

Presidential Power?

Unshackling the Presidency to Fix the Government

PETER BAKER, *The New York Times National Edition*, July 14, 2012, p. A12.

WASHINGTON — In all the discussion these days about how dysfunctional Washington has become, attention usually centers on a fractious Congress riven by partisanship and paralyzed at times by rules and obstruction. Often lost in that conversation is the possibility that the presidency itself may need fixing.



At least that is the conclusion of a bipartisan group of former advisers to presidents and would-be presidents who have drafted what they call a plan to make the presidency work better. With the help of several former White House chiefs of staff, the group, called No Labels, [has fashioned a blueprint](#) that would make whoever wins in November both more powerful and more accountable.

The idea is to cut through some of the institutional obstacles to decisive leadership that have challenged President Obama and his recent predecessors, while also erecting structures to foster more bipartisanship, transparency and responsiveness. If the proposals were enacted, the next president would have more latitude to reorganize the government, appoint his own team, reject

special-interest measures and fast-track his own initiatives through Congress. But he would also be called on to interact more regularly with lawmakers, reporters and the public.

“There aren’t any magic answers to Washington’s problems,” said Dan Schnur, a former Republican strategist who worked on several presidential campaigns and now directs the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California. “But what these reforms do is make it easier for elected officials who are serious about solving problems to do so.”

Nancy Jacobson, a longtime Democratic fund-raiser who, like Mr. Schnur, is a co-founder of No Labels, said the purpose of the plan was to find ways to make a difference, taking into account the current atmosphere. “We’re trying to make the presidency more effective,” she said.

The plan is a follow-up to a similar blueprint from No Labels for making Congress work better. Among those consulted by the group — which describes itself as a movement of Democrats, Republicans and independents devoted to crossing partisan lines to solve problems — were William Daley, a former chief of staff to Mr. Obama, and Joshua B. Bolten, who was the last chief of staff to President George W. Bush.

The plan advances 11 proposals, some of them relatively minor but symbolically important and others fairly sweeping in scope. Many of them may be unlikely to be adopted, but the authors hope at least to prompt a debate about ways to address the dysfunction they see.

To build accountability, the plan calls on the next president to hold monthly news conferences and twice-a-year citizen news conferences; meet quarterly with the Congressional leadership of both parties; bill his political party for travel that involves fund-raising, rather than schedule extraneous official events so that taxpayers pick up part of the tab; and submit to 90-minute question-and-answer sessions each month on the floors of Congress, much as the British prime minister does in Parliament.

To build presidential power, the plan proposes that the next president be given expanded authority to send individual items in spending bills back to Congress for up-or-down votes. It also proposes renewing presidential power that lapsed in 1984 to consolidate and even eliminate parts of the federal government.

The next president would also have more freedom to appoint his administration, a process now widely considered broken. The number of positions requiring Senate confirmation has grown to 1,400 from 280 in the last half-century, and the average confirmation time has increased from 2 ½ months to more than 10 months, according to the group’s research.

To streamline that, the plan endorses a bill, which has passed the Senate and is awaiting House consideration, to trim the number of midlevel posts requiring confirmation. It also proposes that the winner of the election name a list of can’t-wait nominees who would be expedited, and that all nominations be confirmed or rejected within 90 days. Any that were not acted on by then would be confirmed by default.

Perhaps most provocative is a proposal to allow the president to send legislation to Congress twice a year that could not be amended but only approved or rejected. That is patterned after what is known as fast-track authority, often applied to trade agreements. By preventing

lawmakers from changing such legislation, a president could get yes-or-no answers on his top priorities.

William A. Galston, an aide to President Bill Clinton who is now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, suggested that one possible subject of fast-track authority could be the bipartisan plan to reduce the deficit that was created by a presidential commission led by Alan K. Simpson, a former Republican senator from Wyoming, and Erskine B. Bowles, a White House chief of staff under Mr. Clinton. The Simpson-Bowles plan included a cornucopia of unpopular tax increases and spending cuts, but under this proposal Congress would have to accept or reject the whole plan.

Mark McKinnon, a Democratic media consultant who crossed lines to work for Mr. Bush's campaigns and later helped found No Labels, said that the fast-track idea "would be a big game changer" by itself, but that the overall effect of the various proposals would go a long way toward restoring faith in the presidency.

"In their parts, they're effective, but cumulatively can have a huge impact," he said. "The voters are just hungry to see any problem solving. If they start to see action on any or all of these, I think it will have a measurable impact."

Shift on Executive Power Lets Obama Bypass Rivals

By CHARLIE SAVAGE

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WASHINGTON — One Saturday last fall, [President Obama](#) interrupted a White House strategy meeting to raise an issue not on the agenda. He declared, aides recalled, that the administration needed to more aggressively use executive power to govern in the face of Congressional obstructionism.



