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## Campaign Politics, Jobs Crisis May Limit 2010 Agenda

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What a difference a year makes.

At this point last year, President Obama was set to take over the Oval Office with strong approval numbers at his back, an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress at his side, a Republican Party in disarray and an apparent mandate for change from the voters.

Today, Obama still has Democratic majorities in Congress and a Republican Party trying to find its footing, but he is also facing a worsening political climate that has dragged down his approval numbers and has some congressional Democrats nervous about their re-election prospects.

There is little doubt that the November election will hang over everything that lawmakers try to do over the next 10 months, with some issues potentially being scrapped and others being pushed to the forefront in an effort to appease voters.

"Elections are the lens by which policy is developed; it's just simply the reality," said Christopher Borick, director of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion. "A lot of folks out there, especially more moderate Democrats, are going to be gun shy, they're afraid they put themselves out on the limb this year, they sense a sour mood."

Opponents already have no shortage of political ammunition against incumbent Democrats who have been forced to cast votes on items such as industry bailouts, a House climate change bill, a massive stimulus package and health care legislation. As a result, experts say, many rank-and-file Democrats will not be willing to stick their necks out again.

If that kind of attitude takes hold -- in particular among the moderate Democrats who represent the swing votes on major legislation -- the White House and Democratic leaders may be forced to significantly pare down their agenda.

"There won't be an agenda," said Michael Tanner, a congressional expert with the Cato Institute. "The idea that you're going to be able to get anybody to go out on a limb on anything is just unrealistic."

Jobs to dominate

There is one word that appears to be the overriding theme for the upcoming legislative session -- jobs.

Many Democrats hoped that by this point the country would be on its way toward recovery, with the unemployment rate heading downward. While some progress has been made, the national unemployment rate has stagnated at around 10 percent and, analysts say, more than anything else that poor economic

climate has lead to the voters' sour mood.

As a result, pundits say they expect the administration and congressional Democrats to focus the 2010 session almost exclusively on job creation in the hope that voters will believe that an economic recovery is under way.

"My feeling is that if they risk anything, what with the public's apparent resistance to some of these programs that expand the scope of the government, it is another stimulus package for the very reason that jobs have moved to the forefront," said Ross Baker, a congressional politics expert at Rutgers University and former Senate staffer. "They're at the head of the agenda in 2010 -- they have to do something with those unemployment numbers."

The House passed a jobs bill just before adjourning for the Christmas break, and the Senate is expected to take up a jobs measure shortly after returning next week, though few details have emerged about exactly what will be in the bill.

The jobs issue has dominated the administration's early domestic action in 2010. In a high-profile announcement last week, Obama announced \$2.3 billion worth of tax credits today for clean-energy manufacturing projects and tomorrow the president will make another green jobs pitch at a facility in Maryland.

Administration supporters see those actions as a continuation of a jobs agenda that Obama supported even before he was sworn in last January.

"The administration is taking a very logical approach to this and a very smart approach to this," said Josh Freed, a green jobs expert with the Third Way. "Address the immediate needs with job creation -- a lot of what they're doing now is low hanging fruit -- and then make long-term structural changes to fuel America's economic growth."

A part of that long-term structural change, according to the administration, is passage of a climate bill that sets a cap on carbon while spurring development of green technologies. While Senate Democrats say they still hope to get a cap-and-trade bill done this year, some say that kind of legislation is precisely what will fall off the radar as Election Day approaches.

"It's clear Obama is hoping for some kind of legislative action this year," Borick said. "But the environment in which he tries to move that forward and his ability to move that forward and influence what happens in the Senate is not what it was last year."

Others are even more pessimistic, saying they do not see how anxious lawmakers will be willing to tackle anything that is seen as another government spending initiative with a growing budget deficit.

"There will be some symbolic things here and there, but they just don't have the money to do anything big," said Tanner of the Cato Institute. "There will be a lot of talk about jobs -- a tax credit here and there -- but there's not a lot they can do."

Election hangs over session

The fact that legislative activity may slow down substantially as Election Day nears is nothing new, especially as lawmakers spend more time at home and become increasingly fearful of casting controversial votes.

But Democratic leaders are being pulled in two directions, experts say, fearing that more big packages may escalate a backlash from voters while not wanting to appear as if they are backing down from the legislative agenda in the face of criticism.

The majority party already received one hint last year of just how dramatically the climate has turned from when Obama and other Democrats swept into office when they lost a pair of gubernatorial races in two states that President Obama carried in 2008 -- New Jersey and Virginia.

Democratic leaders have played down those losses, saying history has shown there is little correlation between those off-year gubernatorial contests and congressional elections a year later. But at the very least those races pointed out to Democrats that the voters who turned out at the polls in 2008 in order to vote for Obama may not be there in 2010.

As such, experts say, Democrats may need to win back moderate voters in order to survive and that might mean no more sweeping legislative items with large price tags. "They really have to formulate a strategy that appeals to and does not alienate swing voters that are driving this thing," Baker said.

Democratic officials argue that the administration has already made some of that case to voters and that Election Day will not be anywhere nearly as dire as pundits predict -- pointing to the administration's progress on jobs and the lingering problems in the Republican Party.

"We're going to do a lot better than people think," Democratic National Committee Chairman and former Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine said this week on NBC's "Meet the Press." "This president does have a record of success. From day one, focused on economic recovery in ways that have cut job losses from 800,000 a month now in the last month to 80,000 a month. We're not where we want to be yet, but thank goodness we have arrested the free fall of the economy and we see positive signs throughout the nation."

Kaine later added, "There is a civil war that's corrosive on the Republican side that is going to enable us to do a lot better than many folks think."

And though Obama's approval ratings stand below the level of most presidents entering the second year, they are not as low as President George W. Bush's were just before the 2006 election when Democrats won back control of Congress or as bad as President Clinton's when the Republicans won the House and Senate in 1994.

A hint of just how much the voters have turned on the Democrats and whether they are willing to hand the reins over to the GOP could come just a week from today when Massachusetts holds a special election for the Senate seat previously held by Sen. Ted Kennedy. Democrats have figured that they would claim an easy victory, but polls in that race have been all over the place -- within 24 hours one poll gave Republican Scott Brown a 1-point edge, while another had Democrat Martha Coakley up by 17 percentage points.

Should Brown somehow pull out a win in the overwhelmingly blue state, it would end the Democrats' filibuster-proof majority just as the second session of the 111th Congress is getting under way.

As for November, there will be another 36 Senate seats up for grabs -- slightly more than usual due to vacancies created by the departures of senators for administration posts. Though the two parties have an equal number of seats in play, all but about a couple of GOP senators are facing near-certain re-election while about a half-dozen Democrats are gearing up for serious election challenges -- including Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.).

That number does not include two senior Senate Democrats -- Sens. Chris Dodd of Connecticut and Byron Dorgan of North Dakota -- who announced their retirements last week. Dodd's departure may actually improve the Democrats' chances of holding onto that seat while Dorgan's departure likely moves that seat into the GOP column, with popular Gov. John Hoeven (R) announcing yesterday that he will run.

On the House side, if the climate is indeed as sour as some pundits suggest, the ax will probably fall on those very same moderates that in 2006 and 2008 helped put the Democrats in the majority. And analysts say it is those same Democrats who are going to be especially leery of doing anything this year that will put them in further danger and that the president will be forced to respond to those concerns -- regardless of what it does to his own agenda.

Obama, Baker said, "will continue to get buffeted by the liberal base of the party for timidity and hesitancy, but he's got a majority to protect and I don't think he's going to try to walk them through a minefield."

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