Transforming America

Barack Obama in the White House

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Chapter Three

Parties as a Resource for Presidential Leadership

The Case of Barack Obama

John J. Coleman

Barack Obama entered office with the strongest partisan backing of any president in recent memory. Unlike George W. Bush, who was elected in 2000 under controversial circumstances with fewer popular votes than his opponent, or Bill Clinton, elected in 1992 with just 43 percent of the popular vote, Obama received 53 percent of the vote and brought large majorities with him to the US House and Senate. When Bush entered office, there were serious questions about how he would enact his legislative agenda and lead the government, given the raw emotions over the 2000 election and its resolution by the US Supreme Court. For Obama, these questions did not arise in the context of his electoral victory but instead in the frequently stated concerns about whether the new president had the requisite experience to make things happen.

What President Obama did have at his disposal, however, were the resources the American party system offers to presidents to exert leadership and tally legislative successes. Presidents seek to establish identities and political strengths independent of their parties, but they remain dependent on party members to achieve many of their goals. Presidential leadership is connected to the party system in two important ways. First, the historical trajectory of the party system may be more or less favorable for the establishment of presidential leadership. That is, presidents are in a better or worse position because of the strength or weakness of current party alignments. Second, a president whose victory was comfortable and whose party has large majorities in Congress has the potential for victories on a wide range of fronts that would be more difficult to achieve with narrow majorities or when the other party controls part of the legislative branch. I discuss each of these factors in turn.

OBAMA AND THE DYNAMICS OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

President Obama was in a strong position regarding the first factor, the historical trajectory of the party system. Although the dynamics of the party system had pointed in a Republican direction for two decades, these began to slow and reverse during George W. Bush's presidency. Bush won a razor-thin victory in 2000 and then faced a Democratic Senate for most of his first two years. Bush won reelection in 2004 by very nearly duplicating the electoral map from 2000. He won a narrow majority and continued to enjoy Republican majorities in the House and Senate, but the president's approval ratings were drooping amidst economic problems, the war in Iraq, discontent in his own party about the growth of government, and the president's failure to gain much traction or get much of his party's support on ambitious plans to reform Social Security and immigration.

While one could certainly make a plausible argument that in many respects, life in the United States had never been better (Easterbrook 2008), the political reality was that vast swaths of the public felt uneasy and vulnerable to economic insecurity (Hacker 2006). The positive economic conditions of the late 1990s gave way to more troubled times. Unemployment, inflation, gasoline prices, mortgage foreclosures, and the federal budget deficit mushroomed. Trade deficits grew, while the relative value of the dollar fell. Health-care costs continued to climb, while the percentage of the workforce covered by company retirement pension plans continued its decline. Virtually none of these issues received a forceful or vocal response, whether market-oriented or otherwise, by the president and his fellow partisans.

Whether this failure to grasp the shifting landscape was due to preoccupation with the Iraq war, poor political calculations, or some other factor, it surely contributed to the overall public clamor for a change in direction in Washington and to nearly 80 percent of the population saying the country was on the wrong track in mid-2008. The Republican troubles were first clearly visible in the November 2006 elections, when Democrats gained majorities in both the US House and Senate. Although the situation in Iraq improved in Bush's final two years, economic conditions did not, culminating in the bursting of the housing bubble as well as the collapse or near collapse of major financial institutions. The November 2008 election results served up precisely what Republicans had feared: a victory by Barack Obama in many states won by Bush; a drop in the Republican percentage of the vote in nearly all states and among nearly all social groups compared to 2004; the first Democratic presidential candidate to finish with significantly more than 50 percent of the vote since Lyndon Johnson in 1964; and the loss of yet more seats in the House and Senate. The hope for a Republican political era was over, and many analysts speculated the party would be in the political wilderness for some time.