Doug Mills/The New York Times

President Obama speaking in Cleveland in January. Increasingly in recent months, the Obama administration has been seeking ways to bypass Congress.

“We had been attempting to highlight the inability of Congress to do anything,” recalled William M. Daley, who was the White House chief of staff at the time. “The president expressed frustration, saying we have got to scour everything and push the envelope in finding things we can do on our own.”

For Mr. Obama, that meeting was a turning point. As a senator and presidential candidate, he had criticized George W. Bush for flouting the role of Congress. And during his first two years in the White House, when Democrats controlled Congress, Mr. Obama largely worked through the legislative process to achieve his domestic policy goals.

But increasingly in recent months, the administration has been seeking ways to act without Congress. Branding its unilateral efforts “[We Can’t Wait](#),” a slogan that aides said Mr. Obama coined at that strategy meeting, the White House has rolled out dozens of new policies — on creating jobs for veterans, preventing drug shortages, raising fuel economy standards, curbing domestic violence and more.

Each time, Mr. Obama has emphasized the fact that he is bypassing lawmakers. When he announced a cut in refinancing fees for federally insured mortgages last month, for example, he said: “If Congress refuses to act, I’ve said that I’ll continue to do everything in my power to act without them.”

Aides say many more such moves are coming. Not just a short-term shift in governing style and a re-election strategy, Mr. Obama’s increasingly assertive use of executive action could foreshadow pitched battles over the separation of powers in his second term, should he win and Republicans consolidate their power in Congress.

Many conservatives have denounced Mr. Obama’s new approach. But William G. Howell, a University of Chicago political science professor and author of “Power Without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action,” said Mr. Obama’s use of executive power to advance domestic policies that could not pass Congress was not new historically. Still, he said, because of Mr. Obama’s past as a critic of executive unilateralism, his transformation is remarkable.

“What is surprising is that he is coming around to responding to the incentives that are built into the institution of the presidency,” Mr. Howell said. “Even someone who has studied the Constitution and holds it in high regard — he, too, is going to exercise these unilateral powers because his long-term legacy and his standing in the polls crucially depend upon action.”

Mr. Obama has issued signing statements claiming a right to bypass a handful of constraints — rejecting as unconstitutional Congress’s attempt to prevent him from having White House “czars” on certain issues, for example. But for the most part, Mr. Obama’s increased unilateralism in domestic policy has relied on a different form of executive power than the sort that had led to heated debates during his predecessor’s administration: Mr. Bush’s frequent assertion of a right to override statutes on matters like surveillance and torture.

“Obama’s not saying he has the right to defy a Congressional statute,” said Richard H. Pildes, a New York University law professor. “But if the legislative path is blocked and he otherwise has the legal authority to issue an executive order on an issue, they are clearly much more willing to do that now than two years ago.”

The Obama administration started down this path soon after Republicans took over the House of Representatives last year. In February 2011, Mr. Obama directed the Justice Department to stop

defending the Defense of Marriage Act, which bars federal recognition of [same-sex marriages](#), against constitutional challenges. Previously, the administration had urged lawmakers to repeal it, but had defended their right to enact it.

In the following months, the administration increased efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions through environmental regulations, gave states waivers from federal mandates if they agreed to education overhauls, and refocused deportation policy in a way that in effect granted relief to some illegal immigrants brought to the country as children. Each step substituted for a faltered legislative proposal.

But those moves were isolated and cut against the administration's broader political messaging strategy at the time: that Mr. Obama was trying to reach across the aisle to get things done. It was only after the summer, when [negotiations over a deficit reduction deal broke down](#) and House Republicans nearly failed to raise the nation's borrowing limit, that Mr. Obama fully shifted course.

First, he proposed a jobs package and gave speeches urging lawmakers to "pass this bill" — knowing they would not. A few weeks later, at the policy and campaign strategy meeting in the White House's Roosevelt Room, the president told aides that highlighting Congressional gridlock was not enough.

"He wanted to continue down the path of being bold with Congress and flexing our muscle a little bit, and showing a contrast to the American people of a Congress that was completely stuck," said Nancy-Ann DeParle, a deputy chief of staff assigned to lead the effort to come up with ideas.

Ms. DeParle met twice a week with members of the domestic policy council to brainstorm. She met with cabinet secretaries in the fall, and again in February with their chiefs of staff. No one opposed doing more; the challenge was coming up with workable ideas, aides said.

The focus, said Dan Pfeiffer, the White House communications director, was "what we could do on our own to help the economy in areas Congress was failing to act," so the list was not necessarily the highest priority actions, but instead steps that did not require legislation.

Republican lawmakers watched warily. One of Mr. Obama's first ["We Can't Wait" announcements](#) was the moving up of plans to ease terms on [student loans](#). After Republican complaints that the executive branch had no authority to change the timing, it [appeared to back off](#).

