What Happened to Post-Partisanship? Barack Obama and the New American Party System

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Ascending to the presidency in the midst of a severe economic crisis and an ongoing war on terrorism, Barack Obama faced numerous political and policy challenges. We examine the responsibilities he faced in assuming the received tasks of modern presidential leadership amid a polarized political system. To a point, Obama has embraced partisan leadership, indeed, even further articulating developments in the relationship between the president and parties that Ronald Reagan had first initiated, and George W. Bush built upon. Thus Obama has advanced an executive-centered party system that relies on presidential candidates and presidents to pronounce party doctrine, raise campaign funds, mobilize grassroots support, and campaign on behalf of their partisan brethren. Just as Reagan and Bush used their powers in ways that bolstered their parties, so Obama's exertions have strengthened the Democratic Party's capacity to mobilize voters and to advance programmatic objectives. At the same time, presidential partisanship threatens to relegate collective responsibility to executive aggrandizement. Seeking to avoid the pitfalls that undermined the Bush presidency, Obama has been more ambivalent about uniting partisanship and executive power. Only time will tell whether this ambiguity proves to be effective statecraft—enshrining his charisma in an enduring record of achievement and a new Democratic majority—or whether it marks a new stage in the development of executive dominion that subordinates party building to the cult of personality.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Democratic Senator Barack Obama of Illinois offered voters "Change We Can Believe In." But his extraordinary two-year quest for the White House left unclear what kind of change he proposed. In substantial part, Obama ran an idealistic campaign that sought to reprise the modern presidency's role as a transcendent leader, one who could govern independently of political parties. He pledged to bring Americans together, overcoming the raw partisanship that had polarized the Washington community for nearly two decades and divided the country during George W. Bush's eight years in office.

Yet the hopes Obama aroused for a "post-partisan era"[1] obscured the partisan practices that he had adopted in his quest for the White House—practices which, in the sharply partisan and ideological environment of the day, were a key to his historic victory. Many of Obama's campaign promises, such as major government investments in health care, education, the environment, and alternative energy, conformed to long-standing Democratic commitments. Furthermore, Obama and his advisors saw enormous potential in the national party politics that President George W. Bush had practiced—even modeling their organizational efforts on the techniques that Republicans had pioneered in 2004. Eschewing the Democrats' traditional reliance on organized labor and other constituency organizations to mobilize the party faithful, Obama built a powerful, centralized grassroots organization linked to the national party that played a crucial role in this *Democratic* electoral victory.[2] In this sense, Obama's campaign seemed to advance an executive-centered party system—one initiated by Ronald Reagan and continued by George W. Bush—that relies on presidential candidates and presidents to pronounce party doctrine, raise campaign funds, mobilize grassroots support, and campaign on behalf of their partisan brethren.[3]

As president, Obama continued to walk a fine line between the post-partisanship that appealed to many of his young, idealistic followers—as well as moderate Democrats and independents—and the partisan politics practiced with aplomb by his Republican predecessor, and favored by many in the Democratic base. His legislative strategy has tacked between bipartisan efforts to reach out to Republican members of Congress and more partisan appeals to shore up the support of Democrats. At the organizational level, Obama has established his grassroots "machine" as an essential, but partially independent,

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component of the Democratic National Committee. The president has exhibited a willingness to work collaboratively with Congress—especially Democratic leaders in the House and Senate—on legislative issues. But he has also shown enthusiasm for the independence afforded the modern administrative presidency.

If Obama hoped that this ambivalent partisanship would allow him to strengthen his political position and pave the way to a second term, he was to be sorely disappointed. Rather than consolidating the coalition that brought him to victory in 2008, Obama has often found himself "vilified by the right, castigated by the left and abandoned by the middle."[4] The 2010 midterm elections, especially, were a disaster for the president, returning the House of Representatives to the Republicans and eroding the Democrats' margin in the Senate. With the president's approval ratings at an all-time low and the economy continuing to sputter, Obama has even described himself as the "underdog" in the 2012 presidential race.[5]

Why have the audacious hopes aroused by Obama's 2008 campaign been so bitterly disappointed? Is Obama simply a poor politician or weak leader, as some analysts have suggested, or is there a more systematic explanation for his perplexing behavior?[6] There are undoubtedly many factors shaping Obama's relationship to the Democratic and Republican parties—not least of which are the challenges involved in being the first African-American occupant of the office. Many scholars have probed the dynamics of American political culture and public opinion to demonstrate that race has sharpened the partisan divide during Obama's presidency.[7] But there are also structural factors at work, and a close examination of Obama's presidency provides important lessons for understanding the challenges that any contemporary president must face.

Our central point is that Obama's political difficulties have stemmed from his efforts to reconcile two competing approaches to presidential leadership—a venerable method of executive leadership exalting nonpartisan administration of the welfare and national security states, and an emergent style of partisan presidential leadership featuring vigorous efforts to accomplish party objectives. In so doing, he has sought to navigate the complex terrain of a "new American party system," characterized by high expectations for presidential leadership in a context of widespread dissatisfaction with government, strong and intensifying political polarization, and high-stakes battles over the basic direction of domestic and military programs.

In seeking to resolve these tensions, Obama has often adopted a nonpartisan leadership approach, calling for incremental reform and democratically guided experimentation in public policy. Obama's efforts to counteract what he perceives as the puerilities of partisanship have deep historical roots in presidential politics—primarily, though not exclusively, on the Democratic side. In an important sense, Obama has tried to reprise the Progressive tradition that informed the presidencies of the Roosevelts, Woodrow Wilson, and Lyndon Johnson—one that views nonpartisan administration as an essential means for achieving the public interest.[8] Obama's nonpartisanship is also an effort to respond to the yearning of many Americans, especially moderates and independents, for relief from the harsh ideological battles that have roiled American politics over the past three decades.

Yet cast against the recent development of an executive-centered party system, it may no longer be feasible for presidents to stand apart from partisan combat. As Marty Cohen, David Karol, and Hans Noel have recently noted, "the American people may want a president who will rise above party and govern as the president of the whole nation. Parties, however, do not."[9] Obama has not only responded to, but also abetted the partisan polarization and sharp conflict over the scope of the American welfare and national security states that characterize this new American party system. Arriving on the national scene just as partisan polarization was cresting, and conscious that Republican predecessors such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush had scored major victories for conservatism through partisan leadership strategies, Obama realizes that leading his party is essential for accomplishing the far-reaching, and broadly liberal, reforms he envisions. Indeed, with Republicans in steadfast opposition to his agenda, and in possession of formidable elite and grassroots organizations, Obama has been pressed to help the Democrats match the Republicans' partisan strength—to marshal the base through more confrontational Democratic leadership. Just as Obama's post-partisanship is attractive to the politically unaffiliated, so his concessions to polarization have appealed to many in the Democratic base, who view the partisan struggle with Republicans in Manichean terms and long for more confrontational Democratic leadership.

Rather than view Obama as a poor politician, or as a hapless victim of events, then, we argue that he is an ambitious politician caught between the conflicting institutional and electoral imperatives of contemporary party politics. Obama faces the daunting task of reconciling two conflicting leadership impulses, toward compromise and confrontation, in a political context in which both present considerable risks and offer only modest rewards. In truth, it is unclear how Obama, or any president, could easily harmonize these discordant leadership strategies in the midst of conflicting signals from the public. This conundrum not only sheds light on Obama's tortured relationship to the Democratic Party, but also on the challenges that executive-centered party politics poses to representative constitutional government. There is a great risk that presidents like Obama might seek to resolve the tensions between partisanship and governing by resorting to unilateral executive power that threatens both democratic deliberation and the rule of law. As recent presidential history shows, the freedom of action offered by administrative politics—especially in matters of national

security—has often tempted presidents (including ardent party-builders such as Reagan and Bush) to undertake projects that circumvent channels of collective decision-making, and threaten to violate legal and constitutional principles. Although Obama has not yet suffered an administrative scandal on par with those of these predecessors, he has engaged in executive maneuvers in the service of both partisan and nonpartisan objectives that raise important questions about the Constitution and the practice of American democracy. The question remains, therefore, whether the uneasy presidential partisanship practiced by Obama offers a reconciliation of the nonpartisan Progressive style of leadership cultivated by his Democratic forebears and the partisan mode of leadership practiced primarily by his Republican predecessors, or if it marks, instead, a new stage of executive aggrandizement that subordinates partisanship to presidential ambitions and administration.

