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[Obama targets the center with populist rhetoric](#)

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U.S. President Barack Obama speaks about the economy at Osawatomie High School December 6, 2011 in Osawatomie, Kansas. (Photo by Julie Denesha/Getty Images)

President Obama followed the path of Theodore Roosevelt Tuesday, summoning the spirit of the 26th president to send a message on the dangers of rising income disparity, a focal point for his re-election campaign.

Obama traveled to the small town of Osawatomie, Kansas, where Roosevelt called for a so-called "New Nationalism," to defend his economic stewardship and portray Republicans as out of touch with the middle-class Americans Roosevelt championed.

Though in a deep-red state, the hour-long remarks had all the makings of a campaign speech, with the president accusing Republicans of fostering policies that would only add to the divide between the haves and have-nots.

"This is a make-or-break moment for the middle class," he said. "Now, in the midst of this debate, there are some who seem to be suffering from a kind of collective amnesia. They want to go back to the same policies that have stacked the deck against middle-class Americans for way too many years."

In a contest that is expected to hinge on the state of the economy, Obama must convince voters that he is in tune with their concerns and has actually improved a job market dogged by a nearly 9 percent unemployment rate.

Some on the left cheered Obama's populist cry, saying that it will force the GOP to present their own views rather than frame the election as merely a referendum on the president.

"I think the president is finding his voice on economic matters that in the first couple years he struggled to articulate coherently for the American people," said Simon Rosenberg, a presidential campaign adviser for Bill Clinton and founder of the think-tank, NDN. "For Republicans, it's not going to be sufficient to say, 'He failed; we're the other guys; pick us.'"

Obama highlighted his financial regulatory reforms and chided Republicans for blocking his nominee to head a new consumer protection agency, saying that Wall Street would run amok without suitable government oversight.

Republicans accused the president of class warfare as he continues to push for higher taxes on the wealthiest Americans and rails against executive compensation. Some

conservative analysts said Obama could hardly whitewash nearly three years of little economic growth -- and that his emulation of Roosevelt was a reach at best.

"He's evoked about every president you can think of, and to some extent, it speaks to a stunning lack of achievements on his own," said Mark Calabria, director of financial regulation studies at the Cato Institute. "It's hard for me to envision a president 50 years from now saying, 'I'm going to be a modern-day Obama.'"

The remarks came after Obama spent weeks pushing smaller executive actions, individual pieces of his \$447 billion jobs package and the extension of a payroll-tax holiday.

Harping on CEO compensation that is now 110 times greater than their employees' pay, Obama said, "This isn't about class warfare. This is about the nation's welfare."

And though conservatives scoffed at that message, some said it was an effective campaign strategy.

"I think it's horrible public policy and divisive," Calabria said. "But he has a clear 51-percent strategy, and it's smart politically."

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