

For Obama, Winning Reelection and Governing Effectively Are Not Conflicting Goals

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After serving one year as president, Barack Obama gave an interview in which he stated that he would "rather be a really good one-term president than a mediocre two-term president." This is a strange, but revealing statement for a president to make. On one level, it is meaningless, because asserting that it is more important to do one's job well than simply get reelected is something that politicians are expected to do. It is the equivalent of an athlete saying that winning is more important than individual achievements.

The statement, however, sets up a false choice. Good politicians, and good presidents, don't choose between getting reelected and doing a good job, just like good ballplayers rarely have to choose between individual accomplishments and helping the team. A star pitcher like Tim Lincecum of the World Champion San Francisco Giants can help his team by accruing good personal statistics. If Lincecum throws eight shutout innings in a start, his personal statistics will improve, but he will also have helped his team. Similarly, the things a president such as Obama needs to do to remain popular are often the same things he needs to do to govern effectively. If Obama had managed to substantially reduce unemployment, for example, it would have helped his reelection chances while obviously being good for the country, as well.

More significantly, it is almost impossible for a president to do the things he needs to do without public support. Presidents who are not facing reelection, or who are viewed as having little chance of winning again are less, not more, powerful in their pursuit of legislative and other goals. For presidents, popularity and electoral strength are the currency that is needed to pass legislation and achieve goals; and winning tough legislative fights results in more, not less, popularity.

A presidency premised on the idea that the popular thing to do and the right thing to do are likely to be in conflict is very different from one that seeks to build a constituency to support what the president believes is the right thing. The latter will be more effective and characterized by real leadership, whereas the former almost suggests contempt for the people and a view of the role of the president that is in contrast with an important element of democracy, the idea that government serves and represents the people.

Obama's statement about preferring to be a one term president rather than a mediocre two term one seems to have reflected an attitude that has framed his presidency far too much.

Obama's policies and negotiating strategy suggest a belief that doing the popular, or populist, thing is always and almost axiomatically the wrong thing. However, the president's recent actions demonstrate how false this construct is.

Critics of the president's current efforts to raise taxes on the wealthiest Americans have accused Obama of "class warfare" and of putting his reelection ahead of the best interests of the country. Although these efforts may ultimately prove to be too little too late, this experience should demonstrate to the president, who seems to be very committed to these rational if modest proposals, that sometimes, in fact frequently, the right thing and the politically wise thing to do are the same.

Clearly, sometimes appealing to voters' base emotions and preferences is not the right thing to do, but sometimes a lot of people want a policy because it is the right thing. When those people have put you in office, it is probably worth paying them some attention, rather than dismissing their preferences seemingly because those preferences are popular.

Moreover, if it had been known in 2008 that Obama, as president, would be content to serve one term before turning the White House over to Republicans again, he might have had a far more difficult time winning his party's nomination. Democratic activists and donors did not work as hard as they did and contribute as much as they did for a one term president. A good faith effort to win two terms is implied in a presidential campaign. If Obama did not think that was important, he should have let his supporters know that in 2008.

While saying one would rather be a one term president than a mediocre two term president is a platitude, it also suggests an understanding of politics that has characterized much of Obama's presidency. It is not hard to see the link between this statement and Obama's weakness for compromise at any cost or the president's seeming unwillingness to dig in his political heels and draw a line in the legislative sand. It is almost as if the president finds partisan fighting and the political process sufficiently distasteful that he would rather it. However, as he is up against Republicans who are willing to make a partisan fight over anything and are either delusional or deeply committed to obstructing the president no matter what, this approach has not served Obama well.