



POPULISM WON'T BE OBAMA'S PANACEA

The President has to stand aloof from Washington to win back voters

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BELEAGUERED Barack Obama came out swinging in his State of the Union address this week. The President reverted to his winning campaign gambit of running as an outsider against the bad old ways of Washington, while adding a healthy dose of populism. After the "Massachusetts massacre" loss of the Kennedy's Senate seat, and voters' stunning indictment of his first year in office, Obama had few other options.

The voters' complaints are clear. You bailed out Wall Street and ran up trillions in public debt. You have wasted a year on healthcare reform we don't want. But you let unemployment climb into the double digits, and a quarter of us owe more on our homes than they're worth. Do something!

Obama heard this message loud and clear. With his party's fate in November's congressional elections hinging on employment numbers he can't control, Obama's best hope is using his new change-you-can-believe-in populism to shape perceptions of him and his

agenda. But there are three ways it could founder.

First, running for office as an outsider is easy; governing as an outsider is much harder. For much of the country and the world, the President is Washington. Obama admires Ronald Reagan because he was able to pull it off. The great communicator was able to brush

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off his early stumbles with a winning mixture of folksy charm, down-home bravado and ideological commitment that won over many Democrats. Obama has less time for Bill Clinton because the "comeback kid" came back by tacking squarely to the centre after the carnage of the 1994 congressional elections.

Today Obama's problem is that he seems to be losing the very voters Reagan won over

and Clinton's bowed down to. Centrist Democrats in congress are scared stiff of supporting Obama on issues as diverse as healthcare, finance, and climate change because they fear it may cost them their seats.

Obama's first task is to convince them that supporting his newfound populism will have the opposite effect. But this is Obama's second problem. He just isn't a natural populist. Populism is inherently anti-elitist. Obama's Harvard and Chicago law school pedigree, his aversion to tub thumping, his preference for deliberation, and his faith in the power of reason and knowledge, all conspire against the credibility of his populism. That Obama was able to make his urbane outsiderism a winning formula in 2008 was remarkable. Repeating the feat in office as Middle America's champion is much harder.

But the third and biggest problem with all populism, Obama's included, is that it is much easier to say what you are against than what you are for and how you will get there.

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Obama wants to rein in healthcare costs, but he seems willing to accept a reform package that does very little to contain costs. He wants to freeze government spending, but not until he spends a lot more this year to create jobs and build infrastructure. He is committed to winning in Afghanistan, but he will pull out in 2011 come what may.

Governing may be the art of convincing voters that what seem contradictions are, in fact, the path to the promised land. This is his task ahead.

Obama's plan combines what won him office, running against Washington, with what the tenor of the times is calling for, economic populism. Now he must hope that congress buys in, that his jobs agenda works, and that American voters are once again convinced to buy in, too. It has a chance. But no one should bet the farm on it just yet.

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