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Candidate Obama and the Dilemmas of Political Time

David A. Crockett

Abstract

Historical context affects the race for the White House as much as it does presidential leadership. Candidates from the opposition party require several elements to fall into place for them to achieve victory. Is Barack Obama a successful opposition candidate—someone who won office in a fashion similar to Bill Clinton, Dwight Eisenhower, and Woodrow Wilson? Or did he run a campaign that set the stage for a new reconstruction of politics along the lines of Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan? This paper examines the 2008 presidential election through the lens of political time, evaluating the Obama campaign to determine whether it met the criteria for opposition party victory. The answer to that question helps us understand where President Obama may be placed in political time—and the nature of the opportunities and constraints he possesses as either a president of opposition or a president of reconstruction.

KEYWORDS: Obama, 2008, political time, opposition, regime cycle

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Political actors are not completely free agents. Most of the time they have at best a marginal ability to control their own fortunes; larger forces are already in place when they engage the political system. In his analysis of fortune and free will, Machiavelli argues that “a prince will be fortunate who adjusts his behavior to the temper of the times” (1992, 68). That advice reinforces the importance of historical context when examining the presidency. Perhaps the most influential model of historical context today is the work of Stephen Skowronek on political time. In over-simplified terms, we can divide American history into a series of political eras that tend to favor one party over another. We think in these terms intuitively when we use phrases like “Jacksonian era” or “New Deal era,” both eras in which the Democratic party enjoyed a natural advantage over its opponents in winning elections and defining the terms of political debate. Although Whigs and Republicans won elections during these eras, they did so only when operating on Democratic terms. In no way did they transform the long-term political context in their direction.

In Skowronek’s vision, we can see American history as a cycle of partisan regimes that favor a governing party over an opposition party. One party takes long-term control in a redefining election – think Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats in 1932 – and even though they lose office occasionally, they are the dominant force in politics for several decades. These consequential regime founders are followed by heirs apparent, political leaders forced to manage the regime they have inherited, adhering to the regime’s orthodoxy and paying obeisance to the regime’s patron saint. This can be seen in the long Democratic homage to Franklin Roosevelt, as well as the persistent efforts of national Republican leaders to define themselves in terms articulated by Ronald Reagan. Eventually, however, the regime becomes weak and vulnerable, less able to adapt to changing issues, and some sort of partisan catastrophe delegitimizes the once-governing party, allowing the opposition party to redefine the political debate in favorable terms – and the cycle begins again (Skowronek 1993).

If the flow of political time allows presidents from one party to set the terms of political debate, that flow also tends to favor one party over the opposition when it comes to the quest for power. Opposition party candidates operate at a disadvantage because their parties are in a defensive position with respect to the larger political dynamics of the era. And yet, they still find ways to win. While all opposition party candidates would like to be regime founders – presidents who repudiate the established forces and reconstruct politics on their own terms – most do not have that luxury.

This understanding of historical context presents the scholar examining the 2008 presidential election with a problem. In Skowronek’s analysis, the nation entered a conservative era somewhere around Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980. By 2008, the Reagan era was twenty-eight years old, and Republicans had won

five of seven presidential elections. How, then, are we to think about the election of Barack Obama? If Skowronek's regime-cycle model is accurate, then Obama ran for office from the position of an opposition party candidate, and as president he can be placed in one of only two possible categories – new regime founder or Reagan regime preemptor.

Obama cannot be a regime manager or president of disjunction, for that would imply that the Democratic Party, identified as the party of programmatic liberalism, has been the reigning party for the past generation, a notion that strains credulity. The presence of a Bush-led conservative regime struggling to maintain power determines Obama's status in political time. He either ran a campaign running against the grain of history, repudiating the conservative regime's core principles, setting the stage for a new reconstruction of politics, and winning the White House as the second coming of Franklin Roosevelt, or he followed the opposition president model of running *with* the grain of history, winning the White House but remaining opposed to a still-resilient conservative regime.

This question is important because the answer tells us what type of context Obama inherited. If Obama can effect a genuine reconstruction of politics by repudiating the Reagan era, then he enjoys maximum flexibility and freedom to be a transformative leader, bringing "change we can believe in." On the other hand, if Obama is an opposition president, along the lines of Bill Clinton or Dwight Eisenhower, then he faces considerably stronger constraints when it comes to genuine long-term change. Returning to Machiavelli: in what way did fortune favor Obama, and how did he understand his place in political time and respond to it? What was the nature of his victory? Finally, do the dynamics of political time and the Democratic Party's response to that context give us any understanding of the events that have shaped the early days of the Obama presidency?

In earlier work, I examined these questions as they applied to all seven elected opposition presidents in American history: Whigs William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor during the Jacksonian era, Democrats Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson during the long Republican hegemony, Republicans Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon during the New Deal era, and Democrat Bill Clinton during the Reagan era. In that analysis, I determined that there were three key ingredients to successful opposition party victory: taking advantage of a governing party in trouble, running a 'blank-slate candidate,' and waging an indirect campaign. In varying levels of force and intensity, all three of these elements seem to be present when opposition parties win the White House.

While the presence of these factors does not guarantee opposition party victory (most notably, the failure of Thomas Dewey to defeat Harry Truman in 1948), the failure to conform to this model typically leads to defeat. In fact, the only time these elements are absent from an opposition party victory are elections

that lead to a reconstruction of American politics. This paper, then, constitutes an application of that model to Obama's election victory. Did his victory in 2008 match the template established by previous opposition presidents, or does it more closely approximate more transformative and consequential efforts?