Thus, President Obama took office in an electoral environment that had been friendly to Democrats in the preceding two elections and to some degree across the first decade of the twenty-first century, as they did not lose significant ground to Republicans in 2002 and 2004. The policy environment also was favorable toward presidential leadership. The conflict in Iraq was winding down and of diminished salience. Democrats could pin economic turbulence and insecurity at the feet of Republicans—as always, the blame game oversimplified political and economic reality, but presidents invite the public to give them credit and blame and the public obliges. Republicans themselves needed to determine how to overcome the wreckage of the 2006 and 2008 elections and the policy defeats of President Bush's second term. All of these factors provided a relatively favorable environment for Obama's leadership potential.

To some observers, Obama's victory was seen as possibly heralding in a new partisan realignment that would produce Democratic majorities for decades. The concept of *partisan realignment* is an umbrella term covering distinctive varieties of political change. These varieties include secular (or gradual) realignment and critical (or quick-moving) realignment. In effect, realignment theory takes "before and after" photographs of the party system. The "before and after" might be from a period in which one party is dominant to a period in which the other party dominates, or from a time when a party has a particular coalition to a time when that party has a different supporting coalition, or from a period in which one party dominates to a period in which neither party dominates. Whichever change it is, significant policy departures accompany the party realignment.

Our analytical eye is often drawn to the dramatic and disruptive, but V. O. Key (1959) alerted scholars to the fact that significant political change often occurs gradually, with the accumulation of small, incremental developments. This variety of realignment is known as secular (i.e., steady, gradual) realignment. As a social group becomes more affluent, for example, its members might find the policy appeals of a conservative political party more to their liking. As one particular social group becomes better represented within a political party, other groups might gradually pull out of that party. Scholars have suggested that both of these developments have occurred in the party system over the past few decades. For example, as Catholics moved steadily into the middle class, they became less reliably Democratic. As blacks gained a louder voice in the Democratic Party, whites, especially southern whites, increasingly supported Republicans. As religious and social conservatives played an increasing role in the Republican Party, Republican moderates

found themselves increasingly likely to vote Democratic. Evangelical Christians moved from Democratic voting to Republican voting over time.

In the 1990s, secular realignment moved in a direction that tended to favor Republicans. Groups that were considered part of the Democratic New Deal coalition—organized labor, agricultural interests, urban ethnic groups, Catholics, Jews, the less educated, southerners, industrial blue collar workers—tended to support Democrats less strongly in the 1990s than in the 1940s (Mayer 1998). The New Deal coalition could no longer cement Democratic victories and that worked to the Republicans' advantage. Even a candidate who found that he or she did well with these traditional New Deal coalition groups—and most Democratic candidates did do reasonably well with them—would find that he or she needed to reach outside this cluster to ensure victory (Bartels 1998). This provided an opportunity for Republicans in general and George W. Bush in particular. Republicans were poised to strengthen their majority status when Bush entered office and his fellow partisans knew that. That gave them great incentive to cooperate with Bush, which they did at very high levels in roll call votes.

But there were also currents pointing in the Democrats' direction. Minority populations were growing as a share of the population, and minority groups voted more heavily Democratic than did white voters. The Democrats' share among the college educated was growing and was a majority among those with postgraduate education—both these groups were also gaining in size in the population. In some parts of the country—particularly the Northeast and the Pacific coast—high-income voters leaned Democratic, thus erasing the historical tie between income levels and support for Republicans. Democrats were doing better with young voters than they did with other age groups, and this advantage might persist in the future as this group aged, though perhaps not to the same extent as was evident in 2008. On party identification, Democrats gained nationally while Republican identifiers declined, and the Democratic gains among those aged eighteen to twenty-nine were especially dramatic. Given highly partisan voting—about 90 percent of party identifiers will tend to vote for their party's candidate—this created a stiff headwind against Republican victories. Finding a path to citizenship for "illegal immigrants" or "undocumented Americans" also would be likely to add to Democratic votes. Democrats were favored on virtually every issue by 2008. A survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in February 2008 showed Democrats were thought likely to do a better job on the environment, energy, health care, education, reforming government, the economy, taxes, morality, Iraq, foreign policy, and immigration. Republicans led only on handling terrorist threats. These trends continued throughout 2008. Overall, the issue landscape was growing bleaker for Republicans. Add

to these trends the growing unpopularity of George W. Bush, and Democrats saw an opportunity. As did Bush and the Republicans previously, Democrats saw these trends and Obama's victory as potentially ushering in a new era, one they wished to assist by producing significant policy successes. In general, the new president would let Congress be Congress and do the legislating, while he provided the general outlines. This tactic, too, built support and loyalty among his fellow Democrats in Congress.

