

For Obama, Being Right Is No Longer Enough

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: July 17, 2010 09:42 AM

One of the reasons Barack Obama got elected president is that to a majority of voters he was right on the major issues facing the country. Obama's views regarding the war in Iraq, the economy, the environment and the need for widespread change in our government resonated with an electorate that had grown very critical of the Bush administration's approach to these and other issues. While candidates are often judged by their views on major issues, presidents are more frequently judged on their performance. The two are not unrelated, so, for example, because Bush was perceived as a failure by 2008, Obama's positions, most of which were in direct opposition to Bush's, were more popular among voters.

This is the environment which now frames the Obama presidency. The protestations of the far right notwithstanding, Obama's position on issues are still relatively popular, but they are no longer particularly relevant to how the president is viewed. For almost all presidents, opinions on issues are considerably less relevant once they are in office. Occasionally this dynamic even works to their favor. Many voters never really cottoned to President Reagan's far right ideology, but they were pleased enough with the results he delivered to reelect him in a landslide in 1984. Needless to say, this dynamic has not been nearly so helpful for Obama.

On many issues including the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the economy or the debt, it is easy to craft a relatively clear argument about how these problems are due to the misguided policies of previous years and how the Obama presidency has taken a more reasonable approach to all of these problems. However, nobody cares about these arguments anymore because Obama is the president and he is expected to produce results not arguments.

Accordingly, Obama, like most presidents, is faced with essentially two options. The first is to solve problems and make things better. Given the extreme nature of the problems he inherited, and the unprecedented nature of problems which have occurred during his presidency, this has been extremely difficult. Turning the economy around quickly or immediately passing new regulations which would prevent the almost inevitable environmental catastrophe which is a direct result of these deregulations was not a realistic expectation for Obama, or any president. Thus, this first option may simply have not been possible given the gravity of the problems Obama faced.

The second option would have been to be outraged and angry at Bush, the Republican Party and other forces that helped create the economic, foreign policy and environmental mess in which the US now finds itself. Behaving this way is always at least somewhat disingenuous as feigning powerlessness and outrage is usually an easy and popular but unproductive way out for a politician. Moreover, Obama seems unable to express outrage, feigned or real. Even, when he is angry or outraged, Obama's demeanor remains calm and cool. In some respects, this disposition is reassuring, but it is a political liability.

The difficulty involved in digging the economy out of a recession of truly historical significance or in solving one of the worst environmental catastrophes in recent memory should not be understated, but Obama has made mistakes regarding these issues that have harmed his presidency. It remains inexplicable why it took the administration so long to sharpen their rhetorical focus on jobs. Obama could not have single handedly reduced unemployment in his first year, but by spending so little time talking about it, and by failing to explain the strong connection between reforming health care and creating jobs, the president made it easier to be attacked as uninterested in the problems of unemployment.

Similarly, although the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico demonstrates the failure of Republican energy and regulation policy and the disastrous consequences of "drill, baby drill", these policy realities are less significant than the appearance of administration that did not immediately show enough concern for the problem and finally capped the oil well after several months of oil spewing into the Gulf of Mexico. [While images of that oil gushing may have been illustrative of failed Republican policies](#), it was also a powerful daily reminder, for many, of perceived inaction on the part of the Obama administration.

The Obama administration needs to develop a new narrative, one that draws attention to their successes, highlights the energy and focus they bring to their work and, yes, shows the president being a little more impassioned about the problems the country faces, but continues to keep expectations low. If, however, the administration continues to rely on the narrative that they are doing their best after coming to office in a very difficult time they would be making a mistake. This narrative is essentially true but it is no longer of interest to most Americans who are more interested in results than explanations, even when those explanations are sound, or positions, even when those positions are the right ones.