

## Obama throws out the political rules

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The passage of [US healthcare](#) reform is enormously consequential, and not just for the things the new law aims to affect. The manner of its [passage](#), as much as its substance, makes November's mid-term elections pivotal. They may decide the political trajectory of the United States for the next several decades.

To see why, you must understand the improbability of what has happened. [Barack Obama](#) just tore up the US political rulebook.

A year ago there were two scenarios for healthcare reform. One was that the Democrats would carry a willing public with them and pass a comprehensive bill. Another was that opinion would cool, forcing the Democrats to settle for less. What happened was extraordinarily unlikely: the public turned against the Democrats' proposal and the party went ahead and did it anyway.

In Europe, rule by a political class that tells voters what is good for them is an idea so familiar that it is quite taken for granted. In the United States it is novel, and not instantly welcome.

Between now and November, Democrats must persuade the country that they acted in its best interests when they overrode the public's doubts. If they succeed and retain their majorities in Congress they will have a green light to advance their wider aims, which include tax reform, labour relations, energy and industrial policies. They will conclude that Clintonism, with its submission to centrist opinion, was an error: they will have learned that they can capture and move centrist opinion. But if voters

punish their arrogance, their momentum will be stopped. US policy will be set on a very different course.

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What makes the coming months so interesting is that the outcome is uncertain. The ordinary dynamics of US politics have been overthrown. This thing could go either way.

For now, Democrats are elated and feel they have the upper hand. History is on their side, they believe, and Republican resistance is futile.

This conviction has farcical aspects. The Democrats embarked on healthcare reform with a popular new president, a filibuster-proof Senate majority, an even bigger advantage in the House of Representatives, and strong public backing for their policy. After a year of self-flagellation, with an increasingly disgusted electorate looking on, they managed to come within inches of failing. Having barely avoided this ignominy, they congratulate themselves on their discipline, tenacity and tactical brilliance.

None of this matters. When all is said and done, they won. They defeated a Republican strategy that aimed not to influence a needed reform, but simply to block any change. That made the Democrats' victory, once achieved, total.

Whatever happens next, Mr Obama has lifetime immunity from the most telling charge so far levelled against him – that he is all talk. The reform he and his allies have enacted, though flawed, is a real advance for the country. Democrats sold it incompetently, but there is time to put that right. Meanwhile they are refreshed and brimming with ambition. United in success, they have direction and look purposeful.

Republicans are in a state of incoherent rage. One can see why. They won the battle for public opinion. They inflicted wounding electoral setbacks on Democrats in Virginia, New Jersey and above all in [Massachusetts](#) – a liberal state, which elected a Republican running against healthcare reform to Edward Kennedy's old seat. Mr Obama's popularity evaporated. Yet the Democrats kept going and passed their sweeping new law. Stunned Republicans are asking, what on earth just happened?

Their party has arrived at a perilous juncture. A livid strain of fury and intolerance is coming to the fore. Conservative anger is expressing itself in ugly and violent rhetoric, and party leaders are failing to condemn this as unreservedly as they should. Their equivocation is reckless and irresponsible, but also a gross error, because it threatens to repel many of the centrists who have lately moved back toward the party.

Adding to their difficulties, Republicans now need something they never thought to acquire: a healthcare policy. The burden of proof has shifted to them. They must

explain how they will fix the Democrats' plan. As long as Mr Obama is in the White House, talk of repeal is mere whining. He has a veto. Repeal is not going to happen.

If rage and intellectual bankruptcy are the Republicans' main enemy, hubris is the Democrats'. If they are wise, they will dial back the exultation. They will enjoy the Republicans' impotence a little less. Polls show that healthcare reform got a bump in support immediately after passage – but a small one, and more voters still oppose it than support it. Overriding a popular majority was risky enough; rubbing the country's nose in the fact is begging for retribution.

The Democrats need to get the public behind what they have done. Mere crowing about their success will not do that. On the merits, and as a matter of political calculation, they must also keep in mind the problems this reform is going to face. Implementing it correctly will be an enormous challenge, requiring sustained attention. They must approach this soberly – not in a mood of grinning euphoria, looking for the next door to kick through.

Both sides thus have lethal traps to avoid before voters deliver their verdict in November. It would be hard to exaggerate how much is riding on the outcome.

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