

This month, President Biden held the first press conference of his presidency, submitted his first budget request to Congress, and unveiled a massive infrastructure proposal. The House and Senate return to Washington after the Easter recess to a packed legislative agenda. Millions of Americans are getting vaccinated every day, but there is fear of a vaccine wall before America gets to “herd immunity.” There is a growing crisis on America’s southern border and Vice President Kamala Harris has been assigned to fix it.

Biden’s First Press Conference

On March 25, President Biden appeared at his first White House press conference eager to talk about the coronavirus pandemic and recovery efforts. Biden opened with a [prepared statement](#) pledging to provide 200 million vaccines in his first 100 days, doubling his previous goal. The President also reiterated his goal to fully open primary schools in his first 100 days and cited data on meeting that goal, noting that recent [Department of Education surveys](#) found that nearly half of K-through-8 schools were fully open by mid-March. President Biden said that more than 100 million payments of \$1,400 have been distributed, as authorized by the American Rescue Plan and noted that a majority of economic forecasters have significantly increased their projections on the economic growth, with many expecting growth to exceed 6 percent. Beyond the positive picture painted by the President about the trajectory of the pandemic and recovery efforts, he was repeatedly asked about other growing crises and there were a number of headline worthy takeaways. Regarding the crisis on the southern border, Biden rejected the notion that the surge in migrants at the U.S. border is because he’s a “nice guy” who is soft on immigration, insisting this is a cyclical issue. The President warned that China seeks to become the world’s wealthiest and most powerful country, framing it as a contest between autocracy and democracy, and compared Chinese President Xi Jinping to Russian President Vladimir Putin saying they both think “autocracy is the wave of the future.” On Afghanistan, Biden said that it would be difficult to meet the May 1 deadline negotiated by the Trump administration with the Taliban for a withdrawal of all U.S. forces—there are now around 2,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan which is the lowest level since 2011. The President also tore into efforts to [restrict voting rights](#) in states like Georgia, and suggested again that he is [open to changing the filibuster](#), saying the tactic is currently being “abused in a gigantic way” in the Senate. Finally, President Biden, when asked, announced that he does plan to run for re-election in 2024.

Biden Sends His “Skinny Budget” to Congress

President Biden submitted his \$1.52 trillion budget request to Congress. This so-called [“skinny budget”](#) calls for a \$118 billion increase in discretionary spending from fiscal year 2021, the spending programs that lawmakers in Congress can change from one year to the next. This includes a 15.7 percent increase in domestic spending and a 1.7 percent increase in defense. This budget request does not include tax proposals, economic projections, or so-called mandatory programs like Social Security, which will all be included in a formal budget request the White House will release later this spring. The request offers valuable insights into Biden’s priorities and reinforces his belief that expanding, not shrinking, the federal government is crucial to economic growth and prosperity. In a letter accompanying the budget request, Shalanda Young, acting director of the Office of Management and Budget, wrote that [“this moment of crisis is also a moment of possibility.”](#) Biden’s proposal would direct billions of dollars toward reducing inequities in housing and education,

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as well as making sure every government agency puts climate change at the front of its agenda. The submission of this initial budget kicks off what will likely be a long, drawn-out fight on Capitol Hill over funding the government for FY2022 starting on October 1—the question is now whether Congress agrees with the President’s vision.

The President’s Infrastructure Plan

At an [event on March 31 in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania](#), the heart of America’s “rust belt”, President Biden unveiled his \$2 trillion infrastructure plan, named the [“American Jobs Plan.”](#) The proposal makes significant investments into traditional infrastructure, seeking upgrades to America’s highways, bridges, ports, airports, transit systems, and waterways. The plan provides over \$620 billion for transportation infrastructure, including modernizing bridges and roads, and investing over \$170 billion in the electric vehicle market. The plan would invest \$80 billion to improve freight and passenger rail, including a sizable investment for Amtrak, a matter dear to the heart of [“Amtrak Joe”](#), and calls for \$85 billion to modernize existing transit systems and help agencies expand their systems to meet rider demand. The plan would invest \$100 billion to expand access to high-speed broadband to reach 100% coverage, and calls for \$100 billion to improve the electric grid, including through a number of tax credits and other incentives.