The sharpest legal criticism, however, came in January after Mr. Obama bypassed the Senate confirmation process to install four officials using his [recess appointment](#) powers, even though House Republicans had been forcing the Senate to hold "pro forma" sessions through its winter break to block such appointments.

Mr. Obama declared the sessions a sham, saying the Senate was really in the midst of a lengthy recess. His appointments are facing a legal challenge, and some liberals and many conservatives have warned that he set a dangerous precedent.

Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Senate Democratic leader, who essentially invented the pro forma session tactic late in Mr. Bush's presidency, has not objected, however. Senate aides said Mr. Reid had told the White House that he would not oppose such appointments based on a memorandum from his counsel, Serena Hoy. She concluded that the longer the tactic went unchallenged, the harder it would be for any president to make recess appointments — a significant shift in the historic balance of power between the branches.

The White House counsel, Kathryn Ruemmler, said the Obama administration's legal team had begun examining the issue in early 2011 — including an internal Bush administration memo criticizing the notion that such sessions could block a president's recess powers — and “seriously considered” making some appointments during Congress's August break. But Mr. Obama decided to move ahead in January 2012, including installing Richard Cordray to head the new consumer financial protection bureau, after Senate Republicans blocked a confirmation vote.

“I refuse to take ‘no’ for an answer,” [Mr. Obama declared](#), beneath a “We Can't Wait” banner. “When Congress refuses to act and — as a result — hurts our economy and puts people at risk, I have an obligation as president to do what I can without them.”

The unilateralist strategy carries political risks. Mr. Obama cannot blame the Republicans when he adopts policies that liberals oppose, like when he [overruled the Environmental Protection Agency's proposal](#) to strengthen antismog rules or [decided not to sign an order](#) banning discrimination by federal contractors based on sexual orientation.

The approach also exposes Mr. Obama to accusations that he is concentrating too much power in the White House. Earlier this year, Senator Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa, delivered a series of floor speeches [accusing Mr. Obama](#) of acting “more and more like a king that the Constitution was designed to replace” and imploring colleagues of both parties to push back against his “power grabs.”

But Democratic lawmakers have been largely quiet; many of them accuse Republicans of engaging in an unprecedented level of obstructionism and say that Mr. Obama has to do what he can to make the government work. The pattern adds to a bipartisan history in which lawmakers from presidents' own parties have tended not to object to invocations of executive power.

For their part, Republicans appear to have largely acquiesced. Mr. Grassley said in an interview that his colleagues were reluctant to block even more bills and nominations in response to Mr. Obama's “chutzpah,” lest they play into his effort to portray them as making Congress dysfunctional.

“Some of the most conservative people in our caucus would adamantly disagree with what Obama did on recess appointments, but they said it's not a winner for us,” he said.

Mr. Obama's new approach puts him in the company of his recent predecessors. Mr. Bush, for example, failed to persuade Congress to pass a bill allowing religiously affiliated groups to receive taxpayer grants — and then issued an executive order making the change.

President Bill Clinton increased White House involvement in agency rule making, using regulations and executive orders to show that he was getting things done despite opposition from a Republican Congress on matters like land conservation, gun control, tobacco advertising and treaties. (He was assisted by a White House lawyer, Elena Kagan, who later won tenure at Harvard based on [scholarship analyzing such efforts](#) and who is now on the Supreme Court.)

And both the Reagan and George Bush administrations increased their control over executive agencies to advance a deregulatory agenda, despite opposition from Democratic lawmakers, while also developing legal theories and tactics to increase executive power, like issuing signing statements more frequently.

The bipartisan history of executive aggrandizement in recent decades complicates Republican criticism. In February, two conservative advocacy groups — Crossroads GPS and the American Action Network — sponsored a [symposium](#) to discuss what they called “the unprecedented expansion of executive power during the past three years.” It reached an awkward moment during a talk with a former attorney general, Edwin Meese III, and a former White House counsel, C. Boyden Gray.

“It’s kind of ironic you have Boyden and me here because when we were with the executive branch, we were probably the principal proponents of executive power under President Reagan and then President George H. W. Bush,” Mr. Meese said, quickly adding that the presidential prerogatives they sought to protect, unlike Mr. Obama’s, were valid.

But Jack L. Goldsmith, a Harvard law professor who led the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel during the George W. Bush administration, said the Obama administration’s pattern reflects how presidents usually behave, especially during divided government, and appears aggressive only in comparison to Mr. Obama’s having been “really skittish for the first two years” about executive power.

“This is what presidents do,” Mr. Goldsmith said. “It’s taken Obama two years to get there, but this has happened throughout history. You can’t be in that office with all its enormous responsibilities — when things don’t happen, you get blamed for it — and not exercise all the powers that have accrued to it over time.”