Understanding Obama's Leadership in Historical and Theoretical Perspective

Over the past several decades, the dynamics of partisan conflict have changed dramatically, but scholars of American politics have paid scant attention to how this transformation has reconfigured the relationship between presidents and parties. A venerable stream of historically-oriented research focuses on the rise of the (ostensibly nonpartisan) "modern" administrative presidency, beginning in the Progressive era and advancing dramatically with the New Deal. Progressive reformers sought to replace the Congress-centered partisan politics seen as favoring "special interests" with a nonpartisan administrative politics, exalting the presidency as the "steward of the public welfare,"[10] in Theodore Roosevelt's famous phrase. As scholars such as Jeffrey Tulis, Theodore Lowi, Peri Arnold, John Coleman, and Stephen Skowronek have shown, the presidency was gradually invested with new powers to manage the national government during this period, and imbued with new expectations for rhetorical and policy leadership. Indeed, aided by the rise of new mediums to communicate with their constituents, the modern presidents (particularly Democratic chief executives such as Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson) practiced a politics that emphasized their personal relationship with the American people and their special responsibility for the nation's wellbeing.[11] While the possibilities—and limitations—of such presidential rhetorical leadership have been recently explored by Samuel Kernell, George Edwards, B. Dan Wood, and Brandice Canes-Wrone, another vein of contemporary research focuses on the administrative powers of the modern presidency.[12] Scholars such as Terry Moe, William Howell, David Lewis, Kenneth Mayer, Andrew Rudalevige, and James Pfiffner have examined how modern presidents have employed their administrative powers—through executive orders and memoranda, signing statements, and staffing practices, for example—to accomplish their objectives.[13]

As is apparent from this brief overview, the large and diverse body of research on the modern presidency tends to foreground the impressive administrative and rhetorical capacities now associated with the office, while downplaying presidential contributions to party politics.[14] Indeed, at the high tide of the modern administrative presidency from the end of World War II through the Great Society, partisan politics seemed to be at low ebb. The "New Deal Party System," as the period's dominant alignment has been labeled, was characterized in large part by Progressive ideals: high public trust in government, muted partisan and ideological conflict, and relative agreement about the direction of domestic and foreign policy. This system did not, however, feature robust political parties, nor did it foster a high level of citizen engagement in politics, leading some scholars to contend that the "modern" administrative presidency—and the welfare and national security states over which it presides—was, by nature, hostile to partisan politics.[15]

Yet this period of low partisanship has since been revealed by scholars of public opinion and congressional politics as an exceptional one.[16] Since the late 1960s, in contrast, we have witnessed the gradual emergence of a different set of characteristics—a configuration we label the "new American party system."[17] In important ways, this system is the mirror image of the New Deal version. Public satisfaction with government, for example, has given way to skepticism of government performance and disgust with political conflict, as scholars such as Marc Hetherington, John Hibbing, and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse have shown.[18] In addition, the positions taken by members of Congress, as well as many ordinary citizens, have become more polarized on partisan lines, as work by Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, Sean Theriault, and Alan Abramowitz demonstrates.[19] Consequently, the direction of domestic and foreign policy has become a matter of intense partisan and ideological conflict. Moreover, the national party organizations have grown stronger—challenging the notion that they were incompatible with the modern presidency—and citizen engagement with politics has revived, in part because polarized parties "rediscovered grassroots tactics for voter mobilization" as the programmatic stakes of elections increased.[20]

Indeed, far from exhibiting indifference or hostility towards parties, the "modern" presidency appears to have become more partisan itself. Yet, while researchers have closely examined how Congress and public opinion operate in this new party system, the role of the president has only recently begun to receive attention, as Charles Cameron and Jeffrey Cohen have noted.[21] B. Dan Wood's work, for example, offers an exhaustive study of presidential rhetoric over the past six decades, demonstrating that

presidents have often advanced partisan and ideological objectives rather than simply appealing to the median voter.[22] Likewise, Daniel Galvin has shown that "modern" Republican presidents from Eisenhower onward have strengthened their party's organizational capacity, fundraising, candidate recruitment, and grassroots mobilization, contributing significantly to the resurgence of their party and the rise of political polarization.[23] In previous work, we have also pointed to such partisan presidential leadership, examining how George W. Bush—building on Reagan's innovations—sought to fortify the party's grassroots organization, enhance its fundraising capacity, and expand the appeal of its ideology.[24] Considered together, these works suggest that at least some "modern" presidents—especially Republican presidents such as Reagan and Bush—have made efforts to identify with, and strengthen, their political parties, in order to help accomplish their programmatic and electoral objectives. Indeed, given the centrality of presidents such as Reagan and Bush in stimulating the Republican revival of the 1980s–2000s, we argued that the party system was becoming executive-centered, with partisan activity revolving around the political needs of the president, even to the extent of denigrating broader collective purposes.

These differing visions of the presidency—as nonpartisan administrator and as partisan leader—we therefore contend are not mutually exclusive. Rather than replacing the president's role as nonpartisan administrator—embodying the vision of "stewardship" handed down from the Progressive Era, New Deal, and Great Society—the president's role as party leader has been layered atop it. Indeed, because support for each of these divergent roles can be found in the contemporary political environment, they share an uneasy coexistence. The administrative role is strengthened by the deep entrenchment of the institution of the modern presidency, the popularity of many individual government programs (if not the government as a whole), and, as Laurel Harbridge and Neil Malhotra have recently shown, the disgust of many citizens with the strident partisanship of political elites.[25] The partisan role is succored by the rise of partisan and ideological polarization among elected officials and growing partisan differences in public opinion over domestic and foreign policy. Torn between the received commitments of the welfare and national security state, on the one hand, and sharp partisan conflict over the appropriate uses of national administrative power, on the other, the key challenge for presidents in the new party system is *reconciling* these conflicting roles.

This perspective, we argue, sheds considerable light on the puzzling leadership of President Barack Obama—where these differing threads have been noted, but not considered as intertwined. James Kloppenberg for example, has argued that Obama is inspired by a Progressive political vision in which democratically-guided experimentation and the transcendence of narrow partisan ideologies are core ideals.[26] Combined with his sense that many citizens desire compromise, Obama's pragmatism has often led him to favor consensus-based reforms and technical solutions to problems. But Obama has not stood apart from the partisan fray. Contrary to recent studies by Jacob Hacker, Suzanne Mettler, and Daniel Carpenter that portray Obama as a prisoner of partisan rancor, we argue that he has actively—if sometimes reluctantly—embraced the role of party leader in order to further his programmatic and electoral goals.[27] He has contributed to the partisanship that characterizes the contemporary political environment—and even, in a sense, bestowed bipartisan legitimacy on the New American Party System and its executive-centered party politics. It is Obama's efforts to synthesize the conflicting imperatives of post-partisan management and partisanship in a chaotic political environment, rather than lack of skill or confusion about his objectives, that has given rise to his complex—and often awkward—style of political leadership.

Obama's Partisanship and the Rhetorical Presidency

Obama's rhetoric offers a window into his efforts to mediate between post-partisan and partisan leadership styles and thereby negotiate the conflicting imperatives of the New American Party System. Rather than choosing one or the other approach—or vacillating between them in a purely opportunistic manner—Obama repeatedly attempted to join post-partisan and partisan appeals in his campaign speeches and presidential addresses.