The Governing Party in Trouble

The record of history demonstrates that the opposition party cannot defeat the governing party unless there is some pre-existing problem that places the governing party in danger. All presidencies are not created equal, and the central task of the president is to have a strategic sense of the "grain of history," to "understand the possibilities for action permissible in the politics of his time" (Jones 1994, 27; Hargrove and Nelson 1984, 78; Crockett 2002, 17-23). The ability of one party to define the terms of political debate puts tremendous constraints around what the opposition party can attempt, starting with the quest for victory. There are some years that are simply lost causes for the opposition party. It is difficult to imagine what Democrats could have done differently in the 1920s to defeat Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, and equally difficult to imagine how Alf Landon or Wendell Willkie could have taken out Roosevelt a decade later.

But sometimes opportunity knocks. One way it knocked in 2008 was with the most wide-open race in the incumbent party since at least 1952, if not 1928. Incumbency is seen as an opportunity for any president running for re-election, for he has the power to take advantage of his office to shape events in his favor. That advantage is greatest with presidents who are seeking a second consecutive term for their party. The advantage disappears if the president or his party is seeking to extend control of the presidency to a third term or more (Campbell 2008, 102-127). With Bush term-limited in 2008, and Vice President Richard Cheney expressing no desire for higher office, Democrats faced the prospect of an open race in a Republican Party in which no one closely associated with the incumbent administration was running for the nomination.

This opportunity is not as great as advertised, however. An examination of the results of all nineteen open races between 1828 and 2004 demonstrates that the opposition party won only five elections, with one of those being Abraham Lincoln's redefining election of 1860 – a success rate lower than the overall success rate of opposition parties (Crockett 2008, 23-24). In addition, while no opposition president has ever successfully passed off power to his successor for a third straight term (though Eisenhower and Clinton came close), there are several examples of successful multiple-term same-party presidencies in the governing party, making a transition from Bush to John McCain hardly unprecedented.

Another obvious opportunity for the opposition party can come in the form of a bad economy. Economic variables are a mainstay of election forecasts. As Campbell explains, the economy conditions the public mood toward the incumbent party, and if it is weak the people become surly and want to kick the bums out (Campbell 2008, 129). In the past, severe recessions in the 1830s and 1990s greatly helped the opposition party overcome the natural advantages of the governing party. When the economy reaches epic scales of disaster, the governing party can suffer a grand repudiation of its leadership, as occurred in 1932, and in part in 1980. In 2008, however, the bottom did not fall out of the economy until late in the campaign, contrary to earlier economic disasters that took years to percolate. Failing banks and insurance companies in September of 2008, evoking repeated comparisons of the new “Great Recession” to the Great Depression, may have put the final nail in the GOP coffin in a year that otherwise should have favored McCain (Campbell 2010a).

Others argue that the election was conditioned for Democratic victory long before the financial crisis shook up the race. The real advantage for Democrats in 2008 came with the incumbent president’s deep unpopularity. The conduct of the war in Iraq caused Bush’s standing with the public to sink steadily in his second term, with exceptionally negative consequences for his party, leading to Republican loss of control of Congress in 2006 and continued erosion of support through 2008 (Jacobson, 2009a and 2009b). Here George W. Bush draws easy comparisons to such presidents as James K. Polk, Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson – all wartime presidents (and regime managers) who presided over unpopular conflicts that paved the way for opposition party victory.

What is interesting about this scenario historically is that allied political leaders tend to recognize the vulnerability of the governing party long before the election and often respond by attacking it from within. One way this phenomenon manifests itself is through an internal party split. The incumbent president is so unpopular that he draws a nomination challenge. Thus the progressive split in the GOP prompted Theodore Roosevelt to challenge William Howard Taft for the nomination in 1912; anti-war activists Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy challenged Lyndon Johnson in 1968; and conservative stalwart Patrick Buchanan, incensed over several social issues, tried to topple George H. W. Bush in 1992. Had George W. Bush been running for reelection in 2008 instead of exiting the White House because of term limits, it is quite likely that he would have drawn a similar significant primary challenge. As things stood, he drew a *virtual* challenger in the form of John McCain.

Another way intra-partisan trouble can manifest itself is through a factional bolt to the other party. If a specific disgruntled faction does not get its way, it may turn against the party and support the candidate of the opposition party. That is precisely what happened in 1884 when “Mugwump” Republicans

found governing party candidate James G. Blaine impure by their good-government standards, and deserted the party for the upright Democrat Grover Cleveland. Similarly, in 1952 “Shivercrat” Democrats, led by Texas governor Allan Shivers, supported Eisenhower over Adlai Stevenson.

Finally, in what could be considered the mother of all governing party problems, a third party can enter the scene, typically harming the governing party, since it has been in charge for most of the era, far more than the challenging party. Free Soilers in 1848, led by former Democratic Party president Martin Van Buren, helped Whig Zachary Taylor defeat Democrat Lewis Cass. Bull Moose progressives in 1912, led by former Republican Party president Theodore Roosevelt, helped split the GOP vote and allow Democrat Woodrow Wilson to enter office. Segregationists in 1968, led by Democratic governor George Wallace, prevented the Solid South from being solidly Democratic. Finally, the presence of independent billionaire Ross Perot in 1992 hurt Bush far more than it did Clinton.

