

Barack Obama and The Partisan Presidency

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Political scientists have tended to see the powerful presidency of the 20th and the 21st centuries as being the enemy of strong political parties. But over the past quarter century, presidents have been following a more partisan path. They have been relying on their parties more for support, both in Congress and in the electorate, seeking greater partisan control over the executive branch, and even using the media more to mobilize the base than to reach swing voters. Despite his assertions of “post-partisanship,” Barack Obama fits closely with the paradigm of the last quarter century. He has received little support from Republicans at the ballot box, in opinion surveys, or on Capitol Hill. His legislative agenda reflects that of the broader Democratic Party. The conservative “partisan press” is thriving under Obama, while the president woos its liberal counterparts.

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Traditionally, political scientists have tended to see the powerful presidency of the 20th and 21st centuries as the enemy of strong parties.¹² Through an “objective” media, presidents appeal directly to voters, over the heads of party leaders, seeking a non-partisan image. They build ad hoc coalitions of support in Congress without regard to party lines. They preside over an executive branch staffed by non-partisan experts more interested in policy than politics. Presidents show little interest in their party’s performance in down-ballot races, let alone its long-term fate. All of these propositions held true for presidents of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, especially Eisenhower, Johnson and Carter. But since 1980, we have seen the rise of a new kind of presidency – a Partisan Presidency. The division of the Obama era is not an exception to the rule or the product of a recent change.

“Partisan Presidents” have polarized the electorate along partisan lines to an extent unimaginable a generation ago, often experiencing an “approval gap” of 40 points or more. (The “approval gap” is the difference between the approval given to a president by his partisans, as opposed to that given by members of the other party). Relatively few members of the other party have voted for them.

“Partisan Presidents” have received overwhelming support in Congress from their party. More notably, they have confronted strong – sometimes near-unanimous – opposition from the other party. They have often relied heavily on their party’s leadership to deliver votes on Capitol Hill, and they have been unable to enjoy the cozy relationship that earlier presidents had with the opposition, e.g. Eisenhower and Sam Rayburn, Lyndon Johnson and Everett Dirksen. Barack Obama has almost no success in

developing a productive relationship with Republican congressional leaders, while his party's Capitol Hill leadership has driven most of his legislative agenda.

“Partisan Presidents” have sought to put a stronger partisan imprint upon the executive branch, centralizing personnel decisions, and favoring ideological loyalists or spinmeisters over career civil servants or non-partisan experts. It is hard to imagine presidents less interested in “neutral competence” than Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush. Partisan Presidents, particularly Reagan and George W. Bush, have actively campaigned for their party's candidates and sought to use the national party committees as tools of governance. (In contrast, Eisenhower often displayed apathy towards the GOP and Johnson and Nixon exhibited distrust of their national party committees). Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush all showed an interest in their party's long-term fortunes that escaped, say, Jimmy Carter. George W. Bush, perhaps our most “Partisan President,” has shown limited interest in wooing the conventionally “objective” media. Instead he has sought to get his message out through arguably more partisan outlets – Fox News, conservative talk radio, the “Christian” media. Barack Obama has built ties with liberal bloggers and made a point of singling out representatives of the black and Spanish-language media at press conferences.

We need to move beyond outdated notions of presidents above party politics and instead understand presidents who are passionately engaged in them and seek to use their parties as tools of governance.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

“The Modern Presidency” and Political Parties

Most scholars of the presidency agree that a distinctive “modern presidency” emerged in the first half of the 20th century, first under Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, then, most fully, under Franklin D. Roosevelt.³ Generally speaking, the heyday of the “modern presidency” (roughly from the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt through those of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon) saw political parties in decline in the electorate, in government, and as organizations. Roosevelt alienated Southern Democrats through his wages-and-hours bill and his attempt to “pack” the Supreme Court; increasingly, these Southerners aligned with Republicans as part of a “conservative coalition” opposed to expansion of the New Deal. This split only grew over the next generation, making it difficult for Democratic presidents to look to their party to serve as a base of support in Congress and elsewhere.^{4,5}

The Rise of the “Partisan Presidency”

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

This presidential era is partisan in more ways than one. Most obviously, this presidency is partisan through the close ties binding presidents to their parties. But it is also partisan in that the executive branch is used as a tool to support the president's agenda; advice is valued to the extent that it promotes the party's platform and the president's political future, rather than how it fulfills the ideals of "neutral competence." Finally, this presidency is partisan because the president performs as a partisan in the combat of the "permanent campaign." The president, rather than floating above the political system as "leader of all the people," leads the battalions of a partisan army into the battlefield of contemporary Washington. The parties that these presidents lead are not the decentralized, nonideological federations of the 19th century. They are nationalized, ideologically coherent, and headquartered in Washington – ultimately in the Oval Office.⁶

