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Barack Obama and the Partisan Presidency: Four More Years?

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Pundits wring their hands that Obama has not lived up to the "post-partisan" promise of the 2008 campaign, decrying that he has failed to "bring us together" or bring about "hope and change." They also tie themselves in knots trying to explain how his (fairly innocuous) personality explains the triumphs and failures of his administration. Both of these are futile efforts. Obama was elected as a partisan and has governed as one. This should not come as a surprise. Nor is it a success or a failure. And it is not primarily the result of Obama's personality, or of choices he has made. Instead, Obama is a quintessential figure of the era of the "Partisan Presidency," where presidential personality arguably matters less than does party polarization. (Of course, his presidency was also deeply shaped by the extraordinary context he inherited — two wars, an economic crisis, a popped housing bubble).

Traditionally, political scientists have tended to see the powerful presidency of the 20th and 21st centuries as the enemy of strong parties. Through an "objective" media, presidents appeal directly to voters, over the heads of party leaders, seeking a non-partisan image. They build ad hoc coalitions of support in Congress without regard to party lines. They preside over an executive branch staffed by non-partisan experts more interested in policy than politics. Presidents show little interest in their party's performance in down-ballot races, let alone its long-term fate. All of these propositions held true for presidents of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. But since 1980, we have seen the rise of a new kind of presidency – a Partisan Presidency. The division of the Obama era is not an exception to the rule or the product of a recent change.

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The "Modern Presidency" and the Rise of the "Partisan Presidency"

Most scholars of the presidency agree that a distinctive "modern presidency" emerged in the first half of the 20th century, first under Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, then, most fully, under Franklin D. Roosevelt. Generally speaking, the heyday of the "modern presidency" (roughly from the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt through those of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon) saw political parties in decline, in the electorate, in government, and as organizations.

The past quarter century has seen a reversal of the trend toward weaker relationships between presidents and their parties. Beginning with Ronald Reagan, recent presidents have increasingly relied upon their parties for support both in the electorate and in the Congress. They have presented a more distinctively partisan image to voters and have found it difficult to cultivate support from the opposition. They have sought to lead their parties, using the national committees to garner support for their policies, campaigning extensively for their parties' candidates, and even seeking to mold their parties' futures.

While some of the elements of the partisan presidency emerged under Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan defined the Partisan Presidency as surely as Franklin Roosevelt did the Modern Presidency. In an era when many look back to the 1980s as a less divisive period, we must remember what a polarizing figure Reagan himself was in his times. He sought to remake the Republican Party in his conservative image and to vault it into majority status; in this mission, he repeatedly campaigned for Republican candidates. He used the Republican National Committee to win support for his programs, and he worked closely with Republican leaders in Congress, while House Democrats devolved more authority unto Speaker "Tip" O'Neill. Reagan polarized the electorate

more than any of his predecessors, even Richard Nixon. Through centralization of policy decisions and appointment of ideological loyalists, Reagan managed to make the executive branch a tool of conservative governance.

"Modern presidents" such as Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon received substantial cross-party support; their campaigns downplayed partisan themes in favor of invocations of national unity. In the post-partisan 1970s, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter struggled to unify their parties, and Carter lost about one-quarter of Democrats in 1980. By contrast, "Partisan Presidents" must operate in an environment of increased party loyalty and growing ideological polarization. According to the National Election Studies, the 2000, 2004 and 2008 elections showed the highest level of party loyalty in history.

The "approval gap" is the difference between the percentage of the president's partisans who approve of his performance and the percentage of members of the opposite party who do. Before 1980, presidents rarely experienced an approval gap over 40 points; Eisenhower and Kennedy enjoyed popularity across party lines; while Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter confronted significant opposition within their own party. "Partisan presidents" have experienced a much larger "approval gap" than their predecessors. By contrast, Ronald Reagan had an average approval gap of 52.9 points; Bill Clinton experienced one of 55 points, falling below 50 points in only two quarters. George W. Bush experienced the largest approval gaps ever measured, he was the first president to ever exceed 70 points, which he did during most of the 2004 campaign.