Obama's rhetoric—which borrowed liberally from Progressive criticisms of party politics—often gave sustenance to the widely-held view that he was seeking to overcome traditional divisions between Democrats and Republicans.[28] Sensing that many Americans had grown weary of the rancorous partisanship of the Bush era, Obama and his advisors sought to speak to Americans' desire to rise above party disagreements and join hands in addressing the nation's problems.[29] As he explained in innumerable campaign speeches, the partisan battles of the 1990s and 2000s had left both parties exhausted, unable to articulate solutions to the pressing challenges posed by rising health care costs, a floundering education system, and an unsustainable energy policy.[30] Obama also routinely expressed concern that partisanship was driving ordinary Americans away from politics and eroding their faith in the nation's democratic institutions.[31]

Against the harsh partisanship and disillusionment of contemporary politics, candidate Obama presented an image of consensual politics grounded in the wisdom of "the people." As he told the large and enthusiastic audience that gathered in Springfield, Illinois in February 2007 to hear him announce his candidacy for the presidency, "In the face of politics that's shut you out, that's told you

to settle, that's divided us for too long, you believe we can be one people, reaching for what's possible, building that more perfect union."[32] Obama's theme of partisan transcendence was joined to national renewal. "There is something happening when people vote not just for the party they belong to but the hopes they hold in common," he told his disappointed supporters on January 8, 2008 (the night of Hillary Clinton's come-from-behind victory in the New Hampshire primary). "We are ready to take this country in a fundamentally new direction. That's what's happening in America right now."[33]

As president, Obama continued to employ transcendent language that harkened back to the nonpartisan rhetoric of Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson.[34] Drawing from the book of Corinthians, Obama's inaugural address announced that "the time has come to set aside childish things," not least of which were "the worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics."[35] In more prosaic terms, Obama declared in his first address to a joint session of Congress, dedicated to health care reform, that "in a time of crisis, we cannot afford to govern out of anger or yield to the politics of the moment. My job—our job—is to solve the problem."[36] Moreover, Obama repeatedly portrayed the major policy proposals of his presidency—from health care reform to financial regulation to deficit reduction—in a classic Progressive vein, as pragmatic efforts to address major problems facing the nation, rather than as partisan policy planks.[37]

Yet Obama's paeans to nonpartisan unity have been joined uneasily with harsher partisan rhetoric that appeals to, and helps mobilize, his core Democratic constituencies. While he spoke to citizens' desire to overcome partisan divisions, candidate Obama also regularly castigated the "worn out dogmas" of his opponents, especially the "tired and misguided philosophy that . . . we should give more to those at the top and hope that their good fortune trickles down to the hardworking many." Beyond this suggestive critique of Reagan Republicanism, Obama ticked off the perceived failures of the Bush administration with words designed to motivate partisan Democrats. "For eight long years," he exclaimed, "our President sacrificed investments in health care, and education, and energy, and infrastructure on the altar of tax breaks for big corporations and wealthy CEOs—trillions of dollars in giveaways that proved neither compassionate nor conservative."[38] Even as he ostensibly eschewed partisanship, therefore, Obama's rhetoric exhibited his deeper faith in the view that government could be a powerful force for remedying social injustices and protecting citizens against the vagaries of the market—a faith which, in the polarized environment of the day, was destined to enthrall Democrats and arouse the ire of most Republicans.

Since becoming president, Obama has continued to critique core Republican commitments and policies while championing a reform vision that squares comfortably with traditional Democratic commitments and stimulates enthusiasm among the party faithful. Beginning with his first major address to a joint session of Congress, the president has insisted that the economic and social difficulties facing the nation were due to in large part to the failed policies and ideology of the previous administration, setting the stage for a bold Democratic agenda.[39] Indeed, Obama trumpeted a long-term program of structural reform, which he dubbed the "New Foundation." He proposed to build a stronger regulatory framework for the economy; to transform access to higher education into an entitlement; to harness renewable energy that reduces climate change and creates new jobs; and, most important, to achieve major health care reform—the signature program of his first two years in office.[40]

In the polarized political climate of the day, this agenda met with immediate and predictable Republican opposition, which only intensified with the rise of the conservative Tea Party movement. Although the president made rhetorical and policy gestures in a largely unsuccessful effort to win Republican support, he also repeatedly used the bully pulpit to inveigh against Republican "obstructionism" and "bad faith" and thereby steel Democrats for a partisan programmatic assault. Efforts to win enactment of health care reform and financial regulatory reform legislation were punctuated by campaign-style events in which the president directly challenged the Republican Party's ability to govern the nation. By the middle of 2010, in fact, Republican obstructionism became a regular theme of the president's weekly radio addresses to the public, which included titles such as "Republicans Blocking Progress," "Filibustering Recovery and Obstructing Progress," "Moving Forward vs. Moving Backward," and "The Republican Corporate Power Grab."[41]

Nor did the unfavorable 2010 election results dissuade Obama from using partisan rhetoric to criticize Republicans' ideas and policy proposals. Seeking to rally popular support for core Democratic commitments, he excoriated conservative Wisconsin Republican Paul Ryan's plan to partially privatize Medicare as a means of reducing the federal government's long-term debt.[42] Soon thereafter, Obama upped the partisan ante: by declaring that he would veto any plan that reduced the debt solely through spending cuts—that is, without raising taxes on the wealthiest Americans—Obama sought to discredit Republicans by portraying them as standing with the most privileged citizens against the interests of the vast majority of Americans. Obama's nascent reelection effort is using partisan language to mobilize the president's supporters as well, calling on supporters to donate funds so that his campaign can "build the organization President Obama needs to beat Republican challengers who are full-time candidates, able to gather money and support without day jobs to worry about."[43]

The divergent strains in Obama's rhetoric—at one moment transcendent, and in the next, partisan—reveal an effort to mediate between the competing imperatives attending presidential leadership in the new American party system. Unable, and unwilling, to commit entirely to either a transcendent or a partisan rhetorical stance, Obama has repeatedly joined them, sometimes artfully, at other times less so. And yet, if Obama achieved a partial balance between transcendent and partisan themes, his policy leadership often vacillated awkwardly between these poles, creating widespread confusion about his intentions and leading many citizens to question his ability to lead the country.

Tacking between Bipartisan and Partisan Policy Leadership

True to his promise to transcend partisan divisions, Obama repeatedly sought to attract support from Republicans for his initiatives, frustrating liberal Democrats who feared that the president was conceding too much in pursuit of bipartisan support. At the same time, Obama's fundamentally Democratic agenda was anathema to all but a few members of the staunchly conservative Republican caucus. Amid an array of fierce policy battles over the financial stimulus, the budget, and health care reform, the president ultimately had to rely on Democratic majorities to enact his legislation. Consequently, even as Obama scored major policy victories, his leadership exacerbated party tensions in the Capitol and alienated many citizens turned off by the partisan rancor.

The saga over the budget dramatically illustrated the challenges attending Obama's efforts to reconcile the administrative and partisan presidencies in a fractious era. After pushing through a stimulus package (with only three Republican votes), Obama presented a budget proposal so ambitious that some analysts compared it to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program. Indeed, the budget adhered closely to liberal Democratic priorities, calling for major investments in health care, education, and alternative energy, a cap and trade scheme for curbing greenhouse gas emissions, a tax cut for middle class families, and a significant increase in taxes on the wealthy.[44] In a testament to the sharp polarization characteristic of the new party politics, Republicans immediately went on the offensive, charging the administration with profligacy and waste.[45] Revealingly, Obama deflected the Republicans' partisan thrust with a partisan parry of his own, using a primetime news conference and a series of subsequent speeches to rally Democratic legislators to support his proposal.[46] The budget was accepted in early April 2009—with most of its major spending priorities intact—but without a single Republican vote in either the House or the Senate.

And yet, as the American economy continued to sputter—and as massive budget deficits destabilized Western European nations such as Portugal, Ireland, Iceland, Greece, and Spain—Obama began to back away from the expansionary fiscal policy favored by most Democrats. The president's FY 2011 budget called for targeted investments in health care and education, but it also proposed a three-year freeze on other discretionary domestic spending.[47] Furthermore, when members of Congress failed to agree to the creation of a national commission to explore ways of addressing the record federal deficit, Obama created one on his own authority, and gave it a green light to consider all means necessary to reduce the deficit. In November 2010, the deficit commission's co-chairs—conservative Democratic operative Erskine Bowles and former Republican Senator Alan Simpson (WY)—released a draft proposal to address the deficit that seemed to privilege spending cuts rather than tax increases, leading the outgoing Democratic Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi (CA), to declare it "unacceptable."[48] Although Obama showed little sign of recommending a wholesale implementation of the proposal, he risked further antagonizing his base by proposing a freeze on non-defense discretionary spending, including cuts to programs like Pell Grants for low-income students, and energy support for low-income families.[49]

But even as he appeared to move away from liberal Democratic commitments and toward a position more congenial to moderates and political independents, Obama continued to use partisan maneuvers in an effort to set the parameters of the budget debate. While the administration engaged Republicans in a series of budget negotiations—reinforcing liberal Democrats' fears that he would accept major cuts in federal spending—he also repeatedly and sharply criticized Republican efforts to restructure popular social programs, leading debt commission co-chair Alan Simpson to accuse the president of "poisoning the well."[50] Partisan skirmishes led to a crisis in August 2011, when the parties' failure to reach agreement on raising the debt ceiling risked default on the nation's debt. A compromise was finally reached—just before the Treasury deadline—which raised the debt ceiling by $2.4 trillion and authorized a congressional panel to develop a plan to trim an equal amount from the budget over 10 years. However, neither the plan, nor the president's role in the debate, satisfied anyone. While liberal Democrats felt the president had sold out their commitments, Republicans claimed that the president's partisanship had obstructed a more comprehensive resolution to the crisis.

