

DAVID PLOUFFE AND BILL DALEY DOUBLE DOWN ON RHETORIC OVER ACTION

Greg Sargent has a followup to this weekend's NYT article on the Administration's debate over how or whether to make the "pivot to jobs" Obama promised throughout the debt limit fight.

It appears that Plouffe and Daley are doubling down on running on rhetoric over real action on jobs.

In Sargent's piece, an SAO describing what David Plouffe and Bill Daley think says they do favor a "confrontational rhetorical approach" on jobs.

Plouffe and Daley both favor a confrontational rhetorical approach that will blame Republicans for opposing any and all job creation efforts for purely political reasons; both are leading internal boosters of a message that accuses Republicans of putting party before country.

"Plouffe and Daley have been big proponents of the sort of messaging that you saw from the President's Country before Party speech in Michigan," the official says.

In that speech, Obama implicitly accused Republicans of opposing an array of job-creation proposals because of their refusal "to put the country ahead of party," adding that they would "rather see their opponents lose than see America win."

To which Sargent provides this push-back. Note where he refers to actions (which I've labeled with an "A") and rhetoric (which I've labeled with an "R"):

If this speech's message is what Plouffe and Daley favor, this is a bit at odds with the public picture that's emerged. The Times story suggested that the Plouffe/Daley camp worries that any ambitious proposals [A] that seem designed only reveal the GOP as obstructionist will be seen as mere "speeches" by independents [R]. The story also suggests Plouffe and Daley think continuing to reach deficit-reduction compromises [A] with Republicans will prove more politically effective than drawing a sharp contrast with the GOP on the economy [R]. But if Plouffe and Daley favor a continued effort to cast the GOP as blocking economic improvements for political reasons [R], that complicates the picture somewhat and suggests that the latter, too, will be central to the reelection campaign.

Sargent's push-back mixes actual policy measures with rhetoric about policy measures.

In fact, the NYT article itself does the same:

As the economy worsens, President Obama and his senior aides are considering whether to adopt a more combative approach on economic issues, seeking to highlight substantive differences [R] with Republicans in Congress and on the campaign trail rather than continuing to pursue elusive compromises [A], advisers to the president say.

Mr. Obama's senior adviser, David Plouffe, and his chief of staff, William M. Daley, want him to maintain a pragmatic strategy of appealing to independent voters by advocating ideas that can pass Congress [A], even if they may not have much economic impact. These include free trade agreements and improved patent protections for

inventors.

But others, including Gene Sperling, Mr. Obama's chief economic adviser, say public anger over the **debt ceiling** debate has weakened Republicans and created an opening for bigger ideas like tax incentives for businesses that hire more workers [A], according to Congressional Democrats who share that view. Democrats are also pushing the White House to help homeowners facing foreclosure.

Even if the ideas cannot pass Congress, they say, the president would gain a campaign issue by pushing for them.[R]

[snip]

So far, most signs point to a continuation of the nonconfrontational approach – better to do something than nothing – that has defined this administration. Mr. Obama and his aides are skeptical that voters will reward bold proposals if those ideas do not pass Congress. It is their judgment that moderate voters want tangible results rather than speeches.

That is, the article portrayed a fight over whether to pursue policies that will pass and therefore rhetorically set Obama up as someone who has achieved results (regardless of whether those results have anything to do with job creation), or whether the Administration should pursue policies that would if they passed do something about jobs, whether or not they actually would pass, because doing so would rhetorically set up Republicans as obstructionists. It was about how policy drives rhetoric.

But the Plouffe-Daley response to Sargent mentioned only rhetoric, referring to "confrontational rhetorical approach," "message," "messaging."

Ultimately Sargent (without noting that the Plouffe-Daley response didn't purport to make claims about policy, though I didn't note that either until I wrote this post) ends by just hoping that the policy will follow the rhetoric.

But if the Obama team is serious about drawing a sharp contrast – as the senior official insists is the case – we can at least hope that the policies will follow the rhetoric.

But sitting back and hoping that policies follow the rhetoric ignores that Obama's speech itself—the one Plouffe-Daley tell us to look at—is an indication of how the Administration will translate policy into rhetoric.

