

# What Is Obama's Biggest Problem?



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(These Guys)

Democrats in Congress say they want to pass the President's agenda—except when they don't. Can the White House keep them in line?

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**B**ARACK OBAMA HAS FILLED HIS White House with all sorts of academic prodigies and propellerheads, a crew more comfortable with the mortarboard than the flag pin. They are, as a group, masters of the art of the optimal, of creating great solutions on paper if not always in reality. And so every now and then, sobering discussions occur behind closed doors, like the one in mid-April when a collection of Cabinet secretaries, former academics and political advisers

gathered to discuss the Administration's blueprint for a global-warming bill. The experts called for a significant increase in the cost of carbon as a way to reduce Americans' energy consumption—just as Obama had promised in the campaign.

Then the White House political minds at the table jumped in: Democrats in Congress were not going to just go along without some concessions. "If you figure you need the Democratic votes to pass, you have to give the coal-state people some-

thing they can take home," said a participant at the meeting, recounting the course of the conversation. Buying votes with concessions "would not be something that you would draw up in a case study at the Kennedy School of Harvard."

So it has gone in the first four months of the new Administration. Despite Obama's early legislative victories—including passage of the largest stimulus bill in history—the new President has learned how limited his power can be, even when the Democrats control Congress. While much of the political chatter continues to focus on the waning Republican opposition, Obama's real challenge comes from within his own party. With increasing frequency, Democrats have been scratching away at the promises Obama made during his campaign, watering down reforms, removing possible revenue sources and protecting