

# Congressional Republicans' Goals Languish While The New Administration Manufactures Crises



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Less than two months ago, the Trump administration took office amid high hopes from Washington Republicans that with control of the Hill and the White House, they would finally be able to deliver on policy goals they have sought since 2010. Instead, a nonstop series of self-inflicted crises have mired the new administration in turmoil and suspicion, and they've struggled to right the ship.

Alleged connections between the Trump administration and the Russian government have been the biggest source of White House headaches, and as suspicions mount, the President and his staff have made myriad missteps. The situation is unprecedented, and the more the White House spins and deflects, the bigger the obstacles they are throwing in the way of their party.

## **Crisis 101: Stop hiding, be transparent**

The White House's behavior makes clear they have no plan to seek out and share the truth. The Trump inner circle has alternately denied, misdirected and shifted blame onto

outsiders for the steady drumbeat of leaks and revelations. Publicly, White House officials are contradicting each other, divulging troubling off-the-record accounts of infighting, and they seem to have little control over the President's unpredictable behavior. By denying the obvious problems facing the presidency, the White House is ensuring that the cloud of Russia ties will loom over every move the administration makes—guaranteeing their opponents and the media won't let up.

Meanwhile, the entire legislative agenda that congressional Republicans have been clamoring for—and their voters hoping for—is in jeopardy. GOP leaders may be trying to align the focus back on their goals of reforming health care and the tax code, but the continuous cycle of crises drowns out the message on these key policy areas.

### **There is nothing new under the sun**

Congressional Democrats learned in 2009 and 2010 that without a clear, aggressive communications strategy aligned with legislative efforts and led by the President, an issue as complex as health care reform will drag on too long. The GOP should remember this well—it's the main reason they held congressional majorities for most of the Obama presidency.

In President Obama's first months in office, a swift, top-down message strategy helped to push through both the Recovery Act and TARP quickly enough to overcome substantial criticism and opposition. In contrast, the ensuing effort to draft and pass the Affordable Care Act (ACA) left weary congressional Democrats without adequate cover from the White House. An extended timeline for debate gave critics ample time to pick apart individual provisions and build a passionate opposition. Over the course of nearly a year—with voters focused on the down economy, not health policy—angry constituents swarmed town hall meetings, organized rallies and later voted dozens of Democratic lawmakers out of office. We're already seeing organized opposition to the Trump administration on a scale

that dwarfs the crowds at this point in 2009, so time is of the essence to advance legislative priorities.

### **Define your proposals before opponents do**

Despite the obvious analog to the health care battle of 2009, and a seven-year runway to craft and sell the bill, House Republicans thoroughly botched the rollout of their signature policy priority. Key GOP leaders failed to define the goals and features of the bill right out of the gate, and they neglected to build a coalition of key constituencies—inside and outside their own party—to back the proposal ahead of the introduction. In fact, powerful conservative institutions including the Heritage Foundation and the Club for Growth slammed the proposal less than a day after its launch. It's too early to determine whether the effort will recover, but these missteps allowed the media and opposing voices to drive the legislation's narrative, signaling a significant setback for repeal efforts.

In the absence of strong leadership from the White House, mistakes like the rollout of the health care bill are sure to continue. The White House's continued obfuscation and misdirection have left congressional Republicans with no cover from their leader, as the ACA grows in popularity and opposition crystallizes. For the GOP to secure the major policy changes they seek, Congressional Republicans need the White House to stop changing the subject, put its manufactured crises to bed, and take responsibility for advancing the party's agenda.

To do this, congressional Republican leaders first need to hold the administration to account on its dealings with Russia in a transparent and open process. Then, they must move on to the real work of reengaging the activists who emerged during the ACA debate; building a coalition of stakeholders to apply external pressure to Congress; developing a compelling narrative to promote their policy goals; and then sticking to

the plan. Until the GOP can return to the normal course of governing, chaos will continue to thwart their proposals and put the GOP on its heels heading into 2018.

***About the Author:** Liz Wells is an account supervisor at Racepoint Global, providing strategic public affairs and public relations counsel to clients. Prior to joining Racepoint Global, Liz served as communications director for a member of the House of Representatives, and worked on the staff of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. She has also worked on multiple state and federal political campaigns.*