



# The Power of the President

## Recommendations to Advance Progressive Change

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By the Center for American Progress Staff and Senior Fellows

Compiled by Sarah Rosen Wartell

Forward by John D. Podesta

November 2010

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In the aftermath of this month's midterm congressional elections, pundits and politicians across the ideological spectrum are focusing on how difficult it will be for President Barack Obama to advance his policy priorities through Congress. Predictions of stalemate abound. And some debate whether the administration should tack to the left or to the center and compromise with or confront the new House leadership.

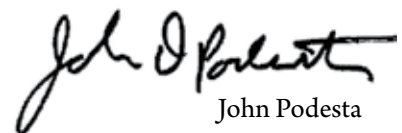
As a former White House chief of staff, I believe those to be the wrong preoccupations. President Obama's ability to govern the country as chief executive presents an opportunity to demonstrate strength, resolve, and a capacity to get things done on a host of pressing challenges of importance to the public and our economy. Progress, not positioning, is what the public wants and deserves.

The U.S. Constitution and the laws of our nation grant the president significant authority to make and implement policy. These authorities can be used to ensure positive progress on many of the key issues facing the country through:

- Executive orders
- Rulemaking
- Agency management
- Convening and creating public-private partnerships
- Commanding the armed forces
- Diplomacy

The ability of President Obama to accomplish important change through these powers should not be underestimated. President Bush, for example, faced a divided Congress throughout most of his term in office, yet few can doubt his ability to craft a unique and deeply conservative agenda using every aspect of the policymaking apparatus at his disposal. And, after his party lost control of Congress in 1994, President Clinton used executive authority and convening power to make significant progressive change. For instance, he protected more great spaces in the lower 48 states than any president since Theodore Roosevelt, established for the first time significant protections for Americans' medical privacy, and urged the creation of the Welfare-to-Work Partnership that enlisted the help of 20,000 businesses in moving more than 1 million welfare recipients into the workforce.

The upshot: Congressional gridlock does not mean the federal government stands still. This administration has a similar opportunity to use available executive authorities while also working with Congress where possible. At the Center for American Progress, we look forward to our nation continuing to make progress.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John D. Podesta".

John Podesta  
President and CEO

# Introduction and summary

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## The opportunity

Concentrating on executive powers presents a real opportunity for the Obama administration to turn its focus away from a divided Congress and the unappetizing process of making legislative sausage. Instead, the administration can focus on the president's ability to deliver results for the American people on the things that matter most to them:

- Job creation and economic competitiveness
- Educational excellence
- A clean energy future and energy independence
- Quality affordable health care
- Consumer protection
- The home foreclosure crisis
- Accountable government delivering results at lower cost
- Sustainable security for the nation

In addition, the key legislative accomplishments of President Obama's first two years in office, most notably health care and financial reform, now need to be implemented effectively. Both the Affordable Care Act and the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act require hundreds of separate rule-makings and other agency actions to implement the legislative framework.

The public has made clear its disgust with Washington's ways—the same sentiment that helped to bring President Obama to office. It would be a welcome relief from watching legislative maneuvering to see the work of a strong executive who is managing the business of the country through troubled times, doing more with less, each day working to create a stronger economy and a more effective government.

The Obama administration, of course, is already using the capacity of the presidency to drive change in the public and private sector. For example, it promoted the forma-

tion of Skills for America's Future, a new public-private initiative in support of the president's goal of 5 million more community college graduates and certificates by 2020. At the recent White House Community College Summit, convened by Dr. Jill Biden, industry, labor unions, community colleges, and other training providers made commitments to help put this initiative into action.

Similarly, President Obama's recent trip to India provided an opportunity for him to win agreements that will bring significant economic benefits to U.S. firms and American workers. Trade transactions were announced or showcased, exceeding \$14.9 billion in total value with \$9.5 billion in U.S. export content, supporting an estimated 53,670 U.S. jobs in the production of aircraft, energy generation equipment, advanced machinery, and telecommunications services, among others.

There is much more the president can do. The list below of ideas from the Center for American Progress's policy experts offers just some of the many possible actions the administration can take using existing authority to move the country forward.

Specifically, in the energy and environmental arena, the president can:

- Reduce oil imports and make progress toward energy independence.
- Progress toward reducing greenhouse gas pollution by 17 percent by 2020.
- Conserve federal lands for future generations.
- Manage public lands to support a balanced energy strategy.
- Convene and engage hunters and anglers in the development of a fish and wildlife climate adaptation plan.
- Generate solar energy on U.S. Air Force hangar roofs.

On the domestic economic policy front, President Obama can:

- Direct an assessment, strategy, and new policy development to promote U.S. competitiveness.
- Launch the new consumer financial protection bureau with an aggressive agenda to protect and empower consumers.
- Increase the capacity of small businesses to expand hiring and purchases by accelerating the implementation of the Small Business Jobs Act.
- Promote automatic mediation to avoid foreclosure where possible and speed resolution.
- Create a web portal to empower housing counselors, reduce burdens on lenders, and speed up home mortgage modifications.

- Help stabilize home values and communities by turning “shadow REO” housing inventory into “scattered site” rental housing.
- Promote practices that support working families.

Elsewhere on the domestic policy front, the Obama administration can:

- Partner with the private sector in health care payment reform.
- Focus on health care prevention in implementing the Affordable Care Act.
- Streamline and simplify access to federal antipoverty programs.
- Replace costly, inhumane immigration detention policies with equally effective measures.

In the education policy arena, the president can:

- Launch an “educational productivity” initiative to help school districts spend every dollar wisely to best prepare our children for the 21st century.
- Ensure students can compare financial aid offers from different postsecondary institutions.
- Improve the quality, standards, and productivity of postsecondary education.

In improving the performance of the federal government, the president can:

- Scrutinize federal spending programs and tax expenditures to achieve greater returns on public investment.
- Build the next-generation Recovery.gov web site to track all public expenditures and performance in real time.
- Use new information technology for faster, more transparent freedom of information.
- Create a virtual U.S. statistical agency.
- Collect data on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans in federal data surveys.

And in the foreign policy and national security arena, the president and his administration can:

- Rebalance our Afghanistan strategy with greater emphasis on political and diplomatic progress.
- Promote domestic revenue generation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Appoint a special envoy for the Horn of Africa and the southwest Arabian Peninsula region.

- Appoint a special commission to assess contracting practices in national security and foreign affairs.
- Use executive branch authority to mitigate the impact of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy if Congress does not repeal it.
- Redouble support for Palestinian state- and institution-building efforts.
- Pursue dual-track policy on Iran while sharpening focus on Iranian human rights issues.
- Reinvigorate the U.S.-Turkey strategic alliance.
- Develop a comprehensive policy on the Russia-Georgia conflict.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the important policy objectives President Obama can pursue over the next two years, but it illustrates the range of important executive branch work beyond proposing and negotiating legislation.

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The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

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