Curbing Your Enthusiasm

By PAUL KRUGMAN

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Why does the Obama administration keep looking for love in all the wrong places? Why does it go out of its way to alienate its friends, while wooing people who will never waver in their hatred?

These questions were inspired by the ongoing suspense over whether President Obama will do the obviously right thing and nominate Elizabeth Warren to lead the new consumer financial protection agency. But the Warren affair is only the latest chapter in an ongoing saga.

Mr. Obama rode into office on a vast wave of progressive enthusiasm. This enthusiasm was bound to be followed by disappointment, and not just because the president was always more centrist and conventional than his fervent supporters imagined. Given the facts of politics, and above all the difficulty of getting anything done in the face of lock step Republican opposition, he wasn’t going to be the transformational figure some envisioned.

And Mr. Obama has delivered in important ways. Above all, he managed (with a lot of help from Nancy Pelosi) to enact a health reform that, imperfect as it is, will greatly improve Americans’ lives — unless a Republican Congress manages to sabotage its implementation.

But progressive disillusionment isn’t just a matter of sky-high expectations meeting prosaic reality. Threatened filibusters didn’t force Mr. Obama to waffle on torture; to escalate in Afghanistan; to choose, with exquisitely bad timing, to loosen the rules on offshore drilling early this year.

Then there are the appointments. Yes, the administration needed experienced hands. But did all the senior members of the economics team have to be protégés of Robert Rubin, the apostle
of financial deregulation? Was it necessary to install Ken Salazar at the Interior Department over the objections of environmentalists who feared, rightly, that his ties to extractive industries would make him slow to clean up a corrupt agency?

And where’s this administration’s Frances Perkins? As F.D.R.’s labor secretary, Perkins, a longtime crusader for workers’ rights, served as a symbol of the New Deal’s commitment to change. I have nothing against Hilda Solis, the current labor secretary — but neither she nor any other senior figure in the administration is a progressive with enough independent stature to play that kind of role.

What explains Mr. Obama’s consistent snubbing of those who made him what he is? Does he fear that his enemies would use any support for progressive people or ideas as an excuse to denounce him as a left-wing extremist? Well, as you may have noticed, they don’t need such excuses: He’s been portrayed as a socialist because he enacted Mitt Romney’s health-care plan, as a virulent foe of business because he’s been known to mention that corporations sometimes behave badly.

The point is that Mr. Obama’s attempts to avoid confrontation have been counterproductive. His opponents remain filled with a passionate intensity, while his supporters, having received no respect, lack all conviction. And in a midterm election, where turnout is crucial, the “enthusiasm gap” between Republicans and Democrats could spell catastrophe for the Obama agenda.

Which brings me back to Ms. Warren.

The debate over financial reform, in which the G.O.P. has taken the side of the bad guys, should be a political winner for Democrats. Much of the reform, however, is deeply technical: “Maintain the requirement that derivatives be traded on public exchanges!” doesn’t fit on a placard.

But protecting consumers, ensuring that they aren’t the victims of predatory financial practices, is something voters can relate to. And choosing a high-profile consumer advocate to lead the agency providing that protection — someone whose scholarship and advocacy were largely responsible for the agency’s creation — is the natural move, both substantively and politically. Meanwhile, the alternative — disappointing supporters yet again by choosing some little-known
technocrat — seems like an obvious error.

So why is this issue still up in the air? Yes, Republicans might well try to filibuster a Warren appointment, but that’s a fight the administration should welcome.

O.K., I don’t really know what’s going on. But I worry that Mr. Obama is still wrapped up in his dream of transcending partisanship, while his aides dislike the idea of having to deal with strong, independent voices. And the end result of this game-playing is an administration that seems determined to alienate its friends.

Just to be clear, progressives would be foolish to sit out this election: Mr. Obama may not be the politician of their dreams, but his enemies are definitely the stuff of their nightmares. But Mr. Obama has a responsibility, too. He can’t expect strong support from people his administration keeps ignoring and insulting.