One of the things that helped George W. Bush in 2004 was the fact that his party was lock-step in his camp. He faced no internal threat to his nomination, and there was no factional bolt or significant third party threat. Of course, in 2008 there was no incumbent president to challenge for the nomination, nor was there a significant third-party threat. But the proverbial natives were certainly restless. The GOP was a more disgruntled group during the nomination season, despite its swifter finish. Among such candidates as John McCain, Rudy Giuliani, Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, and Ron Paul, there was greater ideological range and diversity than among the Democratic Party candidates, and while all of them fought to claim the mantle of Ronald Reagan, they often denigrated each other’s attempts to do so.

In the wake of the Bush presidency, the GOP faced a genuine struggle of self-definition. Several leaders on the Right wrote works accusing Republicans and the incumbent administration of going astray from foundational principles (Viguerie 2006; Bartlett 2006; Tanner 2007; Healy 2008), and Focus on the Family’s James Dobson, a leading figure in the social conservative faction of the GOP, at one point stated that McCain was “not a conservative,” and that he “will not vote for Senator John McCain, as a matter of conscience” (Gilgoff 2008). A factional bolt by conservatives – not necessarily to the Democrats, but perhaps just to stay home – was a real danger.

Thus, McCain’s first task upon securing the nomination was to prevent any such rift and generate greater unity of purpose. Failure to do so would lead to certain defeat in the fall. This may be one reason why McCain chose Alaska governor Sarah Palin to be his running mate (Heilemann and Halperin 2010, 360). As a social conservative, she immediately energized one of the key anchor factions of the GOP, bringing Dobson along with her. Evidence suggests,

however, that disgruntled conservatives did not come out to vote in force, indicating at least a minor partisan bolt (Mowbray 2008).

At the same time, the unpopularity of the Bush administration prompted McCain to run against his own sitting president, playing Ronald Reagan to Bush's Jimmy Carter, airing television ads declaring, "We're worse off than we were four years ago" and "We can't afford four more years of the same," and exclaiming "Change is coming!" at campaign rallies (Baker 2008; Heilemann and Halperin 2010, 373). Such an open repudiation of his own party leadership and obvious distancing from the Bush administration represents a type of pseudo-split, if not a real one, that is certainly a sign of internal trouble for any party.

These internal struggles should not be surprising, considering the state of the Reagan regime in 2008. George W. Bush was a late-regime manager, coming to power twenty years after the regime's founding, and after the governing party had already lost control once. From a regime cycle perspective, this placement matches Bush most closely in political time with such presidents as James K. Polk, Benjamin Harrison, Warren G. Harding, and John F. Kennedy – all presidents forced by circumstances to apply the orthodox principles of the regime to changing circumstances and newly-emerging issues. In Bush's case, this came in the form of trying to extend the "Reagan Revolution": tax cuts at a time when baby boomers were approaching retirement as opposed to being in their prime earning years, transforming a vigorous national security policy from an anti-communist Cold War template to a more amorphous war on terror, and attending to divisive social issues when a younger generation has no memory of the tumult of the 1960s. Barack Obama became fond of saying that John McCain represented a third Bush term, but the more relevant fact is that McCain represented a sixth Reagan-era term. The struggles of Bush's second term, largely stemming from decisions made in his first, were hardly unusual for aging regimes trying to hold onto old victories. All of the talk about a permanent Republican majority in 2004 (Fineman 2004, 22) ignored this fundamental dynamic of political time. McCain may have avoided a severe partisan rift, but he could not escape from Bush's shadow and the difficult politics of late-regime management.

The Blank-Slate Candidate

Once fortune favors the opposition party, the next step is to pick a candidate to be its standard-bearer. History has not been kind to those candidates who have highlighted what makes the opposition party different and distinct from the dominant party. There is a reason why Henry Clay, the very embodiment of Whig purity, never won the presidency during the Jacksonian era, and William Jennings Bryan, the emblem of populist democracy, never won the presidency during the Republican era. Both men were three-time losers. Barry Goldwater was crushed

running as a purist conservative in 1964, the height of the later New Deal era, and Walter Mondale similarly so when running as an old-fashioned liberal in 1984.

Opposition party candidates who win, by contrast, have biographies that mask the central differences between their party and the governing party. Such candidates are “blank-slate candidates” not because they are vacuous individuals with no substance, but because their biographies are vague enough (politically) to allow voters to write their own image of the candidates in their heads. The candidates do not come to the public already politically defined. Well-defined opposition party candidates who win – Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Reagan were hardly blank slates – do not stay in the opposition party, but reconstruct politics along lines that transform theirs into the reigning party of the new era.

There have been twenty-seven blank-slate candidates run by the opposition party between 1828 and 2004 (Crockett 2008, 56), and they come in several varieties. The most popular type earlier in American history was the war hero. Military leaders often have a non-partisan record of heroic service to the country, marked by honor and valor and self-sacrifice. Because they are associated more with military service than with partisan politics, voters from different parties may have positive views about them – and construct their own vision of these individuals in their heads. If George Washington is the archetype of this brand of leader, Andrew Jackson made it a practical reality in an era no longer dominated by the founding generation. Because of Jackson’s success, the opposition Whigs attempted to replicate it. It is no accident that the only two successful Whig elections were won by war heroes, William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor. Dwight Eisenhower is the modern equivalent, the perfect Republican candidate in an era defined by Franklin Roosevelt. Colin Powell is unquestionably the best contemporary example, though Wesley Clark attempted to play this role in 2004.