Obama's awkward blending of nonpartisan and partisan maneuvers continued to dog budget negotiations after the August deal. Because the status of the FY2012 budget remained unresolved, the government again lurched toward default in September 2011. This time, agreement was reached with slightly more time to spare. Although he appeared to take a harder partisan line in this round, Obama's uneasy balancing of bipartisan compromise and

partisan leadership again managed to antagonize both liberals and conservatives. The president was sharply criticized by Democrats for failing to push for tax increases as a way of addressing the debt and protecting social programs, even as he was excoriated by Republicans for threatening to veto any final budget agreement that would not include a tax hike on corporations and the wealthy.[51]

As contentious as these budget debates proved to be, it was the epic battle over the reform of the nation's health care system that brought the tension between Obama's post-partisan tendencies and his more partisan leadership strategies into full relief. From the start, Obama's involvement in health care reform sought to appeal all sides: his party base, independents, and Republicans. His determination to be the "last president" to address health care reform—and, in particular, his expressed support for a public health care option to compete with private providers—spoke to liberal Democrats' hopes for a fundamental break from the patchwork, employment-based system of health care that denied millions of Americans access to coverage. However, the plan sponsored by the Obama administration also sought to appeal to moderates and independents turned off by the partisan politics of the day. It sought not to transform the existing health care system (for example, with the "single payer" system that many liberals desired), but, rather, to buttress it with a system of mandates, subsidies, and regulations.[52] Obama also appealed to budget hawks in both parties by vowing to support only proposals that did not add to the deficit.

As the various health reform bills wended their way through Congress, the president's efforts to reconcile post-partisan leadership and partisanship intensified. On one hand, desirous to achieve programmatic reform and conscious of many citizens' yearning for compromise, Obama made notable efforts to bridge the partisan divide. He shifted position to support a proposal, offered by John McCain during the 2008 campaign but opposed by many liberal Democrats and union members, to help finance health reform by limiting the tax exclusion for employer-provided health benefits.[53] He also accepted a proposal—vigorously sought by the insurance industry—that would require individuals to purchase private insurance (the individual mandate) as a mechanism for extending health care coverage.[54] Most important, as resistance to health reform among Republicans and centrist Democrats intensified in the waning months of 2009, Obama gradually retreated from his support for the public health care option favored by most Democrats, especially in the House, in a bid to consolidate the support of moderates in both parties.[55]

On the other hand, aware that that he had staked much of his political capital on securing health care reform, Obama used partisan strategies to help move the legislative process forward as it became clear that virtually all Republicans would oppose even modest reform legislation. In the summer and fall of 2009, the president made numerous public appearances at rallies and town hall meetings to whip up support for reform among Democrats, and leveraged Organizing for America (the president's former grassroots campaign organization, discussed in more detail below) to pressure members of Congress into supporting the legislation.[56] As the debate dragged into the early months of 2010, the president intensified his partisan assault. Obama's ballyhooed bipartisan "health care summit" in February 2010 was hardly an effort to hear Republican alternatives for reform. Taking place in the wake of the Massachusetts special election that sent Republican Scott Brown to the Senate—thereby reducing Democrats' majority to 59 seats—the summit sought to dramatize Republican intransigence, and thereby justify the use of the Senate's budget reconciliation process, circumventing the filibuster rules of the Senate, to push a *Democratic* bill through Congress.[57] The final push for health reform featured Obama in a series of campaign-style rallies in Pennsylvania, Missouri, Ohio, and Virginia, in which an impassioned president repeatedly taunted Republicans for failing to take on the responsibility of expanding coverage and reducing health care costs.[58] In the immediate aftermath of Obama's multi-state swing, health care reform was passed into law through the unorthodox—and esoteric—budget reconciliation process that exploited the Democrats' firm control of each chamber of Congress. Although Republicans' unwillingness to "deal" on health reform gave eloquent testimony to their partisan approach to legislating, Obama's leadership throughout the health care debate—and his acceptance of the use of the reconciliation process to enact the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act into law—clearly showed a partisan streak as well. Shaped by new style partisan politics, the administration's signal legislative achievement became the first major social welfare program to pass both legislative chambers without a single Republican vote.

The partisan rancor generated by this tortured process would haunt Democrats at the polls, playing a major role in the 2010 midterm debacle. After the election, Obama returned to the awkward balancing of compromise and partisanship that had marked the early campaign over health care reform. At the level of programmatic detail, the administration made important concessions to critics of the law, allowing some business and union groups to secure waivers from certain legal requirements, and abandoning its effort to implement the long-term-care insurance provision of the law.[59] Even as he made some important programmatic concessions to powerful critics of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, however, Obama made health care reform a Democratic rallying cry in the early stump speeches of his 2012 presidential campaign.[60] Indeed, his re-election campaign website suggests that the president is seeking to buy time with short-term pragmatic compromises, while

using the specter of Republican evisceration of the law to help "build a campaign to win in 2012 so we can make further progress to ensure health care is affordable and available for every American."[61]

The budget battle and the struggle over health care reform illustrate the challenges Obama has faced in attempting to reconcile the competing demands of presidential leadership in the new party system. In each case, Obama sought to combine the roles of post-partisan conciliator and partisan leader; and in each, the president's uneasy synthesis fostered intense partisan conflict that exacted a heavy political price. Given the conflicting demands of the executive centered party system, however, it is hard to see how Obama (or any president tasked with navigating the difficult terrain of contemporary American politics) could have avoided such a difficult balancing act.

Organizing for America: A New Democratic "Machine," or a Cult of Personality?

The uneasy blending of nonpartisan and partisan leadership styles that pervaded Obama's rhetorical and policy leadership has also permeated his approach to the Democratic Party organization. The president's most impressive organizational innovation—the grassroots machine "Organizing for America"—maintains a complex relationship with the Democratic Party, in some ways a personalized instrument of Obama's ambition, and in others a potential boon for the party as a whole. Obama's grassroots campaign—widely viewed as one of the characteristic features of his bid for the presidency—was rooted in the complex realities of presidential campaigning in the New American Party System.[62] In part, Obama's grassroots campaign was a response to the partisan polarization characteristic of the contemporary political scene. The closeness of the partisan divide and the competitiveness of elections created a context in which successfully mobilizing voters at the grassroots could spell the difference between victory and defeat, as George W. Bush's impressive grassroots apparatus demonstrated during the 2002 and 2004 elections cycles.[63] As a relative unknown challenging Hillary Clinton, the favorite among most regular Democrats for the party's presidential nomination, Obama and his campaign advisors calculated that a strong grassroots effort capable of mobilizing previously-quiescent voters was essential to the campaign's success.[64]

Drawing on lessons they learned from studying the 2004 Bush-Cheney campaign apparatus, which joined sophisticated Internet networking techniques to old-fashioned canvassing, Obama and his campaign strategists developed their own grass roots organization. This strategy ultimately amassed 13 million e-mail addresses (including 3 million donors), involved 2 million active participants, and helped generate 35,000 local social network groups on MyBarackObama.com.[65] Once supporters' information was acquired, the campaign exploited modern communications tools—e-mail, text messaging, YouTube, and podcasts—to explain the candidate's positions, fire up campaign enthusiasts, encourage supporters to recruit friends and relatives, and alert activists to rallies, fundraisers, and other campaign events. Combining centralized direction and neighborhood activism, the Obama team asked supporters to use standard campaign materials and messages, but also encouraged them to personalize their efforts by organizing their own events, posting their own campaign testimonials, and bundling donations from friends and colleagues. Social network sites organized on MyBarackObama.com further buttressed grassroots efforts, with network members agreeing to canvass in the areas they represented. Like the Bush campaign in 2004, the Obama organization and its paid staffers in battleground states monitored the efforts of local volunteers and held them accountable for reaching performance targets.[66] The online campaign was directly tied to a sophisticated get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort. Campaign officials trained thousands of local precinct captains, recruited through the Internet as well as local party and activist networks, to lead grassroots efforts to register and mobilize potential Democratic voters who would be unlikely to turn out unless they were contacted personally.

