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Roger Pilon

Vice President for Legal Affairs, Cato Institute :

Obama's in a difficult spot: His head tells him to tack right, but his heart's not in it -- and he's not the first Democrat to be in that spot. That's brought out today in a CNN Opinion piece, "[When liberals revolt](#)," written by Arena's (and Princeton's) Julian E. Zelizer. Tracing similar dilemmas that Johnson, Carter, and Clinton faced, Zelizer shows how they all paid a price for tacking right, which it looks like Obama may do. Johnson faced primary challenges that led him to withdraw from the 1968 race. Carter was challenged by Ted Kennedy. He prevailed; but weakened, he then lost to Reagan in 1980. And Clinton's move to the center after the disastrous 1994 midterm elections helped him win reelection, Zelizer argues, but it also left him with a thin legislative record on domestic policy.

In short, moving right has its costs, Zelizer claims. Many liberals are "deeply unhappy with the president, believing that he has already drifted too far away from the promises that animated his supporters in 2008." He'll need those liberals in 2010 and 2012. Pointing to the "long tradition of Democratic presidents taking the left for granted at a cost to their

administrations," Zelizer notes that they learned "that the ire of the left -- a constituency that is very vocal, highly mobilized and politically engaged -- can cause enormous damage."

That it can. But can the left do more than cause enormous damage? In particular: Can it govern? Zelizer cites Ted Kennedy castigating Carter, saying that "the Democratic Party needed to 'sail against the wind' of conservative public sentiment by using the federal government to help alleviate social problems." Fine speechifying. But will it get you (re)elected -- much less enable you to govern? The evidence is not encouraging. In fact, the deeper problem the left is facing is that self-identified conservatives in America outnumber liberals by better than two to one. Cambridge may have voted against Scott Brown by 84 to 14, but that just shows how out of touch Harvard is *with the rest of Massachusetts* -- to say nothing of the rest of the country. Obama won not because the country was enthralled with his vague message, but because his opposition, like Clinton's in 1996, was so uninspiring. In sum, the left's problem -- and Obama's -- is that the country isn't buying the message, now that it's clearer. And that's the heart of the matter.

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