



Agitate

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Written and Edited: Michael Andoscia

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A REPORT CARD FOR OBAMA!



Barack Obama has taken the oath of office (twice...sort of). He is now not only our President, but also our employee. It is our responsibility to keep an eye on him and objectively assess his progress.

I'm a teacher. And as a teacher, I use rubrics as a central part of my professional life. I apply rubrics, objectified graphs of criterion by which to measure student success, to just about every subject. Just today I used a rubric to assess my students' understanding of Confucianism. These are very useful tools.

So a couple of weeks before Obama took office I thought, 'God, I hope this guy is as good as everyone seems to think he is.' As Agitate readers may already know, I was—and remain—very skeptical of President Obama. I publicized that I did not vote for Obama, though I am very happy that he won. I've been a long time advocate of promoting third parties, and I still believe that this is the only way to restore democracy to our country.

It is my position that the Republicans and the Democrats, McCain and Obama, represent entrenched, elite interests in our society. As such, it is unlikely that we will see the kinds of radical, political and social change this country really needs if we leave such decisions to the parties themselves. On the other hand, there is significant pressure from the electorate in the direction of change. The Republican and Democratic parties may represent entrenched interests, but they are, in many respects, competing institutions. Therefore, popular pressure can be a tool for progressive change.

So be it. Barack Obama is our president, and as I did for Bush eight years ago (albeit short lived) I suggest that we give this president a chance to show what he has to offer. I do have higher hopes than with Bush that this time America might have the President we deserve. But that won't remain true for long if we don't remain active and aware of what is going on in our government. We have to remain on top of President Obama's every move because the aforementioned elite interests will be doing the same. Yes, we also have to keep an eye on Congress as well as our state and local pols, but Obama is the leader of our country. In the famous words of Harry Truman, "the buck stops..." in the oval office.

So how do we assess the success of President Obama? Well, rubrics, of course. I've designed a rubric (see the supplemental for this month) for the Obama Administration. The grading period starts on January 20, 2009 and ends in November 1, 2012. By that time we will be able to objectively measure just how effective he's been. Indeed, we can assign him a grade and determine if he "passes" into the next four years.

The curriculum includes: The Economy (of course), Education, Energy, The Environment, International Relations, Human Rights and the requisite "Other" category. Like any good rubric, these categories are broken down into smaller, objective benchmark criterion that are relatively easy to observe, research and measure. The grading scale moves from No Change/Wrong Direction {0 points} to successful implementation {3 points} and is designed so that you, the assessor, can make periodic checks on his progress.

For instance, if in six months President Obama has advocated a policy to reduce the trade deficit, but has not signed legislation or implemented the policy, he gets one point. If six months later he signs legislation to that effect you can check off the box for two points. If the trade deficit is significantly lower on November 1, 2012 (and this is a statistical measure that can be objectively determined) then you can assign Obama three points—a perfect score!

Of course, the rubric contains issues that I think are important. You may not agree with my standards. That's fine. Use the rubric format and change the criterion. All that matters is that the benchmarks you use are measurable and that you have standards for determining success.

It's not enough, for instance, to include "the economy will improve." That's not a concrete measure since the economy includes a great deal of variables. For the last twenty years we've heard talking heads prattle about how the economy has improved, and yet wages have stagnated, benefits have been cut back, work hours are longer. What they meant was that the economy for the top households has improved; for everyone else it's mostly remained the same or gotten worse. You have to decide exactly which indicators you want to measure. Maybe you are heavily invested in the stock market, so a growing NASDAQ is something that you are interested in...Okay, go with that.

What's more, this rubric reduces your time commitment—one of the reasons they are so popular with teachers. All you have to do is periodically check a reputable source to determine progress for each criterion. By organizing the matters that you think are important you can stay informed, make rational decisions and still have time to play with the kids and give Fido a bath.

Our president is under our supervision. We are his bosses. We must have some standards by which to determine the aptitude of our politicians. Too many of us vote for the guy we like, or against the guy we don't like. We make this determination based on subjective criteria such as, "he seems trustworthy," or "he has good character." If teachers graded their students based on nothing more than how they feel about them we would be understandably vexed. Why should we subject the leader of the free world to lower standards than we would a school child?



"I want you to hold our government accountable. I want you to hold me accountable." All right. Let's do it.

Take Action!

Fortunately, this presidential cycle has implemented the power of the internet like never before. There are many eyes on Obama and the political establishment; you need only search for those that satisfy your needs or perspectives. One on-line tool that I will be using is politifact.com.^{*} Long-time readers of *Agitate* will recognize this name. Politifact, a project of the St. Petersburg Times, has a list of around five-hundred promises made by Barack Obama during his campaign, and they are maintaining a scorecard on how many of those promises he's keeping, which promise he's broken, the promises that he's compromised as well as those that are stalled or for which there has been no action. They also keeping track of things said on the major issues and researching the validity of claims made by politicians and commentators. There is no more effective tool for the politically active American citizen.

Go to the Links page at the Journal of a Mad Sociologist
(www.madsociologist.net/4.html)

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