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To Help Democrats in the Fall, Obama May Stay Away

By JEFF ZELENY

WASHINGTON — As lunch was served in the Roosevelt Room of the White House one day last week, [President Obama](#) assured the nine Democratic members of Congress sitting around the table that he would do anything he could to help them survive their fall elections.

Even, he said, if it meant staying away.

“You may not even want me to come to your district,” Mr. Obama said, according to guests, nearly all of whom hold seats that Republicans are aggressively seeking.

Three months before the midterm elections, the president is stepping up his involvement in the fight to preserve the [Democratic Party](#)’s control of Congress. But advisers said he would concentrate largely on delivering a message, raising money and motivating voters from afar, rather than on racing from district to district.

It is a vivid shift from the last two elections, when Mr. Obama was the hottest draw for Democratic candidates in red and blue states alike. And it highlights the tough choices Democrats face as they head toward Election Day with the president’s approval ratings depressed, Republicans energized, the economic slump still lingering and two veteran House Democrats now facing public hearings on ethics

charges.

Democrats who are on the ballot hope to make the election about issues other than Mr. Obama, including the benefits to their constituents of the health care and stimulus legislation and the argument that voting Republican means a return to the policies of President [George W. Bush](#).

That line of thinking is largely shared inside the West Wing, where advisers are trying to determine the balance between using Mr. Obama to inspire voters and keeping him from becoming a defining negative presence. Already, Mr. Obama is popping up more as a target in Republican campaign advertisements than as a positive presence in Democratic ones.

Yet at the same time, many Democrats continue to demand more help from Mr. Obama and his team, and question whether the White House is as committed to their fates this year as it is to the president's re-election in 2012.

When Representative Gerald E. Connolly, Democrat of Virginia, was asked last week whether he was convinced that Mr. Obama was fully focused on the midterm election campaign, he paused for 18 seconds and lowered his head before continuing.

"I don't know the answer to that," said Mr. Connolly, chairman of the freshman class of Democrats, who were elected in 2008. "I am confident they will focus. I'm confident at the end of the day that they understand that significant losses or loss of control will have a terribly serious negative impact on his presidency."

The president has taken several steps to ease tensions.

He is headlining a dozen fund-raisers in August, and he has purposefully sharpened his rhetoric against Republicans to help lead the political debate. The [Democratic National Committee](#) is spending heavily on House and Senate races and on a program intended to draw first-time voters from the 2008 Obama campaign to the polls in November.

The White House chief of staff, **Rahm Emanuel**, is a point person for members of Congress and governors seeking campaign help or advice. The president has sent top advisers to weekly meetings on Capitol Hill to help coordinate the party's message.

The White House responded to complaints that the president had been bashing Washington — Democrats included — rather than framing the election as a path to avoid returning to Republican policies from the Bush era, not a referendum on the Obama administration.

The president, sensitive to the strains between the White House and Capitol Hill, has started inviting small groups of rank-and-file Democrats over for lunch. At a session last week, participants said, Mr. Obama made clear that he understood many lawmakers had taken difficult political votes to support his agenda.

David Axelrod, a senior adviser to the president, said, "I have great admiration and solicitude for those members because they've had to make tough decisions in a difficult time." He added: "This is a tough election. They've got a lot on the line here, so I think there's a natural anxiety. But the notion that we're not fully supportive is not rooted in reality."

But several Democratic candidates and party leaders said in interviews that they were not sure Mr. Obama's political operation was focused on the 2010 fight, and they questioned whether the president sees himself as the head of the party.

A huge database of people who supported Mr. Obama's presidential bid remains off-limits to other Democrats, unless special exceptions are made. Several elected officials have complained that requests for fund-raisers and other types of help get lost in the bureaucracy and are not granted until repeated appeals are made. And members of Congress have raised objections for not being notified that grants or federal projects would be announced in their districts.

More generally, some Democrats suggested that the Obama political team was too insular, sometimes leaving candidates feeling cut off and in the dark about decisions being made in the White House and

at the Democratic National Committee.

“I think much of the House is in a wait-and-see mode to see how helpful the president will be,” said Representative Elijah E. Cummings, Democrat of Maryland, who said he believed that Mr. Obama should spend more time outside the White House. “He has to come into these districts with the same gusto and the same sense of hope that he came into the election with.”

Even [Michelle Obama](#)'s role has emerged as a source of tension between some Democrats and the White House. Party leaders believe that she could be of critical help in reaching some women. Mr. Obama brought the subject up during his lunch with the group of House members last week.

“I'll bet you want Michelle,” the president told the group, participants said, acknowledging that his popularity was significantly lower than that of the first lady — a significant turnaround from some of the more heated days of the 2008 campaign, when Mrs. Obama was widely viewed as a political liability to her husband.

Yet the White House has not granted any requests for Mrs. Obama to campaign for Democrats or decided whether she will have any role in the midterm elections. (Advisers said she is primarily focused on being a mother and on her own initiatives, like childhood obesity.)

For all the questions about whether the White House is doing enough, the Democratic National Committee, under Mr. Obama's control, is investing \$20 million in campaigns for the House and the Senate. Smaller investments are being made in governors' races, including in states like Ohio and Florida that will be critical to Mr. Obama's re-election in 2012.

And the committee has pledged \$30 million to turn out voters. The party has built an extensive modeling and targeting operation, where an individual score is assigned to every voter in a Congressional district, giving strategists the ability to find supporters (particularly those first-time voters who backed Obama) and make sure they cast ballots. And Mr. Obama has started sending more e-mails and has recorded phone calls on behalf of some candidates.

“We have to close that enthusiasm gap that exists around the country,” said [David Plouffe](#), who managed the Obama campaign in 2008 and is the president’s top political strategist.

Three high-profile Democratic defeats — governor’s races in Virginia and New Jersey last year, and the election to choose a successor to Senator [Edward M. Kennedy](#) of Massachusetts early this year — taught the White House at least one thing that is being applied to the midterm elections: Mr. Obama cannot swoop in at the 11th hour and turn a local race.

“The president can’t just whistle and point and make them turn out for someone, but the president can help make the introduction,” said [Dan Pfeiffer](#), the White House communications director.

Mr. Pfeiffer is among the advisers who meet weekly in the Ward Room of the White House, a small room near the Mess Hall in the lower level of the West Wing that is specifically designated for political discussions. The president’s chief pollster, Joel Benenson, presents his findings, along with Jim Messina, the deputy chief of staff, and Patrick Gaspard, the White House political director.

These days, the discussion includes deciding where the president can travel — based, in part, on his approval rating and the local political environment. And for the first time since Mr. Obama arrived on the national scene six years ago, when he was on the [United States Senate](#) ballot in Illinois, the answer is no longer everywhere.



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