

Bill Zaferos: Biden's "Delaware Way" could play well in Wisconsin

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If you want to understand the political style of President-elect Joe Biden, you need look no further than Delaware's unique "Return Day" celebration that takes place in the state's rural Sussex County.

The event features Democrats and Republicans, winners and losers, gathering the Thursday following the elections to bury the hatchet.

Literally.

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After a parade in which political opponents ride together in antique cars and horse-drawn carriages, party leaders symbolically bury a hatchet in a pit of sand.

It is part of the "Delaware Way" of politics, a traditional, if somewhat deteriorating, manner of getting along with both sides of the aisle.

"The Delaware Way is in Joe's bones," said Bobby Byrd, president of the prominent Delaware lobbying group Byrdgomes and a longtime Biden friend. "The fact that he showed up for Return Day after he was elected vice president in 2008 says a lot about the guy. Quite frankly I think he'd be back this year if the event hadn't been canceled because of the pandemic."

See images of Biden and Delaware's tradition [here](#) and [here](#).

Biden's "Delaware Way" should play well in Wisconsin.

Milwaukee Ald. Marina Dimitrijevic, former head of Wisconsin's Working Families Party, a left-leaning grassroots organization, said Biden comes across as "real," something that will resonate in Wisconsin as well as the Midwest in general.

"He has that openness, there's something real about him, and that's a totally Midwestern value," Dimitrijevic said. "Wisconsin is the epitome of TMI (too much information). If you're on a long elevator ride with someone, you'll know their entire history. That is the sort of thing that makes Biden completely relatable. He's open. He's transparent. He tells it like it is, and Midwesterners like his zingers."

Dimitrijevic, who was formerly chairwoman of the Milwaukee County Board, said Biden's first job will be to address the COVID-19 pandemic and its broader implications.

"The pandemic has exposed the great inequities we already knew were there," she said. "People are getting evicted. We need to do something about that, and whether it's healthcare or child care we need to get to work. Most of all we need a healthcare system that we can count on in Wisconsin. We need a very large COVID relief program in Wisconsin that affects daily life and we need him to sign it immediately.

"I think he'll be a person who gets down to business and keeps it real. I hope to goodness he has an amazing Senate majority as well. But he's going to have to get to work quickly. He's got four years of damage to undo."

Former Greenfield Republican Rep. Jeff Stone agreed with Dimitrijevic that Biden's collaborative style may work in Wisconsin.

"My gut feeling is he'll be pretty good," said Stone, vice president and transportation specialist for the Milwaukee-based engineering firm Kapur & Associates. "He comes across as down-to-earth and a friend of the working man, and that probably sells well. He can be combative, but that works in Wisconsin, too. He's going to be blunt in his responses, and I think he'll do all right in that sense."

Stone said Biden needs to address the state's transportation needs, especially in strengthening infrastructure in Milwaukee's east-west corridor and I-43 north.

"We've made a lot of investment in transportation, but how does Biden come out on this issue?" Stone said. "If he wants to serve the Wisconsin constituency he'll need

to focus on urban areas. The question is, how do you get a fair investment that will serve Milwaukee County and maybe the other urban areas while garnering support in rural areas?

“He also needs to address things like public transit, which has been ravaged by the pandemic.”

Byrd said Biden is a consensus builder who will be able to set and accomplish his agenda by working with both sides, a trait common to the “Delaware Way.” He said Biden’s “down to earth” image is real because Delaware, a small state with a population roughly the same as Milwaukee County, requires accessibility and authenticity.

“He never went ‘D.C.’,” Byrd said. “He always went to Washington and came back home on the Amtrak. I used to ride with him to Washington and come right back. He is always accessible. We used to call him ‘Amtrak Joe.’”

Byrd predicted that since as a young senator Biden entered the Senate and learned from consensus builders like Mike Mansfield, D-Montana, and Gaylord Nelson, D-Wisconsin, he will be able to work both sides for positive results.

“He’s not going to govern with a lot of animosity,” Byrd said. “It’s not going to be a ‘gotcha’ style of governing. He’s not going to hold grudges because he disagrees with you. He’s not going to throw you out of the room because he doesn’t like what you say. He’s going to seek out people who don’t agree with him so he makes sure he understands all sides of the issue.

“He’s basically a very nice guy. He’s much more religious than people know, and he is very grounded in his Catholicism.”

Byrd has advice for Wisconsin’s congressional delegation if they want to be successful in getting Biden’s support for issues important to the state.

“If they can come together, agree on some things and come to him with their agenda, come together with something they can all support, they’ll develop a good working relationship with Joe,” he said. “Joe likes to see unity.”

— *Zaferos is an author and freelance writer in Milwaukee who has covered Biden and Delaware politics. See his first book [here](#).*

