

Better Than Tea

by Paul Starr

Something feels wrong about the state of American politics. With millions unemployed and home foreclosures at record levels, the country is still suffering acutely from the recession's effects, yet the Tea Party is the only movement that can put thousands of people into the streets. How is it that so soon after activists helped Barack Obama win the

presidency, the left is quiet while feet march and fires burn on the right?

Many progressives blame Obama, saying that he fell in with the wrong crowd in Washington and Wall Street, gave too much ground on policy, failed to mobilize his grass-roots organization, and lost his true voice, at least until the final weeks of the health-care battle when he barnstormed the nation and looked like the candidate the public elected in 2008.

Envious of the Tea Party's angry crowds, even saying they sympathize with them, these progressives yearn for Democrats to express that same populist anger—but to direct it against the big banks and other corporations.

Obama sometimes does channel that anger, albeit in a limited way and for tactical reasons. When the health-insurance companies crossed the administration by running ads against reform, the president lambasted the industry. Wall Street firms that oppose strong financial-reform legislation have invited another round of tactical populism. This is tit-for-tat, an entirely rational game for the administration to play.

But there are good reasons why Obama cannot and

should not indulge in a full-bore populism that, in practice, would yield nothing but deadlock and disaster.

The Democrats are the party of responsible government, and America needs at least one of those. Rather than play to the crowds and have their programs go down in flames, Democrats need to make progress on the central problems facing the country, and the only way to do that is

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to make difficult choices that upset some of their own supporters. In this year's health-care legislation, for example, they couldn't do what the Republicans did in 2003 with Medicare prescription drugs—create new benefits without any new taxes or compensating cuts in expenditures. Instead, they paid for the program with reduced Medicare spending and additional taxes, despite the unpopularity of those measures.

Overwhelmingly white, well off, and aging, the Tea Partiers are a classic reactionary group. While denouncing the Democrats' supposed government takeover of health care, they want Medicare left untouched. After all, they're

deserving—the hell with uninsured younger workers, who are, in fact, paying for them through Medicare taxes. In effect, the Tea Partiers say to the uninsured, “My health insurance is too costly for you to have any.”

I wouldn't take the Tea Party's fury about big government too seriously. In March, David Frum, the Republican who was later fired by the American Enterprise Institute, sent

interviewers to ask Tea Party protesters how much of gross domestic product the federal government gets in taxes. Their median answer was 40 percent; the actual figure is under 18 percent. Opposed to the stimulus, they are economic illiterates who, if they had their way on a balanced budget, would bring down a depression on themselves and the country.

Superficially, there appears to be a populist case against Obama. The stock market has soared in the past year and profits are rolling in at Goldman Sachs, while the jobless rate is still hovering near 10 percent. It seems unjust for Wall Street to be doing well while so many

suffer, and it is unjust.

As of mid-April, however, the economic data indicate that Obama's policies are working as well as anyone could realistically have hoped under the dire circumstances the president inherited. Yes, the stimulus last year should have been bigger, and we need another round of spending to prevent a double-dip recession. The financiers who profited from the bailouts should have paid a higher price at the time and should pay higher taxes now.

But, for all their limitations, the bailouts and other policies have put the economy back in gear. Growth has resumed, productivity is up sharply, and employers are beginning to

hire. This is how recoveries look: The market anticipates change, while employment lags it. And because most people cannot yet see the fruits, Democrats are paying a price in public approval and may well pay one in November.

For the fall, Democrats could well use more tactical populism, and the battle over financial reform should provide plenty of opportunity for it. But their true hope lies in building a record as the party of responsible government. Let the Republicans drink the Tea Party's brew. Progressives shouldn't wish for the equivalent. Calm and intelligent leadership is ultimately a better formula for long-term public support. **TAP**