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American politics

Democracy in America

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The rejection of Obamaism

From president to politician

Sep 20th 2011, 21:10 by R.M. | WASHINGTON, DC

IN HIS column today, David Brooks thinks himself "a sap" for believing that Barack Obama actually wanted to take a moderate approach to deficit reduction, the economy and everything else. The piece is titled, "[Obama Rejects Obamaism](#)", and it would make perfect sense if you were unaware of everything that happened before yesterday.

Yesterday Mr Obama proposed a disappointing [deficit-reduction plan](#) that was more a sop to his liberal supporters than an actual solution to the problem. So today the moderate Mr Brooks feels like a fool, which is probably how Mr Obama felt for the previous 33 months. Because it turns out that moderation is not a cure for political dysfunction, a conclusion seemingly reached by the president and still ignored by the columnist. So instead of acknowledging the futility of his beliefs, however noble they may be, Mr Brooks suggests that the president hasn't proposed moderate solutions to an array of America's problems.

But that's not quite right, and Mr Brooks knows it. Health-care reform may not have contained as much reform as many would've liked, but it was about as moderate as the Heritage Foundation [circa 1989](#) or Mitt Romney circa 2006. Mr Brooks says the president "whispered about seriously reforming Medicare but then opted for changes that are worthy but small." Those whispers were widely reported, actually, and they included raising the eligibility age and means-testing. They were to be part of a moderate deficit-reduction deal that also included some tax reform, though Mr Brooks similarly laments the

About Democracy in America

In this blog, our correspondents share their thoughts and opinions on America's kinetic brand of politics and the policy it produces. The blog is named after the study of American politics and society written by Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political scientist, in the 1830s

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president's inaction in these areas. Still, his disregard of the president's moderation is preferable to the Republicans' disdain for it.

This is not to say that the administration has gotten it all right. Certainly not. But there is a political reality that must be acknowledged when confronting Mr Obama's recent transformation from president to posturer. And had Mr Brooks acknowledged that reality, he might have titled his article, "Intransigent Republicans successfully reject Obamaism, president *finally* decides to adopt their tactics". When viewed in this way, the president's behaviour is not so much disappointing, as it is inevitable.

 358



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HealthySkepticism wrote:

Sep 20th 2011 9:43 GMT

Watch the Republicans flush half their political capital down a toilet to shield the wealthy from tax increases. Somehow they can grow a spine only for their most self-defeating positions.

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hankjw wrote:

Sep 20th 2011 10:10 GMT

"Health-care reform may not have contained as much reform as many would've liked, but it was about as moderate as the Heritage Foundation circa 1989 or Mitt Romney circa 2006."

As a policy matter the PPACA surely does qualify as moderate given the range of options debated in 2009, and yes, yes, Republicans were the ones to first propose the individual mandate.

But to suggest that the politics surrounding the passage of the PPACA were moderate belies a serious bout of amnesia. A majority of public opinion was clearly against its passage. No less than the people of Massachusetts handed Ted Kennedy's Senate seat to a Republican. Having lost their filibuster-proof Senate majority, the Democratic leaders of Congress then engaged in legislative gymnastics to pass a bill affecting one-sixth of the economy through the budget reconciliation process.

This contributed in no small part to the mid-term "shellacking." The political reality the president has inevitably bowed to is mostly of his own creation.

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Lafiel wrote:

Sep 20th 2011 10:34 GMT

"Health-care reform ... it was about as moderate as the Heritage Foundation circa 1989 or Mitt Romney circa 2006."

Following this logic and expand a bit for a pure example by assuming viewpoints are suppose to remain forever unchanged. Ignoring zeitgeist and other factors for the claims above.

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Let us compare the health-care reform to legislation and legal system to circa 1800 and the health-care reform would be considered so extreme there would be no United States as everyone would have left the Union...

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liberalwithsanity wrote:

Sep 20th 2011 10:42 GMT

"Intransigent Republicans successfully reject Obamaism, president finally decides to adopt their tactics".

Well said! I have been a loyal reader of Mr. Brook's column for about 8 years now, and have great respect for him and his opinions. This is the first piece that I absolutely have to disagree. First, taxing the ultra rich at higher rates makes sense in today's economic environment where the middle class are being squeezed, a larger portion of the population are living in poverty, and the country is buried under debt. Second, Mr. Obama might have used some political craftsmanship in his wording to present his plan. But hey, so what? Amid what the conservatives in the house have put out there, the president's rhetorics is not disappointing, but inevitable, and almost a must!

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cs r wrote:

Sep 20th 2011 10:46 GMT

Obama is, and ever was, a hard lefty.

He got Obamacare passed as leftward as he could. But the "intransigent" moderate Democrats (with Republicans) stopped the public option, cap & trade, card check, etc. Obama wasn't successful on those fronts despite a filibuster-proof Democratic majority.

Why did moderate Democrats feel compelled to stymie their "moderate" president for 24 of the 33 months referenced?

I often disagree with Brooks, but must admit he is right that he was naive about Obama.

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martin horn wrote:

Sep 20th 2011 10:54 GMT

David Brooks follows the simplistic model of, "Bipartisan = good."

Which is adorable, really. Rather than analyze each issue and determine if the Republicans offer the best plan, or if the Democrats do, or if there's actually room to compromise, Brooks goes, "WILL IT HAVE 75 VOTES IN THE SENATE? NO? THEN IT MUST BE BAD!"

The "moderate" solution isn't always the best one.

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bampbs wrote:

Sep 21st 2011 12:16 GMT

Obama was the sap. It was clear by the summer of '09 that there was no one on the other side to be moderate with. Like a fool, he allowed the voters heads to be filled with Republican fiscal lies and hypocrisy without challenging them. We are in the debt hole we're in because of decades of GOP fiscal irresponsibility, going obscenely into hock not to win a war or end a depression, but to give tax cuts to those who do not need them.

