

Can an Obama Jobs Bill Be Taken Seriously?

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President Obama is [preparing to propose a jobs bill](#) which will seek to address the chronic unemployment in the US, likely through a combination of payroll tax cuts, extending unemployment benefits and some public spending. To describe this proposal by the president as a day late and a dollar short would be extremely generous. Obama is already two years late and several billion dollars short in his efforts to generate employment.

For Obama to begin talk of legislation to create more jobs following signing off on a Republican debt ceiling deal which has had the predictable, and predicted, result of causing the country to move ever closer to another recession seems almost surreal, as if the President seems almost unaware of the damage his failure to stand up to the right wing extremists who now constitute the Republican Party has done.

This bill almost certainly has its origins both in Obama's need to address the problem of widespread unemployment as well as for the President to regain the political upper hand in the jobs debate. While it is good that the President is concerned about unemployment and preparing to try to address this problem, albeit through proposals that will inevitably end up being too modest to make a significant difference, it is troubling that this far into his term, Obama is still searching for a way to both help develop jobs and to demonstrate that he is genuinely concerned with the widespread unemployment that has existed since he took office.

There are many things about Obama's presidency that are inexplicable, not just to those who criticize him from the left, but to those who are frustrated with the president's seeming inability to play an ongoing leadership role in addressing the country's economic ills. The most puzzling of these is Obama's failure, either through words or action, to prioritize jobs and employment, despite coming into office during a time of significant unemployment. The need for Obama, after more than two and a half years in office, to again signal his concern over jobs further underscores this. The fact that he is seeking to do this through a modest uncreative piece of legislation makes it even clearer that, for whatever reason, the President still does not quite understand how to address the problem.

Two and a half years into his term, after seeing his party lose control of the House of Representatives and conceding to the Republicans on an enormous range of spending and tax issues, Obama's options on job creation are so limited that no bill that is politically possible can make much of a difference. This leaves the President in a very difficult position but one which is substantially of his own making.

There is very little Obama can do now to show his concern, presuming it is real, for job development. At too many junctures during his presidency Obama has refused to make job creation a priority. His initial stimulus bill was, by most accounts, too small to have had a substantial impact on job creation. Obama spent months working on a health care bill, but never explained why reforming health care was helpful for strengthening the economy and facilitating job growth. Moreover, for the first two years or so of his presidency, Obama allowed the right wing narrative on deficits to take hold, thus again implicitly allowing job creation to become a lower priority as cutting spending became the Republican mantra, one insufficiently rebutted by the White House. By proposing this jobs bill now, Obama almost draws more attention to his powerlessness than to his concern about jobs. If the bill passes, by the time it gets out of congress, it will probably be little more than another tax cut for businesses and, of course, have very little impact on the overall employment picture.

For Obama to genuinely demonstrate his concern about jobs, he will need to do more than offer the occasional and predictable legislation. He will need to both propose major measures which will involve committing substantial resources to job development, and sell these measures to the American people. Obama cannot do this by operating within the Republican defined framework of austerity and reduced spending. Seeming to agree with the far right that reigning in spending is the top priority and that only through doing this can we get the country moving again, precludes taking job development seriously. However, this is precisely what President Obama has done, if not through his words than through his deeds.

It is not too late to change this, but it is getting there. Moreover, only through strong, confrontational and forceful action and rhetoric will Obama succeed in making job development a priority. For almost the first three years of his presidency, we have not seen this, so it is unlikely to emerge now. Nonetheless, Obama may have a lot to gain by being seen as a leader on jobs rather than somebody who is just trying to make it seem like he cares.