Like his rhetoric and policy leadership, however, Obama's organizational efforts blended partisan elements with a liberal measure of post-partisanship. Indeed, the grassroots campaign incorporated numerous features calibrated to appeal to voters weary of the partisan combat of the Bush years. Acutely aware that many of Obama's grassroots supporters were motivated not by loyalty to the Democratic Party, but by the "change" that Obama's candidacy symbolized, the campaign frequently eschewed traditional state and county fundraisers, and did not aggressively seek the endorsements of party leaders during the Democratic primaries.[67] Instead of appealing to the party's base, Obama and his advisors sought to "change the demographics of the campaign" by activating non-voters and by attracting as many independents and disaffected Republicans as possible.[68] During the general election campaign, Obama continued to underscore his independence from the Democratic Party. For example, his campaign instructed the Democratic National Committee not to advertise on TV, cable, or radio on Obama's behalf.[69] His campaign also rejected direct assistance from the liberal "527" organizations closely affiliated with the Democratic Party so as to claim that it was not beholden to interest groups.[70] Finally, as the *Washington Post* reported, Obama and his team "turned down a series of requests for appearances on behalf of down-ballot Democrats—the better to avoid situations in which his political brand could have been tarnished."[71]

Envisaging a post-election role for OFA, the president-elect, newly appointed chair of the Democratic National

Committee (DNC) Tim Kaine, staffers, and volunteers engaged in extensive internal discussions, finally resolving that OFA should be absorbed into the official Democratic Party apparatus as a significant part of the national party's expanded field operations in the states.[72] The merger between OFA and the Democratic Party was not seamless, however. There was ongoing tension between party regulars and community organizers, reflecting Obama's own ambivalence about whether OFA should be deployed as a personal organization or as the grassroots arm of the DNC. In a nod to the concerns raised by opponents of the merger, who had hoped to keep the organization separate so that it could remain an independent power base for the president, OFA was incorporated as a distinct entity within the DNC rather than being subsumed entirely under it. As a result, OFA enjoyed "departmental" status, retained control of its own e-mail list, and was managed by Obama campaign staffers, rather than DNC personnel.[73]

The distance between Obama's grassroots machine and the regular Democratic Party apparatus was evident during the first year of Obama's presidency. The organization usually avoided the partisan rhetoric and policy positions that appealed to Democratic activists in order to reach out to Republicans and independents.[74] The independence of OFA from the regular party apparatus also was evident at the grassroots level. Local volunteers, encouraged by "best practices" training sessions, often referred to themselves as representatives of "Barack Obama's Organizing for America," rather than as Democratic Party activists.[75] OFA's tenuous link to the party was put in stark relief by its mishandling of the pivotal 2009 campaign to fill the seat of Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy, whose death put the Democrats' "filibuster-proof" 60 vote Senate majority in jeopardy. Democratic candidate Martha Coakley's own miscues undoubtedly contributed to her defeat by Republican Scott Brown. However, because the president and OFA only belatedly came to Coakley's aid—long after it was clear that her campaign was failing—some party officials blamed Obama for failing to support the Democrats' collective interest in sustaining the party's Senate majority.[76]

Yet, if OFA messages and strategies were not always in tune with congressional Democrats and progressive activists, Obama's "family," as one lead staffer referred to the grassroots organization, has advanced objectives valued by party regulars.[77] When the Democrats' campaign to enact health care reform legislation bogged down beginning in the summer of 2009—threatening their ability to deliver on their most memorable platform plank—OFA played a critical role in sustaining momentum for reform. It collected more than 2 million declarations of support for the president's plan, as well as more than 238,000 "health care stories" from OFA members that dramatized the problems of the existing system. OFA also encouraged supporters to write letters to the editor on behalf of health reform, ultimately tallying more than 250,000 such letters sent by the end of the year. Finally, the organization mobilized supporters to lobby members of Congress. In the most prominent example of OFA grassroots lobbying—an October 20, 2009 "day of action"—members made more than 315,000 phone calls to members of Congress in support of health care reform.[78] In the end, the president, DNC chair Kaine, as well as OFA staff and volunteers strongly believed that the health care bill would have died without OFA's "robust communication with members of Congress through phone calls, letters and meetings," as one staffer put it.[79] Thus, even as the organization distanced itself from the Democratic Party, it served as a critical contributor to the Democrats' premier programmatic achievement between 2009 and 2010.

OFA's ambiguous relationship with the Democratic Party reflected Obama's tortuous efforts to reconcile pragmatism and strong party leadership in an era of both popular yearning for compromise and widespread political polarization. Paralleling the fight for programmatic achievement, the ideal of post-partisanship gradually succumbed to the gritty realities of sharp partisan conflict in the run-up to the 2010 elections. Facing a tough economy, declining approval ratings, and increasingly vigorous Republican opposition, President Obama and OFA moved in a more partisan direction. In April 2010, OFA announced a new "Vote 2010" initiative, backed by $50 million in OFA/DNC funds, to mobilize voters to support Democratic congressional candidates.[80] Between June and October of 2010, OFA sought to revive Obama's grassroots army to register voters, raise funds, staff phone banks, and canvass on behalf of Democratic candidates.[81] Notably, unlike its earlier approach, which emphasized the organization's independence from the Democratic Party, OFA's "Vote 2010" used explicitly partisan appeals to induce members to engage in myriad grassroots activities.[82]

The president himself embraced a more partisan role during the 2010 campaign. This partisan turn culminated in a series of large "Moving America Forward" rallies in California, Connecticut, Illinois, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—in all, attended by at least 250,000 people—at which Obama repeatedly proclaimed that the choice before voters was between "moving backward" with Republican policies and "moving forward" with Democratic ones.[83]

The campaign suggested that, with his congressional majority at stake, Obama was willing to embrace party leadership with a determination that rivaled the fervent partisanship of his predecessors Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. In the end, of course, OFA was fighting against an overwhelming Republican tide. Nonetheless, OFA officials contend that the "Vote 2010" effort helped Democrats in some close Senate races—especially Michael Bennett's win in Colorado—and contributed to

Democratic gubernatorial victories in California, Illinois, and Oregon.[84] As a mark of the White House's faith in OFA, no staff members were laid off after the election, an important sign to volunteers that the president continued to value their grassroots efforts on behalf of his political and programmatic commitments.[85]

All indications suggest that Obama intends to reprise OFA's grassroots organizing role in the upcoming 2012 elections. As the 2012 campaign gets underway, however, it remains unclear whether OFA will continue to provide resources and organizational muscle for Democratic congressional and gubernatorial candidates, or will remain primarily an extension of the *president's* programmatic and political ambition.[86] While the DNC advertises Obama's campaign, there is hardly a mention of the Democratic Party on the official Obama campaign website. This ambivalence is also evident at the grassroots. Some volunteers who worked in congressional campaigns in 2010 fretted that the merging of OFA and regular organizations detracted from their commitment to community organizing on behalf of Obama and his programs.[87] Facing an angry and polarized electorate with his own political future on the line in 2012, Obama may eschew the partisan turn of the 2010 campaign in favor of a more conciliatory approach in order to regain the support of pivotal independent voters.[88]