If the "reformed" presidential process of the 1970s produced nominees such as Carter and George McGovern who had had little contact with their party establishments, the "post-reformed" process of the past quarter century has produced nominees backed by party insiders during the "invisible primary." If Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford and even Richard Nixon had to confront challengers for re-nomination, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama had no such grounds for concern.[1]

Many scholars of the presidency see as the model for presidential-press relations as the amiable back-and-forth between reporters and presidents like Franklin D. Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy; they may also envision the reliance of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon on televised addresses, presumably aimed at the nation as a whole. Neither paradigm fits the reality of media relations in this partisan era. Since Nixon, administrations have tried to actively manage the news through the White House Office of Communications. With the rise of the Internet and cable television, the audiences for presidential addresses, except in crisis situations, have been declining; there is some evidence, at least for George W. Bush, that those audiences have also become more partisan. Evidence continues to mount that presidents can do little to shift public opinion. Under those circumstances, and given the polarized state of public opinion, why shouldn't presidents focus their public relations efforts on motivating support from their loyalists? In a fragmented media landscape, some news outlets now target distinctive ideological audiences, and traditional notions of professionalism seem on the wane.[2]

Modern Presidents often could not depend upon their congressional parties for legislative support. Those parties were usually divided; the North–south split within the Democratic Party was most notable, but there were divisions among Republicans as well, such as those between internationalists and isolationists after World War II, which forced Dwight Eisenhower to look to Democrats for support of his foreign policy. But the period of the "Partisan Presidency" coincides with the rise of polarization and party leadership in Congress. In an era of increased partisanship, presidents find more difficult to win support across party lines in Congress. But it is also true that presidents are now better able to rely on their congressional party for support than their predecessors could. There is some evidence that united and divided control matter more in a polarized era than they did a generation ago. The voting records and constituencies of congressional Democrats and Republicans increasingly diverge; party leaders wield more clout than they once did.

Modern Presidents led an executive branch where party politics played a diminishing role. Technocrats, career civil servants, and personal loyalists replaced patronage hacks in key jobs. Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower relied heavily on the "neutral competence" of the Bureau of the Budget in shaping their domestic policies. Lyndon Johnson had nonpartisan task forces, dominated by academics, formulate his leading policy proposals. Richard Nixon appointed as his first

[1] Neither Clinton nor Reagan appeared to be a "lock" for re-election a year in advance. In the Gallup Poll taken 1 year before the election, Clinton had an approval rating of only 52 % and Reagan stood at just 49 % — not much higher than Gerald Ford's 44 % standing in the fall of 1975. Barack Obama had an approval rating of only 43 % — actually weaker than Ford. Despite their potential vulnerability, neither Clinton, Reagan nor Obama attracted an in-party challenger. (George W. Bush's approval rating in November 2003 was 54 %; his father in November 1991 stood at 59 %). Data from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

[2] According to the Pew Research Center, 13% of Republicans – and 17% of conservative Republicans – listen to Rush Limbaugh "regularly," while only 2% of Democrats do. Two out of five Republicans watch Fox News "regularly," compared to 1 in 6 Democrats. 1 in 5 Republicans watch Bill O'Reilly, only 3% of Democrats do. By contrast, 16% of Democrats report watching MSNBC regularly, compared to 6% of Democrats. CNN, NPR and *The New York Times* also had heavily Democratic. Pew Research Center, "Americans Spending More Time Following the News; Ideological News Sources: Who Watches and Why." September 12, 2010. http://www.people-press.org/2010/09/12/americans-spending-more-time-following-the-news/

domestic policy advisor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Democrat and veteran of the two preceding administrations; his first Cabinet was so ideologically diverse as to lack coherence.

But Nixon also set the pattern for presidents taking greater control of the executive branch. Frustrated by the tendency of appointees to "go native" and by continuing power of civil servants and clientele groups, Nixon sought to remake his administration in 1972–73. He centralized power in the White House and in a handful of trusted aides, he increased the power of the White House Personnel Office, he appointed loyalists to cabinet and sub-cabinet positions, he tried to use the Office of Management and Budget to rein in regulatory agencies. While Nixon's "administrative presidency" strategy was often interpreted as a means of a president "governing alone" without the support of a political party, it can also be a means of turning the executive branch into a tool of partisan governance, as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush discovered. Both presidents selected ideologically sympathetic subordinates, centralized policy and personnel decisions in the White House, and used the OMB to curb regulatory excess.

Barack Obama and the Partisan Presidency

Barack Obama pledged to end an era of partisan division, but his ambition seems to have borne little fruit. His rhetoric of national unity appealed to a public desire for harmony – but there is no policy consensus that could give form to it. Many parts of his personality serve to alienate his conservative opponents. A biracial, urbane Ivy League-educated intellectual grates on the sensibilities of some Americans. But one could make similar statements about an often-inarticulate Texas evangelical born to oil wealth or a one-time McGovern supporter and admitted marijuana user with a history of marital infidelity.

