Progressives Should Anticipate Another Frustrating Year

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This year has been very frustrating for many progressives. The president in whom many progressives placed so much hope, probably too much, proved himself to be largely a disappointment. Some of the most significant legislation for which President Obama can claim credit during 2010, including the health care reform bill and the recent tax legislation emerged from compromises in which Republicans clearly got a lot more than progressives. President Obama, almost literally, frequently added insult to progressive injury by rhetorically attacking not the conservative Republicans who have sought to destroy Obama since the day he took office, but progressives who have expressed disappointment in his compromises.

The election in November further discouraged progressives as Republican control of the House of Representatives beginning in January will all but assure that no truly significant progressive legislation will come out of Washington anytime soon. It was not only the degree of the Republican victory, but the nature of the victory which saw the further consolidation of the Tea Party as the dominant faction of the Republican Party. The acceptance of bizarre assertions that the president is a socialist, and perhaps not even a citizen, become accepted wisdom among substantial proportions of the population. That particularly rankled many progressives.

In the last few weeks of the year, however, something different has happened. For the first time in what seemed like a very long time, President Obama began to win a few legislative battles. These were real victories, not based on compromises that primarily benefited Republicans. The repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) and the ratification of the START treaty are both not only important victories for the administration, and its progressive supporters, but stinging defeats for the Republicans. The repeal of DADT demonstrated that for all the noise social conservatives make in the Republican Party, there is a larger, although quieter consensus emerging nationally which believes in equality for all Americans. The START treaty, while less polarizing in substance, was opposed by Republicans largely because it was supported by Obama. The ratification of the START treaty suggests that simply opposing everything Obama does is no longer a demonstrably winning strategy for Republicans.

While these are both significant accomplishments, it is far too early to interpret these victories as signaling any kind of shift in the balance of power between the president and Congress. These victories were achieved during the last few weeks of a Democratic controlled congress. Beginning in the New Year, of course, the Republicans will take over the House and will control more seats in the Senate making Obama's task even more difficult. It is most likely that START and DADT were a few nice victories for the Democrats during the last weeks of a two year period that was mostly a lost opportunity.

It is unlikely that 2011 will be less frustrating than 2010 for progressives or that Obama will begin to be more responsive to progressive voters who played such an important role in his 2008 victory. This is partially due to the president's understanding of reality in Washington, including
his party's defeat in November of this year, but is also influenced by the evolving national political environment. While there has been some talk of a challenge from the left in the Democratic Primary in 2012, Obama's political team seems to understand that this is very unlikely to occur and even more unlikely to be a significant challenge if it were to occur. Regardless of whether or not Obama, in some abstract sense, deserves this challenge, it is hard to imagine a situation where a progressive candidate mounts a serious challenge to the Democratic Party's first African American president. Obama still has strong support among African American voters who would almost certainly rally around the president in the face of this type of challenge. With little support from African American voters, any challenger would have a very difficult time running a serious campaign, especially as most of the party's leadership, regardless of ethnicity, would probably continue to support the president.

This means that as 2010 turns to 2011, many progressives find themselves disappointed in the president, defeated at the ballot box and with few options for the immediate future other than to continue to support the president who has spent much of the last two years disappointing and insulting them. Fortunately, things can change quickly in American politics. Less than two years ago, after all, the Republican Party was defeated and on the brink of irrelevancy. The demographic bases of the two major parties, the need for the Republican Party to govern rather than just shout down the president and the likelihood that the Republicans in congress will overplay their hands and seek to read too much ideology into their recent victory are all reasons why progressives can have some hope going into 2011, but it won't be an easy year.