



Written by [Brendon S. Peck](#) on October 11, 2011

Obama's Base Losing Heart and Just Leaving

In March 2009, just three months after Obama took office, liberal economist Paul Krugman claimed to be in ["despair"](#) over administration policy. At this early stage, though, such a feeling was shared by few progressives. Instead, in the "Age of Obama," left-wing ascendancy was expected. And in the new President, they had found their champion.



Today, however, much has changed. Many leftists now doubt Obama's fealty to their cause. The "capitulation" toward Republicans and the continuation of key Bush policies have even been characterized as [treachery](#). From their perspective, Obama's ideological impurity and divergence from dogma is offensive. Calls for a primary challenge are arguably an outgrowth of this.

Now, it is true that a serious challenge from the Left is unlikely and, therefore, it may be tempting to dismiss the discussion as ephemeral, even irrelevant. That would be a mistake. Its proponents include iconic liberal thinkers and academics like Gore Vidal and Cornell West. Their involvement speaks to the high level of disillusionment felt among the very foot soldiers and activists Obama will need in 2012. And many of them want to use the primary process to force Obama sharply leftward, lest progressivism be ["betrayed"](#) further.

Surely the committed Left's frequent excoriation must trouble the White House. The liberal constituency is decidedly, increasingly vocal in its criticism, and its attacks are more virulent and public, and they serve to undermine Obama's fading reelection hopes. Primary challenge or not, the President knows he can ill afford a protracted fight with his base. Not when his job approval suffers persistent erosion or when the majority of voters, including an increasing number of Obama's own supporters, disapprove of his handling of the economy and the country's course heading or when unemployment remains so high.

For the President, then, an inescapable trend of new lows and lost independents underscore his ineffectiveness and profound political vulnerability. But among key Democratic constituencies, support has fallen to a level that few could have expected.

Predictably, the White House refuses to publicly acknowledge the corrosion of base support, maintaining that its core constituencies are ["mobilized behind the President."](#) Democratic consultant Jamal Simmons, too, echoes much the same theme. The Left, he says, is "unified." These claims willfully ignore the evidence. Consider that in 2008, candidate Obama carried 56 percent of the women's vote. Today, however, just 41 percent approve. In the Jewish community, the President once enjoyed an 83 percent approval rating; it has since dropped to [54 percent](#). Among Latino voters, just 48 percent now



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approve — a 12-point decline since January. Obama captured two-thirds of the Hispanic vote in 2008.

It is, however, Obama's rating amongst African-American's that should startle Democrats. It was not but five months ago that more than 8 in 10 expressed their strong support. Now only 58 percent strongly approve according to a recent *Washington Post* poll. Under Obama, African-Americans have not fared well. Black unemployment stands at 16 percent.

But worse for the White House, there is a definable enthusiasm deficit within their party. According to Gallup, only [45 percent](#) are excited about voting in 2012. In 2008, nearly 80 percent were. Republicans, in contrast, are far more energized. This cannot be welcome news. In fact, even Ed Schultz, a leftist flamethrower on MSNBC, acknowledged the electoral consequences of a despondent base. In a "[red alert](#)" to Democrats, he warned that the party would be badly beaten unless its voters were equally motivated. For Schultz, "sitting on the sidelines is not an option." But for some, it seems, it is.

MoveOn, for example, a far Left organization that mobilized a surge of volunteers and votes for Democrats in 2008, now seems to have buyer's remorse. Obama's political decisions, lamented as not liberal enough, have compelled the group to reevaluate its stand with the President. [Justin Ruben](#), MoveOn's executive director, made plain the state of play. Its members, he says, "are wondering how they can ever work for President Obama's re-election, or make the case for him to their neighbors."

Similarly, labor unions have also recalculated, shifting resources away from Democrats who are increasingly seen as not representing their interests. In fact, union contributions to national candidates, the vast majority of which go to Democrats, have declined almost 40 percent since 2009. While this is an unmistakable indication of labor discontent, it is also part of a larger strategy now in its initial stages.

AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka, the leader of the largest labor union in the United States, is currently building a political organization that intends to operate independently from the Democratic Party. This effort could have profound political implications both in the near and long term. It is well known, for instance, that Democrats are heavily reliant on union cash for their campaigns. This move means even less labor money for their party machine. And, if labor were to field candidates of its own, they could split the liberal vote, tipping tight races to Republicans, a nightmarish scenario for Democrats who will do all they can to avoid this future specter.

At present, though, as Obama confronts leftist discontent, whether labor or otherwise, he faces a real dilemma. The broad electorate has long soured on his policies. His approval rating stands at [42 percent](#). Support among independents hovers in the low 30s. The latest CNN survey shows that 65 percent disapprove of his economic leadership, while a CBS poll finds that only 19 percent approve of the nation's current course heading. Tacking leftward in this climate isn't likely to be politically successful, but the President must still be mindful of his base. His dramatic increase in class-warfare rhetoric is, in part, an attempt to appeal to the party's core. As is his recent endorsement of a plan to impose a surtax on the wealthy. That such a policy would do nothing to create jobs, broaden the tax base, or grow the economy is unimportant to Obama; he is already in campaign mode.

The White House knows Democrats may not have an alternative on Election Day next year, but many could elect to stay home.

The larger question, though, is this: How did leftist disillusionment become so politically potent that it now undermines Obama's 2012 prospects? The answer is a multifaceted one.

In part, as it is often cited, expectations were unrealistically high, set both by Obama's soaring rhetoric



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and the Left's misreading of the public mood. Americans, so their narrative went, were tired of Republicans, conservatism and all things Bush, and were more willing to embrace liberal ideology. It didn't quite work out that way.

Additionally, many committed leftists believe that Obama deceived them by campaigning as a "transformational" progressive figure while governing from the ["corporate center right."](#) Indeed, Matthew Rothschild, editor of *The Progressive*, even suggests that progressives are not the President's "real base." Instead, Rothschild claims it's Wall Street. While such an assertion strains credulity, it's worth noting that many leftists view Obama's corporate ties with disdain. Incidentally, those ties may make it difficult for Democrats to benefit from the left-wing "Occupy Wall Street" protests now making headlines.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Rothschild and similarly minded people believe Obama has abandoned them. On healthcare, the lack of a public option and the failure to push for a single-payer system is often mentioned, as is the "small" size of the \$830 billion stimulus package. "Capitulation" on tax cuts for "millionaires and billionaires" is seen as another slight, while the decision not to move on a proposed EPA regulation left liberals dazed. His foreign policy is seen as equally grievous, and the list goes on.

Like labor unions who seek independence from Democrats with the creation of their own political conduit, the progressive-minded are also distancing themselves, if not from the Democratic Party, certainly from President Obama. They seem simply not to trust him.

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