

# Liberal Democrats withdraw letter to Biden that urged him to rethink Ukraine strategy



Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.), chair of the House Progressive Caucus. (J. Scott Applewhite/AP)

The Congressional Progressive Caucus has rescinded a letter, signed by 30 House liberals and sent to the White House on Monday, that urged President Biden to negotiate directly with Russia to bring an end to the war in Ukraine.

The withdrawal comes a day after the letter, led by Congressional Progressive Caucus Chair Pramila Jayapal (D-

Wash.), triggered fierce pushback from many Democrats. The retraction was also a stunning misstep for a prominent House liberal who has [expressed interest](#) in seeking a leadership position in the party.

In the wake of the letter's release, Democrats and Ukrainian officials argued that it was [unrealistic to negotiate with Russian President Vladimir Putin](#). Those officials also worried the letter could create more pressure on Biden as he tries to sustain domestic support for the war effort, at a time when the region is heading into a potentially difficult winter and Republicans are threatening to cut aid to Ukraine if they retake Congress.

On Tuesday, Jayapal said the letter had been drafted several months ago and "released by staff without vetting." She also sought to distance Democrats from recent comments by House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), who [suggested that a GOP-led House would not support additional aid to Ukraine](#).

"As Chair of the Caucus, I accept responsibility for this," Jayapal said in a statement. "The proximity of these statements created the unfortunate appearance that Democrats, who have strongly and unanimously supported and voted for every package of military, strategic, and economic assistance to the Ukrainian people, are somehow aligned with Republicans who seek to pull the plug on

American support for President Zelensky and the Ukrainian forces."

Democrats were not made aware that the letter would be issued Monday, including those who had signed the letter over the summer, according to three congressional aides who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak frankly about private discussions.

Many blamed Jayapal for the misstep, with several aides saying they believed this could tarnish her chances of winning a spot in Democratic leadership. This year, the congresswoman [made preliminary calls](#) to her colleagues about running for a leadership position, leaving the impression among some members that she would challenge Rep. Katherine M. Clark (D-Mass.), who is also a member of the progressive caucus, for a presumed No. 2 spot in the party.

Several of the letter's signatories had earlier retracted their support for the letter. Late Monday, Rep. Mark Pocan (D-Wis.) seemed to commiserate with someone critical of the letter on Twitter.

"Hear you. First, this was written in July & I have no idea why it went out now. Bad timing," Pocan [tweeted](#).

"Timing in diplomacy is everything," Rep. Sara Jacobs (D-

Calif.), one of the letter's other signatories, tweeted Tuesday morning. "I signed this letter on June 30, but a lot has changed since then. I wouldn't sign it today. We have to continue supporting Ukraine economically and militarily to give them the leverage they need to end this war."

One person close to the progressive caucus, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations, said it was strange to publicly release a letter with only 30 signatures out of the 220 Democrats in the House.

In the original letter to the White House, dated Oct. 24 and [first reported by The Washington Post](#), the lawmakers called on Biden to pursue a "proactive diplomatic push, redoubling efforts to seek a realistic framework for a cease fire."

The liberal Democrats noted that the war's disastrous consequences are increasingly felt far beyond Ukraine, including elevated food and [gas prices](#) in the United States and spikes in the price of wheat, fertilizer and fuel that have created global food shortages, not to mention the danger of a nuclear attack by Moscow.

The letter was signed by some of the best-known and most outspoken liberal Democrats in Congress, including Reps. Jamie Raskin (Md.), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (N.Y.), Cori Bush (Mo.), Ro Khanna (Calif.) and Ilhan Omar (Minn.). Its release came as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.)

spoke Monday at an international summit on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, where she downplayed the possibility that U.S. aid to Ukraine would end if Republicans took the House.

"I believe that the support for Ukraine and the people of Ukraine ... will not stop," Pelosi said, adding that "support for Ukraine is bipartisan, it is bicameral."

In remarks Tuesday in Zagreb, Croatia, Pelosi was even more forceful.

"All of us here pledged to stand with Ukraine and with the Ukrainian people, recognizing their courage — in Crimea, in other territories that [Russian President Vladimir Putin] has attempted to illegally annex and across the country — until victory is won. And that is what we will do, until victory is won," she said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) said that U.S. support for Ukraine is bipartisan and bicameral at the Crimea Platform summit in Croatia on Oct. 24. (Video: AP)

The Democratic Party has overwhelmingly supported Biden's denunciations of Russia and his spearheading of a global coalition to funnel massive support to Ukraine. Biden has framed the conflict as part of his broader view that the world is witnessing a historic confrontation between authoritarianism and democracy.

White House spokesman John Kirby said Monday that the administration appreciated the lawmakers' "very thoughtful concerns" but signaled no shift in the administration strategy on Ukraine.

"We're not going to have conversations with the Russian leadership without the Ukrainians being represented," Kirby said during a briefing with reporters Monday. "Mr. Zelensky gets to determine — because it's his country — what success looks like and when to negotiate."

Privately, some administration officials questioned the timing of the letter, which came two weeks before [midterm elections](#) and one week after McCarthy said the GOP could oppose more aid to Ukraine.

Jayapal issued a statement Monday evening "clarifying" the position the liberal lawmakers outlined in the letter, stressing that they still supported Ukraine and Biden's commitment to ensure Ukraine is represented in any discussions about its future.

"Let me be clear: We are united as Democrats in our unequivocal commitment to supporting Ukraine in their fight for their democracy and freedom in the face of the illegal and outrageous Russian invasion," Jayapal said. "Diplomacy is an important tool that can save lives — but it is just one tool."