Executive Power in Domestic Affairs

Partisan leadership is hardly foreign to the realm of electioneering in which OFA resides, but management of the federal bureaucracy is a different arena, one in which the modern president's claims to transcend partisanship were nurtured. Yet even here, Obama's administrative maneuvers reveal efforts to reconcile the conflicting imperatives of the new party system. Indeed, far from committing wholeheartedly to either an administrative or a partisan approach to governing, Obama has blended the two in a complex, and often unwieldy, mix. Faced with declining public approval, a struggling economy, and an impending presidential election, however, Obama may be tempted to retreat further into the politics of executive administration in the coming months. History suggests that this is a path fraught with danger: the presidencies of both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush were tarnished by aggressive administrative actions that stretched the bounds of constitutional propriety. Though he has so far avoided constitutional crises of the scale that blemished the Reagan and Bush presidencies, Obama faced a managerial crisis during the BP Gulf oil spill in the summer of 2010, and, in general, his administrative politics shows considerable signs of strain.[89]

On one hand, Obama has used some of the unilateral powers of the presidency—such as executive orders and memoranda—in order to service important Democratic constituencies. In his first few days in office, for example, President Obama reversed a number of important domestic and foreign policies promulgated by the Bush administration with the stroke of the pen, in order to satisfy Democratic allies in the environmental and labor movements.[90] As resistance to its agenda from congressional Republicans has increased, the administration has vowed to use such tools at its disposal to accomplish policy objectives favored by Democrats.[91]

On the other hand, Obama has asserted vigorous authority to exercise power independently of his Democratic base in Congress. In organizing the White House Office, he appointed a number of policy "czars" with broad authority to "cut through—or leapfrog—the traditional bureaucracy" in matters of climate change, economic policy, health care, housing, and education.[92] Such a top-heavy administrative organization relegated some cabinet secretaries and agency heads, who tend to have stronger ties to Congress and party constituencies, to the status of weak and, often, isolated middle management.[93] Not surprisingly, the concentration of policy responsibility in the West Wing sometimes resulted in efforts to contravene legislation passed by Congress, even when it was controlled by the Democrats. Notably, although candidate Obama sharply criticized Bush's use of "signing statements" to ignore provisions of laws enacted by Congress, President Obama embraced the controversial practice during the first eight months of his presidency.[94] After one signing statement received an overwhelming *bipartisan* rebuke in the House of Representatives, Obama agreed to limit his future use of this administrative tool. But he did not abandon his self-proclaimed right to shelve congressional acts. Rather than openly challenge legal provisions with which it disagrees, the administration declared it might quietly ignore them, using opinions from the Office of Legal Counsel to guide its decisions.[95] Furthermore, after the Republicans took control of the House of Representatives following the 2010 elections, Obama resumed the practice of openly issuing signing statements to rescind provisions of laws that he opposed.[96]

Obama's approach to regulatory affairs has exhibited the same complex mix of partisan and post-partisan elements that marked his administrative maneuvers. In some ways, Obama views regulatory policy—central to the Progressive ideal of enlightened administration—as a form of party building. Indeed, Obama has suggested that he wants to counter Republican anti-regulatory dogma with a Democratic collective commitment to pragmatic problem solving.[97] This strategy to establish the Democrats as the guardians of a policymaking state underlies Obama's New Foundation—his ambition to revitalize venerable Democratic regulatory commitments to give the federal government a vital role in combating the vicissitudes of American capitalism. Consequently, the Environmental Protection Agency under Obama has assumed a much more assertive posture, reversing dozens of relatively lax Bush-era rules in

order to more vigorously regulate water and air pollution, and claiming the authority to regulate greenhouse gases as environmental pollution. The Food and Drug Administration also adopted an approach characterized by "more warning letters, more regulatory activity," and "a much more rigorous approach to regulating products on the market," according to Kenneth Kaitin of the Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development.[98] Of equal importance, with the enactment of major health care and financial reforms, Obama attempted to lay the foundation for a new regulatory era that could significantly expand the role of the executive branch in the these sectors.

Even so, Obama has not merely employed Progressive means in the service of partisan ends. In fact, the president's commitment to executive "stewardship" has led his administration to embrace themes of management and performance long trumpeted by Republicans.[99] Obama's appointment of University of Chicago law professor Cass Sunstein as head of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), who had expressed some admiration for "cost-benefit" analysis in his preconfirmation writings, seemed to signal a desire to encourage a more nimble regulatory approach than that favored by many Democrats, while still promoting health, safety, and environmental protection.[100] Furthermore, building on the initiatives of George W. Bush, Obama established an "Agenda for Government Performance" that put an emphasis on the formal evaluation of existing programs and the measurement of agency progress toward stated objectives.[101] Not surprisingly, Obama's emphasis on public management has sometimes set him at odds with Democratic lawmakers: indeed, his call after the 2010 elections for a leaner regulatory bureaucracy in order to promote economic growth raised red flags among liberal Democrats who feared that it would result in the evisceration of environmental and workplace safety regulations.

In sum, Obama's administrative politics have combined Progressive and partisan impulses in complex ways, defying easy categorization. But his emphasis on "enlightened administration" threatens a relapse into some of the pathologies of the New Deal and Great Society eras—the forging of an institutional partnership, comprised of bureaucratic agencies, congressional committees, and interest groups, that insulated regulatory policy and administrative politics from political parties, elections, and public opinion.[102] Obama's health care and financial reforms, for better or worse, hardly herald a new era of government mastery of these sectors. These are immensely complex programs that are likely to delegate many policy decisions to highly contentious but largely invisible "issue networks" that delegate many policy decisions to largely invisible issue networds that will attend to routine, but consequential, matters of the legislation without much intense political conflict or public awareness.[103] Indeed, as noted, such negotiations have already begun in the implementation of health care reform, as the Obama administration has liberally issued waivers that give select unions and employers, as well as several states, considerable leeway in determining the level and timing of benefits.[104]

More troubling still, it seems likely that the challenge of mediating between nonpartisan and partisan leadership may encourage Obama to retreat further into the politics of executive administration, especially as struggles between Democrats and Republicans intensify in anticipation of the 2012 elections. Recently, when Congress declined to reform the No Child Left Behind Act—the law, overdue for reauthorization, which requires states to hold schools accountable for their students' performance on standardized tests—the Obama administration began to cut deals with states that allow them to relax some of the law's central provisions.[105] Should such maneuvers become more frequent, Obama's administrative politics would risk short-circuiting the legislative process and implementing major reforms through means largely invisible to the public.

Executive Power and the War on Terror

If Obama's administration of the bureaucracy in the realm of domestic policy illustrates an ongoing, if sometimes awkward, effort to reconcile his Progressive and partisan impulses, his management of national security affairs provides strong evidence of his desire to transcend party conflict. One of the most telling anomalies of Obama's presidency is that the "change we can believe in" trumpeted on the campaign trail has "disappeared into the secret world of the post-September 11 presidency."[106] Obama's presidency already has produced several national security episodes of debatable constitutionality. There is a serious danger that the thankless task of harmonizing divergent leadership approaches may tempt Obama to retreat further into the realm of administrative politics in national security affairs, threatening similar breaches of legal and constitutional norms to those that tainted the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.

As a candidate, Obama drew a sharp contrast between the Bush administration's policies and those he would pursue as president: pledging to end the policy permitting torture of enemy combatants, close the Guantanamo Bay prison for detainees in the War on Terror; and, most importantly, end the war in Iraq.[107] The follow-through, however, has been mixed. President Obama has achieved important revisions to procedures surrounding interrogation and trial of enemy combatants, but the controversial practice of "rendition" continues, military commissions remain the basis of the trial system, and the Guantanamo facility remains open.[108] In Iraq, the administration successfully implemented its plan, first announced in February 2009, to draw down US forces—with tanks carrying the last combat troops rolling out of Baghdad in August 2010.[109] But efforts to "win" the war

in Afghanistan have proven less successful. Obama deployed almost 50,000 additional troops to Afghanistan over the course of his first two years in office, but the influx failed to substantially further US objectives.[110] Though envisioned from the outset as a temporary measure, Obama's willingness to expand this US military commitment and adopt a "surge" strategy suggested resemblance more than contrast with his predecessor.

