The Mandate Myth
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"Voters," political scientist V.O. Key famously remarked, "are not fools." By and large that's true. The specious corollary drawn by many politicians, however, is not so true. Since voters are not fools, politicians reason, they must have clear, thoughtful, and decisive expectations for a new president coming into office. By and large that's false.

Nevertheless, this 'myth of the mandate' is firmly ensconced in the political DNA of the American politician. We see it regularly every eight years - and sometimes more often - as we change presidents or political parties.

The winning party inexorably 'discovers' - be it a landslide like Johnson in 1964 or a squeaker like Bush in 2000 - that the voters have delivered a mandate. And not just any mandate. But one that serendipitously demands enactment of the very program the new administration already plans to enact. In this self-serving manner, new administrations come to forget or misunderstand why they were elected in the first place.

History abounds with examples of presidents who moved beyond where the American people were willing to be led. The Obama administration is merely the latest in a long line of new administrations that has drunk the mandate Kool-Aid, coming to believe that their 2008 win was a ringing voter endorsement of every Democratic platform promise made in the last 20 years.

It was not!

In fact, what the voters actually said in 2008 was singularly simple: We are very, very tired of George Bush and want someone different, and we want someone to fix the economy and end the hemorrhaging of American jobs.

Sure some voters wanted more, a lot more - health care reform, action on global warming, caps on carbon emission, immigration reform, and a long laundry list of other issues around which no consensus had developed. But 'some voters' are not 'the voters.' And that little piece of syntactical distinction is threatening to setup the still young Obama presidency for what could be a massive mid-term thrashing later this year.

If the American politician's fixation on mandates only affected the pols themselves it might be harmless enough. But alas, the mischief reaches far beyond its self-interested inventors.

President Obama's two immediate predecessors both provide painful examples. Both learned that creative readings of election results can produce calamitous consequences.

Bill Clinton won in 1992 promising laser-like focus on the economy. Instead he raised taxes without a single Republican vote in the House and then evoked a bitter controversy with his proposal to lift the ban on gays serving in the military. But it was his proposal to overhaul the nation's health care system that nearly ended his presidency. Before the smoke had cleared, his party had suffered an historic loss in the House, lost control in the Senate, and ushered in Republican control of the Congress until 2007.
A more recent example of mandate miasma occurred after George W. Bush's reelection in 2004. Flushed with victory, Bush tried to govern from the right while advocating dramatic social security reform and pursuing a war that the American people came to oppose. His bungled social security proposals eerily evoke the similar botched handling by Obama of comprehensive health care reform. In the end, Bush finished his term as one of the most unpopular presidents in American history - his domestic agenda suspect and his foreign policy compromised.

What, if anything, can Obama do to pull his own chestnuts out of the fire? How does he salvage his rapidly eroding support with the American people? Clearly he can learn from earlier presidents who also overreached and misread their mandates, but ultimately recovered in the end.

Indeed, many presidents have stumbled early but regained their balance in time. Bill Clinton may be the poster child for presidents who initially misread the political tea leaves, but bounced back.

During its first two years, his administration seemed obsessed with alienating voters by pursuing unpopular policies. Consequently, his party suffered an historic mid-term loss, dropping 54 seats to Republicans. But after his party's collapse Clinton moved resolutely to the center, co-opted Republican themes, such as welfare reform, put more cops on the streets, and advocated tougher penalties for criminals. He coasted to an easy reelection.

So Obama has time to save his presidency. But there is a price to pay. He, like many modern presidents, will incur a cost for pursuing policies based on the mandate myth.

It is all but inevitable that his party will lose a substantial number of seats in this year's mid-term election. The only question is how he can limit the damage.

But if he can't avert a mid-term correction, he can avoid a mid-term catastrophe. The even larger issue is whether his administration will be remembered as a failed presidency, fatally compromised by not understanding what the voters were saying, or as a successful presidency that stumbled early but recovered.

Neither Obama nor the American people will have to wait long to know which it will be.

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