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Remarks at a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Dinner in Chicago, Illinois

May 22, 2014

The President. First of all, to Fred and Dan, I'm so grateful for you guys hosting us here today. I'm trying to remember, was it 2 years ago or 3 years ago that I was here?

Audience member. Two years ago. And you were here in——

The President. Well, I've been here a lot, I know. [*Laughter*] I meant most recently. I have abused Fred's hospitality for quite some time. But it is wonderful to be home now that is has warmed up. [*Laughter*] And it is wonderful to be with a lot of old friends.

There are a couple other people I just want to acknowledge real quickly. Obviously, our Governor, Pat Quinn, is in the house. Please give him a big round of applause. Pat is doing a lot of hard stuff, and he's doing it the right way. And I'm very appreciative for all the efforts that he's making down in Springfield.

We also have two of our finest public servants in the country. The first has the thankless job of being the chair of the Democratic senatorial reelection committee, and that is our outstanding Senator from Colorado, Michael Bennet. And the second guy is the person who, upon my election to the United States Senate, essentially taught me everything that he knew and kept me out of trouble and supported me every step of the way when I ran for President and has been a great friend and champion on behalf of working families not just in Illinois, but all across the country. He is a great friend. I couldn't be prouder to be associated with him: Dick Durbin.

So the goal here is not for me to give a long speech, because I want to have a conversation with you, but let me just set the context. A little over 5 years since I've been elected. We've gone from losing 800,000 jobs a month to creating over 9 million jobs. The unemployment rate has come down. The housing value has come up. The stock market, gone up. Trillions of dollars of wealth restored for families all across the country. The deficit—you wouldn't know it always from reading the newspapers—has been cut by more than half.

Clean energy, we've doubled. Greenhouse gases, we've lowered. Exports, we're on track to double. College enrollment hitting alltime peaks. High school dropout rates going down. Latino dropout rates cut in half since 2000.

We've ended two wars. We are—or we've ended one war, and we're in the process of ending the second. We're producing more energy than we ever have before, and we're importing less foreign oil than we have in close to two decades.

So there are a whole bunch of metrics, a whole bunch of measures by which you'd say, indisputably, that we are better off now than we were when I came into office. And a lot of that has to do with the incredible resilience and grit and hard work of the American people. And yet, there's still anxiety all across America. And some of it is that people still feel the trauma of seeing their home values drop or their 401(k)s plunge or losing their job or seeing a friend of theirs lose their home. And you don't shake those things off right away. It feels as if the ground is less firm under your feet.

But a lot of it has to do with the fact that we've got trends that have continued over the course of decades in which those of us, frankly, in this room continue to do better and better. Folks at the top have seen their incomes and their wealth soar. And ordinary Americans have seen their wages and incomes flatline at the same time as the costs of everything has gone up. And so they're less confident that not only they will be able to retire with some dignity and maintain their standard of living; more importantly, they're concerned that their kids are not going to be able to match their standard of living and the upward trajectory of their lives, the idea that if you work hard, if you take responsibility in this country, you can get ahead.

Now, there are a lot of issues that we face in this country, but nothing is more important than restoring, making real that ideal that if you work hard in this country, you can make it. And everything I think about every single day that I'm President revolves around that issue, along with keeping the American people safe. And the problem I've got right now is not that we're on the wrong side of issues. There's not an issue out there in which we do not enjoy majority support. Immigration reform, the majority agrees with us. Minimum wage, the majority agrees with us. Equal pay for equal work, the majority agrees with us. Increasing clean energy, the majority agrees with us. Invest in education, early childhood education, making college more affordable—folks on our side. That's not my problem. That's not our problem.

Our problem is very simple: We have a Congress that currently is controlled, at least half of it, by an ideological faction that is not representative of the traditions of the Republican Party as I understood them, maybe because I come from the Land of Lincoln. I thought we believed in investing in infrastructure. I thought we believed in science. I didn't think those were partisan issues. I thought we believed in education. But this crowd doesn't believe in science, doesn't really believe in investing in our kids to make sure that upward mobility exists, doesn't believe in climate change, doesn't think that there's really a problem in terms of the pay gap between men and women, isn't interested in providing help for families.

They operate on a single theory, which is, if government is dismantled and folks at the top can do more and more without restraint, that everybody else is going to benefit from it. I don't know if they actually believe it, but that's what they say. And this is not a situation of equivalence where the Democrats are this far left, crazy group and we're not willing to meet in the middle. And if you need a better example than that, take a look at a health care law that uses the private sector to encourage people to buy insurance and has brought health care inflation down to its lowest rate in 50 years. And you would think that I had dismantled the entire free market system, despite the fact that we now have somewhere between 13 and 15 million people who have insurance now that didn't have it before.

