

Can Obama Lead Again?

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The ability to set the agenda is extremely important in American politics. This was one of candidate Obama's great strengths. When Hillary Clinton wanted to talk about experience and phone calls at 3AM, Obama kept the focus on change and the war in Iraq. In the general election, when John McCain wanted to talk about Georgia, mavericks or his experience, Obama was able to keep the campaign about jobs, Iraq and change. Even when the media attention on Reverend Jeremiah Wright was too strong to ignore, Obama still managed to control the agenda by turning the controversy around Reverend Wright into an opportunity to give a very well received speech about race in America.

Obama's presidency has been different. While all presidencies need to set the agenda on important pieces of legislation *and* respond to domestic and international events, Obama has not mastered this balance. This has contributed to both the administration's lack of real legislative success since the stimulus bill as well as the ongoing political problems confronting Obama and his party. Moreover, this situation has gotten worse, not better, as Obama's presidency has progressed.

The health care debate was framed, to a large extent, by the right wing opposition, so socialism and death panels dominated the discussion rather than issues of spiraling health care costs and the impact having so many uninsured Americans has on our health and economy largely because Obama lost control of the health care agenda. Further, as momentum on the health care bill fizzled out with the election of Scott Brown, it became broadly accepted that Obama had made a mistake by focusing on health care reform rather than jobs and the economy. The administration allowed the idea that health care was not a real economic issue to gain traction by not pushing back at this easily refutable notion. By allowing health care to be defined as a non-economic issue, the Obama administration contributed to the perception that it was insufficiently sensitive to the overwhelming economic concerns of many Americans.

The current emphasis on jobs, while long overdue, still feels somewhat forced from the White House. Obama's proposals on job creation seem to be more of a response to the clamor for attention on the increasingly serious problem of unemployment than a solid, well thought out plan for genuinely stimulating job development. The problem is not so much that the administration is responding to the clamor, but that they allowed themselves -- by not seizing the jobs agenda enough in 2009 -- to be vulnerable to this kind of noise. This raises the question of how the administration could have possibly thought that they could get away with doing so little to explicitly create jobs, and demonstrates an insensitivity to political and policy realities that we never saw from candidate Obama.

Once a president loses the power to set the agenda, it is very hard to get it back. Even relatively successful presidents, like Bill Clinton, were largely unable to regain this position after it was lost. After failing on health care reform in 1993 and seeing his party lose badly in 1994, Clinton

remained popular but never seemed to be the prime mover in Washington after failing on health care policy, particularly on domestic issues. This meant that while Clinton governed well and often made good decisions, he never made the big changes or reforms which great presidents make. Similarly, once the Democrats took over congress in 2006 the Bush presidency lost any ability to set the agenda and was all but finished.

The danger for Obama is not that his presidency will be a failure. He remains too smart for that. His ability to avoid scandals and controversy beyond the right wing fringe, to generally make the right reactive decision, and his still substantial personal appeal provide him more room for error than many presidents. Obama, like Clinton (a comparison that seems increasingly apt), will also very likely benefit from a Republican Party that is too extreme for many Americans. Ironically, big gains by that party in November will contribute to Obama's reelection hopes in 2012 the same way that the 1994 takeover of congress by the GOP all but solidified Clinton's reelection in 1996.

For Obama, the problem is that the loss of control over the political agenda threatens to make his presidency irrelevant as the White House will become a bystander or arbiter of congressional debates and will react to events at home around the world, but will not be a prime mover or leader. A truly successful presidency is not simply one that survives for eight years -- although this is an impressive accomplishment -- but one that is able to reshape domestic and foreign policy to meet the needs and challenges facing the country. This was at the heart of the change which the Obama candidacy promised and which the Obama presidency has not yet delivered. Meeting this goal will not be possible unless the White House is able to remain a leader and set the agenda as was the promise in 2008.