An equally effective type of blank-slate candidate is the political unknown. Most presidential candidates come up through the political ranks, serving in a variety of offices and becoming closely associated with their party and its goals. For some, however, their rise to power is so fast and sudden that they remain largely unknown to the public, and disconnected from the partisan battles of recent memory. For example, four years before he won the 1884 Democratic nomination for president, Grover Cleveland was the newly-elected mayor of Buffalo. No one in 1880 would have identified him as presidential timber. Similarly, four years before he won his nomination in 1912, Woodrow Wilson was president of Princeton University. War heroes can double as political unknowns, especially if they have no obvious connection to politics. Zachary Taylor’s rise to power was as easily as swift and unexpected as Cleveland’s, and Eisenhower’s partisan affiliation was in doubt before he finally announced it. In fact, Democrats tried to recruit him in 1944 and 1948. By contrast, all

reconstructors rose to national prominence and cut their mature political teeth more than a decade before their successful presidential run. Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Reagan: all were deeply involved in the politics of the previous era, and none were political unknowns.

The most common form of blank-slate candidate is the ambiguous centrist – the anti-Clay and anti-Bryan candidate who may have a solid partisan history but is not easily identified as a member of the anchor faction of the party. A comparison of Nixon to Goldwater, or Clinton to Mondale, should make this argument clear. Although Nixon and Clinton were both career politicians, they also experienced tension with the ideological purists in their parties, Nixon for his association with moderate Eisenhower and Clinton for his status as a leader of the centrist “New Democrat” faction. War heroes and political unknowns are not always available, but parties can always find individuals who mask the central cleavages that divide the party and pose more as a post-partisan “third way” candidate. A political system that rewards moderation makes this profile a popular one in American history.

John Kerry had little hope of pulling off this strategy in 2004. *National Journal* ranked him as the most liberal member of the Senate in 2003, a story that received considerable coverage. Kerry attempted to compensate for this image by marketing himself more as a war hero than a veteran of the Senate. It was a sensible gambit, for the war hero will always have a more positive image than the Washington politician with a voting record, but the “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” called into question certain aspects of Kerry’s service, and the war hero strategy failed. It may be that war heroes need to be general officers rather than junior officers to qualify for this category, but Kerry was neither an unknown nor a centrist, and his attempt to compensate by luring John McCain to the ticket failed.

All of which brings us to 2008. It should be obvious that Hillary Clinton did not qualify as a blank-slate candidate. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a candidate more likely to provoke stark comparisons on Reagan-era issues. She had a long history of political conflict in the Reagan era, perhaps summed up best in her charges against the “vast right-wing conspiracy.” She exemplified everything about the partisan conflict of Bill Clinton’s presidency. Fairly or not, she became a symbol, and such symbols do not win elections unless the time is ripe for reconstructive politics. Many high-ranking Democrats understood this truth early in the nomination cycle, which is why they encouraged Obama, tacitly or explicitly, to get into the race (Heilemann and Halperin 2010, 33-37). Similarly, John Edwards, former North Carolina senator and vice-presidential candidate, tried to cast himself in the role of progressive crusader, also a strategy that is successful only in rare circumstances.

On the one hand, Barack Obama, like Kerry before him, was ranked the most liberal senator in 2007 by *National Journal* – more liberal than Hillary Clinton and Ted Kennedy, more liberal than self-professed socialist Bernie Sanders. On the other hand, Obama was also a classic unknown, a first-term senator and political newcomer no one had heard of four years before he announced his candidacy for the White House. The fact that Obama opposed the war in Iraq, while Hillary Clinton voted to authorize it, certainly helped him in the Democratic nomination contest. Yet it was his newcomer quality that aligned him with previously successful opposition party efforts. This former community organizer-turned-state legislator had served only two years in the Senate before declaring his candidacy for the presidential nomination, matching up very well with the likes of Cleveland and Wilson, each of whom served just two years as governor before winning the presidency.

As a fresh face on the national scene, Obama was essentially disconnected from the long political battles of the previous thirty years, including those associated with the most recent Democratic president, Bill Clinton. Despite the fact that he is a very traditional liberal, Obama used rhetoric and charisma and style to mask the profound differences he has with the core Reagan-era program. The nation's first exposure to Obama came in his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech, where he rejected ideological labels and famously declared, "There's not a liberal America and a conservative America – there's the United States of America" (Seelye 2004).

In running a campaign based on unity and bringing America together, Obama tried to link his status as a political unknown to a post-partisan image – almost by definition an ambiguous centrist. In fact, by historical standards, he was the Democratic Party's ideal candidate (especially since war heroes were in short supply). Obama himself seemed to understand this quality. In June of 2008, he told the *New York Times*, "I am like a Rorschach test" (Powell 2008a). Voters were able to see in him whatever they wanted to see, the very definition of a blank-slate candidate. It was incumbent upon McCain to highlight Obama's traditional liberalism in the general election campaign, but that effort failed in the flood of the financial crisis.