The “American Jobs Plan” seeks to accelerate the fight against climate change by hastening the shift to new, cleaner energy sources, and help [promote racial equality in the economy](#). On climate, the plan would reduce the carbon emissions by adding one million affordable and energy-efficient housing units, focusing on building electric vehicle charging stations, and making improvements to the electric grid and other parts of the power sector. The plan also directs funds toward communities of color and regions of the country that need the most help and have suffered most from pollution, echoing a campaign pledge that a top priority would be [“modernizing schools in the most economically underserved communities in our nation — all too often in Black and Brown communities.”](#)

To pay for the infrastructure plan, President Biden proposed the [“Made in America Tax Plan,”](#) which would raise taxes by \$2 trillion over the next 15 years. The plan would raise the corporate tax rate to 28%, set a global minimum tax for multinational corporations, attempt to crack down on tax haven jurisdictions, deny companies expense deductions for offshoring jobs, create an on-shoring tax credit, and enact a minimum tax on corporate book incomes, among other things. Biden has appointed five Cabinet members to coordinate with the White House team to work out the plan’s details with Congress, and to sell the proposal to the American people. The [“Jobs Cabinet”](#) members are Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Marcia Fudge, Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh, and Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo.

Congress Returns to a Packed Agenda

The House and Senate returned to Washington the week of April 12 following their Easter recess and have a full legislative plate. The aforementioned jobs and infrastructure plan is a top priority and

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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she hopes lawmakers would pass the measure before the month-long August recess. Over the next several weeks House and Senate leaders will meet with administration officials to see where common ground can be found, but Democrats on the Hill have also made clear they will be willing to move forward without Republican support and utilize the reconciliation process, as they did earlier this year on a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package. Legislation using reconciliation in the Senate can advance with just a simple majority, rather than 60 votes, and Democrats currently hold a 50-50 majority, with Vice President Harris casting a tie-breaking vote.

The President has also called on Congress to address gun violence in America, which he calls an “epidemic” and an embarrassment for America on the global stage. According to the [Gun Violence Archive](#), there have been more than 130 mass shootings in the United States this year, meaning that the U.S. has seen more than one such shooting a day on average. Biden is urging the Senate to pass the House-passed legislation that closes gun background check loopholes, [“Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2021,”](#) and the [“Enhanced Background Checks Bill of 2021”](#). He is also urging the Senate pass the [reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act](#) that closes the so-called “boyfriend” and “stalking” loopholes, and is calling on Congress to pass an assault weapons and high capacity magazine ban, and repeal the liability immunity for gun manufacturers, among other measures. While calls for action always grow in the wake of mass shootings, passing gun legislation in Congress is always a heavy lift. Recently, the president also announced [several executive actions](#) to curb gun violence in the absence of progress on the Hill.

There is also a heated battle brewing on Capitol Hill on voting rights and civil rights. Last month, the House passed the [“For the People Act”](#) which would overhaul federal elections and expand voting rights—the measure is now before the U.S. Senate. In a rare bit of political theater, Senate Majority Leader Schumer and Senate Minority Leader McConnell both [spoke at a Senate Rules Committee hearing](#) considering the package. In addition to revising federal elections, the legislation would blunt some Republican state legislators’ efforts to restrict access to the ballot box, a matter that has [increasingly drawn the involvement of the business community](#).