As a presidential nominee, Obama benefited from a united Democratic Party eager to regain the White House. He also was aided by the rise in Democratic party identification during George W. Bush's second term. Despite his "post-partisan" rhetoric, Obama has polarized the electorate much as Bush did, and has advanced an agenda that has so far proved to have little cross-party appeal. Obama's presidency has featured an "approval gap" similar to that found for his predecessor. For example, the Gallup Poll found during the week of April 30- May 6, 2012 that 83% of Democrats approved of Obama's performance, but only 14% of Republicans did – an approval gap of 69%. His average approval gap, according to Gallup, has exceeded 60 points since March 2010. This places him firmly in George W. Bush territory.

In some ways, Barack Obama marks a shift from the two decades of insider control of presidential nominations. Hillary Rodham Clinton was the "establishment" choice for the Democratic nomination, and Obama benefited from the support of many liberal activists alienated by her refusal to apologize for her vote on the Iraq War. On the other hand, he also enjoyed the backing of such quintessential insiders as Tom Daschle and Richard M. Daley; nor did his candidacy open deep ideological divisions within the party, since Obama and Clinton agreed on virtually all issues. (If journalistic accounts are to be believed, Obama also received the behind-the-scenes support of Senate Majority Harry Reid and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi). Despite the months of struggle, Democrats united fairly easily during the summer of 2008. After his victory, Obama stocked his administration with numerous veterans of the Clinton administration, including his leading opponent for the nomination.

Barack Obama originally sought to reach out to congressional Republicans, but his efforts bore virtually no fruit. Two cycles of Democratic triumph had nearly eliminated the moderate Republicans who might have been disposed to cooperation. Republican opposition to Obama's major initiatives – the economic stimulus, "cap-and-trade," financial regulation, and health care reform – was virtually unanimous. Obama has had to rely entirely on Democratic votes to support his program. While he has been subject to the divisions within the party, he has also benefited from the desires of his co-partisans for a Democratic president to succeed.

Voting on Party Lines

The 2008 elections produced the second highest level of party loyalty among all presidential elections included in the National Election Studies. According to exit polls, 89 % of Democrats voted for Barack Obama and 90 % of Republicans backed John McCain. NES data shows 92% of "strong Democrats" voting for Obama, along with 83% of "weak Democrats," and 88% of Democratic-leaning independents. But Republican loyalty was also very strong: Obama received the support of 2% of "strong Republicans," 10% of "weak Republicans," and 17% of Republican-leaning independents.

High percentages of Republican voters rated Obama as "very liberal," or perceived him as a "socialist," a secret Muslim, or has having not been born in the United States. They placed Obama farther to the left on an ideological index than Republicans had done for any previous Democratic presidential candidate. Only 4.4 % of Obama's voters were Republicans – the lowest ever percentage of opposite-party identifiers ever found within a winning candidate's coalition. But Obama's victory did also require significant support from the political center – backing that abandoned

him, to a large extent, in 2010. States were polarized at the highest level in 60 years; 13 states gave McCain support that was 10 percentage points higher than his national average.[3] 22% of the nation's counties – mostly rural, downscale, Southern, and predominately white – gave McCain a higher percentage of their vote than they bestowed upon George W. Bush in 2004.

In 2008, Obama benefited from an environment highly favorable to his party. Democratic party identification had increased significantly during George W. Bush's second term; Bush himself had an approval rating of about 25% on Election Day. The percentage of "strong Republicans" in the electorate fell by 4 points between 2004 and 2008. Obama's 2008 performance owed much to this growth in Democratic identification, especially among young Americans. Democrats won across-the-board victories in 2008, taking 8 seats in the Senate and 21 in the House of Representatives.

But they suffered devastating losses in the 2010 midterms, losing six seats in the Senate and 63 in the House. Democrats suffered deeply from Obama's unpopularity at a time of high unemployment: 55% of voters expressed disapproval of the president (they voted 84 % Republican), while 41% strongly disapproved (they voted 90 % Republican). It was a strongly nationalized election, in a fashion that hurt Democrats badly: 37 % of voters said that they intended their vote to show disapproval of Obama – not surprisingly, 92% voted GOP. The midterm electorate was also much more Republican, conservative, white, old, and religious than its counterpart in 2010.

Partisans remained overwhelmingly loyal, following the pattern established in recent decades. But Independents were also critical to the GOP victory. After favoring Democrats in the past two congressional cycles, Independents voted 56 %-37 % Republican. Much like his predecessor in his second term, Obama found himself backed only by his partisan base, abandoned by Independents, and facing a united and motivated opposition. Obama was hurt by a weak economy, but also inflicted political damage upon his own party through the passage of health care reform, which seems to have been especially troublesome for Democrats representing more conservative constituencies.