Another form of historical change is known as critical realignment. Elaborated most importantly by V. O. Key (1955) and Walter Dean Burnham (1970) and vigorously challenged by Mayhew (2002), realignment theory posits that some elections (either an individual election or a series of two elections in sequence) have enduring consequences for the party system. Rather than the gradual change at the heart of secular realignment, critical realignment focuses on sharp, quick transformations of the political landscape that have effects for a generation or longer. Typically, critical realignments bring a new majority party to power and have effects at the local, state, and national levels. To scholars, the 1800 (Jeffersonian Republicans), 1828 (Jackson and the Democrats), 1860 (Lincoln's Republicans), and 1932 (Roosevelt and the Democrats) elections fall into this category. Other realignments might keep the same majority party but create a new supporting coalition for that party, as in 1896 (McKinley and the Republicans). Scholars debate whether other years such as 1968, 1980, and 1994 qualify for the critical realignment label.

Claims that 2008 marked a critical election were occasionally seen in the blogosphere after 2008, but the more serious arguments that the historical position of the party system was advantageous for Barack Obama concerned secular realignment. Viewing the centrist "third-way" approach of Bill Clinton in the 1990s to have been a failure for building an enduring Democratic majority, the party was open to a different approach and somewhat different message, and its activist base was determined to push the party in a liberal, progressive direction. Obama capitalized on these openings and garnered tremendous loyalty from Democrats in Congress. Coming to office when he did, Obama was able to leverage his leadership opportunities to a great degree. His ability to exercise leadership, his Democratic colleagues reasoned, would enhance his public approval and help the party in upcoming elections. These expectations were dealt a severe blow in the November 2010 election.

One other feature of the historical dynamics of the party system contributed to Obama's ability to lead. Obama's leadership benefited among Democrats because of his place in political time. As explained elsewhere in this volume, Obama entered office as a potentially "reconstructive" president, in Stephen Skowronek's terms. These presidents take office in an environment that is hostile to the current dominant direction in public policy and that is poised

to entertain presidential leadership and a new policy direction. Previous examples were Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. In elections like those electing these two presidents in 1932 and 1980, respectively, all the wind appears to be at the back of the non-incumbent party. The economy, concerns over health care, and foreign policy troubles all intersected to provide a powerful push for the Obama candidacy. Once elected, expectations are high for this kind of president, as they certainly were for Obama, but these high expectations encourage fellow partisans to cooperate with him. President Obama was given substantial leeway to lead and shape the broad agenda among Democratic politicians and activists.

OBAMA AND PARTY CONTROL IN CONGRESS

The second major factor connecting the party system to presidential leadership success is the size of the president's victory and the strength of his or her party in Congress. In these respects, Obama was well situated. His own victory in 2008 was comfortable, registering gains among nearly every population group compared to Democratic nominee John Kerry in 2004 and winning nine states won by President Bush in that election. Obama's victory was not overwhelming, but it was solid and convincing. In Congress, Democrats increased their House majority. In the Senate, although this was not clear on election day, Democrats eventually obtained a supermajority of sixty meaning they could, if perfectly united, defeat any filibuster threat by Republicans. No president in five decades had such a favorable alignment in Congress. Intersecting this opportunity with the historical trajectory of the party system, as previously discussed, gave President Obama a rare ability to lead, an ability due not just to his own political skills but the resources provided him by the American party system. Knowing that the public's view of the party will depend heavily on its view about the president, and that their view about the president will depend on his policies and whether they are considered successful, members of the president's party have good reason to help him enact his agenda.

