



Looking back on Obama's first year

LESLEY RUSSELL

This week marks the first anniversary of the presidency of Barack Obama. The euphoria of that cold, sunny day 12 months ago is gone, sapped by the poor economy and continued job losses, the costs of two ongoing wars, vicious and even racist commentary from the right, and the hard realities of governing in an atmosphere of poisonous partisanship.

Governing is never easy, and Obama came into office knowing that he would have to address the chaos and the economic crisis left behind by Bush and Cheney. Moreover, the American political system is fraught with checks and balances and a president cannot simply tell Congress what to do. Everything takes time and requires ugly compromises.

Abroad, President Obama is still loved. But at home his approval rating has fallen from almost 70 per cent a year ago to 50 per cent now. The proportion of Americans who disapprove of the job he is doing has quadrupled, from 12 per cent to 44 per cent.

It is not that Americans have suddenly fallen in love with Republicans, who are unable or unwilling to offer a coherent alternative. Rather, they are fearful of the recession and job losses and fed up with government in general. As the public face of power, the

president gets the blame.

Yet Obama has made some very real achievements in his first year.

If his health care reform bill passes this month, he will deliver his first State of the Union address having accomplished more than any other post-war American president at a comparable point in his presidency.

His legislative record includes enactment of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to drive the economic stimulus, expanding the State Children's Health Insurance Program to cover four million more children, and the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act to give the Food and Drug Administration unprecedented powers to regulate tobacco.

Obama has also acted to remove barriers to responsible scientific research involving human stem cells. He has reached out to people of colour for his appointments and installed the first Hispanic, Judge Sonia Sotomayor, on the Supreme Court.

Obama has done wonders for US image abroad, although arguably at this early stage his accomplishments are more in the realm of creating good inputs to policy rather than achieving good outputs. He has shown he is serious about taking on Al Qaeda, and is pulling US troops out of Iraq, as he promised.

Unfortunately domestic issues, led by the economy, are far more

important to the public than foreign policy issues, and a majority of Americans disapprove of how the president is handling these.

That could change quite quickly. There's mounting evidence that the \$US787 billion economic stimulus Obama signed in February, combined with the bank bailout package, prevented an economic depression.

However, Obama's second year could be even tougher than 2009. The Senate must tackle climate change, and the mid-term elections loom. Even before then the filibuster-proof margin in the Senate could be lost through death or retirement.

The Republicans show no signs of easing up on their partisanship, and the Tea-Party conservatives look set to dominate the debate.

Still, two-thirds of the public continue to believe that he has the leadership skills and personal characteristics a president should have. In his inaugural address Obama acknowledged the difficult challenges and the scale of his ambitions and gave notice that he would not be deterred from the task ahead. No one should under-rate this president's abilities to make the seemingly impossible happen.

■ Lesley Russell is a visiting fellow at the Center for American Progress in Washington DC.