A Nation Still Divided

As president, Obama soon found himself confronting the same partisan divide that his immediate predecessors had confronted. Even during his relatively strong honeymoon period in the first few months of 2008, he confronted the largest "approval gap" of any incoming president. Republicans were united in their opposition to Obama throughout his first 3 years in office. According to Gallup, after the summer of 2009, Obama's approval rating among Republicans would never rise above 25 %, and would often fall into single digits.

A changing media environment also affected Obama's relationship with the American public. Presidents had long sought the ability to go around the media "filter," often by communicating with local news outlets, which were generally less critical than their national counterparts. But the "new media" of the Internet, talk radio, and cable television reduced the influence of traditional journalists. Audiences for both newscasts and presidential addresses have continued to decline, except during crises, as viewers migrate to their many other media options. During his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama employed "social media" such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to reach voters; as president, he continued these practices. In a fragmented media world, Obama cultivated outlets likely to reach his supporters: the African-American magazine *Ebony*, the left-leaning cable network MSNBC, and various liberal bloggers.

But the same fragmentation and polarization also empowered his most ferocious opponents. A Pew study in July 2011 found that 1 in 3 Republicans listed Fox News as their main source of information; this was up slightly from the George W. Bush years. (Only 9% of Democrats reported Fox as their primary news source). The same poll showed record numbers of respondents seeing the press as biased and inaccurate. As in previous administrations, nothing encourages partisan media than being out of power. Conservative commentators increased their visibility during Obama's first year and half in office. Rush Limbaugh continued to be a favorite target for the venom of progressive activists. But the shift in the media world can be overstated, Martha Joynt Kumar finds that the Obama White House still emphasizes contact with the "old media," while the president has rarely granted interviews to Internet-only outlets. Obama also found that no amount of media "spin" could overcome the grim reality of the American economy during a period of high unemployment and slow growth.

Obama as Party Leader

Obama famously ran as an agent of "change," but that change took different forms in the minds of different individuals. For many voters, "change" meant ending the Iraq War and restoring the economy to health. The first has been accomplished, the second much less so. For the American Left that provided much of Obama's base during the

[3] For example, McCain won Oklahoma with 66 % of the vote, 20 points higher than his overall performance. While most of the 13 states were relatively small (only Tennessee has electoral votes in double digits), they elected 19 Republican senators, almost one-half of the GOP conference in 2009–10.

Democratic nomination struggle, "change" meant policy change that went well beyond the incrementalism of Bill Clinton. While this constituency has often been dissatisfied, Obama has been able to deliver on a remarkable array of progressive policy outcomes. For those who imagined partisan division to be the product of ephemeral misunderstandings, "change" meant the healing of the national wounds opened through three decades of polarized politics. This "change" has emphatically not been realized, and what one questions whether this is an achievable goal.

Obama himself was torn between two visions: one of "post-partisan" unity, the other of achieving the programmatic goals of the Democratic Party. His presidential campaign gave rise to Organizing For America, a permanent grassroots organization located within the Democratic National Committee. OFA sometimes kept its distance from party "regulars," but supported the Obama agenda and turned out voters for Democratic candidates in 2010. Obama himself often used partisan rhetoric, attacking conservative "dogma," excoriating Republicans for "obstructionism," and tying his opponents to the discredited George W. Bush Administration.

A Partisan Government

When he assumed the presidency, Barack Obama confronted a Congress that presented both sides of the partisan era. On the one hand, Democrats controlled both the House and the Senate by huge margins that mostly eliminated the need for any Republican cooperation. These were the largest congressional majorities enjoyed by either party since 1979–80. While tremendous Democratic gains in 2006–08 had inevitably brought in many centrists (there were 49 House Democrats representing districts won by John McCain), the party caucuses were still more homogenous than the majorities confronted by Bill Clinton or Jimmy Carter. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi were both savvy inside operators (though not necessarily attractive public faces of their party) committed to Barack Obama's agenda.

As a result, Obama was able to oversee the passage of one of the most impressive legislative packages since the New Deal.[4] Nearly all these accomplishments were enacted through near-party-line votes. In 2009, Obama received the highest congressional support score of any president ever; his backing on the Hill fell slightly in 2010, but was still among the top 10 ratings ever. Such are the returns available to a president in the partisan era facing friendly majorities on Capitol Hill. Obama was able to achieve these results despite having a personality ill-suited to legislative backslapping.