President Obama deployed his strong party advantage in Congress effectively. The president did not need to uncap his veto pen at any point in his first two years. Congress passed an ambitious agenda including an economic stimulus plan, health-care reform, and new regulations of the financial sector, among other items, with virtually no Republican support—Congress was more polarized along partisan lines in Obama's first two years than in any previous Congress since 1879—and in some cases against strong public opposition.

Democratic support for the president's position on roll call votes was extremely high. As a measure, roll call support has its weaknesses. For example, the votes in question might not be key items on the president's agenda. And items on that presidential agenda that never made it to a vote in both chambers, such as the president's "cap and trade" environmental plan or his attempt to revise immigration law to provide a pathway to citizenship for children whose parents brought them to the United States illegally, cannot be factored into the score. They did not come up for votes, but were in fact defeats. Still, the measure provides a reasonable signal that Congress was casting votes consistent with the president's wishes.

Whether unified party control, such as that during the first two years of the Obama administration makes a difference in legislative success, or whether divided control between the parties is just as productive, has been a simmering debate in political science. Research since David Mayhew's (1991) path-breaking contribution, which expressed skepticism that the enactment of major legislation differed much between eras of unified and divided party control, has produced a range of results. Some, consistent with Mayhew, stress that significant policy can be passed under a variety of partisan arrangements (Jones 1994, 1997; Skowronek 1993).

Overall, however, the findings in recent research strongly support the premise that party control matters for the passage of significant legislation. Howell, Adler, Cameron, and Riemann (2000) provide the most elaborate compilation of significant enactments and find that while enactment of what they categorize as major legislation does not appear to vary significantly between unified and divided government, enactment of landmark statues does so at a rate of about two or three statutes per congressional term. This is similar to the result—about two to three significant enactments per term—found by Coleman (1999). Certainly the president's passage of health-care reform and financial-industry reform would qualify for landmark status, and other legislation might arguably do so, as well. Other studies show that proposed significant legislation is more likely to fail in divided government (Edwards, Barrett, and Peake 1997; Binder 2003) and that when the president and Congress are more similar ideologically, Congress is more willing to delegate to the executive branch additional power and responsibility (Epstein and O'Halloran 1996, 2001). Health-care reform provides a classic example of the latter point. Although the legislation was detailed and two thousand pages long, most of the detail will be worked out by executive branch agencies. This delegation of decision was a remarkable legislative grant of authority to the executive branch. Although it cannot be said definitively that it would not have happened under divided government, research tells us it was far more likely to happen under the kind of unified party control enjoyed by President

Obama. In sum, the president's leadership benefited from the important partisan resource of having his party in control of both the House and Senate and from the fact that his own victory was comfortable and expanded the Democrats' vote share among almost every sector of the population.

ROCKY ROAD

President Obama inherited a party system that was well situated for his leadership efforts. He could make a reasonable claim to have an election mandate in 2008—if not for precise, specific policies, then for a change in direction and trying new ideas. In addition, many Democratic commentators were convinced that their party was on the verge of long-term dominance, freeing the president to enact bold, sweeping changes. Their confidence resulted from the size of the Democratic victories in 2006 and 2008, the strong support for Democrats among young voters and first-time voters, the improved turnout by minority voters, and the growing minority share of the American population. Despite this success, the president's public approval began drifting downward in his first two years, especially among Independents and Republicans.

Within twenty-four months, the president's party had gone from a rare position of historic strength to a midterm election repudiation that was itself historic in its breadth across the national and state levels and in its depth, with Republicans picking up over sixty seats in the House and another half dozen in the Senate. Unlike for President Bush, the increasing difficulties in a war—in Afghanistan, not Iraq—did not play a major role in President Obama's drooping approval ratings. The deterioration of the economy, particularly high unemployment, played a starring role in the president's reversal of fortune and the Democratic drubbing. Also playing a key role were highly energized conservative voters who were opposed to the policy direction being implemented by President Obama and the Democratic Congress and whose voice was expressed by the Tea Party movement. Whether inadvertent or anticipated, the president's agenda revived the debate over the proper role of the federal government, reminding many observers of the debates from 1995 to 1996, when the Republican Congress faced off against President Clinton, and from 1981 to 1982, when the Democratic House squared off against the Republican Senate and President Reagan. The 2009–2010 debate focused in particular on the federal government's proper role in the economy, the operation of private enterprise, the protection of property rights, and the government's fiscal and monetary management of the economy—precisely the kinds of issues identified by scholars of American political parties as central to political party competition over history and as essential catalysts to the

resurgence of partisanship in the public (Aldrich 1995; Coleman 1996). The debate over the "fiscal state" from 2009 to 2010 was deep and passionate.