The Indirect Campaign

The final key to opposition party success lies in running a campaign that avoids the core issues that divide the parties. To employ a military metaphor, rather than launch a full-frontal assault against the governing party, the opposition party should pursue a more indirect attack. Absent a reconstructive opportunity, there is no victory for the opposition party if it highlights the core ideological differences between the two parties. Barry Goldwater attacked the core principles of the New

Deal system in 1964 and suffered for it. Walter Mondale attacked the core principles of the Reagan regime in 1984 and met the same fate.

Common to all successful indirect campaigns is that they focus on things other than core-issue differences. For example, running William Henry Harrison as a Jackson-like war hero under the informative slogan “Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too,” while passing out large quantities of hard cider, helped the Whigs to avoid discussions of banks and tariffs in 1840. Similarly, eight years later, Zachary Taylor believed that most of the older issue differences that separated Whigs and Democrats were passé, and he chose not to focus on them. Democratic forces pounced on the Blaine campaign’s indelicate “Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion” remark in 1884 to win in the closing days, and campaign slogans such as “I Like Ike” and “Nixon’s the One” were absent any policy substance (admittedly a phenomenon hardly unique to indirect campaigns).

Perhaps more interesting is the fact that a call for change is no sure indication of a frontal assault. Eisenhower’s official campaign theme was “It’s Time for a Change,” and he promised to lead a “crusade” for freedom. Yet the indictment against “Korea, Communism, and Corruption” was not a promise to rescind the New Deal, just a pledge to make it more efficient. Clinton’s centrist “New Democrat” campaign in 1992 also promised “change vs. more of the same.” Yet even as he blasted the “decade of greed,” the promised change was one of new and better stewardship of the economy, not an assault on the core doctrines of the Reagan revolution. Four years later, Clinton was reduced to channeling Reagan with his 1996 declaration that “the era of big government is over.”

John Kerry did his best to take this approach in 2004. The Democratic National Convention’s more overt pro-military and pro-religion tone that year was an attempt to appeal to moderates. In the general election campaign, it was often unclear how exactly Kerry and Bush differed with each other on policy details. On taxes, Kerry played by Reagan-era rules, speaking in terms of tax cuts and coming very close to repeating the elder Bush’s 1988 pledge of “no new taxes” – unless someone made over \$200,000 a year. The two men were not in sharp disagreement about the next step in the war in Iraq, and on social issues, Kerry tried to pick the “moral values” lock through such phrases as “personally pro-life but” and “oppose gay marriage but.” Yet eleven state ballot measures concerning gay marriage and the image of Michael Moore campaigning on Kerry’s behalf made the indirect campaign a difficult sell.

What about 2008? Here we find perhaps the most problematic aspect of the campaign when it comes to opposition party politics. On the one hand, Barack Obama’s campaign slogan was “change we can believe in.” The examples of Eisenhower and Clinton demonstrate that campaigning on “change” does not necessarily imply *fundamental* change. However, during the primary season, Hillary Clinton criticized Obama’s reference to Ronald Reagan as someone who

changed the trajectory of American politics. Obama was not praising the substance of Reagan's policies; he was simply commenting on the fact that Reagan was a transformational president, unlike Bill Clinton (Nagourney 2008). The subtext of the statement was that we are due for a similar type of transformation, and Obama is the man who can effect that change, in a long-term and durable way.

A quick examination of Obama campaign rhetoric provides a hint of this potential change. The Democratic Party platform promised to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act and the "don't ask, don't tell" policy concerning gays in the military – both right-leaning, socially conservative policies implemented by the Clinton presidency. Obama also launched a commercial attacking McCain on the issue of abortion, and video footage of his promise to Planned Parenthood to sign a Freedom of Choice Act alarmed social conservatives. Various pledges in his convention speech – promises to defeat "terrorism and nuclear proliferation, poverty and genocide, climate change and disease," and end American dependence on Middle East oil while winning the war in Iraq responsibly – read like classic and very overt and ambitious liberalism, and his rhetoric took direct aim at the Reagan era. Obama declared that "It's time for [the Republicans] to own their failure. It's time for us to change America" (Obama 2008).

This was a pretty strong and direct frontal attack. Obama's choice of Delaware senator Joe Biden to be his running mate – ranked by *National Journal* as the third most liberal senator in 2007 – gave credence to the Republican charge that this was the most liberal ticket in many years. Most famously, in his well-reported confrontation with "Joe the plumber," Obama stated, "My attitude is that if the economy's good for folks from the bottom up, it's gonna be good for everybody.... I think when you spread the wealth around, it's good for everybody" (Cooper 2008). Given such an obvious repudiation of core conservative tenets, one could easily conclude that the "change" campaigned for this time was meant to be deep and durable.

At the same time, however, Obama created anxiety within his own ideological house during the campaign. He supported the Supreme Court's decision overturning the gun ban in Washington, D.C.; he supported a new wiretap law; he favored the death penalty for child rapists; he endorsed a role for religious organizations in delivering social services; he pulled back on the notion of renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement; he reconsidered the idea of offshore oil drilling; he equivocated on the question of withdrawing troops from Iraq. We can add to this list the areas in which Obama and McCain were on fairly common ground: immigration reform, nuclear non-proliferation, global warming, embryonic stem-cell research, tax cuts for working families (that apparently number 95 percent of the population or more), and cuts in capital gains for small businesses (Powell 2008b; Hook, Wallsten, and Nicholas 2008).