While some of the elements of the partisan presidency emerged under Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan defined the Partisan Presidency as surely as Franklin Roosevelt did the Modern Presidency. In an era when many look back to the 1980s as a less divisive period, we must remember what a polarizing figure Reagan himself was in his times. He sought to remake the Republican Party in his conservative image and to vault it into majority status; in this mission, he repeatedly campaigned for Republican candidates. He used the Republican National Committee to win support for his programs, and he worked closely with Republican leaders in Congress, especially Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker. In response to Reaganism, House Democrats devolved more authority unto Speaker "Tip" O'Neill.⁷ Reagan polarized the electorate more than any of his predecessors, even Richard Nixon. Through centralization of policy decisions

and appointment of ideological loyalists, Reagan managed to make the executive branch a tool of conservative governance. Even a skeptic of presidential partisan leadership such as Sidney Milkis admitted that the Reagan era may have “marked the watershed ... for a renewed link between presidents and the party system.”⁸

Despite his previous service as chairman of the Republican National Committee, George H. W. Bush harkened back to a less partisan style of leadership with his willingness to work with a Democratic Congress. But the era of détente did not last. Conservative Republicans angrily opposed Bush’s agreement to raise taxes in the 1990 budget agreement; Bush found himself desperately tacking to the right to win back his base as the 1992 election approached. Meanwhile, congressional Democrats increasingly blocked his legislative proposals in anticipation of a Democratic win in November.

Bill Clinton was not as relentlessly partisan as his successor, but he still fits into the post-Reagan paradigm. While he had his own brief period of détente with congressional Republicans beginning in late 1996 and climaxing with the 1997 budget agreement, he usually faced a remarkably united and determined opposition. In 1993-94, Republicans almost unanimously opposed Clinton’s budget and health care plan; in 1995-96, an empowered GOP sought to impose its own agenda, attempting to overturn one of the defining characteristics of the Modern Presidency; and in 1998-9, congressional Republicans attempted to remove Clinton from office, despite widespread public opposition. Clinton deeply polarized the electorate, experiencing an “approval gap” even larger than Reagan’s. Even during his second term, when his overall popularity often soared over 60 percent, he continued to inspire intense loathing among evangelicals and

conservative Republicans (the same groups who would later adore George W. Bush).⁹ Views of impeachment followed the same polarized pattern.¹⁰

George W. Bush set a new standard for partisanship by a president. If Reagan was the Franklin Roosevelt of the Partisan Presidency, Bush was the Lyndon Johnson, building upon his predecessor's legacy to an amazing extent. Unlike Reagan, Bush was able to work mostly with Republican Congresses, freeing him of the need to win over Democrats. After the 2006 elections, he did little to mend fences, falling behind a wall of vetoes and filibusters to protect his policies. With the exception of the rally period after 9/11, Bush was intensely unpopular with Democrats.

While Barack Obama pledged to end an era of partisan division, his presidency, while young, shows far more continuity than change. Like George W. Bush, Obama has been able to work with Congresses of his party, while facing relentless opposition from the other side. He, too, has polarized public opinion, inspiring intense devotion and loathing that disturbed many observers.

The President as Party Leader

“Modern Presidents” placed little priority on leading their party and often found allies across the aisle. Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon showed scant interest in their national party committees; Dwight Eisenhower avoided partisan appeals and distributed patronage to “Citizens for Eisenhower” activists as well as to traditional Republicans. By contrast, “Partisan Presidents” have served as active party leaders, campaigning for candidates, working with party committees, and even trying to mold their party's future. Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush both sought to make the Republican party both a

majority party and a more clearly conservative party. Bill Clinton, while less disciplined in his commitment, tirelessly raised money for the Democratic Party and outlined a “New Democrat” vision to appeal to the center.¹¹ Both Bush and Clinton set new standards for presidential travel and fundraising on behalf of their party’s candidates.¹² While Barack Obama has not yet laid out an agenda for a Democratic future, his ambitious legislative program seems to rest more on long-standing party goals (and the demands of an economic crisis), rather than priorities of his own. Any plans he has must rely exclusively on Democratic votes, given the solidarity of Republicans in opposition.

A Partisan Public?