This reversal of fortune in the 2010 election repeated a pattern seen frequently in US history. Democratic president Bill Clinton enjoyed unified government for two years before losing Democratic control of both the House and Senate in the 1994 election. President Jimmy Carter returned the White House to Democratic control following the 1976 election and inherited large majorities in Congress due to economic troubles from 1973 to 1976 during the Nixon and Ford administrations, as well as the lingering backlash against Republicans due to the Watergate scandal that drove President Nixon out of office. Nonetheless, Carter's disapproval was high by 1978, the Democratic majority thinned in that year's election, and the party was on the defensive electorally through 1979 and 1980. The unified Democratic Congress in 1965 and 1966 and Democratic president Lyndon Johnson had a large number of legislative victories but suffered massive electoral losses in the 1966 election. Republican president Dwight Eisenhower enjoyed two years of unified government in 1953 and 1954, but a weak economy flipped control to the Democrats after the 1954 election.

One thread connecting these examples is that partisan strength in Congress is a great resource for presidential leadership, but it does not guarantee subsequent high approval or electoral success, even when a party has full control of Congress and the presidency. There are at least three reasons why this might be so. First, parties can be thought of as coalitions or networks of interest and advocacy groups. The concerns of these groups might not necessarily align with the priorities of the public. When this is the case, the opposition party has a wide opening through which to begin a critique of the priorities of the president and his party. This is precisely what happened to President Obama. Democrats passed an economic stimulus plan with no Republican support in Congress, but the bill was characterized by opponents as primarily taking care of Democratic interest groups and constituencies and providing funding that would not be spent for well over a year despite the ongoing economic problems. The other key items on the Democratic agenda, such as health-care reform, financial reform, and new environmental regulation policies, could be cast by Republicans as distractions from the real national priority of revving up the economy and employment. Conservative talk show hosts delighted in presenting montages of the president saying at frequent intervals during his first two years that his intention *now* was to focus on the economy and jobs.

Second, a large win by the president's party exacerbates the problems just mentioned. With a supermajority in the Senate, a large majority in the House, and a president supportive of their positions, every significant interest group aligned with the Democrats wanted speedy action on items of interest

to them. Better to have our interests addressed under these favorable conditions they calculate, than wait two years when the environment might be less accommodating. For a party that had not had unified control of government in fifteen years, there were many pent-up demands that rose to the top of the agenda. Surely some, maybe many, of these demands were important and deserved attention. However, amidst deteriorating economic conditions, they were easy to portray as a distraction.

Third, winning an election with large majorities, after a long period under divided government or government controlled by the other party, creates a risk of misreading the message from the election that swept you to office and overestimating Americans' appetite for change. This is not an inevitable feature of unified party control, but the risk rises when a party has been out of power for some time, when it wins at what appears to many of its supporters to be a historic turning point, and when a party has a high degree of internal ideological unity. Republicans and conservatives frequently reminded Americans, in the form of a warning, that the president promised to "fundamentally transform" the United States. The Tea Party movement arose in large part due to a conviction that Obama had improperly interpreted his election victory as a mandate to expand the size and scope of the federal government and change the nature of American society. Although not occurring under unified government, this assertion of over interpretation of a mandate was similar to the charge launched by Democrats against the Republican Congress of 1995 to 1996. That Congress was the first in forty years with Republicans in control of both chambers. It is perhaps not surprising that when a rare event happens, those applauding the event tend to read more into it than the political reality can sustain. Voters may be simply throwing out the previous bums who did a poor job, but victors often want to see their victory as a mandate for fundamental change. Not infrequently, they are rebuked by voters in a subsequent election.

