

The Obama Disappointment and Its Cost

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Barack Obama's presidency, while far from being a failure, has been something of a disappointment to many of his initial supporters. The noise from people on the far right who question the president's place of birth or believe him to be a socialist because he passed a stimulus package that many economists believe to be too small and a health care bill that will lead to millions of new customers and new revenue for the insurance companies, has overshadowed some of this. However, Obama's disappointed supporters are far more important to his political future than angry opponents who never have and never will support him.

Disappointment from progressive circles seems to be based on three things, Obama's support for the war in Afghanistan, his failure to take any strong positions on important issues to progressives such as marriage equality and the relatively modest nature of the legislation the administration has passed on key issues such as health care and the economy. These decisions can all be explained-some might say rationalized. Obama, after all, campaigned on expanding the war in Afghanistan. While the health care and economic stimulus bills are not perfect, they took a great deal of work and are better than nothing. Obama has to be careful about doing too much for his base because he risks alienating moderates. These explanations are either irrelevant; nobody cares how much work or legislative pyrotechnics it took to pass the bills, or wrong; supporting marriage equality comes at far less political cost than many think.

The immediate cost of this disappointment to Obama's political future will be obvious, but also debatable. Progressive supporters who came to the polls out of excitement and hope surrounding Obama in 2008 will be less likely to vote in 2010 after being disappointed by the president. There is some truth to this, but it should not be overstated. Turnout is always lower in midterm elections, so it would be wrong and ahistorical to expect turnout among progressives in 2010 to be comparable to what it was in 2008. Moreover, the possibility that the base of one or both parties will be angry and stay home is raised during virtually every election, but both parties make strong efforts, often with some success, to bring these voters out in the weeks leading up to the election.

During the campaign in 2008, Obama mobilized his base substantially around the notion that he was a transformative political figure. The change which was the central theme of his campaign was not just the change that Obama was going to represent following eight years of the Bush administration, but also the change Obama was going to bring to Washington and to politics more generally.

It is now, and was probably even then, obvious that the latter type of change was not likely to happen, but this was at the heart of Obama's campaign. When opponents pointed out that this somewhat amorphous but broad vision of changing politics in America was not quite realistic, Obama regularly appealed to his base to support him and refute these cynical views. Given the role that the belief in change and Obama's perceived ability to deliver that change played in his

election, it would seem that the President owes his supporters more than essentially arguing that it is tough getting things done, that he is doing his best, and having supporters recite talking points describing the real, but far from transformative accomplishments of the president.

The disappointment Obama supporters feel is not simply due to their naïve expectations and hope being hijacked by reality. Many of those who are now disappointed were not naïve neophytes unfamiliar with American politics. They were progressives, angry about eight years of the Bush administration who were persuaded by Obama himself to allow themselves to have hope one more time. Critics of Obama always argued that Obama was manipulating these people. The president's ongoing failure to do anything for this important part of his base may ultimately prove these critics right, leading these people to feel not only to feel manipulated by Obama but angry at themselves for allowing this to happen.

The cost of this will not be limited to dampened enthusiasm from the progressive base in the 2010 and 2012 elections, but may also lead a large group of people stop participating in the political process. Even if they continue to vote, they will probably not continue to offer their energy, time and money, at least at the national level. People who feel disappointed, or even manipulated, by Obama will be very unlikely to be excited by any future candidates as this experience will leave a mark on their political consciousness. As these people remove themselves from politics it will not only cause short, and long, term harm to the democratic party but will increase the level of anger and instability in our already precarious polity.