Operating in an environment of declining partisanship, “modern presidents” sought to win over voters across party lines. Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon all won substantial support from voters in the other party; all three downplayed partisan themes in their campaigns. The “approval gap” is the difference between the percentage of the president’s partisans who approve of his performance and the percentage of members of the opposite party who do. Before 1980, presidents rarely experienced an approval gap over 40 points; Eisenhower and Kennedy enjoyed popularity across party lines; while Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter confronted significant opposition within their own party. “Partisan presidents” have experienced a much larger “approval gap” than their predecessors. From Eisenhower through Carter, no president had an average approval gap of more than 41 points; the approval gap never exceeded 48 points in any quarter. By contrast, Ronald Reagan had an average approval gap of 52.9

points; Bill Clinton experienced one of 55 points, falling below 50 points in only two quarters.¹³

George W. Bush set new standards for approval gaps. Not only has he experienced the largest approval gaps ever measured, he was the first president to ever exceed 70 points, which he did during most of the 2004 campaign.¹⁴ For most of his presidency, Bush has received more than 90 percent approval among Republicans, making him one of the most popular presidents ever with his own party; during 2004, his support among Democrats was among the worst ever received for a president within the opposition party. In his last year of office, with an economic crisis replacing Iraq in the headlines, Bush's support among Republicans finally began to crumble, sending his overall ratings into the 20s. Consistently, a majority of Democrats disapproved "strongly" of Bush's performance; similarly, a majority of Republicans "strongly" approved.¹⁵ In 2006, this polarization came back to haunt Republicans, as they lost six seats in the Senate and 30 in the House. Not only did Democrats vote near-unanimously for their party, but exit polls showed 57 percent of Independents voting Democratic in House races.¹⁶ Two years later, Republicans lost eight more Senate seats and 21 in the House.

Obama's presidency has featured an "approval gap" similar to that found for his predecessor. For example, the Gallup Poll found during the week of September 28-October 4, 2009 that 87 percent of Democrats approved of Obama's performance, but only 16 percent of Republicans did – an approval gap of 71 percent. His average approval gap, according to Gallup, has exceeded 60 points since March. This places him firmly in George W. Bush territory.

When polarization reaches such an extent, one wonders if the phrase “public opinion” has much meaning, at least as a singular noun. Certainly, with the divergence in electoral constituencies, and the decline in “split-ticket” states and districts, Democratic and Republican officeholders are operating in radically different contexts.¹⁷

“Partisan presidents” are also operating in a political system in which public opinion has become much more polarized along party lines.¹⁸ Americans perceive far more ideological distance between themselves and presidents than they did in the 1950s and 1960s; arguably, more and more citizens see an enemy, not a leader, in the White House.¹⁹ The past three presidents spawned opposition of unusual intensity: the “birthers,” the “truthers,” the conspiracy theorists who accused Bill Clinton of murder; while such extremism has always flourished at the far ends of American politics, it seems to be embraced by more mainstream figures than in the past..

Partisan Elections

“Modern presidents” such as Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon received substantial cross-party support; their campaigns downplayed partisan themes in favor of invocations of national unity. In the post-partisan 1970s, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter struggled to unify their parties, and Carter lost about one-quarter of Democrats in 1980. By contrast, “Partisan Presidents” must operate in an environment of increased party loyalty and growing ideological polarization. Candidates find it difficult to win over cross-partisans and may decide that swing voters have become rare.

According to the National Election Studies, the 2000 and 2004 elections showed the highest level of party loyalty in history; in 2000, 87 percent of voters supported the presidential candidate of their party, in 2004, 90 percent did.²⁰ Not surprisingly, the 2004

race also found both campaigns focusing on turning out their core supporters. The NES showed that Republicans expressed toward John Kerry the most negative views of any Democratic candidate since George McGovern; Democrats gave George W. Bush the lowest thermometer rating that they have ever bestowed on a Republican nominee.

In 2006, the “Partisan Presidency” may have reached its logical conclusion. Exit polls showed that 91 percent of Republicans remained loyal to their party’s House candidates; the base stood firm. But only 7 percent of Democrats voted Republican, and fewer than two in five Independents did.¹ Not surprisingly, a Republican House could not rest only on a foundation of Republican votes. In 2008, according to exit polls, 89 percent of Democrats backed Obama, while John McCain won 90 percent of Republicans, showing little change from previous elections.