Trying to Turn Obama Voters Into Tax Allies



Nathan Weber for The New York Times

The Obama campaign headquarters in Chicago in October. The administration is drawing on supporters for help in other areas.

By **MICHAEL D. SHEAR**

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WASHINGTON — When [Tea Party](#) activists swamped town hall-style meetings about health care in the summer of 2009, [President Obama](#)'s army of campaign volunteers largely stayed away, seemingly less interested in fighting for legislation than they had been in electing the nation's first African-American president.

Now, Mr. Obama is seizing a second chance to keep his election-year supporters animated.

With lawmakers scheduled to return to work on Monday to begin intense discussions before a looming fiscal deadline, Mr. Obama's aides are trying to harness the passions that returned him to the White House, hoping to pressure Republicans in Congress to accept tax increases on the wealthy. The president's strategists are turning first to the millions of e-mail addresses assembled by the campaign and the White House.

Already, supporters are being asked to record YouTube videos of themselves talking about the importance of raising taxes on the rich. Aides said those videos would be shared on Facebook and Twitter and would be forwarded to centrist Democrats, as well as to mainstream Republicans, who they hope will break with their Tea Party colleagues.

An e-mail last week urged activists to share with their friends a graphic explaining the president's tax argument. And Mr. Obama's campaign manager sent an e-mail appeal asking supporters to fill out a survey about issues they would like to stay involved in.

The president is planning rallies in influential states to remind supporters of the need to keep the pressure on lawmakers during the fiscal talks. And should negotiations break down, Mr. Obama's team is arranging for Republican lawmakers to hear from tens of thousands of riled-up activists through angry Twitter posts, e-mails and Facebook messages.

"If Republicans refuse to move, if they refuse to cooperate, then you've got to be willing to engage the American public," said Representative Chris Van Hollen, a Maryland Democrat and important Obama ally. The campaign machinery, he said, "will respond to the president calling upon it to get engaged."

As Mr. Obama tries to motivate his army of supporters, his rivals will be working to do the same. Republicans have acknowledged that they did not match Mr. Obama's campaign operation, but in the tax fight, the party and its allies will also be using technology.

The Republican National Committee has turned to Twitter regularly to talk about the impact of tax increases on small businesses, using the hashtag #StopTheTaxHike. And the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) has begun a multimedia campaign that it says is intended to prevent a financial disaster if Congress and the president do not reach an agreement.

The chamber's site has a "Fiscal Cliff Countdown" clock, a calculator to determine "your post-taxmageddon taxes" and links to e-mail members of Congress.

Republicans in Congress will not have access to the kind of national list that Mr. Obama does. And yet it is not certain that Mr. Obama and his allies will be any more successful in motivating his followers than they were during the postelection period four years ago.

The fiscal negotiations are taking place behind closed doors, and to reach a deal with Speaker John A. Boehner, Mr. Obama will probably have to make compromises that could undermine the fervor of his most ardent supporters.

"The big issue they are going to have to figure out with the list is that activists want to fight for issues they can believe in," said Eddie Vale, a spokesman for [Protect Your Care](#), a liberal advocacy group. "A call to cut a bipartisan deal — that's not going to cut it."

At the same time, the White House needs to avoid overplaying its hand and antagonizing Republicans to the point where a deal becomes impossible.

Obama aides view keeping their grass-roots supporters energized as important to the president's second-term success on broader tax changes, an [immigration](#) overhaul and efforts on [climate change](#).

In his first term, Mr. Obama's yearlong battle over health care failed to inspire the millions of activists from his 2008 campaign to put pressure on Republican lawmakers. "We were stunned that it never showed up," said a senior member of a pro-health-overhaul interest group, who asked for anonymity to avoid angering the White House. "They had this thing built, and we were waiting for them to turn it on, and it just never came."

Later on, Mr. Obama's team did more to rally pressure on his adversaries. The president succeeded in fights with Republicans to extend the [payroll tax](#) cut in 2011 and to change [student loans](#).

"There's always a challenge between rallying cry issues and the challenge of governing," said Neera Tanden, the president of the [Center for American Progress](#), a liberal research group. "It's one that I'm confident he can navigate."

The first test of the mobilization efforts will come quickly, as the president pushes the tax issue during the lame-duck session of Congress. The idea, aides say, is to marry old-fashioned phone calls to the offices of wavering lawmakers with the latest social media tools.

Unions and progressive groups have made a Web site, [theaction.org](#), calling for an end to "the [Bush tax cuts](#) for the richest two percent." Supporters are encouraged to download an "action kit" that includes materials needed to make signs, letterheads and Web site banner ads — all arguing for an end to the tax cuts.

One sign that can be printed out says "Middle Class Over Millionaires." Another says "Fairness & Progress from Congress." A typical banner advertisement that supporters can download and post on their Web site says "End the Bush Tax Cuts for the Wealthy."

