks," tweeted Jaime Harrison, chair of the Democratic National Committee. "We have to pick up more seats," he added, before listing some of the party's best opportunities to grow their majority in what will be a difficult midterm cycle. 'Giving up is not an option'

That frustration extended from Ohio to Wisconsin to Florida, where Democratic Senate candidates responded to Manchin's Sunday comments by positioning their candidacies as the best way to cut into Manchin's power and address overarching issues that Democrats have with the legislative body.

"Hey Joe Manchin, giving up is not an option," tweeted Rep. Tim Ryan, who is running for Senate in Ohio. "This is what happens with a government that's full of career politicians who have lost sight of the needs of the people they represent," said Alex Lasry, a candidate for Senate in Wisconsin. And Rep. Val Demings, who's running for Senate in Florida, pinned a simple tweet: "I would vote for Build Back Better in the Senate."

The upshot of Manchin's decision for Democratic candidates is that it plays into an argument many have been making since they began their campaigns earlier in the year -- that the chamber is broken and the only way to fix it is to elect more Democrats.

"The Senate is so broken, but I refuse to be discouraged," said Mandela Barnes, the lieutenant governor of Wisconsin who is also running for Senate. "Let's be clear, this moment is bigger than one senator or one piece of legislation. It's Build Back Better today, but tomorrow it could be legislation to expand voting rights, to stop climate change, or to permanently make Roe v. Wade law of the land."

Barnes, in a shot at the legislative body he hopes to join, added, "It's unacceptable that initiatives like these with broad support from the American people can be stalled by the vote of any one senator."

And in North Carolina, former state Supreme Court Chief Justice Cheri Beasley told local outlet WFMY that she believes in making the child tax credit permanent -- something Manchin opposed -- but hopes that negotiations continue despite the West Virginia senator's announcement.

"I think there has to be an opportunity to stay at the negotiating table," Beasley said, in a more measured comment about Manchin. "This is certainly worth fighting for. People are challenged, and that's what I'm hearing across the state."

To win in what could be trying midterms, these operatives have argued it's critical for candidates to tie Senate inaction to what they see as Republicans rejecting everything Democrats have attempted to do for middle class and working people.

To do that, candidates like Ryan have been putting the onus on Republicans for not coming to the table and working with Democrats on the Build Back Better plan.

"This is a no-brainer," Ryan told CNN of the plan. "No Republican came to the table to try to help. So, we can talk about Manchin and (Arizona Sen. Kyrsten) Sinema and the Democrats, not one Republican stepped up on childcare, on a tax cut for working people, on helping seniors with their hearing aids and glasses. ... Not one Republican."

He added: "They're MIA in this whole process, which the voters are going to certainly know about next year."