

[Ezra Klein, Washington Post](#)

Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.) is leading the charge in the House against President Obama's tax-cut deal. The problem, he says, isn't just the deal itself, but the process that led to it. We spoke this afternoon, and a lightly edited transcript of our conversation follows.

Ezra Klein: Tell me your concerns with the deal.

Peter Welch: The context for the House Democrats is that this was presented after the president made his deal with the Republican leadership. But in terms of policy, the central issue we should be focusing on is the economy. Ideally, our decisions, whether to borrow money or adjust taxes, should be based on where we get the most bang for the buck. If this is a stimulus bill, we have to ask whether we should have a stimulus where we're borrowing money and using tax policy or where we're building things. After this money is borrowed, we won't have more broadband or bridges or roads.

And many Americans are skeptical about debt and borrowing. Even if economists can argue that the payroll cut, for instance, is a good thing, Americans are skeptical. Last night, I had a telephone townhall for my constituents back in Vermont, and we had 11,500 people on it. And I had people on Social Security saying if getting fewer benefits will help us on the debt, they're for it. And I had a farmer saying that he's had subsidies for 35 years but we can't afford them anymore. And if you look at the bond market, it's skeptical of this deal, too.

But isn't there a tension between saying that jobs and the economy should be our top concern and saying that we need to worry about deficits? If the economists are right that recovery could be aided by more short-term deficits, wouldn't making the economy our top priority suggest we should borrow more?

You are correct, there's a tension there. I favor the extension of the middle-class tax cuts because in a recession they're stimulative and they help with demand. And what the president is doing here is using tax policy to get more stimulus, to increase aggregate demand. And if you add up how much he gave and how much he got, he probably got a pretty good deal. But what

the Democrats are saying is that to have reached this agreement without a fight, we don't know whether we could've gotten a better outcome.

If the president had really fought for the Democratic position on this, if he'd given speeches around the country and gone on a whistlestop tour and hammered the Republicans and they just proved implacable on this, would the Democratic reaction be different if he made this same bill when the clock struck midnight on December, 31st?

I think a lot different. One of the things I give Nancy Pelosi a lot of credit for is that she's able to get things passed and hold her members together because she shows us that she's doing everything possible to get our views into these bills. I was a single-payer person, and I was disappointed in the health-care bill. But I supported the public option, and I watched as Nancy Pelosi fought and fought and fought to get the public option into the bill. But then it came back from the Senate without it. And I knew Pelosi had done every single thing she could possible do to get it in there. So I knew it was really the best we could get, and I had to decide whether to vote for it or not. And I think the president had the opportunity to do something similar here. This policy gets to a central question in economic policymaking, which is whether we'll let the wealth transfer to the rich continue. And we should've engaged on it.

So your view is that the policy isn't the only deliverable here, that moving the ball forward on the economic philosophy shared by most Democrats should've been part of the deal, and the president didn't do that.

Yes. The president had a chance to engage America. He had the bully pulpit. And in politics, it's important to engage in fights where you really show the American people the differences. What could've been a better opportunity than this? The polls back him up, the House votes for his bill, the Senate votes for this bill and gets stopped by the filibuster, and the president could've pushed the Republicans into the glare of the light to defend their position by taking vote after vote after vote. But we didn't do it.

One thing you hear some in the Senate argue is that if they just let the Republicans filibuster till December, 31st, there'd be no time to try and pass the START treaty or DADT repeal or the DREAM Act. What do you think of that argument?

I don't think much of it. The central issue for this country and this party is jobs and the economy. That's more important than anything else. To the extent we let anything get in our way on that, we undo our ability to succeed on all issues.