Visitors to the site are also given the option of expressing their support for Mr. Obama with a single click that creates a Twitter message: "The election is over. Don't rest. Join the action. The action to end the Bush tax cuts for the rich. #theaction."

Another button on the site takes visitors to a Facebook page that can be used to organize meet-ups for the tax fight.

"People just spent five years winning two presidential elections together," Jim Messina, the president's campaign manager, [told Politico](#) last week in his first extended interview since

the election. “They’re now not going to walk away and not help him become the change that they want to see.”

In the survey e-mail that came from Mr. Messina shortly after the election, supporters were asked to identify issues they would be willing to volunteer on, including the economy, education, immigration, jobs and trade, tax fairness, urban community issues and climate change.

Among the questions on the survey: Would supporters like to continue to volunteer in their community as part of an Obama organization? And if so, the survey asked, how many hours a week could they work?

“They built these tools,” Mr. Messina said. “They’re the people that know how to do them. And I think what they want to use them on now is to continue to help the president advocate for his agenda.”

The president himself has vowed to take the lead by continuing a campaign-like presence in communities across the country as he battles for the tax increases on the wealthy and what he calls a “balanced” approach to spending cuts and deficit reduction.

If Mr. Obama succeeds in the fight over the tax cuts because of help from energized activists, his advisers hope the victory will embolden those supporters even more.

“Success begets success,” Ms. Tanden said. “If they are able to take this argument and mobilize them on the fiscal cliff, then I believe he will have success on immigration reform and future issues.”

Obama's Backers Seek Big Donors to Press Agenda: A Goal of \$50 Million

By NICHOLAS CONFESSORE

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Doug Mills/The New York Times

President Obama has said that his public campaign against Republicans is not producing results.

President Obama's political team is fanning out across the country in pursuit of an ambitious goal: raising \$50 million to convert his re-election campaign into a powerhouse national advocacy network, a sum that would rank the new group as one of Washington's biggest lobbying operations.

But the rebooted campaign, known as Organizing for Action, has plunged the president and his aides into a campaign finance limbo with few clear rules, ample potential for influence-peddling, and no real precedent in national politics.

In private meetings and phone calls, Mr. Obama's aides have made clear that the new organization will rely heavily on a small number of deep-pocketed donors, not unlike the "super PACs" whose influence on political campaigns Mr. Obama once deplored.

At least half of the group's budget will come from a select group of donors who will each contribute or raise \$500,000 or more, according to donors and strategists involved in the effort.

Unlike a presidential campaign, Organizing for Action has been set up as a tax-exempt "social welfare group." That means it is not bound by federal contribution limits, laws that bar White House officials from soliciting contributions, or the stringent reporting requirements for campaigns. In their place, the new group will self-regulate.

Officials said it would voluntarily disclose the names of large donors every few months and would not ask administration personnel to solicit money, though Obama aides will probably appear at some events.

The money will pay for salaries, rent and advertising, and will also be used to maintain the expensive voter database and technological infrastructure that knits together Mr. Obama's 2 million volunteers, 17 million e-mail subscribers and 22 million Twitter followers.

The goal is to harness those resources in support of Mr. Obama's second-term policy priorities, including efforts to curb gun violence and [climate change](#) and overhaul [immigration](#) procedures. Those efforts began Friday, when thousands of Obama supporters were deployed through more than 80 Congressional districts around the country to rally outside lawmakers' offices, hold vigils and bombard Congress with e-mails and phone calls urging members to support stricter background checks for gun buyers.

"There are wins we can have on guns and immigration," Jon Carson, the group's new executive director, told prospective donors on a conference call on Wednesday, according to people who participated. "We have to change the conventional wisdom on those issues."

But those contributions will also translate into access, according to donors courted by the president's aides. Next month, Organizing for Action will hold a "founders summit" at a hotel near the White House, where donors paying \$50,000 each will mingle with Mr. Obama's former campaign manager, Jim Messina, and Mr. Carson, who previously led the White House Office of Public Engagement.

Giving or raising \$500,000 or more puts donors on a national advisory board for Mr. Obama's group and the privilege of attending quarterly meetings with the president, along with other meetings at the White House. Moreover, the new cash demands on Mr. Obama's top donors and bundlers come as many of them are angling for appointments to administration jobs or ambassadorships.

“It just smells,” said Bob Edgar, the president of Common Cause, which advocates tighter regulation of campaign money. “The president is setting a very bad model setting up this organization.”

Mr. Obama’s new organization has drawn rebukes in recent days from watchdog groups, which view it as another step away from the tighter campaign regulation Mr. Obama once championed. Over the past two years, he has reversed course on several campaign finance issues, by blessing a super PAC created by former aides and accepting large corporate contributions for his second inauguration.