This hodge-podge of issue similarities runs the gamut from left to right, but the point is that there was often less difference between the two campaigns than one might think from someone who talked about change. Finally, Obama's repeated line that he did not "fit the typical pedigree" of a president (Obama 2008) and that he did not "look like all those other presidents on those dollar bills" (Weisman and Eilperin 2008) represented a clear appeal to image and style, and perhaps some racial guilt, that deflected any focus on core issues.

Thus, the Obama campaign had a certain schizophrenic quality. The opportunity for reconstructive change was clear to some. Former senator Gary Hart argued that the nation was shifting from the Reagan era to a new left-wing era, and he believed Obama could be a transformational president who would redefine politics for the next few decades (Hart 2008). Obama seemed to think of himself as a new Reagan rather than a new Clinton, and his potential agenda was far more ambitious than Clinton's ever was. The return to "Big Government," best exemplified by the promise of large-scale health care reform, coupled with stronger Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, gave Obama the chance to be an epoch-making president.

At the same time McCain, despite his reputation as a maverick and despite his effort to distance himself in some areas from his own party's administration, ran openly as a conservative and a "foot-soldier in the Reagan revolution" (Fineman 2008, 32). Whereas McCain was comfortable embracing a strong pro-life position, Obama felt it necessary to claim that such issues were "above [his] pay grade" (Weisman 2008). Tantalized by the lure of regime reconstruction, Obama was also conscious of the possibility that the nation remained a center-right country, and he acted as if he needed to create some distance between himself and pure unmitigated liberalism.

Results and Projections

Two competing narratives about Obama's victory have risen to prominence since his election. One envisions the progressive dream of full-blown reconstruction: Obama as modern-day FDR. The other focuses on the conservative hope for a conflict-wrought opposition presidency: Obama as an updated version of Eisenhower or Clinton. Presenting the case for reconstruction in the immediate wake of Obama's election, Harold Meyerson of the *Washington Post* argued that 2008 "was a genuinely realigning election" (Meyerson 2008). John Judis of *The New Republic* agreed, saying it was "the culmination of a Democratic realignment" (Judis 2008). Writing a year and more later, contrarian voices argued that there has been "no seismic shift" in "the country's governing landscape," that Obama and his team had misinterpreted the 2008 election, believing that "Obama's election marked the beginning of a long progressive era"

when the reality was quite the opposite (Harris and Lee 2010; Wehner 2010; Douthat 2010).

It is always problematic to make comparisons of campaigns across time when candidates operated under different rules and contexts, but it is useful to see how the Obama effort stacks up against other successful opposition presidents. Evaluations of two of the three criteria described above are relatively unambiguous. The governing party was certainly in trouble in 2008. George W. Bush's unpopularity made him a weak incumbent who proved to be a severe drag on other Republican Party campaigns. At one point McCain was reduced to stating the obvious: "Senator Obama, I am not President Bush. If you wanted to run against President Bush, you should have run four years ago" (Rutenberg 2008).

Internal stresses created ideological tension within the party. Although there was no full-blown third-party split, as witnessed in 1848, 1912, 1968, or 1992, the election of 2008 compares well with less extreme years such as 1884 or 1952. The rhetorical device of linking "great" recessions to depressions was an attempt by Democrats to define 2008 in a 1932-like context, and while it is far from clear that it merits placement in such an apocalyptic category, it certainly added impetus for a change in management.¹ Nevertheless, while the intensity of the GOP's partisan trouble is debatable, its existence is not.

Similarly, it is also obvious that Obama merits classification as a blank-slate candidate. His status as a political unknown who affected a post-partisan image trumped his *National Journal* ranking of most liberal member of the Senate. When it comes to personal biography and image, Obama fits more neatly alongside the likes of Taylor, Cleveland, and Wilson than Lincoln, Roosevelt, or Reagan.

The one ambiguous part of this question is the nature of Obama's general election campaign. Was it an indirect strike or a full-frontal assault? While it certainly was not a contentless campaign the way the 1840 effort has come down to us, Obama walked a very narrow line between highlighting short-term problems of the governing party (Iraq and the economy), appealing to style and image points idiosyncratic to him, and firing the occasional rifle shot against carefully selected Reagan-era targets. While sharper than Eisenhower's mild acceptance of the inevitability of the New Deal, it was hardly in the same class as

¹ If the economy were to proceed along a destructive downward spiral, the retrospective evaluation of 2008 could become devastating for Republicans, assuming voters continue to blame them for the bad news. But an important element in this calculus is the fact that the financial collapse took place very late in Bush's presidency. The two previous "great" depressions in American history – those that began in 1893 and 1929 – both started early in the presidencies of Grover Cleveland and Herbert Hoover, making them (and their parties) sole bearers of blame after almost four years of economic calamity. The 2010 midterm election results indicate that Bush will not be held solely responsible for an economic downturn that began in the final few months of his term.

Franklin Roosevelt's purging of the proverbial money lenders from the temple. The troubles confronting the GOP in 2008 provided an opportunity to Democrats, but the sharp comparisons of personality and campaign theme that were present in earlier regime-building efforts were muted by Obama's sudden and swift rise from obscurity and his decision to hedge his bets when it came to taking on the conservative era.

