

Consensus in the face of 'no compromise'

Finding the mandate President Obama needs for governing

Damon Shelby Porter

This article is the second in a series about the U.S. presidential elections. The series will continue until the election of November 6.

*"What's at stake aren't Democratic values or Republican values but American values. And we have to reclaim them."*¹

*"The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term President."*²

President Obama has been confronted with two challenges throughout most of his presidency: getting things accomplished and getting re-elected. The public is frustrated by the inability of Congress and the White House to reach consensus and govern in a bipartisan manner. Public outrage at legislative and executive branch non-cooperation is underscored by the country's economic vulnerability.

It's the economy, stupid!

High unemployment, lack of confidence among consumers and little infusion of private investment have placed an overall drag on the pace of economic recovery. A majority of American voters are dissatisfied with the direction of the country as political extremism is injected into public policy debate.

As the economy struggles to recover, the gap between the wealthiest and poorest Americans grows while at the same time corporations are experiencing record profits and large executive bonuses. This income divide has contributed to a growing political divide.

President Obama inherited this crisis; one that is rivalled only by the Great Depression. The financial meltdown affected every segment of the economy stretching from Wall Street to Main Street. For his part, the President has remained focused on finding solutions where the federal government and the private sector can work collaboratively to regain economic momentum. He should be credited with curbing the financial free fall and averting a second recession. The inability to create sustained job and economic growth has contributed to his overall low approval ratings.

The outcome of the 2012 presidential election will certainly turn on the question of the economy. Political victory in November will prove challenging for President Obama. Previous electoral data suggests that re-election for the incumbent is less likely when the economy is the

primary concern for voters. Although the economy will be front and centre in the minds of most American voters, President Obama's chance for victory and governing rests with making the election a referendum on Congressional obstruction. The President's campaign narrative must remind voters that Republicans view 'compromise' as a dirty word and the future Washington political dynamic should embrace bipartisan cooperation.

From gridlock to unity

Congressional Republicans have not hidden their desire to see the President serve one term. The constant drumbeat of 'no compromise' under any circumstance has become the Republican standard. Republican leadership, along with rank-and-file Members of Congress, has demonstrated a united political firewall, choosing to take no credit over sharing credit.

For Republicans, reaching a political compromise with Congressional Democrats or President Obama equals surrender of core Republican policy or values. This 'no compromise' position has backed Republicans into a corner that prohibits its leadership and rank-and-file members from supporting issues that were previously endorsed by the party. President Obama has attempted repeatedly to reach consensus by including Republican-sponsored ideas as part of comprehensive job creation and deficit reduction policy. As recently as the American Jobs Act of 2011 every recommendation proposed by the President in the bill was previously supported by both Democrats and Republicans. Despite the bipartisan, noncontroversial provisions, Republicans unanimously opposed the jobs bill.

The unwillingness of Republicans to agree to mainstream ideas has not gone unnoticed by the American electorate. A majority of voters blame Congressional Republicans for the lack of progress on handling the economy or tackling other issues including energy policy, immigration reform, education standards and financial securities regulation. Six out of ten voters appreciate President Obama's willingness to work across the political aisle and believe he is genuinely interested in working with Republicans to get things done.

Should President Obama be successful on election night, his victory must come with a clear and convincing mandate to lead without partisan obstruction. Currently Republicans control the House of Representatives and Democrats hold a slim majority in the Senate. With 21 out of 33 contested Senate seats held by Democrats and at least nine of these contests competitive, a second Obama term could potentially include an all Republican-led Congress. Without voter affirmation that pragmatic compromise trumps partisan ideology, the United States faces years of political paralysis at a time when both the country and the international community need American leadership.

The last two years have seen bitter political discord in Washington. Gridlock has replaced governing. Polling data repeatedly concludes that over eight out of ten voters want to see Congress and the President work together even when compromise on both sides is necessary to reach consensus. In 2008, President Obama's campaign theme focused on the importance of resolving issues as Americans, regardless of political, economic, social or religious identity. His message appealed to a broad cross-section of Democrats, Republicans and Independents.

President Obama has no choice but to return to the same message of national unity in 2012 if he wants to win and get things done.

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1. President Barack Obama, State of the Union Address to a Joint Session of Congress, Washington, DC, January 24, 2012
2. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky), October 2010 interview with the *National Journal*.