

Obama and the Compromise Fallacy

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[President Obama's defense of the agreement reached with the Republicans on the Bush tax cuts](#) makes it seem as if his political team had done focus groups and determined that Obama should use the word compromise as much as possible. To some extent, compromise has become the signature word of Obama's presidency. Obviously, compromise is in many cases good; and politicians who do not know when, or how, to compromise are rarely very effective.

For Obama, however, compromise seems to have taken on a bigger meaning. Rather than view compromising as an important tool, but only one of many that is at his disposal, Obama has treated it as an ends, and goal, in itself. Compromise, however, is only a valuable tool if it is one of several, such as strong-arming recalcitrant legislators or building popular support for a position and is backed up by a credible threat to end negotiations, attack the other party or something else. Since taking office, Obama has seemed reluctant to view compromise this way.

Obama's attachment to compromise also contributes to the discrepancy between how the White House sees itself and how many Americans, regardless of ideology, view the administration. Dissatisfaction with Obama's presidency, outside of the far right, stems largely from a sense that the president has not acted quickly or effectively enough to combat the problems, largely but not exclusively economic ones, which he encountered when he took office. For these voters, the outcome is what matters, but for Obama it increasingly seems as if the process, specifically the compromise itself is more important, so Bush tax cuts, the policy in Iraq, or health care are treated by the White House as successes simply because a compromise was reached.

If all you have is a hammer, than everything looks like a nail; and compromise has become Obama's hammer. But, that is all he seems to have, so every problem is seen by the president as one where the solution is compromise. If early in his term, when he had far more political support and influence, Obama had just once stared down the Republican opposition or refused to move from a principled position, the rest of his presidency would have been a lot easier. By compromising so quickly on the economic stimulus bill and health care, Obama made it clear to members of the other party that he would always be quick to abandon his original position and reluctant to pursue any tactic that would make compromise more difficult. This gave the Republicans a valuable strategic advantage, which they will almost certainly continue to use as long as Obama is in office.

Obama has created a framework for making policy where the absence of a compromise is always viewed as a failure. This was most clearly seen in during the health care debate where then Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel famously [encouraged the President to pass more or less any bill so he would not be seen as failing, while downplaying progressive concerns about the bill](#). The health care bill which eventually passed seemed to satisfy virtually nobody. Progressives criticized it for not having anything resembling a public option while conservatives continued to attack the

bill as evidence of creeping socialism. In that case, the instinct to compromise led to a bad bill and a bad political outcome.

During the health care debate, there were several options available to Obama other than compromise or failure, but the administration appeared too myopic to see that. Rather than compromise the White House could have pushed harder for the reforms they wanted, cut a better deal, mobilized public support for those reforms or, at the very least, mobilized some public support to counter the then nascent tea party movement.

By compromising so quickly on the Bush tax cuts, effectively linking support for the unemployed during the middle of winter to tax cuts for the richest Americans, and all but suggesting a moral equivalency between the two, Obama has sent a message to his political foes that he will compromise on anything. Any smart Republican lawmaker who saw Obama do this will conclude that there is nothing for which the President will fight or that he will not trade away for the holy grail of compromise.

Obama's penchant for compromise has come at the expense of leadership. While leaders need to know when to compromise, they also need to know when to stand up fight for their positions. For Obama, the choice has always been the former. With more than half his first, and perhaps only, term over, it will be extremely difficult to change this now. Without the popular and congressional support he enjoyed in 2009, the President will likely be forced into more frequent and unpleasant compromises, like the one he just made.