Indeed, Obama has pressed his authority as Commander in Chief to the hilt in order to expand the scope of American military operations in the War on Terror.[111] He has embraced a sweeping interpretation of the "Authorization for the Use of Military Force" passed by Congress after the 9/11 attacks, arguing that the resolution gives the president authority to deploy preemptive strikes against suspected terrorists anywhere in the world. Consistent with this approach, the Obama administration has escalated Bush's use of "targeted killings," dramatically increasing the number of Predator drone attacks and expanding their use beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, to include other nations that housed al-Qaeda activities, such as Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen.[112] Indeed, when an American-born radical cleric, Anwar al-Aulaqi, was killed in a recent drone attack in Yemen, a *Washington Post* reporter concluded "Obama has taken a clear step beyond the Bush war on terror."[113]

Furthermore, the president has expanded on Bush's deployment of ground forces in a so-called "Secret War" to root out suspected terrorists.[114] According to reports, Special Forces and other military personnel may be deployed in up to seventy-five nations—up from sixty at the start of Obama's term in office—engaged in various military and counter-terrorism missions.[115] Of course, one of these operations resulted in a great victory for the administration: the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, during a Navy Seals assault on the al-Qaeda leader's compound in Pakistan. But this accomplishment—popular and justified as it was—dramatized the Obama administration's determination to maintain presidential predominance in the direction of American forces abroad.

Recent American operations in Libya confirmed this approach. In March 2011, ostensibly to protect Libyan civilians from the brutalities of dictator Colonel Muamar el-Qaddafi, Americans forces joined with NATO in intervening in that nation's civil war. Obama claimed the unilateral authority to direct American operations in Libya. Straining credulity, administration officials argued that the War Powers Resolution, which requires the president to report to Congress on the deployment of American forces, did not apply to the Libyan conflict because a state of "hostilities"—a trigger for the Act's provisions—did not exist.[116] Although the conflict concluded with the death of Qaddafi and the victory of the NATO-backed rebels, Obama's forceful claim of unilateral authority to engage the United States in a foreign conflict raised many of the same constitutional questions engendered by Bush's management of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Considered together, these episodes reveal the enduring appeal of unilateral authority in national security affairs to presidents seeking relief from the constraints imposed by the give-and-take of normal inter-branch relations. Although Obama and his national security advisors claimed that the overthrow of Qaddafi and weakening of al-Qaeda were accomplished with a new approach to war that relies on multinational rather than unilateral action and on surgical strikes rather than massive troop deployments, such a pragmatic approach to national security threatens to make extraordinary claims of executive authority a routine feature of American politics. Indeed, in the future, presidents such as Obama, frustrated by the conflicting demands of the new party system, will have little incentive to restore the rule of law in national security policymaking.

Conclusion

Observers of Barack Obama's presidency have often expressed confusion—if not outright dismay—about his leadership as president. Even as there is broad dissatisfaction with Obama's leadership, there is profound disagreement about the sources of the president's alleged deficiencies. Calling on Obama to "stop blaming and start leading," the conservative *Washington Times* blasted the president for failing to "put the needs of American workers and the American economy before his failed, liberal big-government dogma."[117] At the same time, many liberals and Democrats would agree with Andy Stern, former president of the Service Employees International Union, that Obama's biggest problem is that he has "erred on the side of trying to reason with unreasonable people [in the Republican Party], which seems to be the wrong strategy."[118]

Our core argument is that Obama's complex leadership approach reflects neither personal ineptitude nor confusion about political purposes, but rather a sustained effort to reconcile two competing philosophical and institutional legacies in a New American Party System that offers challenges to leadership at every turn. The first legacy is a transcendent form of leadership that champions the president as "steward of the public welfare," standing apart from political parties and exercising the tools of the modern administrative office to promote the public interest. Although the modern presidency has provided indispensible leadership in the face of domestic and foreign crises—and enjoys the support of citizens who long for relief from the partisanship of the new party system—the question remains whether the executive of a vast bureaucratic state can truly be the direct representative of the people.[119] This concern has only heightened in recent years with the emergence of what Andrew Rudalevige calls "the new imperial presidency," abetted by the gradual erosion of the constraints on executive prerogative that Congress enacted

after Watergate and accentuated by a seemingly permanent War on Terror.

Vigorous presidential party leadership emerged as a second legacy, especially during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, partly in response to the intensifying partisan polarization among members of Congress and the many party identifiers that marks today's new party system. These presidents forged new linkages between presidents and parties, suggesting the possibility of reinvigorated national parties and expanded public participation in politics. But they also tied expanded partisan leadership to the politics of executive administration, compromising their accomplishments with disturbing breaches of the rule of law.

As we have seen, the Obama presidency has not conformed fully to either of these archetypes; instead, it has attempted to join elements of each, resulting in an ambiguous, sometimes mystifying mix. Is Obama's ambivalent leadership style a good thing, a purposeful "third way" that offers presidents a viable leadership path in today's factious party system? Certainly there are admirable features of this approach. His campaign and presidency have advanced the development of an executive-centered party system that might eventually reconnect the modern presidency to the American democratic tradition. Improving on the innovative techniques developed by the Bush–Cheney campaign in 2004, Obama further refined a "reciprocal top-down and bottom-up campaign strategy" that mobilized followers to "realize their collective strength."[120] Indeed, for all the angst over the health care battle, which pitted OFA against the grassroots maneuvers of the conservative Tea Party movement, the struggle showed, as one Democratic congressional staffer observed, that "the age of apathy is over, and that's a good thing."[121] Furthermore, the White House appears to have accepted the challenge of joining OFA with the president's "partners" in the Congress.[122] With the health care fight, especially, Obama displayed effective legislative leadership; he has been willing and able to work closely with his fellow partisans, and to embrace a partisan leadership style, when necessary, to rally Democrats to support his legislative initiatives. And the 2010 midterm elections proved that Obama was willing to deploy OFA on behalf of Democratic congressional candidates, an effort that might have staved off a more devastating debacle for the president and his party.

Still, Obama's Progressive pragmatism—his belief that the "categories of liberal and conservative . . . are inadequate to address the problems [that the country faces]"—makes it unlikely that he will embrace the tasks of party leadership with the same alacrity that George W. Bush displayed in grasping the mantle of "Republican-in-Chief."[123] A substantial part of Obama's original political appeal stemmed from his determination to transcend traditional partisan and ideological divisions and establish a more consensual form of politics grounded in the authority of "We, the People." Although sometimes joined to enduring programmatic achievement, such a leadership posture may also deteriorate into a plebiscitary form of politics that promises more than a president can, or should, assume. Furthermore, Obama's example suggests that executive aggrandizement will continue to complicate efforts to realize the democratic potential of presidential leadership in the new party system. Far from rejecting the administrative legacies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, Obama has doubled-down in a bid for mastery. Executive leadership could thus devolve into a new form of administrative aggrandizement in which the party serves chiefly as an instrument of—rather than a check on—presidential power.

Nevertheless, Obama and his supporters have taken great pride in breaking all the conventional rules in electing the first African-American president, enacting major health care reform, and deploying a grassroots offensive in defense of the beleaguered Democratic forces in Congress. In this spirit, the presidency of Barack Obama might someday be viewed as an important stage in the development of the New American Party System, one that tests whether it is possible to fuse grassroots activism, collective responsibility, and executive prerogative.

Notes

1 Obama never uttered these words, and denied in his first full State of the Union message that he expected his election to "usher in . . . some post-partisan era." See Obama 2010a. But other than change, the message that resonated most in his campaign was his promise to convene a coalition of Democrats, Republicans and independents behind an agenda of sweeping change. See Weisman 2008; Cohen 2010.

2 See, for example, Galvin 2008.

3 On the advance of a nationalized party system during the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations, see Milkis and Rhodes 2007.

4 Baker 2010b.

5 Quoted in Calmes 2011b.

6 Wilson 2011b.

7 For example, see Sugrue 2010; Kennedy 2011; King and Smith 2011; Piston 2010; Abramowitz 2010. We see some interesting parallels between our study and the work of Jennifer Hochschild and Vesla Weaver (2010) on the policy and politics of multiracialism. Just as Obama's hopes to transcend partisanship were stymied by party polarization, so his effort to bridge the color line has aroused a resurgence of a populist identity politics, focused on fears of immigration and terrorism. See also Isaac 2010.