So here's what Obama had to say about his own policies last Thursday:

- He gave a very weak nod to the government's willingness to “invest in the research and technology that holds so much promise for jobs and growth,” but never explicitly notes that the government provided grants that led directly to jobs like those at JCI
- He boasted about renegotiating CAFE standards (emphasizing he did that without Congress)

That's it—those are the only policy successes Obama pointed to (which implicitly points out that the debate as portrayed in the NYT leaves aside a third possibility, to run on the policies—the ones that actually relate to jobs—Obama already passed). Significantly, Obama made no mention of saving the auto industry, no mention of health insurance reform, no mention

of defending US companies against unfair foreign competitors, all of which could have arguably fit this theme (I don't think health insurance reform as passed does much for any but health industry jobs, but Obama is supposed to believe that). In his speech today, he apparently called out aid to states, which fits the theme too.

The point is, in the speech Plouffe-Daley point to as precisely the tack they want to take, Obama didn't even claim clear credit for the jobs his policies had the most direct role in creating, which would have created the largest contrast with Republicans (particularly given what Republicans have claimed about this particular factory).

Now, Sargent sees the choice to ignore a number of clear policy successes—including, largely, the one most significant to the speech Obama was making—as nothing more than a conservative policy frame, all the while hoping Obama will embrace some good policies going further. But this entire discussion is about how to use policy successes and strategy to drive electoral rhetoric. And the Obama Administration chose to give freedom the most credit for creating the JCI jobs, not to claim clear credit themselves!

That's not a frame. That's a disavowal of a policy choice, one that has been successful in the past, but one that also might disrupt the claims of a top government official who believes that, "It would be political folly to make the argument that government spending equals jobs." It's a decision (presumably conscious, particularly given that Obama has claimed credit for this in the past) not to mention how successful the most meaningful job creation policy, government investments, would be.

And put that disavowal in the context of the speech (again, the one Plouffe-Daley point to as the embodiment of their crack reelection strategy). Here's the entire context of where Obama introduces the "country before party" idea Plouffe-Daley point to as their way to heighten contradictions with Republicans.

Unfortunately, what we've seen in Washington the last few months has been the worst kind of partisanship, the worst kind of gridlock -- and that gridlock has undermined public confidence and impeded our efforts to take the steps we need for our economy.

It's made things worse instead of better. So what I want to say to you, Johnson Controls, is: There is nothing wrong with our country. There is something wrong with our politics. (Applause.) There's something wrong with our politics that we need to fix.

We know there are things we can do right now that will help accelerate growth and job creation -- that will support the work going on here at Johnson Controls, here in Michigan, and all across America. We can do some things right now that will make a difference. We know there are things we have to do to erase a legacy of debt that hangs over the economy. But time and again, we've seen partisan brinkmanship get in the way -- as if winning the next election is more important than fulfilling our responsibilities to you and to our country. This downgrade you've been reading about could have been entirely avoided if there had been a willingness to compromise in Congress. (Applause.) See, it didn't happen because we don't have the capacity to pay our bills -- it happened because Washington doesn't have the capacity to come together and get things done. It was a self-inflicted wound. (Applause.)

That's why people are frustrated. Maybe you hear it in my voice -- that's why I'm frustrated. Because you deserve better. You guys deserve better. (Applause.)

All of you, from the CEO down, are

working hard, taking care of your kids or your parents -- maybe both. You're living within your means. You may be trying to save for your child's college education or saving for retirement. You're donating to the church or the food pantry. You're trying to help the community. You're doing your part. You're living up to your responsibilities. It's time for Washington to do the same -- to match your resolve, and to match your decency, and to show the same sense of honor and discipline. That is not too much to ask. That's what the American people are looking for. (Applause.) [my emphasis]

That is, that "country before party idea" is originally pitched as the solution to the jobs crisis, but then Obama elaborates on what that solution is and it's ... more deficit cutting. And when, later in the speech, they repeat the "country before party" idea in the specific context of jobs, they do so to introduce the policies that won't really do much about jobs (though I'd be happy for highway investment). After which, Obama returns to deficit cutting again.

Plouffe-Daley told Sargent very clearly where to look for their take, what they mean by "confrontational rhetoric." And it turns out that rather than boasting of the jobs he did create, it consists of Obama just whining about the deficit some more.