Parties, as stated above, provide presidents with valuable leadership resources. They also, as networks of groups and activists, can produce legislative victories that may lead to electoral defeat. This pattern has been recurrent in US history. Presidents are in a difficult spot—their party network provides them leadership resources, but their dependence on their parties also means that it is difficult to discipline the party's multifaceted groups and maintain the public perception that the party is focused on the most important problems as identified by the public. Indeed, at times the Obama administration was criticized in strong terms by various components of the Democratic coalition—from environmentalists to gays and lesbians, labor union leaders, immigration reform advocates, antiwar activists, and advocates for a stronger government role in health care. All accused the president of caving in to opponents at key times or not giving their concerns the proper weight.

Party coalitions are dynamic, not static. Managing them is a difficult task and sometimes involves deprioritizing the interests of some coalition members and sometimes even supporting policies directly in opposition to the stated views of these members. In some extreme cases, such as the Democrats on civil rights in the 1960s or the Republicans and Democrats on trade policy after 1970, the parties flip their positions entirely as they try to mold a new coalition or respond to the changed viewpoint of another coalition member (Karol 2009). The savviest presidents learn how to use the party network to achieve their leadership goals while making sure the party does not appear to be veering too far outside the major concerns or the ideological boundaries shared by most Americans. Barack Obama succeeded on the first task, but struggled on the second.

THE PATH AHEAD

One does not have to look back far to find another president who had a rude awakening after electoral success. By the time of his second inauguration in 2005, George W. Bush could look back and see gains for Republicans in the House and Senate. He earned a reelection victory that was more comfortable than his initial victory, though thin by historical standards. Urged on by his chief strategist, Karl Rove, the president thought big, believing he could forge a durable Republican realignment. He unapologetically claimed a mandate and famously noted that he had earned "political capital, and now I intend to spend it" (Stevenson 2004). But midway through 2005, observers were already noting that the president seemed to be failing on several policy fronts and that Republicans were growing more restless. By 2006, Republicans had been booted out of their House and Senate majority.

After his election victory and two years of legislative accomplishment, President Obama now faces two years of divided government, with the Republicans in control of the House and in a stronger position in the US Senate. He also has fewer allies on the state level, where Republicans gained control of additional governorships and picked up the largest gains of either party in state legislatures in sixty years. Legislative successes will require the kinds of concessions to Republican positions that were unnecessary in his first two years. But Republicans themselves now face the challenge of being an opposition party with governing authority; a party that wants to stop the president's agenda but will need the president's help to advance any of its own initiatives. Republicans will have incentives at times not to cooperate with Democrats, and Democrats will have the same with Republicans—some issues, they will calculate, are best left to the next election rather than accepting a half-best

solution now. Republicans will introduce bills in the House that they know Democrats in the Senate cannot support, and Democrats in the Senate will do the same to Republicans in the House. Party debate will flourish over many issues, but centrally it will revolve around the scope of government involvement in the economy, the issue around which party conflict has so often thrived, and what those beliefs demand of citizens and government. The parties will debate the appropriate balance between liberty, property, democracy, equality, opportunity, freedom, and other fundamental American beliefs. The president will, if history is a guide, try to portray himself as the reasonable leader above the squabbling parties.

This is the party politics to which we have become accustomed. Over the twenty years from Bill Clinton's election in 1992 through 2012, there have been eight years of unified control and twelve years of divided control. In the twenty years before that, there were only four years of unified control and sixteen years of divided control. So the country has been here before, and the business of government will go on. President Obama spent two years enjoying the fruits of his partisan advantages; the fruits of the Democrats' strong historical position in the dynamics of the party system, the size of the president's victory in 2008, and the victory of his fellow partisans in Congress. For the next two years, he would need to learn to lead without as strong a partisan base in Congress. Victories will be fewer, and more of the victories will not be ideal from the president's point of view. But his party still has some of the forces of secular realignment working in its favor, and with a growing economy, the president would position himself well for reelection in 2012.

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