In the same vein, the results of the 2008 election do not make the case for reconstruction. Obama's popular-vote advantage over McCain (7.2 percent) was lower than the mean and median for all popular-vote margins since 1828, as were his electoral vote results – hardly the makings of a mandate for change. If Obama is a president of reconstruction, he would be the weakest one in history, judged solely by the November vote. Instead, Obama's victory ranks as a healthy opposition-party effort – not as thin as Taylor, Cleveland, or Clinton, but not as strong as Harrison or Eisenhower, depending on one's measures. Only Eisenhower performed better in the popular vote for an opposition president's first victory, and Obama's victory was certainly strengthened by the presence of successive Democratic gains in both houses of Congress in 2006 and 2008.

The final clue reinforcing the oppositional nature of Obama's victory is the conduct of Obama as president. Presidents of reconstruction strike hard at central features of the old now-repudiated governing party, undermining its core philosophy and redefining the terms of political debate. Thus Franklin Roosevelt rejected laissez-faire economics and established programmatic liberalism as the new governing philosophy, which was in turn replaced by Reagan with modern conservatism. By contrast, opposition presidents tend to move in one of two directions. They either strike hard at the foundations of the governing philosophy, hoping to redefine politics in their favor but suffering conflict and rejection, or they make their peace with the governing philosophy and seek only to trim and prune its edges (Crockett 2002).

The model for the first is Andrew Johnson, the War Democrat successor to Lincoln, who engaged in fierce partisan conflict with a Republican Congress and escaped conviction in an impeachment trial by one vote. The model for the second is Eisenhower, who managed a fairly successful two-term presidency by accommodating himself to a New Deal system he could not (and therefore did not try to) replace. One president who had feet in both models was Bill Clinton, who began office governing toward the left, then quickly shifted gears and accommodated himself to the conservative era after the midterm election losses in 1994.

The Obama presidency itself seems uncertain of its status in political time. Recall the blunt counsel of Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel: "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.... This crisis provides the opportunity for us to do things that you *could not do before*" (Spillius 2008; emphasis added). Yet this oft-

reported statement is inherently ambiguous. It has typically been reported as an acknowledgement that the new administration had bold regime-changing plans it wanted to effect, but it also betrays an uncertainty about the larger political context – that without the financial crisis, which hit *after* Obama began his run for the presidency and is of uncertain length and intensity, such bold plans would not be acceptable.

Certainly the financial crisis and resulting “Great Recession” gave Obama the political capital to push a large stimulus program anchored by unusually energetic involvement of the federal government in the American economy, including the veritable takeover by the federal government of some industries. Obama intended energy legislation to restructure large parts of the economy, and his signature healthcare reform effort promised to bring to fulfillment decades of liberal hopes. David Leonhardt of the *New York Times* argued that Obama’s policies represent “a progressive agenda to remake Washington” and end “the age of Reagan” (Leonhardt 2010a, 2010b) – clearly a vision of reconstruction. The sharp and rapid increase of the federal budget deficit demonstrates Obama’s willingness to spend aggressively to accomplish his programmatic objectives. Finally, we see a much different president on the world stage. Obama is not likely to apply the word “evil” to anyone (whether “evil empire” or “evil-doers”), and his cancellation of the Bush administration’s planned missile shield in Eastern Europe represents a reversal of long-standing Reagan-era strategic doctrine.

However, the countervailing evidence of a more moderated and cautious approach is more compelling. Obama’s cabinet picks, especially in the national security and economic policy field, did not come from the progressive wing of the party, and his renomination of Ben Bernanke as head of the Federal Reserve solidified Bush-era economic guidance. His selection of Sonia Sotomayor for the Supreme Court was carefully crafted to mute at least some conservative dissent, and she avoided articulating a vigorous defense of progressive judicial philosophy during her confirmation hearings. One year later, Obama again avoided more obvious progressive voices when he selected Elena Kagan to take the seat of Justice John Paul Stevens.

Obama has retained or merely tweaked a variety of Bush administration security policies, including ramping up the campaign in Afghanistan, an effort guided in part by Bush’s – and now Obama’s – Secretary of Defense. Even while promising tax hikes for some, he continues to operate according to Reagan’s playbook, by promising no tax increases for most and signing into law a two-year extension of Bush-era tax cuts. In the arena of social policy, Obama has been hesitant at best – reversing Reagan-era executive orders on abortion while also denying its place in his healthcare plan, pledging to change or rescind the military’s don’t-ask/don’t-tell policy and the Defense of Marriage Act while preferring to delay action on these items, and working nimbly to recover from the

racial contretemps involving Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates and Cambridge police sergeant James Crowley.

Finally, Obama's willingness to discard the public insurance option from his healthcare plan, due to a loud if selective negative reaction by the public, indicates an awareness of his uncertain position in history. Despite the high-profile nature of the healthcare reform debate, Obama did not take to waving "health security" cards or veto pens in front of Congress and the public, as Clinton did, demonstrating he is even less confident of his context than his partisan predecessor. Obama succeeded in rescinding don't-ask/don't-tell only after losing control of the House in the disastrous 2010 midterm election, pushing through the measure in the lame duck session of Congress. His energy policy fell apart, and vigorous opposition at the state, congressional, and judicial branch level still threatens the vitality of his signature achievement, healthcare reform.

