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Biden held his first big reelection rally in Philly. Here are four takeaways.

Joe Biden loves a union crowd, and Saturday about 2,000 union workers loved him back.



President Joe Biden speaks to people at the AFL-CIO convention at the Pennsylvania Convention Center on Saturday.

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Elizabeth Robertson / Staff Photographer

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[Joe Biden](#) loves a union crowd, and about 2,000 union workers loved him back Saturday at a Philadelphia rally to kick off his reelection campaign.

Biden, 80, is the oldest president in American history and faces the challenge of fending off concerns about his age and drooping approval ratings to reassemble the coalition that narrowly delivered him the White House in 2020.

The president [picked Philadelphia and a friendly union crowd at the Convention Center for the first large-scale campaign rally](#), which came a day after the AFL-CIO, the nation's largest union, and 17 others endorsed his campaign. And Pennsylvanians can expect to see a lot more of Biden between now and next November, as he's sure to continue focusing on the key swing state.

Here are some standout moments from the first big event of Biden's 2024 campaign.

'Hello organized labor!'

This did not feel like a kickoff for a president with a 40% approval rating. Biden picked extremely friendly territory for his first big rally. The sea of people in neon T-shirts represented an alphabet soup of unions and cheered loudly throughout — interrupting with “Let's Go Joe!” and “USA!” chants.

“He has helped the labor movement immensely and it could have all fallen apart during the pandemic,” said Cheryl Omlor, a third-generation union member at the rally.

Labor is a group Biden has focused on throughout his career, and a crowd he genuinely seems to enjoy interacting with. The president was noticeably more energetic than he was at a briefing about [the I-95 collapse](#) earlier in the day. He choked up early in his speech while acknowledging the union endorsement.

“I’m more honored by your endorsement than you can imagine,” Biden said. “Coming this early it’s gonna make a gigantic difference in this campaign.”

Biden also noted the environmental groups who’d endorsed him last week: “We’re coming together,” he said.

He repeated some of his favorite lines about the middle class, saying it “built this country and you built the middle class.”

And he drew a direct line between the infrastructure bill, which will fund 32,000 improvement projects across the country, and the union jobs those projects could create.

“I really believe this country is about to take off,” Biden said. “The investments we’ve made these past three years have the power to transform this country for the next five decades. Guess who’s going to be at the center of that transformation? You.”

Unions can be a powerful political force to energize and turn out voters.

Robert Pate, a member of Unite Here Local 54, which represents casino workers, said he volunteered for Biden in 2020 and would do so again in 2024.

“I haven’t head a president talking about bringing back manufacturing jobs in a long time,” Pate, 42, said. For Pate, Biden’s age isn’t a concern: “His age brings experience.”

Biden-omics

Biden previewed his campaign’s economic message, centered on helping

working-class people. He talked about investing in advanced technology and increasing semiconductor production and clean energy. He credited himself for creating 13 million jobs (including many that don't require college degrees) and for the unemployment rate hitting a 50-year low. And he touted progress in lowering prescription drug costs.

“Big pharma was always ready to stop us,” he said. “Not this time.”

Biden also acknowledged there are things he wants another term to fix: improving supply chain issues and investing more in research and development.

He pledged to end tax loopholes for wealthy people and businesses.

“How can it be fair when 55 of the largest corporations in America paid zero in federal income tax with \$40 billion in profit?”

The power of incumbency

Don't expect a ton of rallies to follow this kickoff. Biden's greatest asset as a candidate is the power of incumbency and the attention he can draw as president. Arguably the most impactful moment of the day wasn't Biden standing on a stage packed with union members, but [flying above I-95, looking down on a collapsed bridge](#) and vowing to help fix it.

"I told the governor there's no more important project right now in the country as far as I'm concerned," Biden said after the aerial tour of the collapse site. "I've directed my team ... to move heaven and earth to get it done as soon as possible."

A crisis like the I-95 collapse also fits perfectly into one of Biden's major campaign themes — rebuilding failing infrastructure. "President Joe Biden Rebuilding I-95" signs were set up next to the podium at the press event, and Democratic lawmakers lauded his responsiveness.

Biden has two Democratic primary challengers, environmental lawyer Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and author Marianne Williamson. But he will likely largely ignore being in a primary — instead portraying that he’s focused on being president. Most, if not all, Democrats in Congress will be behind him, and the Democratic National Committee has said it won’t hold debates.

U.S. Rep. Brendan Boyle, (D., Pa.), a member of Biden’s campaign advisory team, argued that’s a good strategy ahead of the general election.

“I’m not terribly worried about where the president is in terms of polling,” Boyle said. “We just have to continue to tell our story. This country was flat on its back, the Congressional Budget Office was saying we wouldn’t have a full recovery from COVID for another decade. We already have that and more.”

No MAGA mentions

Biden’s 25-minute speech was entirely focused on his economic message and a pledge to do more for working people.

There was none of the rhetoric of a speech [last September at Independence Hall](#), when he said former President Donald Trump “and the MAGA Republicans represent an extremism that threatens the foundation of our very

republic.” And there was no mention of Trump, the GOP front-runner, or of Trump’s most recent [federal indictment](#).

Biden did criticize the Republican party, warning the crowd: “They’re coming for your jobs. They’re coming for your future. They’re coming for the future we’re building for your kids and your grandkids.”

And he told union members that Republicans want to bring back tax cuts for the wealthy. ”Who do you think is going to be stuck carrying the burden?” Biden asked. “You are. Working people in this country.”

Asked earlier in the day by reporters in the White House traveling press pool if he thought the campaign ahead would be a nasty one, Biden responded:

“It depends on who the nominee is.”

Staff writers Gillian McGoldrick, Leo Cassel-Siskind, and Punya Bhasin contributed to this article.

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