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What's at Stake for Local Governments in the Presidential Election.

For all the years Donald Trump has lived in Manhattan, he's cast American cities as the enemy during his presidency.

Big cities—in particular those run by Democratic mayors—earned particular vitriol from the president, who has deemed them “rodent infested,” “disgusting” places sieged by violence “worse than Afghanistan.” He's sent federal agents in to crack down on protests against the wishes of local leaders, threatened to withhold federal funding from “anarchist” and “sanctuary” cities, and castigated local leaders when they fight his policies.

The antagonistic relationship has many in local government banking on a reprieve if former Vice President Joe Biden ousts Trump on Election Day.

“The Trump administration has a hostile relationship with local government,” said Mitch Landrieu, the Democrat mayor of New Orleans from 2010 to 2018 and former president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. “There has never been a level of hostility that exists today in previous administrations.”

But the animosity hasn't undercut all of the Republican president's relationships with local government—Trump received a standing ovation when he spoke at the National Association of Counties conference in March and promised to continue to be a “friend, partner, ally and resource” to local governments. It was the first time a sitting president had addressed the NACO conference, which includes both rural and urban county leaders, a symbol some Republican officials say reflects the Trump administration's accessibility to local government officials.

“The president and his directors have been available,” said Ron Wesen, a commissioner in Skagit County, Washington and the past president of the National Conference of Republican County Officials. “It was really impressive to me the outreach the administration had.”

The clear partisan split isn't as evident when it comes to the most pressing crisis that local governments currently face: the coronavirus pandemic. Lobbying groups for counties and cities agree that much more federal assistance is needed, both to pay for the Covid-19 response and help governments deal with budget shortfalls that have already resulted in furloughs and layoffs.

This spring, Trump at times signaled a willingness to consider more direct aid for state and local governments than was included in the CARES Act package approved in March. But that sentiment has since largely evaporated. More recently, the president has echoed Senate Republicans who've said they don't want to “bail out” Democratic cities and states they describe as poorly run.

That means the outcome of the election could be a determining factor in whether states and localities get more aid. The Democratic-led House passed legislation in May that would have provided nearly \$1 trillion in direct aid to state and local governments. On Thursday, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi described state and local assistance as one of the key sticking points in working out a new deal.

While Senate Republican resistance means a Democratic takeover of the Senate is probably a necessary condition for a sizable new package, Biden is vowing to help and has promised local leaders direct access to the White House.

"We should have a local emergency fund that drives resources straight to you, expand your health infrastructure, reimburses overtime pay for the essential workers and first responders," Biden said during an address to the U.S. Conference of Mayors in late September. "Whatever your community needs the most."

Cooperation with Biden

Political observers say there is plenty of reason to believe a Biden administration would approach relationships with local governments differently than Trump. Biden has a strong record of engaging local leaders and taking the time to understand how local government works, said Frank Shafroth, the director of the Center for State and Local Government Leadership at George Mason University.

In particular, Shafroth points to Biden's role as vice president working with the city of Detroit after the city filed for bankruptcy in 2013. Detroit's was the largest municipal bankruptcy filing in U.S. history. Under President Obama, Biden helped the city secure federal transportation funding for several projects and was credited as advocating for the city's needs throughout the process.

"It shows he has experience and that he appreciates those cities," Shafroth said of Biden's interactions with city leaders. "He listened and had he not listened, I don't know if Detroit would exist as a city today."

It's that willingness to listen and get involved at the local level that Debbie Goettel, chairwoman of the National Democratic County Officials, said would be beneficial in helping to get local governments back on track as they emerge from the coronavirus pandemic. Collaborating with the Trump administration on infrastructure projects, the type of investments that could help revive local economies post-pandemic, has been slow going, Goettel said. She placed the blame on the departure of federal employees with experience working with local governments, including many who have not been replaced.

"It's been harder and it's been slower," said Goettel, a commissioner in Hennepin County, Minnesota, specifically citing delays on a light rail project that only recently received grant funding from the Federal Transit Administration.

She believes a Biden administration would take requests from local governments more seriously.

"Trump is listening at a much higher level. Biden would really get down to a local level and really listen to us," Goettel said.

Last month, Biden told local government leaders that improving relationships with them would be a goal of his administration should he win.

"Whether your city is red or blue, I'm going to be there," Biden said during the mayors' conference. "Every American community deserves the full support of the American president. The worst thing that a president can do is drive wedges that make your job tougher because he thinks it benefits him or stirs up chaos in your communities."

Trump's Open Door

Despite Trump's public brawls with big-city mayors, some Republican local leaders said they have

found his administration to be particularly accessible.

The “back channels were always open” when it came to discussions between the administration and state and local governments about increased federal funding as part of a coronavirus stimulus bill, said Bryan Barnett, the Republican mayor of Rochester Hills, Michigan and past president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

“We found at times an ally in the White House, at times an obstacle,” Barnett said of the still unsuccessful discussions. “We were always talking about numbers we thought that could work.”

The Trump campaign did not return a request for comment inquiring about his record on working with cities.

Trump has prioritized “law and order” on the campaign trail and the U.S. Department of Justice has provided federal resources and pushed efforts to crack down on violent crime in a handful of Midwestern cities. Trump continues to have high support among police and sheriffs.

However, when local government leaders have balked at enforcing Trump’s policies, the president has tried to counter by taking away federal money.

Early on in Trump’s tenure, the Justice Department sought to link the award of law enforcement grants to local and state cooperation with federal immigration authorities as part of the president’s bid to crack down on illegal immigration and “sanctuary cities.” But the policy has been stymied, as three of four federal appellate courts have ruled against Trump’s sanctuary city policies.

More recently, Trump tried a similar tactic when he announced an executive order that would seek to limit federal grants to “anarchist” jurisdictions that he said did not do enough to contain violence during national protests this summer against police brutality. Among the grants the White House has considered targeting for cuts are millions of dollars for coronavirus relief, as well as support for HIV treatment and health screenings for newborns, Politico reported this month.

“We have other cities that are out of control; they’re like warzones,” Trump said during a press conference over the summer. “We’re not going to put up with that.”

Cities’ Needs Don’t Change

No matter who is declared the winner of the presidential election next month, the most pressing challenges facing cities will remain the same, Barnett said.

“Mayors are going to get up on Nov. 4 and continue to have to lead their cities,” he said.

Because so many pandemic-related challenges—from reopening schools to help with distribution of any future Covid-19 vaccine—are local responsibilities, it will be important for the winner to forge strong working relationships with local governments, political observers said.

“This country is made of local, state, and federal governments,” said Wesen, the Washington state county official. “Our taxpayers expect us to work together.”

Route Fifty

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OCTOBER 29, 2020

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