

Making Job Creation a Priority Keeping the Wheels on the Obama Presidency

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The wheels have not yet come off the Obama presidency, but they could next year. The best way to prevent this from happening would be for Obama to reenergize his political base so that they can be help put pressure on uncooperative members of Congress and help work to minimize Democratic losses in November of 2010. This will require Obama to define a progressive position on almost any issue, be it marriage equality, Wall Street bonuses, health care or anything else, and aggressively pursue it.

The primary political failure of the Obama administration so far is that the president has not delivered one meaningful, major policy change for his progressive base, or more accurately, progressive bases. This not only infuriates many progressives, but ultimately it weakens Obama's presidency. Obama has not taken a strong stand on any of the issues, such as marriage equality, which are important to his base; nor has he responded to the economic problems facing the country by an explicit and substantial jobs program or a genuinely aggressive effort to regulate the economy. Instead, he has charted a course of offering some bailout money to financial institutions while seeking to cajole them into lending more money to small businesses in the hopes that this will generate jobs.

On foreign policy, Obama has sought to wind down the war in Iraq while expanding the war in Afghanistan. He has pursued less confrontational policies regarding China and Russia while seeking to reinvigorate traditional alliances in western Europe. Obama's foreign policy is an improvement over Bush's because it is grounded in pragmatism and realism rather than ideology and fantasy, but it would be very premature to call Obama's foreign policy successful.

Obama has also failed to pass a single major piece of truly progressive legislation. This is most clear in the area of health care. The [willingness of the White House to swap the expansion of Medicare in exchange for Joe Lieberman's vote on cloture](#) reveals how far the administration has come from what many progressives hoped health care reform would look like. The White House has compromised away a compromise, expanding Medicare, which was itself a compromise from the public option idea, which was an early compromise away from a single payer approach.

There is, of course, nothing axiomatically wrong with compromise and pragmatism, but a presidency driven by compromise and pragmatism must be judged by the results it produces. So far, in both foreign and domestic policy, Obama cannot really point to any concrete and positive results, only trends.

Politically, pragmatism without tangible results puts Obama in danger of backing himself into a corner. Swing voters will increasingly, fairly or not, judge Obama on outcomes. If jobs do not come back and if success in Afghanistan continues to be elusive, they will not evaluate him

kindly. A president can survive this if he still has a strong political base, but for Obama this base is in danger of eroding. Reports that [African American members of Congress are increasingly dissatisfied with President Obama](#) suggest that this has already begun to happen.

If Obama is losing support among African American members of Congress, anti-war activists and advocates for marriage equality, he risks becoming a much weaker political figure. This alone will not be enough to cost him re-election, but combined with a continued inability to deliver results from his compromise-driven policies it could. In the short term, this loss of support will make it harder for Obama to drive legislation and policy in Washington.

Nowhere is this clearer than regarding health care, the defining domestic policy initiative of this administration. The White House has seemingly decided that getting a bill, no matter how weak, should be the goal. This is a Clintonian approach which, [not surprisingly, was strongly supported by former Clinton aide Rahm Emanuel](#). It worked for Bill Clinton. However, it worked for Clinton because he presided during a time of relative peace and prosperity. In that context passing reform legislation was not so important to the president's future. It is different today. Because he cannot provide peace and prosperity, Obama needs to pass some meaningful legislation to demonstrate that he is doing something positive as president. Just getting a bill passed will mean nothing to many Americans who are too focused on the economy and, to a lesser extent the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to notice some minor changes in how health care is covered. It will, however, not be lost on progressives who will view the whole episode as another disappointment by Obama. On balance, Obama is better off energizing his political base by sticking to some principles on health care, even if he fails, than by passing a sufficiently weakened bill that nobody even notices, but this is not the path he seems to be pursuing.