Many traditional advocacy organizations, including the Sierra Club and the National Rifle Association, are set up as social welfare groups, or [501\(c\)\(4\)](#)’s in tax parlance. But unlike those groups, Organizing for Action appears to be an extension of the administration, stocked with alumni of Mr. Obama’s White House and campaign teams and devoted solely to the president’s second-term agenda.

Robert K. Kelner, a Republican election lawyer who works with other outside groups, said the arrangement “presents a rather simple loophole in the otherwise incredibly complex web of government ethics regulations that are intended to insulate government officials from outside influence.”

The closest precedents for Organizing for Action exist at the state level. In New Jersey, a 501(c)(4) called the Committee for Our Children’s Future, set up by friends of Gov. Chris Christie, has run hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of advertising praising Mr. Christie’s proposals.

In New York, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo encouraged the formation of a nonprofit group, the Committee to Save New York, that is run by business leaders allied with him, and it has raised millions of dollars from corporations, private sector unions, and individuals. The group supported Mr. Cuomo’s agenda — but it also thrust him into controversy when The New York Times [revealed](#) that gambling interests poured \$2 million into the group as Mr. Cuomo was developing a proposal to expand casino gambling.

Organizing for Action said it would accept unlimited personal and corporate contributions, but no money from political action committees, lobbyists or foreign citizens. Officials said they would focus — for now — on grass-roots organizing, amplified by Internet advertising. Friday’s “day of action” involved half a million dollars’ worth of targeted Internet ads and events in Florida, Maine, Pennsylvania and California, among other states.

“O.F.A.’s first day of action was about bringing the issue of closing background-check loopholes into communities across the country that feel very strongly about supporting the president’s plan to reduce gun violence,” said Katie Hogan, a spokeswoman for the group.

Organizing for Action has also promised to steer clear of electoral politics, unlike the politically active nonprofit groups like the right-leaning Crossroads Grassroots Policy Strategies and Americans for Prosperity. Such groups spent hundreds of millions of dollars on advertising during the recent election campaign season, ostensibly for issue advocacy, spurring a wave of lawsuits, ethics complaints from campaign watchdogs and criticism from Mr. Obama himself.

But the distinction between campaigning and issue advocacy may be hard for Organizing for Action to maintain in the prelude to the 2014 elections, especially if it continues its emphasis on pressing lawmakers on delicate issues like immigration and guns.

In Wednesday’s conference call, Mr. Carson said the group hoped to form partnerships with other 501(c)(4) groups on the left, including America Votes, which was at the center of Democratic efforts to defeat President George W. Bush in 2004 and now serves as a coordinator for progressive advocacy organizations. He also said Organizing for Action wanted to be a counterweight to grass-roots organizations on the right, like the N.R.A., according to people who took part in the call.

There should be “as much of a price to pay if you tick off the gun violence people” as there is for angering the N.R.A., Mr. Carson said, according to those people. “Let’s build an organization that means that Republicans are embarrassed to have climate change deniers running for office.”

In Latest Campaign, Obama Takes Deficit Battle to the Public



Doug Mills/The New York Times

President Obama took in a roller coaster at a toy factory in Pennsylvania. Mr. Obama has framed the issue of averting a year-end-fiscal crisis in terms of extending the Bush-era cuts for families with income under \$250,000.

By PETER BAKER and JONATHAN WEISMAN

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HATFIELD, Pa. — The blue “Forward.” signs with the lonely period were gone. But U2’s “City of Blinding Lights” once again blared over the loudspeakers, and some in the audience broke into a chant of “fired up, ready to go!”

President Obama doffed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Someone shouted, “We love you,” and he gave his typical “I love you back” response. Then, sounding like he was still a candidate, he said he was “fighting” for the middle class and called on the crowd to enlist in the battle.

If Mr. Obama’s visit to a toy factory here on Friday felt like a time warp back to the campaign trail, then get used to it. The lesson he drew from four years of often-frustrating relations with Congress was that sit-down negotiations with the opposition do not work unless he turns up the public heat on lawmakers. And so, just weeks after his re-election, Mr. Obama has made it clear that the campaign will continue.

The goal at this point is not winning re-election but instead promoting his plan to raise taxes on the wealthy and avert a year-end fiscal crisis. While House Republicans have signaled a

willingness to generate additional tax revenue, they are still resisting raising rates on higher income.

Mr. Obama framed the issue in terms of extending the Bush-era cuts for families with income under \$250,000, which would have the effect of allowing them to expire on income above that level for the 2 percent of Americans who earn more. Without agreement, the Bush-era cuts will expire at the end of the year for all taxpayers.