But Obama also confronted a united Republican minority that had little reason to cooperate with him. With the GOP devastated by major losses during George W. Bush's second term, few Republicans hailed from constituencies friendly to Obama or his policies. Given the intense feelings of the Republican base, GOP legislators who sought compromise found themselves faced with a primary challenge, under attack from the conservative press, or shunned in the party cloakroom.

Drawing upon the "post-partisan" rhetoric of his presidential campaign, Barack Obama did engage in outreach to congressional Republicans and to conservative intellectuals. After the GOP takeover of 2010, Obama again tried to find common ground, for a time, building a constructive relationship with Speaker of the House John Boehner. But in both cases, the gap between the two parties remained too large for any amount of personal good will to overcome.

Not only did Republicans win control of the House of Representatives in a landslide in which they won 63 seats, but they had an unusually specific mandate to oppose Barack Obama's policies. According to one study, Republicans gained about 25 seats due to Democratic members' votes for health care reform – perhaps enough to swing control of the House, certainly enough to make the difference between a closely divided body, and one clearly under GOP control. The new Republican House also proved to be unusually ideologically extreme, and provoked a confrontation over raising the nation's debt limit in the summer of 2011.

While Obama promised "change" and to overcome division between the parties, his presidency sometimes appeared to be a generic Democratic administration of the partisan era. Top positions tended to go to veterans of the Clinton Administration, Democratic staffers on Capitol Hill, and onetime employees of the Center for American Progress (achieving its mission of becoming the "Democratic Heritage").[5] Relatively few major positions went to personal friends of Obama.

The Future of the Partisan Presidency

Should Barack Obama win a second term, he will probably have to spend much of his political capital defending the

[4] These included a far-reaching economic stimulus package, greater regulation of financial markets, open service by lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the military, appointment of two liberal justices to the Supreme Court, and, above all, the long-sought enactment of universal health care coverage.

[5] This group would include Leon Panetta (OMB Director and White House Chief of Staff under Clinton, CIA Director and Secretary of Defense under Obama), Eric Holder (Deputy Attorney General under Clinton, Attorney General under Obama), Rahm Emanuel (a top White House staffer for Clinton, White House Chief Staff under Obama), and, of course, Hillary Rodham Clinton.

accomplishments of his first, especially health care reform. The Republicans will likely maintain control of the House of Representatives, blocking the passage of any legislation backed by Obama. Given the continued use of the filibuster, little action should take place in the Senate, regardless of who has nominal control. Even if he is re-elected, Obama is unlikely to win many Republican votes, giving little reason for the congressional GOP to slacken its hostility. The success of conservatives in Republican primaries, most notably in ousting six-term Sen. Richard Lugar (IN), sends a clear message that moderation reaps few dividends.

The second Obama administration should resemble the first, in its domination by Democratic veterans. Many assume that Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004, would serve as Secretary of State. Given the likely gridlock on Capitol Hill, Obama will likely continue to use the powers of the executive branch to accomplish policy change.

Mitt Romney won the Republican presidential nomination as the choice of party insiders, and his advisors are mostly drawn from the GOP establishment. As president, we would expect him to mostly appoint Republican veterans of previous administrations and of Capitol Hill, rather than personal loyalists. He has already made clear his desire to enact the agenda of congressional Republicans. The GOP should continue its hold upon the House of Representatives, and may gain control of the Senate. Given that Romney would likely be elected by a small margin, few Democrats will have much incentive to cooperate with him. Senate Democrats will likely use the filibuster to block Romney's major initiatives. But those vulnerable Democrats elected from states likely to back Romney – e.g., Mark Pryor (AR), Mary Landrieu (LA), Max Baucus (MT) – may seek to compromise with the new administration, much as some had done with George W. Bush.

Implications of the Partisan Presidency

Observers of American politics often find it tempting to dwell upon the idiosyncrasies of individual presidents. But one can understand the Obama Administration best without focusing on the personality of the man in the Oval Office. Inevitably, the crises Obama inherited shaped many of his actions in office. But he also sought to fulfill the programmatic agenda of the Democratic Party, and accomplished much of it. He also operated in a context of extreme polarization, which he was helpless to alter. Sometimes this environment aided Obama; congressional Democrats proved loyal to his policies, while Democrats in the electorate remained a solid base of support. But Republicans throughout the political system remained united in their hostility, and one strains to imagine a situation in which they would have behaved otherwise. In this era, whoever wins the White House, his (or her) administration will be shaped by the context of the partisan presidency.

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