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Obama at Year One

How do you assess President Barack Obama's first year in office?

By Gleaves Whitney

One year ago, Barack Obama rode into the White House on a powerful electoral wave. Independents and a surprising number of disgruntled Republicans and conservatives joined progressive Democrats to elect the nation's first African-American president.

During the past 12 months, though, Obama got mugged by reality. Unemployment, bailouts, war, diplomacy, and terrorism taught Obama that it's easier to campaign than to govern. Our very capable 44th president is learning that charisma, hope, and idealism go only so far.

While Obama is very much liked as a person, approval ratings for his policies dropped below 50 percent 10 months into his administration. According to Rasmussen polling, two-thirds of Americans believed the nation was on the "wrong track" by November 21, 2009. The numbers have not moved appreciably since the holidays.

It may seem that frustration with Obama came unusually fast compared to other presidents. But a look at Roper Center polling shows that Americans historically have been quick to register frustration with their man in the White House. Indeed, since World War II, only one president's approval rating never dropped below 50 percent. That rare accomplishment belongs to John F. Kennedy. Other presidents had to woo back a fickle public early into their administration.

Here's a look at presidents since World War II, and the point when their approval rating dropped below 50 percent:

- Dwight Eisenhower went 62 months before his approval rating dropped below 50 percent.
- George W. Bush took 40 months to drop below 50 percent.
- Lyndon Johnson took 31 months.
- Richard Nixon, 26 months.
- George H. W. Bush, 23 months.
- Jimmy Carter, 13 months.
- Bill Clinton, 11 months.
- Harry Truman, 11 months (the first president for whom such numbers were tracked).
- Barack Obama, 10 months.
- Ronald Reagan, 10 months.
- Gerald Ford, less than 2 months (because of his pardon of Nixon).

The median number of months that the majority of Americans grow discontent with their president is 13 months after their inauguration. Obama experienced majority disapproval some 10 months into his administration. Given the Great Recession, two wars, and the health-care battle on Capitol Hill, it is remarkable that our 44th president did not dive below 50 percent even sooner.

Obama will have to rely on more than charisma to have a successful presidency. Last week's election in Massachusetts sent a warning to the White House. Some of the same Americans who put Obama into office 14 months ago spurned his party in the Bay State's special Senate election. Voters in the "bluest of blue states" elected Republican Scott Brown to the Senate seat long held by liberal icon Ted Kennedy.

To put this remarkable result into perspective, consider that only 14 months ago, Democrat Obama carried Massachusetts by 26 points. Last week, Republican Brown won the state-wide race by 5 points. The dramatic 31 point turnaround reveals the anger Americans are directing at establishment politicians.

In 2008 voters in Massachusetts and around the nation elected a president whom they thought could – and would – change the political dynamic inside the Beltway. Citizens were saying they wanted their representatives to govern from the middle – not from the extreme left or extreme right. But it hasn't happened. If anything, the political climate in our country has gotten worse over the past year.

Take Exhibit A, the wrangling over national health care legislation. Instead of transparency, we got stinky backroom deals – the "Louisiana Purchase" and "Nebraska Kickback." Instead of bipartisanship, we got Democrats virtually ignoring Republicans on Capitol Hill. Instead of fiscal responsibility, we got spending sprees by pols with no credible idea how to pay for their programs.

The people are fed up. The same voters who with good reason threw the Republicans out of Congress in 2006, and out of the White House in 2008, repudiated the president's party in Massachusetts last week. Independents are in the saddle, and their message is clear: Incumbents had better abandon politics as usual, or independents will abandon them.

Will the tin-eared politicians on Capitol Hill and the ideologues in the White House get the memo?

Gleaves Whitney is the director of Grand Valley's Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies. [Ask your question.](#)

(Question from Megan Sall, 2009 Master's degree in public administration at Grand Valley)



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