8 As Jeffrey Tulis has argued, Obama's pragmatism is best "understood as restorative in the sense that Obama extends and elaborates the New Deal of the

1930s and the Great Society of the 1960s, which itself was an elaboration of the New Deal"; Tulis 2011.
9 Cohen, Karol, and Noel 2008, 87.
10 This phrase comes from Roosevelt's address, The New Nationalism, August 1925, 1910; see Roosevelt 1926, Vol. XVII, 19.
11 Milkis 1993, 2009; Tulis 1987; Lowi 1985; Arnold 1987; Coleman 1996; Skowronek 2008.
12 Canes-Wrone 2006; Edwards 2012; Kernell 2007; Wood 2009.
13 Moe and Howell 1999; Howell 2003; Lewis 2003, 2008; Mayer 2001; Rudalevige 2005; Pfiffner 2008.
14 See, especially, Milkis 1993, Coleman 1996.
15 On features of the system see, for example, Milkis 1993; Lowi 1985; Skowronek 1997; Skowronek 2011; Coleman 1996. On hostility, see especially, Milkis 1993, Coleman 1996.
16 Han and Brady 2007.
17 Milkis and Rhodes 2007.
18 Hetherington 2005; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002.
19 McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Theriault 2008; Abramowitz 2010.
20 Nickerson, Friedrichs, and King 2006, 85.
21 Cohen 2011; Cameron 2002.
22 Wood 2009.
23 Galvin 2010; see also Galvin, 2011.
24 Milkis and Rhodes 2007.
25 Harbridge and Malhotra 2011.
26 Kloppenberg 2011.
27 Mettler 2010; Hacker 2010; Carpenter 2010.
28 For examples of this view, see Bai 2008; Drew 2008; Becker and Drew 2008; Nagourney 2008.
29 This strategy is explained in detail in Balz and Johnson 2009, 29–31. See also Plouffe 2009.
30 This theme is evident in "Republicans and Democrats," the first chapter of Obama's de facto campaign announcement, *The Audacity of Hope*; Obama 2006.
31 Obama 2008c.
32 Obama 2007a.
33 "New Hampshire Primary Night." Nashua, New Hampshire. January 8, 2008. See Obama 2008a, 210.
34 On the transcendent rhetoric of Roosevelt and Johnson, respectively, see Milkis 1999, ch. 4–5.
35 Obama 2009a.
36 Obama 2009b.
37 On health care reform, see Obama 2009f. Similar themes are apparent in his proposal to reform regulation of the financial sector. See Obama 2009e.
38 Obama 2008b.
39 Obama 2009b.
40 The New Foundation was announced in Obama 2009d.
41 Obama 2010c, 2010d, 2010e, 2010g.
42 See Obama 2011a.
43 See Smoot 2011.
44 Sanger 2009.
45 Hulse 2009a.
46 Hulse and Herszenhorn 2009; Hulse 2009b.
47 Milligan and Wirzbicki 2010.
48 Bai 2010. Pelosi is quoted in Nicholas and Mascaro 2010.
49 Calmes 2010; Feldman 2010.
50 Quoted in Jackson 2011. On GOP suspicion of the negotiations, see Stiles 2011.
51 Calmes 2011a.
52 Eckles and Schaffner 2010.
53 Harwood 2009; Herszenhorn 2009.
54 See PBS 2010.
55 See, e.g. Pear and Herszenhorn 2009; Kirkpatrick 2009; Stolberg 2009b; Baker 2009.
56 Quoted in Bellantoni 2009. For details on OFA's role in the health reform debate, see Melber 2010.
57 Budoff Brown and O'Connor 2010; Budoff Brown and Thrush 2010.
58 Obama 2010b.
59 See Millman 2011; Levey 2011.
60 Obama 2011c.
61 Obama for America 2011.
62 See Mendell 2007, 64–80; Remnick 2010, 125–181.
63 Milkis and Rhodes 2007.
64 Plouffe 2009, 21.
65 Heilemann 2009.
66 Doster 2008; Vargas 2008; Whoriskey 2008; Dickinson 2008.
67 Plouffe 2009, 46, 64, 70–71, 161, 182.
68 Plouffe quoted in Wolffe 2009, 70.
69 Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson 2010, 266.
70 Taddeo 2009.
71 Cillizza 2009.
72 Homans 2010; Dickinson 2010; personal interview with Tim Kaine, Chairman, Democratic National Committee, August 9, 2010.
73 Rutenberg and Nagourney 2009; Trish 2011.
74 See Bellantoni 2009.
75 Personal interview with OFA volunteer, June 9, 2010.
76 Dickinson 2010.
77 Personal interview with OFA volunteer, October 19, 2011.
78 Melber 2010.
79 Personal Interview with OFA staff member, August 4, 2010; personal interview with OFA volunteer, June 9, 2010.
80 Organizing for America 2010b; personal interview with DNC Chairman Tim Kaine.
81 The "2010 HQ Blog" on OFA's website offers a play-by-play of the "Vote 2010s" activities. See Organizing for America 2010c.

82 Organizing for America 2010a.
83 Data provided to the authors by Patrick Rodenbush of the Democratic National Committee.
84 Personal interview with Jeremy Bird, Deputy Director, Organizing for America, December 14, 2010.
85 Personal interview with OFA volunteer, January 5, 2011.
86 Personal interview with Jeremy Bird, February 16, 2010; personal interview with DNC official, October 14, 2011.
87 Interview with OFA volunteers. January 5, January 11, 2011.
88 Personal interview with Jeremy Bird, February 16, 2010; personal interview with DNC official, October 14, 2011.
89 On management during the oil spill see, for example, Robertson 2010.
90 Stolberg 2009a.
91 See, for example, Baker 2010a.
92 Shapiro and Wright 2011.
93 Lewis 2011.
94 Savage 2009.
95 Savage 2010a. See also Baker 2010a.
96 See, for example, Risen 2011.
97 When asked to respond to the charge of many Democrats that President Obama had not been sufficiently partisan, DNC chair Kaine stated, "I have heard that expressed, but the President is clear if you are part of solving big issues with me, you are tackling the Washington problem. In my lifetime, this has been the Congress most willing to tackle the big substantive issues, to do the big things. Anyone can demonstrate they are part of the doing something party"; personal interview with DNC Chairman Tim Kaine.
98 Quoted in Zajac 2010.
99 Office of Management and Budget 2009, 34.
100 See, for example, Adams 2009.
101 Brass 2011.
102 Lowi 1979.
103 See, for example, Hacker 2010; Carpenter 2010. For the seminal statement on the important role that issue networks play in the administrative state, see Heclo 1978.
104 Pear 2011.
105 Dillon 2011.
106 Ignatius 2011.
107 Obama 2007b; Obama 2008d. On the relationship between Obama's antiwar stance and his popularity among Democrats (which helped him to secure nomination over the more hawkish Hillary Clinton), see Jacobson 2010, 212.
108 The administration has managed to alter some military commission procedures—banning coerced confessions, for example, and providing for additional independent appellate review. See Radsan 2010, 557. On the failure to close Guantanamo—amid strong congressional resistance—see Savage 2010b. Obama has issued Executive Order 13567 recommending periodic review of the need for detaining individuals at Guantanamo; White House 2011a.
109 Obama 2009c, 2010f; Cooper and Stolberg 2010.
110 Obama sent an additional 17,000 troops to Afghanistan, beginning in February 2009, and announced a "surge" involving a further 30,000 troops in December 2009. 2010. See Cooper 2009; Obama 2009g. These troops were originally set to be removed by the end of August 2011, but setbacks on the ground made this unfeasible; Baker and Landler 2010. Obama thus announced revised plans for withdrawal in June 2011; though a strategic case for withdrawal could be made, the timing of the decision amid declining support for the war and economic instability at home suggested a political calculus. See Obama 2011b; Cooper 2011; Landler and Cooper 2011.
111 Wilson 2010.
112 For a recent discussion, see McKelvey 2011.
113 Wilson 2011a.
114 Bergen and Tiedemann 2010; Shane, Mazzetti, and Worth 2010; Scahill 2010.
115 DeYoung and Jaffe 2010; Shane, Mazzetti, and Worth 2010.
116 This position is laid out in an official document; see White House 2011b.
117 Cardenas 2011. For a scholarly analysis that indicts Obama for overreaching, see Edwards 2012.
118 Quoted in Zeleny 2011.
119 Dahl 1990.
120 Heclo 2009.
121 Personal interview with Democratic Congressional staff member, July 19, 2010.
122 Personal interview with DNC Chairman Tim Kaine.
123 Obama 2006, 34.

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