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**Evaluations**

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## **The Advantages of Incrementalism**

To [my suggestion](#) that possibly, just possibly, voters are reacting negatively to ambitious liberal governance as well as to the unemployment rate, Jon Chait [ripostes](#):

I think voters probably do have some problem with liberalism in practice. I think they have a bigger problem with conservatism in practice. Voters want to keep or expand all the major programs in the federal budget, they want the budget balanced, and they want lower taxes for everybody but the rich. George W. Bush came closer to giving the public what they want — here's a tax cut plus a Medicare prescription drug benefit plus a couple wars, all paid for by debt — but that combination ultimately proved less than wildly popular as well.

We can agree on this much: The public likes its taxes low, its existing entitlements untouched, and its lunches free — and has an aversion, as a result, to both a coherent, comprehensive liberal agenda *and* a coherent, comprehensive conservative agenda.

But what this reality suggests, I think, is that both right and left would do well to cultivate a principled incrementalism, rather than trying to throw the “comprehensive reform” long ball every time a crisis [hands them the opportunity](#) to do so. For the Obama Democrats, that would have meant — and [could still mean](#) — taking a “more Medicaid and bigger risk pools” approach to health care reform, instead of trying to mandate-regulate-subsidize their way to a [possibly chimerical](#) universal insurance system. For the Scott Brown Republicans (if you will), it ought to involve plucking some reformist ideas from the pages of [National Affairs](#), instead of promising [across-the-board tax cuts](#) and sweeping, unspecified spending cuts that probably won't happen, and wouldn't be popular if they did. For both sides, it would mean trying to prod the country in the direction they want it to go, instead of trying to drag the public, kicking and screaming, toward wholesale transformations.

Obviously this sort of incrementalism isn't the most inspiring approach to politics. Certainly it doesn't fit well with [the world-healer mystique](#) that we've built up around our presidents. But it's probably looking pretty good to Democratic lawmakers these days.