

What We Learned from the Republicans Last Week

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The Obama administration's successful passage of the stimulus package, although not the exact one they wanted, is a significant and telling victory for the new administration as it has been decades since a Democratic president has begun his term with a comparable legislative accomplishment. Although, the stimulus package had its detractors, and its passage was not exactly an easy process, it was a victory for the new administration and should put to rest concerns regarding the ability of this administration to get things done.

Much of the media coverage of the stimulus debate, from the beginning, focused on the problems the new administration faced in passing this major piece of legislation. During the time the bill was being considered and voted upon, two prominent cabinet nominees withdrew their candidacies for the cabinet, the Republicans dragged out old canards about socialism and Democratic spending and pundits tried to argue that the new administration had feet of clay. An implausible narrative that somehow Obama was Jimmy Carter redux, suggesting that Obama did not know how to legislate, began to emerge on conservative media outlets. However, things did not quite work out that way.

Instead, the administration and the new president demonstrated the same focus that made the Obama campaign so successful, and passed their bill. After initial efforts to seek Republican input were rebuffed, the administration rightly understood the Republican attacks to be a distraction and proceeded to round up the votes, including enough Republicans in the senate, to pass the needed legislation, rather than get drawn into a contretemps with essentially powerless congressional Republicans. The Republicans in congress, correspondingly, demonstrated that they, like most other political opponents of the president's, were unable to move Obama off of his plan or strategy.

Obama's success not only is a good sign about the focus and competence of this administration, but it forced the Republicans to reveal something of how they will play the admittedly bad hand they have been dealt, or more accurately, have dealt to themselves. In this regard the stimulus debate and legislation drew the Republican Party out a bit. This was the first meaningful reappearance of that party since their big defeat last November. It was not an encouraging showing or a good first step back towards relevance.

The Republican Party misplayed this issue in a number of tactical ways. First, by standing in almost complete unity against the stimulus, the Republicans put themselves in a position where if the economy begins to turn around, they will not be able to claim any credit whatsoever. Some Republican loyalists will undoubtedly assert that the Republican Party acted out of principle, not out of tactics, but the notion that the Republican Party still has any principles on which to stand, particularly with regard to spending policy, should not be taken seriously in the 21st century.

Similarly, some Republican strategists will contend that Obama and the Democratic Party will now take the blame if the economy fails to recover. If I were a Republican strategist, I would not want to stake my party's future on this notion because it requires two things to happen: the economy not to recover and voters to blame the Democrats for this even though the Democrats are the only party that has tried to do something to help the economy. It is also unlikely that anybody on the Democratic side of the aisle is going to let the American people forget the role of the Republican Party in creating this economic disaster.

The Republicans also showed that while they are able to make noise and even drive the news cycle, they are unable to have an impact on legislation. In the last two weeks, the Republican leadership in congress has shown that they can talk, but we already knew that. They have not yet, however, shown that they can become a partner, or even an obstacle, in policy making. This combined with Republican declarations of success in the middle of last week underscored the perception that the Republicans are more interested in creating problems for Obama than they are in being part of the solution to the dire economic problems facing the country. Overstating expectations, making cookie cutter complaints about a popular president and failing to propose productive solutions for ongoing problems is a recipe for continued irrelevance. This approach also creates almost no incentive for Democrats to join with Republican in opposition to the popular president. In fact, it has the exact opposite effect. The Republican's carping and attacking only strengthened Democratic Unity.

In the first weeks of his administration, Barack Obama has shown that he and his party are the only ones interested in the real challenges of governance. The Republicans have opted to remove themselves from the process. It is encouraging to see the president confront this challenge, risking his political capital for needed reform and stimulus. The new administration would be wise to build on this success by moving ahead quickly on other important domestic legislation in areas such as healthcare, environmental regulations and education before the Republicans either start trying to have a serious impact on proposed legislation, or find a way to act in a less polarizing way and weaken Democratic resolve and unity.