

Obama's Choice for 2010

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The New Year is likely to be a difficult one for the Democrats. The Democrats picked up seats in the House and the Senate in both 2006 and 2008, but 2010 will almost certainly be a better year for the Republicans. The Democrats will probably retain control of both houses of congress, but will have smaller majorities. This will be most significant in the Senate, where the Democrats will not have close to the sixty votes needed for cloture after the November election.

In most midterm elections, the president's party loses seats, so 2010 will not be something out of the ordinary. Moreover, like most administrations, the Obama administration will be somewhat reigned in after November. The first two years of their administration are critical for all presidents because that is when they have the best chance to push through major legislation. After this period, regardless of how much wiser and more experienced the president becomes over the course of his time in office, the opportunity to make real change rarely comes again.

2009 was not an easy first year for Obama as not only did the unrealistic expectations which many had for him remain unmet, but he also failed to do some of the easy things which would have made Obama's progressive supporters more satisfied. The willingness, or perhaps enthusiasm, for compromise which characterized Obama's first year in office was variously interpreted as a sign of maturity or a sign of weakness, but led to bills on both health care and economic stimulus which were significantly different than what the president and many of his supporters initially would have liked.

After 2010, the Obama presidency, if history is any guide, will change substantially. It will become reactive, initiate few, if any, major pieces of legislation, and focus more on foreign policy where cooperation from congress is often less necessary. Even if he is reelected in 2012, the energy, Democratic majorities, appetite for change and political power of the president, which characterized 2009 will not be as great in the beginning of Obama's second term. After 2010, Obama's presidency will be about reaction and management not initiative and change.

This presents Obama with a clear choice which will have a major impact on the overall tone of his presidency. Obama could use the next ten months to begin to transition into the second phase of his presidency one where the focus is on reacting to various international events, making good judicial appointments, focusing on more modest goals and stewarding the economy, rather than on making the change which lay at the heart of Obama's electoral appeal and success in 2008. There is a certain logic to this approach as that is what Obama will probably spend the last two, or six, years of his presidency doing anyway.

Obama might also decide to take use 2010 to make one more attempt at making significant legislative change. This would be a far more risky strategy, but as with most risky strategies has far greater potential benefits. Obama has already compromised away real change on health care

and did not take strong positions on financial reform, but it is still possible to take a stronger position on the latter issue. Moreover, there are other areas such as the environment, energy, consumer protection and the like where strong government legislation could bring about meaningful change.

There is no guarantee that Obama will succeed in any of these areas, but after 2010 his chances of success will drop even more. If Obama decides to take the more risky path and to use 2010 for one more attempt at passing an ambitious legislative agenda he will have to take the right lessons away from his first year in office. Obama's healthy desire for compromise and seeming unwillingness to play hardball with uncooperative legislators undermined his agenda in 2009. If the Obama administration understands this and changes their strategy accordingly in 2010, they will have a better chance of getting some good bills through in 2010.

While Obama may, by both temperament and intellect be good at the management and reactive part of governance, it is not what the country needs right now. Obama was elected with strong Democratic majorities in both houses amidst a national call for change. This presented the administration with the kind of opportunity that is rare in American political life. During its first year in office, due to either tactical missteps or poor political judgment, this opportunity was lost. Obama can take the easier option and move a year early to the management stage of his presidency, but it would mean lowering the expectations for his presidency and on some level admitting defeat. The harder, but more rewarding choice, would be to learn from 2009, and take one more year to try to make real change.