Brooks is often quite sane; if he's a sap, it's because there has been no place for sanity in the GOP since 1995.

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jaybrew@vt.edu wrote:

Sep 21st 2011 12:19 GMT

A lot of people here, including the author, seem to be getting on Mr. Brooks' case for a "Moderate or Bust" attitude. However, I believe the point he was trying to make wasn't that every policy should be moderate but rather that Obama strayed from his original plan and self-defining "Obamaism".

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Ah Beng wrote:

Sep 21st 2011 12:30 GMT

In the middle of the road, all you find are yellow lines and dead armadillos.

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ow4744 wrote:

Sep 21st 2011 12:37 GMT

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No-one mentioning how 'radical' healthcare reform seems to have noticed that it was a central tenet of Obama's 2008 election campaign - if it was so dangerously 'lefty' then why did 69 million Americans vote for him on election day?

During the summer healthcare legislation was being passed support was still on a knife edge, and I don't recall it dipping below 45% in any sensible poll. It is amazing that public support held up that well given the ruthless smear campaign run against it by unscrupulous politicians and special interest groups. Anyone remember the death panel?

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RestrainedRadical wrote: Sep 21st 2011 12:40 GMT
Brooks is a tortured soul trying to be the most liberal conservative. Every once in a while he has to prove his conservative credentials by slamming liberals.

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Heimdall wrote: Sep 21st 2011 12:59 GMT
The best word to describe Obama's first couple of years is "naive".

And to be fair, very few non-Republicans I know had any idea how far Republicans would go in order to thwart any and all initiatives proposed by Obama. Even if those initiatives were to the right of Republican policies of recent history. Which many were.

Health care reform is a great example. Obama's plan was to the right of Nixon's plan.

First off, it was health *insurance* reform, not health *care* reform. So unlike the UK, for instance, the FedGov doesn't own the hospitals and care providers.

Nor is it single-payer, so the FedGov doesn't own the insurers. Nor is there a 'public option' with the FedGov as but one of the insurers. Nor is it universal: millions of Americans will still fall through the cracks. Nor is it even implemented until 2014.

Yet Republicans successfully branded it as "socialism". Which is kind of like branding rib-eye steak to be a vegetable.

Unbelievable...

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RestrainedRadical wrote: Sep 21st 2011 1:15 GMT
Health-care reform may not have contained as much reform as many would've liked, but it was about as moderate as the Heritage Foundation circa 1989 or Mitt Romney circa 2006.

Democrats had the playbook and still fumbled. Had they framed it as Republicans past have, i.e., as making freeloaders pay for their ER visits, they would've had more support. But Obama and Co. had to run to the left of that, even proposing single-payer.

@Heimdall, "Health care reform is a great example. Obama's plan was to the right of Nixon's plan."

And Bush was to the left of Andrew Jackson on education. Nixon established food price controls, something President Dennis Kucinich wouldn't even do. Any more useless comparisons you wanna make?

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shubrook wrote: Sep 21st 2011 1:53 GMT
Ah beng,

Why do I suspect that that catechism was coined in Arizona?

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happyfish18 wrote: Sep 21st 2011 8:20 GMT
Obamic Socialism is doomed from the start because it simply involves transfer of wealth from the haves to the have-nots who are into subsidised education, living and health costs. There is nothing in the Obama plan to make the economic pie bigger.

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Doug Pascover wrote: Sep 21st 2011 9:18 GMT

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locke 9000 wrote:

Sep 21st 2011 3:00 GMT

@happyfish18, that's simply not true. Incentivizing hiring, tax cuts for middle-income earners, and staving off the likelihood of having to file for bankruptcy due to an unexpected medical condition—all of these initiatives are targeted toward making "the economic pie bigger."

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Heimdall wrote:

Sep 21st 2011 3:21 GMT

RR,

Are you seriously asserting that a comparison between today's political environment and that of 40 years ago is analogous to a comparison between today's political environment and that of 180 years ago?

I would respectfully submit that comparing today's political climate to that of my parents is a *very much more relevant* thing than comparing it to that of my great-great-great-great-great-great-grandparents.

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jouris wrote:

Sep 21st 2011 4:55 GMT

Contra cs r, Obama is not, and never was, a lefty. Let alone a hard lefty. His health care plan (whatever its merits) was built primarily on plans developed *and advocated* by Republicans - - which is why there is so much unhappiness with it on the left.

What Obama has accepted, and Brooks clearly has not, is that it is impossible to develop constructive compromises with someone whose primary goal is to oppose you. It is clear from the last couple of years that, if Obama proposed a bill to cut taxes on the rich by 10%, the Republicans would denounce that as socialism . . . because he hadn't proposed reducing them by 25%. You simply cannot compromise in these circumstances, no matter how much you want to.

In my more cynical moments, I try to come up with *anything* Obama could do or propose that Congressional Republicans would not oppose. As far as I can tell, the only thing that they might not oppose is a formal resignation. But maybe not even that . . . they might denounce it because it didn't come with a resignation of the Vice President as well.

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RestrainedRadical wrote:

Sep 21st 2011 7:08 GMT

@Heimdall, "Are you seriously asserting that a comparison between today's political environment and that of 40 years ago is analogous to a comparison between today's political environment and that of 180 years ago?"

I'm asserting that they're both useless. 40 years ago, most Democrats were pro-life, most Republicans were Keynesians, much of the south was still Democratic, Nixon won 49 states, Rick Perry was a Democrat and Hillary Clinton was a Republican (actually 44 years ago).

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