So I need a new Congress. But at a minimum, I've got to have a Democratic Senate. And that's why you're here. Which leads me to my last point: If in fact people agree with us, why is it so hard for us to get a Democratic Senate and a Democratic House? Well, part of it is demographics. I was in Brooklyn with de Blasio—this is right before he was about to be elected—and we were coming from this wonderful school that's training kids in math and science. And we're driving down Brooklyn and crowds are cheering, and we go into this place to buy some cheesecake, and people are hugging me and, "Oh, my uncle just got on Obamacare, and it's terrific." And a woman yells out, "What can I do to help?" And I said, "Move to Nebraska!" [*Laughter*] I don't need 80 percent of the vote in New York City—[*laughter*]—or Chicago. But Democrats tend to congregate a little more densely, which puts us at a disadvantage in the House. Obviously, the nature of the Senate means that California has

the same number of Senate seats as Wyoming. That puts us at a disadvantage. Gerrymandering in many of these States puts us at a disadvantage.

So there are some structural reasons why, despite the fact that Republican ideas are largely rejected by the public, it's still hard for us to break through. But the second reason is, we have a congenital disease, which is we don't like voting in midterms. Our voters are younger, more minorities, more single women, more working class folks who are busy and trying to get to work, trying to find work. And oftentimes, we opt out during midterms. If we had the same turnout in 2012 that we had had in 2010, I might have lost. Instead, of course, we had a very significant and solid victory.

So this is pretty straightforward: I need more votes. I need more people voting to reflect our values and what we care about and our stance on the issues, which, in turn, leads to Senators and Congressmen who then vote on behalf of actually getting stuff done. A bunch of you, because you've known me for a long time, came up and commiserated while we were taking pictures, "Oh, these folks are so mean, and there's always slinging and hurling stones and arrows at you," and all this. And I said: "You know what, it turns out—maybe I'm from Chicago—I'm a tough guy. It doesn't really bother me too much."

There is one thing that bothers me, which is when I hear folks saying, oh, you know, if you just play golf with John Boehner more—[*laughter*]—and we're just trying harder to be more bipartisan, then we'd get more stuff done. That's not the problem. [*Laughter*] On every issue, we are more than happy to sit down in reasonable fashion and compromise. The problem is not that we're too mean or we're too partisan. The problem is I don't have enough votes, full stop.

The first 2 years, when we had a Democratic House and a Democratic Senate, we had the most productive legislature since the 1960s, since Lyndon Johnson; more significant, meaningful domestic legislation than any time since Medicare was passed. House Republicans take over, and we now have—you remember Harry Truman with the do-nothing Congress? This is a less productive Congress than the do-nothing Congress. [*Laughter*] This Congress makes the do-nothing Congress look like the New Deal. [*Laughter*]

So I need everybody to feel a sense of urgency. That's what we're here tonight to talk about. And whatever else I say, whatever issues you are concerned about, ultimately, it translates into math: Are we turning out voters who, in turn, produce majorities that allow us to advance the values that we care about? Everything else is just talk. And if we don't feel that sense of urgency in this election, we're going to have problems. And if we do, then in the next 2½ years, we can make as much progress as we did the first 2 years I was in office.

All right. Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:17 p.m. at the residence of Fred Eychaner and Dan Whittaker. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Warren "Bill" de Blasio of New York City. Audio was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Democratic National Committee fundraisers :: Chicago, IL, dinner.

Names: Bennet, Michael F.; Boehner, John A.; de Blasio, Warren "Bill"; Durbin, Richard J.; Eychaner, Fred; Quinn, Patrick J., III; Whittaker, Dan.

Locations: Chicago, IL.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Civil rights : Wage equality; Congress : House of Representatives :: Speaker; Democratic Party : Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Income inequality, increase; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : High school dropout rate and prevention programs; Education : Hispanic students :: Performance and completion, improvement efforts; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary education :: College opportunity, expansion efforts; Elections : 2014 congressional elections; Elections : Voter participation; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: U.S. production; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies :: Promotion efforts; Energy : Domestic sources; Environment : Climate change; Health and medical care : Affordability and costs; Illinois : Democratic Party events; Illinois : Governor; Illinois : President's visits; Immigration and naturalization : Reform; Labor issues : Minimum wage; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts .

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