

Obama and the Political Center

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Posted: October 22, 2009 09:09 AM

The noise in recent months made by Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Glenn Beck, the birthers and others on the far right as well as the bizarre accusations and claims that they make has obscured the more interesting story of the failure of any of these people or movements to get any traction outside of the right wing base. While this right wing base may have grown in recent years, and has certainly become louder during that period, it has made no real inroads into mainstream political life.

Claims that President Obama is a socialist, or not an American, that his administration is seeking to set up reeducation camps or shut down unfriendly media outlets draw a lot of attention on Fox News and the right wing blogosphere, but these assertions are in no way part of the political dialog or debate that matters in Washington. The political center in the US has again proven itself to be surprisingly strong and resilient.

Even when these right wing fringe tactics have seeped into the political mainstream, they have not been successful and have stopped quickly. For example, during the health care debate, opponents of health care reform have sought to introduce the rumor and fear mongering of the far right as well as their bullying tactics into the debate by accusing the administration of wanting to set up death panels, shouting down Democratic members of congress at town hall meetings and, predictably, calling Obama a socialist. None of this should have been surprising, but the speed with which these tactics were abandoned, presumably because they accomplished nothing and tarred all opponents of health care with the same radical and nutty brush, was noteworthy.

While progressives can take some comfort in the failure of the right wing fringe to develop a broader appeal, the strength of the center has not been an entirely positive development for progressives. Some of the disappointment many progressives feel in the Obama presidency is because the Obama administration, in spite of its roots in progressive politics, has largely governed from the center.

Obama's transition from the candidate of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party to being broadly appealing to the American center began during the campaign. Correspondingly, the general election campaign of 2008 may have been the beginning of the resurgence of the American center. The two national elections preceding 2008 had been extremely close and extremely divisive. These elections contributed to an eight year period of intense partisan fighting and an evenly and intensely divided electorate. In 2008 this changed. During this time, partisan rhetoric on the extreme left, while not as nasty, outrageous or dangerous as what the right wing has said during the last year or so, was strong and viciously critical of President Bush, his policies and those around him.

The 2008 election was different because the middle had quietly reasserted itself back into politics. The winner of that election was the candidate not who appealed most to his party's base, but who could speak most effectively to the ideological center. Republican candidate John McCain did not see this coming, so his effort to run a Bush era divisive and ideological campaign was almost completely unsuccessful, leaving him with very little support outside of his party's base. Obama, of course, sought to, and succeeded in, positioning himself as a centrist. The failure of McCain's divisive message to resonate beyond the base should have alerted Republican leaders to the resurgence of the center, but they seemed to have missed this clue.

The inability of the right wing to make their message appeal to the ideological center and the unwillingness of Republican strategists to seek to appeal to a broader swath of the electorate combine to ensure that Obama will remain relatively popular and, if these trends continue, win reelection in 2012. To make his presidency truly successful, however, Obama has to leverage his appeal to the political center to pass progressive legislation. For example, passing health care reform, under any circumstances will be an impressive accomplishment, but passing meaningful health care legislation while being viewed as governing from the center will be a paradigm shifting accomplishment.

The Republican Party has ceded the center to the Democrats and President Obama precisely when centrist politics are becoming more relevant than they have in years. The ideological center, in 2009, however, is defined more by disdain for the rhetoric and tactics of the right or the left than by a cohesive set of policy preferences. This provides Obama, who has successfully transitioned to a politician of the center, an historic opportunity to help redefine the center. For Obama to be a truly transformative president, he must govern as a progressive, but from the center, passing progressive legislation while maintaining a style and temperament that is moderate and calm.