The fact that Obama's 2008 campaign represented a fairly standard exercise in opposition party politics does not mean a reconstructive effort was doomed from the start. Personal agency remains an overlooked factor in regime-cycle analysis. There is a tendency to think of political time as overly deterministic. Just as presidents of disjunction face no-win scenarios about which they can do nothing, so if the time is ripe for a reconstructive moment, it will happen, regardless of the personal qualities of the leaders involved. There is evidence, however, that regime-building moments can be missed due to leadership problems. Historian Michael Holt argues that the Whigs had the opportunity to effect a durable realignment after the election of 1840, the only time they had control of all elective branches of government (Holt 1999, 122). Instead, the sudden death of William Henry Harrison and his replacement by John Tyler led to severe intra-partisan conflict as Tyler and Henry Clay dueled for control of the agenda, at the cost of party unity and effectiveness.

In 1892, Democrats accomplished a similar partisan "revolution," winning control of all elective branches for the first time since before the Civil War, only to lose massively two years later, at least in part due to Grover Cleveland's leadership inadequacies (Williams 1963, 139-142). Finally, the much-analyzed contemporary era finds different candidates for inaugural date, the most popular ones being 1968 and 1980. A simple way to resolve the scholarly dispute is to acknowledge that the Republican Party was presented with a regime-building opportunity in 1968, but Nixon failed to govern as a reconstructive president, an effort that had to wait for Reagan's arrival (Crockett 2002, 28-29).

Just as regime-building moments can be missed, it is also clear that they must be constructed, and it takes time to do so. None of the three most recent successful reconstructions – Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Reagan – were accomplished immediately upon election. The success of Lincoln's efforts had to wait until battlefield victories secured his re-election in 1864. Roosevelt won his most

durable and consequential policy victories, such as establishing social security, in the second phase of the New Deal, following his midterm election gains in 1934. Finally, although Reagan made arguably his biggest domestic policy splash in his first year, it was not until the economy turned around in 1983 that his legacy was assured. This understanding of the dynamics of political time does not mean that all opposition presidents are failed regime builders, but it does mean that leadership matters.

Time will clarify any lingering ambiguity about Obama's placement in political time. The political-time model has never been a great tool for instant analysis. It works best when we have some clarity about decisions and consequences. However, patterns are suggestive. An Obama reelection in 2012 would not necessarily settle this issue, for all elected opposition presidents in the twentieth century won two terms in office, and Grover Cleveland won three popular elections in a row. Much would depend on the nature of Obama's successes.

If he wins reelection on the back of dramatic healthcare reform that moves the nation toward universal coverage, and that plan enjoys popular support and promises to be durable (as opposed to the catastrophic health care effort of the late 1980s), we would have a good indication that the nation has moved in a more liberal direction. We also know that no opposition president has ever successfully passed power to his party's successor for a third straight term, but all presidents of reconstruction have done so without fail, some for multiple terms. So, if Obama's agenda were to be sustained in succeeding elections and reinforced by a "third Obama term" in 2017, then we would have pretty solid proof that the Reagan era truly ended in 2008, and Obama would be considered the second coming of FDR.

At this point, however, the strong Democratic losses in Congress in 2010 and the growing and persistent effort to repudiate Obama's domestic agenda through a variety of judicial and budgetary mechanisms demonstrate the likelihood that the Reagan era has not yet exhausted itself, and that Obama is a late-phase opposition president. Several analyses of the 2010 midterm elections highlight a familiar story: opposition president runs an ambiguous indirect campaign but governs like a purist, only to be repudiated at the first opportunity (Ceaser 2010; Busch 2010; Campbell 2010b). Despite persistent problems with the Republican *Party* brand, polling makes clear that the overall ideological balance in the nation has not changed: there are more conservatives than liberals, with moderates holding the balance of power.

Despite having the best year in terms of legislative success of any president on record, Obama is also the most polarizing president in history (Seib 2010; Jones 2010). Republican Scott Brown's unexpected victory in Massachusetts in January of 2010 shocked the political establishment and cost Democrats their filibuster-proof majority in the Senate. The budget report the

following month renewed popular concerns over sky-rocketing deficits, giving force to “Tea Party” factional candidates. Months after passage of the healthcare reform bill, polls indicated that independent voters were still opposed to this core agenda item (Brady, Kessler, and Rivers 2010). In the most revealing incident, at a post-State of the Union meeting with congressional Republicans, Obama was compelled to insist, “I am not an ideologue” (Baker and Hulse 2010). One can hardly imagine a conservative Republican being forced to engage in such a denial.

A cottage industry has arisen in which commentators compare Obama to earlier presidents in an attempt to see whom he will best resemble in history. Supporters point to someone like Reagan, while opponents look to Carter (Schier 2010). From a political-time perspective, however, the real question is whether Obama is Reagan or Clinton, a president of reconstruction or of opposition. Obama’s 2008 campaign matched the model of successful opposition efforts, and his administration’s struggles since then confirm that assessment. The flow of political time puts constraints around political actors, but it is not rigidly deterministic. Obama’s task in 2008 was to recognize what opportunities and constraints history presented to him.

Evidently, the answer to that question was not very clear. By masking the core differences between the two parties and counting on his charisma and personality to construct a mandate, Obama failed to lay the necessary foundation for dramatic and durable policy change, and the desire to be another Roosevelt then ran into the buzz saw of the midterm elections. A population that rejected George W. Bush’s management of the government did not reject the core principles of the Reagan revolution or embrace a sharply progressive alternative. It should not be surprising that uncertainty in the campaign on that question has led to uncertainty in presidential leadership.

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