The president mentioned spending cuts only in passing, and without specifics. “I’ve been keeping my own naughty and nice list for Washington,” he told workers on a factory floor featuring a series of [K’NEX construction toys](#) assembled in the shapes of roller coasters, a merry-go-round and an American flag. If Republicans refuse to go along, he said, then everyone could end up paying more next year. “That’s sort of like the lump of coal you get for Christmas. That’s a Scrooge Christmas.”

Mr. Obama’s return to the hustings seemed to irk Republicans. “Campaign-style rallies and one-sided leaks in the press are not the way to get things done here in Washington,” the House speaker, John A. Boehner of Ohio, complained on Thursday. Hours later, Republican aides leaked Mr. Obama’s opening bid in the fiscal negotiations.

On Friday, Mr. Boehner again rejected that bid, a \$4 trillion, 10-year deficit-reduction package with \$1.6 trillion in new taxes and \$50 billion in immediate stimulus spending. “There’s a stalemate. Let’s not kid ourselves,” he said. “Right now we’re almost nowhere.”

Mr. Boehner did not offer a counterproposal, but he made it clear that Republicans stood firm in favor of extending the tax cuts across the board. “Increasing tax rates draws money away from our economy that needs to be invested in our economy to put the American people back to work,” he said.

With a few cracks developing in Republican solidarity, Democrats are increasing the pressure on Mr. Boehner to take up a Senate-passed bill extending middle-class tax cuts. Representative Nancy Pelosi of California, the Democratic leader, called on him to schedule a vote for next week. If not, she would circulate what is known as a discharge petition to force a vote if it draws 218 signatures. That remained a long shot, but Democrats were increasingly confident they were playing a winning hand.

Mr. Obama’s trip here evoked many of the atmospherics of the campaign. As if seeking volunteers for Election Day, Mr. Obama asked supporters to engage in the tax fight directly. “I want you to call, I want you to send an e-mail, post on their Facebook wall,” he said. The White House even set up a special hashtag word for Twitter users to express their support.

Minutes after Mr. Obama spoke at the factory, the White House sent its e-mail list a letter from David Plouffe, an Obama senior adviser, that had the tone and feel of a fund-raising letter, albeit without asking for money.

“You’re changing an entire policy conversation. And we have to keep it up,” he wrote.

“There’s no denying the power of your voices,” he added.

“Will you speak out today?”

The strategy stemmed from what the White House saw as successful public campaigns to press Congress to renew a temporary [payroll tax](#) cut a year ago and to extend lower federal [student loan](#) rates this summer. In both cases, Republicans complained that the president was more interested in campaigning than negotiating, but he ended up getting what he wanted and, in his team’s view, he scored political points too.

In some ways, Mr. Obama’s actions are reminiscent of those of presidents like Ronald Reagan, who went over the heads of a Democratic House to rally public support for his legislative priorities.

“Public persuasion by the president as part of Congressional negotiations can be an effective tactic,” said Frank J. Donatelli, the White House political director under Mr. Reagan. The difference, he said, was that Mr. Obama seemed to be neglecting the negotiation side of the equation.

“Public pressure can help to close differences, but cannot be a substitute for the negotiations themselves,” Mr. Donatelli said. “Reagan compromised with Democrats to win his tax bills in 1981 and 1986 and in negotiations to save [Social Security](#) in 1983. Thus far, we have seen very little give in Obama’s positions.”

That may change as the end-of-the-year deadline gets closer. Few people, if any, in Washington expected the two sides to show their hands so early. If nothing else, the president and House Republicans have strong incentives to fight, or at least look like they are fighting, right up until the last minute to convince their respective liberal and conservative bases that they resisted as long as possible whatever concessions they ultimately decide to make.

“In Washington, nothing is easy,” Mr. Obama said in the one statement of the day that both sides could agree on. “So there is going to be some prolonged negotiations. And all of us are going to have to get out of our comfort zones to make that happen.”

Peter Baker reported from Hatfield, Pa., and Jonathan Weisman from Washington.

As World Boils, Fingers Point Obama's Way

By PETER BAKER, *The New York Times* National Edition, August 16, 2014, A1, A9.

WASHINGTON — In this summer of global tumult, the debate in Washington essentially boils down to two opposite positions: It is all [President Obama](#)'s fault, according to his critics; no, it is not, according to his supporters, because these are events beyond his control.

Americans often think of their president as an all-powerful figure who can command the tides of history — and presidents have encouraged this image over the years because the perception itself can be a form of power. But as his critics have made the case that Mr. Obama's mistakes have fueled the turmoil in places like [Syria](#), [Iraq](#) and [Ukraine](#), the president has increasingly argued that his power to shape these seismic forces is actually limited.

“Apparently,” he said in frustration the other day, “people have forgotten that America, as the most powerful country on earth, still does not control everything around the world.”