Pandemic Update

There is cause for hope as well as concern about the trajectory of the pandemic in the United States. [More than 20 percent of the U.S. population has been vaccinated](#), and deaths are declining steadily. Many states have expanded their Covid-19 vaccine eligibility—there have been over 230 million doses distributed, with over 180 million doses administered, and over 70 million Americans are fully vaccinated. The rate of vaccinations continues to rise with an average of over 3 million shots administered daily. However, new cases are on the rise and the U.S. has stepped up its surveillance for coronavirus variants in recent weeks as experts warn there is much further to go if the country wants to stay ahead of new and potentially more dangerous variants. There is also increasing concern about hitting a [“vaccine wall,”](#) meaning demand for the coronavirus vaccine will decrease well before the U.S. has reached herd immunity. This concern is exacerbated by a growing vaccine hesitancy, especially in rural Republican-heavy states, and [recent analysis](#) predicts that the rate of vaccine distribution will plateau by the end of April.

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The Crisis on the Border

[Preliminary figures released by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection \(CBP\)](#) shows that more than 170,000 migrants were taken into custody at the southwest border of the United States in March, the highest monthly total since at least 2006, and a 71% increase over February. The root causes of migration from Latin America include economic insecurity, poor governance and environmental displacement. While there was an overall dip in migration during 2020, due to COVID-19 pandemic, and the closure of borders in response to the pandemic, the pressure to migrate in Central America and Mexico only accelerated due to those root causes. The surge at the border is also cyclical and seasonal—migrants respond to weather patterns, labor demands, and enforcement regimes, not just in the United States, but also elsewhere in Latin America. Moreover, it must be noted that there has been a crisis at the southern border for decades now—[every year between 1973 and 2009](#), there were more than 500,000 migrants apprehended annually at the U.S. southern border. Nevertheless, this issue has political overtones. President Biden cited the cyclical nature of the matter and said “it happens every year” during his previously mentioned press conference. Republicans have seized on the issue, claiming that the surge is a direct result of President Biden’s decision to end policies put in place by his predecessor, believing that the issue could dominate the 2022 midterm elections. President Biden has [assigned Vice President Harris](#) the role of leading the effort with Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) to stem the flow of migrants to the southern border and to address the variety of push factors.

Personnel Updates

Department of Agriculture – **Sandra Eskin** is deputy undersecretary for food safety. **Janie Hipp** is general counsel.

Department of Commerce – **Leslie Kiernan** is general counsel.

Department of Defense – The nominee for undersecretary for acquisition and sustainment is **Michael Brown**. The nominee for comptroller is **Michael McCord**. **Roland Moultrie** is the nominee for undersecretary for intelligence and security.

Department of Health and Human Services – **Xavier Becerra** was confirmed as secretary. **Dawn O’Connell** is the nominee for assistant secretary for preparedness and response. **Loyce Pace** is director of the office of global affairs.

Department of Homeland Security – **John Leonard** is the executive assistant commissioner in CBP.

Department of State – **Jose Fernandez** is the nominee for undersecretary for economic growth, energy and the environment. **Daniel Kritenbrink** is the nominee for assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific affairs. **Brett Holmgren** is the nominee for assistant secretary for intelligence and research. **Brian Nichols** is the nominee for assistant secretary for Western Hemisphere affairs. **Dan Feldman** is the chief of staff and counselor to John Kerry, the President’s special envoy for climate.

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Department of the Treasury – **Nelly Liang** is the nominee for undersecretary for domestic finance. **Lily Batchelder** is the nominee for assistant secretary for tax policy. **Jonathan Davidson** is the nominee for assistant secretary for legislative affairs. The nominee for assistant secretary for climate policy is **Ben Harris**.

Central Intelligence Agency – **William Burns** was confirmed as director of CIA.

The White House – **Gene Sperling** is the coordinator for the American Rescue Plan and senior advisor to the President.

National Economic Council – **Leandra English** is special assistant to the President and NEC Chief of Staff. **Seth Harris** is deputy assistant to the President for labor and the economy. **Daniel Hornung** is special assistant to the President for economic policy. **Samantha Silverberg** is special assistant to the President for transportation and infrastructure policy. **Elizabeth Reynolds** special assistant to the President for manufacturing and economic development. **Timothy Wu** is special assistant to the President for technology and competition policy. **Jennifer Harris** is senior director for international economic and labor—she will sit on both the NEC and NSC staff.