

Medill Reports Chicago



OBAMA RIPS TRUMP DURING WISCONSIN RALLY

OCTOBER 30, 2018

By Alexis Shanes

Medill Reports

MILWAUKEE — Former President Barack Obama attacked his successor as a liar during a rally Friday, warning voters about Republican dishonesty and hammering the GOP leadership for undermining

health care guarantees as he stumped for Wisconsin Democrats.

Obama avoided referring to President Trump by name, but in an impassioned address to 3,500 people at North Division High School, he denounced the nationwide partisanship that Trump's administration has heightened, going so far as to criticize the media, a move rare for a Democrat.

In a sprawling tirade, he likened the GOP's narrative to the 2014 Ebola scare and the 2016 coverage of Hillary Clinton's email habits, calling it "fearmongering." He said it is the latest in a series of Republican attempts to "scare the heck out of people" ahead of every election.

"Until we start getting a little bit better about calling a lie a lie," he said, "the only check we have on this behavior is you and your vote."

Obama urged voters to support Tony Evers, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate expected to unseat two-term Gov. Scott Walker (R), and incumbent Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D), who spoke at length about her support for the Affordable Care Act, otherwise known as Obamacare.

Walker's embattled administration is a point of controversy even outside Wisconsin, his race against Evers one of the nation's most contentious. His supporters herald the state's slow-but-steady economic improvement — projected 2018 GDP growth is 1.6 percent — and 3 percent unemployment rate. Even some Democrats hesitate to question Walker's economic victories, although many jobs pay little more than minimum wage.

Walker's critics cite cuts to school budgets and the conditions of the state's roads and bridges, while union members remain angered over his successful effort to weaken public employees' unions.

The crowd, weary from polarized rhetoric gripping the country ahead of the Nov. 6 elections, gave Obama a fervent welcome. His magnetic personality was newly emphatic as he skewered the Trump administration, noting what he characterized as corruption within the Republican Party.

"In Washington, they have racked up enough indictments to field a football team," he said before pausing for effect. "Nobody in my administration got indicted.

"Their promise to drain the swamp — that was not on the up and up," he added, his voice cracking.

He honed in on health care, slamming Walker, a fierce ACA opponent who says he favors guaranteed insurance coverage for pre-existing conditions yet supports a lawsuit that would eliminate such protections. Walker is among a number of Republicans around the country who are running TV ads de-

claring their support for pre-existing conditions coverage while simultaneously attempting to torpedo the law.

“That is some kind of gall,” Obama said. “That is some kind of chutzpah. But let’s also call it what it is: it is a lie.”

Obama, at times sounding incredulous, drew a roar from his sea of supporters as he ripped Trump’s recent promise to enact a middle-class tax cut through the House, a policy statement that surprised lawmakers on both sides of the aisle.

“The president said he’d pass a tax cut bill before the next election,” he said, in a tone of disbelief. “Congress isn’t even in session.”

Obama criticized Trump’s promise to “help the little guy,” noting that Trump’s tax cuts have hardly reflected his vows. Contrary to Republican assertions, the 2017 tax bill barely reached the middle class, while 65 percent of the benefits went to the upper income quintile, according to a Tax Policy Center analysis.

Obama also denounced his successor’s tendency to take credit for Obama administration successes.

“We got the economy going again,” he said. “It’s still going, by the way. Where do you think that started?”

Audience members showed concern for a spectrum of issues extending beyond health care and Washington partisanship. For Teanna Evans, a 25-year-old sixth-grade teacher from Milwaukee, the rally was an opportunity to “hear what’s going on and what needs to change” ahead of the election.

“I think there’s a lot that needs to go on with our public schools and making sure that our schools are funded correctly,” she said amid a Wisconsin gubernatorial election where education has taken center stage. “Things like that, I’m very passionate about.”

Clarice Collins, 41, a member of the Communication Workers of America, said she is most worried about Wisconsin’s Act 10. The 2011 legislation, Walker’s signature accomplishment, wiped out collective bargaining for public employees, drawing protests and a failed attempt to recall him from office.

“Cost of living is really expensive, and we’re still making \$7 as a minimum wage,” Collins said. “That’s a huge issue.”

Ahead of the rally, Collins stood in the rain among fellow union members, holding a CWA sign. The key, she said, is to be sure to vote. Turnout counts in a state where Clinton received 238,000 fewer votes than Obama received four years earlier. Trump's victory margin was barely 22,000.

"I'm from the north side of Milwaukee, which is a very powerful vote in Wisconsin right now," she said. "In the sixth grade, I was taught the Constitution and my power, the power of my vote. It's an honor to be able to vote. No one should take that lightly."

Milwaukee resident Dorion Higgins, 33, is a correctional officer. He said he hopes the upcoming elections will change the country's narrative about key issues, such as health care access and tax cuts, which he said failed the middle class.

"I think it will be a check on the Republican Congress," he said. "If we win, we can turn things around and push forward to 2020, the presidential elections."

Higgins, who described himself as a "staunch Democrat," said he attended the rally in search of enlightenment from the former president amid widespread, Republican-driven partisanship and national political discontent.

"Our whole way of life right now is at stake," he said.

Obama echoed that sentiment in his final plea, even as he acknowledged that a single election will not repair the damage he perceives.

"The character of our country is on the ballot," Obama said. "If you vote, things will get better. It will be a start."

Photo at top: Former President Barack Obama received an enthusiastic welcome in Milwaukee — 3,500 fans packed the gymnasium at North Division High School, and an additional 600 crowded into an overflow room. (Alexis Shanes/MEDILL)

SHARE:

