What Obama Still Can Learn From Ronald Reagan

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The latest polls confirm that President Obama and his policies are more popular than Democratic or Republican congressional leaders. President Obama's personal appeal, while not yet translating into legislative accomplishments, has not yet worn off. Meanwhile, Republican efforts to paint Democratic congressional leaders such as Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid as extremists have been somewhat successful; and the Republican leadership, although stronger than where it was a year ago, still has not won back the confidence of support of the American people.

The question this data raises is, so what? What is the value of Obama and his policies being more popular than his foes or his allies, particularly in a political system where Obama needs 60 Senate votes to accomplish anything? If Obama continues the strategic approach he used in his first year, including a willingness to bargain too early in the negotiating process, refusing to pressure Democrats in Congress -- particularly the Senate -- to support the party's position, and never going on the offensive against an aggressive Republican leadership, his popularity will not help him. However, popularity, particularly when it is bolstered by support for policies, can be an important asset to a president if it is used well.

Interestingly, although Obama has said that he would rather be a "good one-term president than a mediocre two-term president", he has not governed that way. In fairness to Obama, this statement is something of a meaningless platitude, as it is hard to imagine any president saying anything different on this subject. Nonetheless, Obama has carefully guarded his popularity, rather than use it to pass legislation. Critics of Obama have said that he has learned that Washington and public policy is not as easy to change as the president suggested in his campaign. This may be true, but in some respects Obama hasn't tried yet.

Presidential popularity is a very valuable asset; it may be one of the few sources in the legislative process that a president has, but it is only valuable if it is used. If it is not used it simply, and naturally, dissipates. This is, to a great extent, the story of Obama's first year in office. Rather than push for controversial legislation and see his numbers go down, Obama has soft-pedaled legislation, avoided real confrontation, and seen his numbers go down.

This strategy has accomplished very little as the health care bill, even in its very compromised current form, remains stalled. Meanwhile, Obama's chances of passing progressive legislation on job creation and the economy, assuming that is something he wants to do, are not good. And while the environment for passing this type of legislation will be more difficult in 2010 than it was in 2009, it will still be easier this year than next year when the Democrats will have probably lost seats in November.

Obama's willingness to compromise on important aspects of legislation was exploited by politicians from both parties because they were aware that there would be no consequence for
opposing the popular president. The strategy that Obama should have used in 2009 was one of leveraging his popularity to make it clear to reluctant legislators, particularly Democrats and Republicans from swing districts and states, that voting against the president meant voting against the interests and preferences of their constituents, and of outlining consequences for voting against the president.

The best recent example that Obama might follow, perhaps ironically, was set by another president who was more popular than congress. Unlike Obama, however, Ronald Reagan only enjoyed a majority for his party in one chamber of Congress. Reagan's domestic policies were similarly polarizing, but he very effectively used his personal popularity, if not necessarily that of his policies, to pass legislation with an enormous impact on the US. This strategy was central to the transformative nature of the Reagan presidency.

Scott Brown's victory in Massachusetts makes Obama's task more difficult. Although November is still nine months away, Brown's victory has created a perception that there is no electoral cost for opposing the president, at least among Republicans, while Democrats may see Coakley's loss as a reason to avoid being seen as too close to the president. Obama, however, still has some political assets. He will be president for at least three -- and most likely seven -- more years. During these years there will be ample time for Obama to award or withhold political goods from various legislatures and to use his popularity more effectively. Obama has said he would rather be a good one-term president than a mediocre two-term president, now is the time to start acting that way by taking some risks and using his popularity for political ends.