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Is Obamacare in the E.R.?

After one year in office and thousands of pages of proposed legislation, what are the odds that President Barack Obama will be able to push through significant health-care reform in his first term?

By Gleaves Whitney

After the Inauguration, a president usually experiences a “honeymoon” with Congress and the American people – a time of renewed hope, relatively high approval ratings, and rapport with the media. During his freshman year in office, President Barack Obama enjoyed a sustained honeymoon, helped by the fact that Democrats dominate both houses of Congress and 29 of the 50 governors’ offices. (Recent gubernatorial contests in Virginia and New Jersey went Republican, so Democrats next year will have only 27 of the 50 governors’ offices.)

Polls show that the nation’s first African-American president remains well liked at home and abroad, but the numbers also reveal dramatically eroding support for his plan to overhaul the nation’s health care. Ten months after the Inauguration, the honeymoon is over.

Take a battleground state like Ohio, where the numbers vividly illustrate the uphill battle the 44th president faces. Obama carried Ohio by some 262,000 votes in last year’s presidential campaign – a 4.6 percent winning margin. But this past July, when the president’s job approval began falling nationally from the high 50s to the low 50s, Ohio was the first place his declining popularity showed up in the polls. At the same time, support for his health-care overhaul slipped from 44 percent to 36 percent, and now 57 percent of Ohio voters disapprove of his handling of it.

Ohio is reflecting a trend that is evident in Michigan and throughout the nation. When the stakes are high – and any proposal that seeks to overhaul a \$2.5 trillion industry (one-sixth of the U.S. economy) meets the definition of “high stakes” – presidents have to do a gut check and remember not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Half a loaf is better than no loaf at all.

Presidential historian Robert Dallek has argued that a president’s ability to carry out extensive domestic reform becomes increasingly problematic if the nation is waging a major war.

It’s easy to see how wars derail domestic reform. They are expensive and necessarily rearrange the nation’s political priorities. At present, the U.S. is bogged down in Afghanistan, so Obama faces tough choices. Does he devote more resources to the war, or to health care? The skyrocketing national debt cannot be ignored, and there is only so much political capital he can afford to spend.

As he looks at the challenges his predecessors in the White House faced, he will see mixed lessons and unintended consequences. Many times during the last one hundred years, a well-liked president has been able to parlay his popularity into programs – to a point. Usually it is war that stops further domestic change.

Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) believed he would be one of America’s greatest domestic reformers. During his first years in the Oval Office, he crusaded for the New Freedom, a progressive agenda to expand economic opportunity for people at the bottom of society while eliminating special privileges for the rich and powerful. The New Freedom reforms were stopped dead in their tracks by America’s entry into World War I.

Franklin Roosevelt (1933-1945) entered office when the nation was in the grips of the Great Depression. People were desperate for relief and reform, so many of his New Deal proposals passed during his first hundred days in office. But Roosevelt had even more ambitious plans for domestic reform than the New Deal. His far-reaching economic bill of rights was analogous to the political Bill of Rights crafted by the founders in 1788. However, America’s need to fight on two fronts in World War II made pursuit of further domestic reform all but impossible.

FDR’s successor, Harry Truman (1945-1953), championed a Fair Deal that progressives considered far ahead of its time. He called for an increase in the minimum wage, expansion of Social Security, a federal housing bill, national health insurance, infrastructure improvements, liberalized immigration laws, and ambitious civil rights legislation for African Americans. To Truman’s chagrin, the Korean War erupted and derailed his domestic agenda.

Lyndon Johnson (1963-1969) was spectacularly successful in pushing through nearly one thousand bills of his Great Society program. He wanted to achieve even more, but his ambitions were thwarted by the Vietnam War, and he left office an exhausted, embittered man.

It is too early to know whether President Obama will be able to push through far-reaching health-care legislation. But the lessons of the past one hundred years suggest that ambitious presidents can achieve dramatic reforms at home if they are not fighting expensive wars abroad.

Wars derail the best-laid plans. But global conflict also expands the size and scope of the national government. For better or worse, this unintended consequence makes it easier for later presidents to bring about domestic reforms that seem impossible to achieve today.

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

(Question from Hannah Anderson, freshman, engineering major at GVSU)



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