

## Healthcare and Politics

*What does the battle to enact healthcare reform signify about the state of politics in Obama's America?*

### *I. INTRODUCTION*

Ever since Lyndon Johnson's introduction of Medicare in 1965, healthcare reform has galvanised the nation, dividing Americans left and right. The most recent battle over reform is a perfect illustration of this: discontent Tea Partyers spitting at congressmen, egged on in part by the rhetoric of extreme-right politicians urging them to take up arms against the state.<sup>1</sup> This new wave of militant conservatism has prompted social commentators to argue that the state of politics in Obama's America is in decline; that the system of government is broken.<sup>2</sup> This essay argues, however, that this claim is overstated. Politics in Obama's America continues to function, as evidenced by pre-2010 welfare reform in Congress and the positive attitude of the public towards the state. Ultimately healthcare passed, demonstrating that, albeit polarised, Obama's politics is far from collapse.

### *II. BYE BAYH: THE DEATH OF MODERATES?*

The argument that American politics is in decline is often predicated on the fact moderate congressmen are leaving Congress out of frustration with the gridlock. The departure of Senator Evan Bayh, a conservative Democrat from Iowa, on 15 February 2010, due to "brain-dead partisanship" which was preventing "the people's business"<sup>3</sup> from getting done, is a case in point for the broken government thesis. His recommendation of a wholesale ejection of incumbents in the November mid-term

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Palin called out to disenchanted Republicans after the healthcare vote to not "retreat" but "instead RELOAD!" Quoted in Peter Hartcher, "How Obama Moved In For the Kill". *The Sydney Morning Herald* (March 30, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> James Fallows, "How America Can Rise Again". *The Atlantic Magazine* (Jan/Feb 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in "A Study in Paralysis; America's democracy". *The Economist* (Feb. 20, 2010).

elections, and their replacement with people who care about reforming the system, has been used to portray the sequence of events as a crisis of governability.<sup>4</sup> Liberal commentator Peter Beinart argues there is now a “vicious political cycle” in Washington—rigorous government action is lacking, which damages people’s faith in the government, which in turn makes government action harder still.<sup>5</sup> This vicious cycle phenomenon largely came about following the 1994 Republican landslide victory, when a new Republican majority, led by Newt Gingrich, realised it could use political polarisation to stymie the government, and use government failure to win elections.<sup>6</sup>

But it is wrong to portray this sequence of events as a crisis of governability. First, the present Congress is “one of the most productive” since the 89th Congress of 1965-66 during which LBJ pushed through the series of bills that created his “Great Society”.<sup>7</sup> It is not true that Congress is a muddy bog through which nothing can pass: Obama’s \$700bn Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) bill passed even though it came at the end of Bush’s presidency, saving American banks from fiscal collapse. In addition, the \$787bn stimulus bill made it through within a month of Obama taking office. This package promised \$19bn for health-information technology, and over \$1bn to test the effectiveness of healthcare treatments. Stimulus money also helped reform schools, create a smart grid for electricity, expand access to broadband internet and also expand children’s health insurance. Had the Congress passed all these measures

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Beinart and Jonah Goldberg. Radio Blog. 17/2/2010. Available at: <http://bloggingheads.tv/diavlogs/26105> (accessed 5 May 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Peter Beinart, “The Problem with Washington Politics”. *Time* (Feb. 18, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Norman J. Ornstein, “A Very Productive Congress, Despite What the Approval Ratings Say”. *The Washington Post* (Jan. 31, 2010).

separately, it would be considered enormously productive; that it did it all in one bill demonstrates a state of politics very much alive and kicking.<sup>8</sup>

### *III. THE FALL OF ROME?*

In addition to foregoing criticisms about partisanship, a frequent attack on Obama's politics is that American governance is sclerotic and badly in need of reform. Some even compare America's supposed decline to the collapse of the Roman Empire.<sup>9</sup> These arguments stem largely from abysmal government approval ratings—a recent CBS news poll found that only one in five Americans trusts the government to do what is right “all or most of the time”.<sup>10</sup> Scholar James Fallows makes the jeremiah: “this is the American tragedy of the early twenty-first century: a vital and self-renewing culture that attracts the world's talent and a governing system that increasingly looks like a joke”.<sup>11</sup>

These decline concerns are largely held on the assumption there is growing mistrust amongst the American public towards its government. But this assumption is in fact problematic, since the public remains largely positive about the underlying constitutional framework. Eighty percent of Americans say the U.S. is still the best place to live and 90% like their democratic system of government, with very few believing this system should be overthrown.<sup>12</sup> While party politics has indeed become more polarised than in the past, much of this apparent ‘mistrust’ towards government is generated by polling data which weigh responses that are sensitive to the way

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<sup>8</sup> “Leaders: What's gone wrong in Washington?” *The Economist* (Feb. 20, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> “Most Americans Don't Trust Government”. *CBS News Poll* (April 18, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Fallows, “How America Can Rise Again”.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “American Politics is in Crisis, But It is Certainly Not Broken”. *The Daily Star* (April 14, 2010).

questions are asked. Essentially, declining confidence in government has not caused the mass catastrophe many have claimed it would—laws and taxes are largely abided by; government officials are less corrupt than in earlier decades;<sup>13</sup> a rampant voting decline is now back up to 58%;<sup>14</sup> and three-quarters of Americans feel connected to their communities and say the quality of life is excellent.<sup>15</sup> So while there is an apparent mistrust towards government and growing polarisation in party politics, “America’s political system is not as broken as critics who draw analogies to the fall of Rome or other empires would have us believe”.<sup>16</sup>

#### *IV. A HEALTHY VICTORY—THE PASSAGE OF HEALTHCARE*

The battle over healthcare culminated in its passage on 21 March 2010. The historic bill validated Obama’s America, signifying a change in politics. As Jim Loftus, former Democratic White House staffer and aide to the Obama campaign, states: Obama now “gets to appeal to a sense of fairness”,<sup>17</sup> compared to the extremist Tea Partyers and neocons. This is reinforced by David Frum, former speechwriter of Bush Jr, who describes Obama as a reasonable, results-driven President, compared to his extremist opponents—be they Republican congressmen, Fox News or Glenn Beck. Far from being Obama’s “Waterloo”, healthcare has become what Frum terms “a Republican own goal”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The World Bank gives the U.S. a score above the 90th percentile for “control of corruption”.

<sup>14</sup> Based on 2008 election voter turnout.

<sup>15</sup> Nye, “American Politics”.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Hartcher, “How Obama Moved In For the Kill”. *The Sydney Morning Herald* (March 30, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

## V. CONCLUSION

While the fight over healthcare has revealed much polarisation in party politics, the fact Obama was able to get through the biggest piece of legislation since LBJ's "Great Society" demonstrates that the American state of politics is neither in decline nor broken. On the contrary, Obama has succeeded in convincing Americans that short-term pains are for the greater good, and that a sacrifice now—in the form of higher taxes—will pay off later—in the form of universal healthcare.<sup>19</sup>

**Word Count: 996 words (not incl. bibliography or question).**

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<sup>19</sup> William Galston, "In Government America Must Trust". *The Financial Times* (March 3, 2010).

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