

# THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF OBAMA'S WONK CORE

There's a telling paragraph in this [post](#) from Ezra Klein, one of a series of posts written lately by self-described "wonks" defending the electoral and political approach Hillary Clinton embraces.

It's a vision that is intuitively plausible to many liberals because it resonates with their own experience. They remember being excited by the promise of Obama's agenda and then disappointed by the compromises he made, the fights he backed away from, the deals he cut with industry. They remember being organized in 2008 and demoralized in 2010. They remember feeling like they could accomplish anything, only to be told they needed to stop hoping for so much.

The argument is that something about the first years of Obama's Administration led people to be more realistic in their political expectations. It comes after two more paragraphs characterizing Sanders' vision of his own break with Obama: mobilization of voters.

"The major political, strategic difference I have with Obama," Sanders [told Vox's Andrew Prokop in 2014](#), "is it's too late to do anything inside the Beltway. You gotta take your case to the American people, mobilize them, and organize them at the grassroots level in a way that we have never done before."

This is the vision Sanders is selling in Iowa. It's a vision that is hopeful both in its diagnosis of the problems in American politics and in its prescription. It's a vision that says liberals were right all along, and the American people have always been with

them, and it's the corrosive influence of corporate donors that has snapped that bond and confused the country.

But Ezra then turns that vision of mobilization into something with a very short history: just back to 2008, when Obama mobilized voters to get elected but then disappointed them in 2010.

Curiously, Ezra doesn't describe what demoralized liberals in 2010 – I'm not actually sure whether he means the final shape of the health insurance reform or the electoral losses that year (the size of which were exacerbated by the politics of the health insurance reform). That, of course, is critical to any consideration of the efficacy of pragmatism, because if making pragmatic choices ends up losing historic majorities in Congress, pragmatism will always be a loser for liberals.

But it's the assumptions Ezra makes in the paragraph that really strike me (they seem, in part, to be based on a [story](#) Norm Scheiber wrote in 2014 about former Obama precinct captains from Iowa, which is crazy in that the story and [Ezra's interview](#) based on it were entirely premised on Hillary being unstoppable this time around): that something about Obama's campaign was uniquely exciting, uniquely promising to liberals and therefore his compromises in office were newly disappointing. That assumption that Obama's campaign was uniquely exciting really puzzles me. After all, presidential candidates have been exciting voters, including newly active voters, since at least JFK (or, in Hillary's case, Goldwater). And while those inspired by Kennedy are unique (in that he didn't live long enough to disappoint them), for all others, there's always a hangover, after which people take many different paths: disillusionment, integration within the larger party, or excitement by some other candidate in some future race. So why would Obama be different (aside from the fact he's black, which is important, but certainly not the main thing that inspired even black voters)?

I was so puzzled I actually double checked Ezra's age because it seemed like something someone who had never voted before 2008 might say, but (as I vaguely recall), even Young Ezra was not only old enough, but quite active, in the 2004 campaign, where a guy named Howard Dean lost in Iowa, but went on to dedicate four years to mobilizing Democratic voters across the country, until Obama replaced the man whose efforts helped to get him elected.

Those years that came before are critically important, too, because they represent a period when the decline of unions – the Democrats' former method of mass mobilization and still very much a crutch for the party – and the rise of the mobilized Christian right made Republicans newly competitive in presidential elections. And while Hillary's husband definitely inspired his own share of newly excited voters, the response to the decline of Democrats' natural mobilized base led to a new kind of Democratic politics, reliant on big donations and lots of TV. We needed Dean to refocus on organizing because the Democratic party had led local organizing to atrophy, which was all the more devastating given the rise of ALEC and with it a machine to help conservatives dominate legislative elections at the state level.

Which brings me to the other curious admission in Ezra's piece: that even as Hillary-favoring "wonks" beat up on Bernie supporters for their foolish idealism, Hillary herself doesn't have a plan to challenge Republican dominance.

The problem for Clinton is that the immediate future looks grim for the progressive agenda, and she knows it. Republicans are likely to hold both the House and the Senate. They have a 5-4 majority on the Supreme Court and, at least for the moment, huge majorities in governorships and state legislatures. Americans are, if anything, growing more divided. Money is an ever more powerful

force in American politics. The fact that voters don't want a fight doesn't mean they're not going to have one.

Clinton doesn't have an easy answer for any of this, and, perhaps to her credit, she's refused to pretend otherwise. Democrats were bitterly disappointed by the compromises Obama made when he had huge Democratic majorities. The compromises the next Democratic president will have to make, given the likely Republican dominance of Congress, are going to be even more brutal for liberals – and if they're not, it will likely be because nothing of importance gets done in the first place.

Let me clear: there's not an easy answer to reverse the work Republicans have been doing since Reagan "changed the rules." There's definitely not a quick answer. But if liberals don't start doing the work now, the apparent blind faith among some in the Democratic party that 2020's census will magically reverse the political order will fail (if the country doesn't fail worse before then). Though, as I note, Trump's [candidacy is itself changing the rules](#), in ways Democrats could well capitalize on if they stopped ignoring it.

The thing is, it's no secret how to change things: it does remain organizing, and outside of some pre-existing institution of civil society (whether that be unions or evangelical churches), that organizing is going to require both inspiration and a commitment to issues that will benefit the masses of ordinary people.

Pessimism about how much the current Congress will get done may be realistic, but it is no more realistic than the assessment that mobilizing the people who've gotten screwed by Republican policies is a necessary antidote.