While as a statement of fact Mr. Obama's assertion may be self-evident, it was seen by adversaries as a cop-out and even by more sympathetic analysts as a revealing moment for a president whiplashed by international instability.



“At least since World War II, presidents have been unwilling to discuss deficiencies in capability because they’re expected to do everything, and they like that sense of omnipotence,” said Jeremy Shapiro, a former Obama State Department official now at the Brookings Institution. “Obama has been trying to change that in the last year because he senses that the requirements of omnipotence have gotten so far out of whack with what he can actually accomplish that he needs to change the expectations.”

The risk, naturally, is that the president looks as if he is simply trying to excuse his own actions, or inactions, as the case may be.

“It’s become a refrain to the point where I think people are becoming quite critical that that’s his response to everything,” said Daniel L. Byman, a former member of the Sept. 11 commission staff now teaching at Georgetown University. “He’s not differentiating between things he can influence and those that he can’t.”

The bill of particulars against Mr. Obama is long. In the view of his critics, he failed to stanch the rise of the [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria](#) when he rejected proposals to arm more moderate elements of the Syrian resistance. He left a vacuum in Iraq by not doing more to leave a residual force behind when American troops exited in 2011. And he signaled weakness to President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, encouraging the Kremlin to think it could intervene in Ukraine without fear of significant consequence.

“I certainly do not think President Obama is responsible for all of the world crises that have taken place during his time in office,” said William C. Inboden, a former national security aide to President George W. Bush and executive director of the William P. Clements Jr. Center on History, Strategy and Statecraft at the University of Texas. “But he is responsible for actions and attitudes he took that have contributed to some of those crises — and he is also responsible for how he responds, or fails to respond.”

Republicans are not the only ones voicing such sentiments. In her interview with *The Atlantic* that caused a recent furor, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said “the failure” to build up moderate Syrian rebels left a vacuum for the more ruthless forces of ISIS to fill.

In a *Wall Street Journal* opinion article on Friday, Gen. James L. Jones, the retired NATO commander and Mr. Obama’s first national security adviser, said the president should have left some troops in Iraq, retaliated against Syria for crossing his “red line” by using chemical weapons, and pressured the Baghdad government to arm the Kurds.

Such criticisms exasperate Mr. Obama and his team. In some cases, they argue, the crises that have emerged were wholly unforeseen. In others, they said, the solutions proffered by critics would not have worked and, in fact, may have made things worse. And besides, they often add, Mr. Obama inherited a situation that was broken when he got it, pointing to Mr. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in the first place.

In his recent interview with Thomas L. Friedman of *The New York Times*, Mr. Obama said “it’s always been a fantasy” to think providing arms to moderate Syrian rebels would have helped them against hardened Islamic extremists. And he said if he had left troops in Iraq, “The difference would be we’d have 10,000 troops in the middle of this chaos as opposed to having a much more limited number.”

Former Representative Lee H. Hamilton, Democrat of Indiana, said presidents can influence but not dictate events. “Americans have a very strong tendency to think that whatever we do is the most important thing happening everywhere, and we have so much power and so much clout that we can control events everywhere,” said Mr. Hamilton, now director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. “That’s part of what he’s wrestling with here.”

As it happens, Mr. Obama’s policy of restraint seems to match the public mood — polls find little appetite for robust American intervention in Ukraine, Syria or Iraq. And yet, there is a palpable sense of disappointment with Mr. Obama’s leadership on the world stage as well. Fifty-eight percent of Americans in a recent New York Times/CBS News poll disapproved of his handling of foreign policy, the highest of his presidency.

Presidents often find their popularity suffers when the world seems off kilter and they are held responsible even for events that may be beyond their sway. The who-lost-China debate during the early Cold War has been replicated repeatedly ever since in various forms.

Strobe Talbott, president of the Brookings Institution and a former deputy secretary of state under President Bill Clinton, said what makes this period different is the diffusion of power from states to nonstate forces, the rapid spread of technology and the rise of Islamic extremism.

“We have an overall contagion of diffusion which makes it much harder to advance the cause of regional and global governance,” he said.

Some Democrats said Mr. Obama’s challenge has not necessarily been his approach to these crises, but his ability to explain and sell it.

“What he’s come up with in Iraq and in Ukraine are sensible strategies,” said former Representative Jane Harman of California, now president of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. “He now needs to link them with a narrative that explains to the American people why we have to re-engage in foreign policy matters, and I hope he does that.”

Tom Donilon, another former national security adviser to Mr. Obama, said the president has had to exercise leadership in situations he inherited as well as in others that were not of his making, but added that to avoid letting them consume his remaining time in office, he should set the agenda for positive international initiatives.

“With almost two and a half years left in his presidency,” said Mr. Donilon, “it’s important to get beyond the incoming of crises around the world and look to a set of strategic initiatives that the United States can pursue that can bring change of a permanent nature.”