

Biden Makes Strategic Visits, Mulling Presidential Run

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's journey to a decision on whether to run for president is taking him this week to California, Michigan, and Ohio—critical states for fundraising and electoral recognition if he decides to jump into the race.

The locations are not a coincidence, even though the events he is attending are officially sanctioned by the White House.

They suggest the vice president is keeping up a campaign-in-waiting as he deliberates whether to take on former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whose front-runner status for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination has been tarnished by her handling of an email controversy.

Biden is giving mixed signals, in public and in private.

Last week he gave an emotional interview in New York to Stephen Colbert on CBS's "Late Show," in which he suggested he was not ready to give the required 110 percent to a campaign while continuing to grieve for his son Beau, who died recently.

On the same trip, however, he met with a top fundraiser who has pledged support to Clinton.

"I don't think he knows what he's going to do. I think he's struggling with it," said a close friend of Biden's, who met with him a couple of times in the past week, on the condition of anonymity.

On Wednesday, Biden came to California, a state rich with Democratic donors, to tout solar energy and represent the administration at a conference with China on climate change.

Global warming is a top issue for environmentalists, who made up an important part of President Barack Obama's political base.

Sounding a bit like a candidate, Biden referred to the Republican presidential debate on Wednesday and predicted some would deny climate change.

"They'd probably deny gravity as well," he said in Anaheim.

In Los Angeles he met a labor leader, in a nod to an important Democratic constituency. He joked later that he could not highlight his friendship with someone from Iowa because of the political connotations of that early-voting state.

His comments appear to be part of a trend.

On Tuesday night he discarded prepared remarks at an event with Latinos at his residence in favor of a diatribe against Donald Trump, the Republican front-runner whose comments on immigration have upset Hispanics, another group whose support is critical to Democrats.

Biden is not only watching Republicans.

The former U.S. senator, who has twice competed unsuccessfully for the Democratic nomination, is eyeing Clinton's rocky performance and weighing his options. He would join former U.S. Senator Jim Webb of Virginia, former Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley, former Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee, and U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont in the race.

Sanders, who describes himself as a socialist, is polling especially well in the early voting states of Iowa and New Hampshire, capitalizing on Clinton's weakness.

"(Biden) wants there to be a Democratic president. He's worried about where she's at," Biden's friend said.

Biden's official events and travel are sending signals. On

Thursday he goes to Michigan and Ohio, two political swing states that historically help decide the outcome of most presidential elections.

He has official events in Detroit, where he will talk about transportation, and in Columbus, where he will rail against sexual assault.

For more on the 2016 presidential race, see the Reuters blog, "Tales from the Trail."

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