



Why liberals crashed Obama's phones

Growing anger from the left led to last week's action against president.

By **Ambreen Ali**

Erica Payne wasn't expecting to crash the White House phone lines when she launched a protest against the president's tax-cut deal last week.

But the political strategist tapped into a growing frustration on the left with President Obama, one that she believes will get worse if the administration doesn't change its strategy.

"The whole thing has caught me by surprise," said Payne, whose **Agenda Project** aims to build a 21st century political movement for the left.

As she recovers from the campaign, Payne tells Congress.org what she and her list of 10,000 influential Democrats have planned next.



How did you manage to crash two White House phone lines?

[Tax cuts] are one of those issues in American political life that simply doesn't have much of a gray area. People we have been in touch with feel pretty strongly that this is a defining issue for people who consider themselves more progressive types. We were just directing their deep and personal frustration in a way that they had historically seen as effective.

Do you think you had an effect on White House policy?

I think it's unlikely that what we did yesterday will have an impact on this specific piece of legislation, because I think we probably did it a week too late.

I think the White House has some amount of cognitive dissonance in terms of what's happening right now, and I think they fundamentally misinterpreted the results of this election. I don't think they understand the degree to this issue is a litmus test on his presidency.

Were you surprised by the effectiveness of your campaign?

The whole thing has caught me by surprise. It caught me by surprise how badly the entire administration handled marketing of this idea. It caught me by surprise that I had to deal with it.

This is so obvious that the fact that we have to work on it is ridiculous. We are having to tell people in Washington that people who make \$10 million a year don't need tax cuts. This is a great example of how unbelievable our political system is and how out of touch people in both parties are in Washington.

Tell us a little bit about how you operate.

Our goal over time is to increase the market share of ideas in the public sphere. The way we do that is packaging, marketing and distribution. There are a variety of different think tanks that find ideas that should be promoted. Our specialty is packaging and marketing those ideas so we have a bigger market share.

Who are your supporters?

We are not a membership organization. Most of the people are those I have built relationships with over the last 20 years in politics. They are really a very influential group of people, and they include about 5,000 of some of the biggest funders of the Democratic Party, every organization leader on the left, most of the staff people on the left, and 500 major liberal economists, policy experts, writers, and documentary filmmakers. This is a group of 10,000 people who I don't know if I would call grassroots because it's more than that. This is a really influential group.

We don't have dues, but we do take contributions and are grateful for them. Some major donors fund us. We have a much looser relationship with this set of 10,000 people. All we're trying to do is say, here is an action that could be helpful and here is why. They are acting on their own given strategic direction.

Are there unique challenges to pressuring your own party?

There are a surprising number of issues that are not actually intellectual disagreements between left and right—that are rather influence and power disparities between people inside the beltway and outside the beltway. A prime example is financial regulation, where there was an overlap of probably 80 to 90 percent between people on the intellectual free market side of the equation and people who are more liberal economics/regulators.

We did a lot of work around the mosque [near Ground Zero]. That was an issue where we were very happy to take on senior Democrats and tell them they were contributing to the environment of hatred and fear against Muslims in much the same way as Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, and Newt Gingrich were. I think politicians need to be challenged by people who generally agree with them. It's too easy to take supporters for granted.

But what can you hold over them if, ultimately, they have your vote?

It's very important for people to realize that, all evidence to the contrary, politicians are the least important part of politics. They are like basketball players who play by the rules made for them. If there are different rules, they will adapt.

Politicians work the same way. We create the environment that they're playing in. I think it's incumbent on us to work to do what we can do to change the playing field that they are on.

People are furious at this White House both from a policy point of view to a seeming utter lack of capacity on the messaging and communication front and really fundamentally bad strategy. Do I think a lot of people would consider sitting the election out, giving less, or giving later than otherwise? Yes.

Will this frustration last?

This is something that has been building in general. I think that for people who start further on the left side of the political aisle, they were very frustrated with Obama's economic team and had a lot of concerns about Obama's economic messaging.

Health-care reform was an issue where their messaging policy got into question. It was the policy problem, messaging problem, and a strategic disaster around implementation of health care that was directly responsible for the good old-fashioned whooping that Democrats had at the polls.

The White House came out seeming to take wrong message from that experience. So you have all of that stuff put together in a pot, stirred up at about the boiling point, and then you have the president preemptively take the legs out from underneath a counterargument that perhaps giving tax cuts to people who make over \$1 million is not the highest strategic imperative.

Will we see more liberal protests of the president? As much as the tea parties?

This issue was the straw that broke the camel's back, but there was already a lot of hay on that camel. There is no doubt that we will see substantially more vocal opposition from the left. I would agree that the tea party has been substantially louder than left so far, but I can be really loud when someone gives me 50 million dollars too.

What strategies are you recommending to your list?

For people who don't have a lot of money, I say help us get a lot of bodies and, ideally, bodies in strategic places. Then do the kinds of things you did yesterday.

I would encourage people who do have money to use their voices more effectively and use their money more effectively. Beginning nine years ago, progressives started to build communications infrastructure. We built some institutions many of which are helpful. They are necessary but not sufficient.

It's time now to build some critical capacity. I am going to be working on encouraging major donors to actually fund the things they need to fund.

It's about a value chain, like Nike's. The best way to have an impact on the political system in the long term is to go back and design a better tennis shoe: the set of institutions, think tanks, legal advocacy groups, and academic centers.

Conservatives have Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, Leadership Institute, American Enterprise Institute. In 40 years, that set of institutions had changed the climate in the country. We need to build that set of institutions, too, if we ever hope to turn the country back in the right direction.

Ambreen Ali writes for Congress.org.

[Like us on Facebook.](#) [Follow us on Twitter.](#)