If the “reformed” presidential process of the 1970s produced nominees such as Carter and George McGovern, who had had little contact with their party establishments, the “post-reformed” process of the past quarter century has produced nominees backed by party insiders during the “invisible primary.”²¹ If Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford and even Richard Nixon had to confront challengers for re-nomination, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush had no such grounds for concern (The only president in the partisan era to face such a challenge – George H. W. Bush – was also the least partisan).²

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html>

² Neither Clinton nor Reagan appeared to be a “lock” for re-election a year in advance. In the Gallup Poll taken one year before the election, Clinton had an approval rating of only 52% and Reagan stood at just 49% -- not much higher than Gerald Ford’s 44% standing in the fall of 1975. Despite their potential vulnerability, neither Clinton nor Reagan attracted an in-party challenger. (George W. Bush’s approval rating in November 2003 was 54%; his father in November 1991 stood at 59%). Data from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

In some ways, Barack Obama marks a shift from the two decades of insider control. Hillary Rodham Clinton was the “establishment” choice for the Democratic nomination, and Obama benefited from the support of many liberal activists alienated by her refusal to apologize for her vote on the Iraq War. On the other hand, he also enjoyed the backing of such quintessential insiders as Tom Daschle and Richard M. Daley; nor did his candidacy open deep ideological divisions within the party, since Obama and Clinton agreed on virtually all issues. Despite the months of struggle, Democrats united fairly easily during the summer of 2008. After his victory, Obama stocked his administration with numerous veterans of the Clinton administration, including his leading opponent for the nomination. Perhaps Democrats have now developed a group of insiders who govern from administration to administration much like the Republicans had with Nixon-Ford veterans such as James A. Baker, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and George Shultz.

Congressional Relations

Modern Presidents often could not depend upon their congressional parties for legislative support. Those parties were usually divided; the North-South split within the Democratic Party was most notable, but there were divisions among Republicans as well, such as those between internationalists and isolationists after World War II, which forced Dwight Eisenhower to look to Democrats for support of his foreign policy.²² But the period of the “Partisan Presidency” coincides with the rise of polarization and party leadership in Congress.²³ In an era of increased partisanship, presidents find more difficult to win support across party lines in Congress.²⁴ Opposition parties not only

unite against the president's policies, they may adopt a "no" strategy, refusing to cooperate on virtually anything he proposes – a strategy novel when used by Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole in 1993-94, but expected today. Fewer members are likely to support the policies of an opposition-party presidency, as Southern Democrats had done so frequently for Republican presidents.²⁵

But it is also true that presidents are now better able to rely on their congressional party for support than their predecessors could. There is some evidence that united and divided control matter more in a polarized era than they did a generation ago.²⁶ Both George W. Bush and Bill Clinton enjoyed close relationships with the congressional leadership of their parties, and both men had deeply troubled relations with the leaders of the opposition.²⁷ Barack Obama has delegated much of his domestic policy to the Democratic congressional leadership; even his chief of staff is a former chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

But congressional partisanship, of course, goes far deeper than the personalities of particular presidents. The voting records and constituencies of congressional Democrats and Republicans increasingly diverge; party leaders wield more clout than they once did.²⁸ Even a president who wanted an old-fashioned bipartisan relationship with Congress, George H. W. Bush, was ultimately unable to have one. Clinton's brief period of détente with congressional Republicans ended not only because of the Lewinsky scandal, but also because Speaker Newt Gingrich nearly lost his position in an uprising by conservatives who were angry that he had "sold out." Partisan Presidents have helped create our polarized system, but they also must operate within it. The options available to them are limited;

Barack Obama originally sought to reach out to congressional Republicans, but his efforts bore virtually no fruit. Two cycles of Democratic triumph had nearly eliminated the moderate Republicans who might have been disposed to cooperation. Republican leaders, especially Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Minority Whip Eric Cantor, found it easy to rally their troops around united opposition to a new president's program. Republican opposition to Obama's major initiatives – the economic stimulus, “cap-and-trade,” and health care reform – has been virtually unanimous. Obama has had to rely entirely on Democratic votes to support his program. While he has been subject to the divisions within the party, he has also benefited from the desires of his co-partisans for a Democratic president to succeed.

Partisan Administration

Modern Presidents led an executive branch where party politics played a diminishing role. Technocrats and personal loyalists replaced patronage hacks in key jobs, especially under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, who centralized many personnel decisions in the White House. But even Roosevelt, after lavishing patronage on a starved Democratic Party during his first term, gradually evolved to favor career civil servants and New Dealers of questionable partisan background.²⁹ Modern Presidents preferred advisors from policy-oriented backgrounds, even when they came from the opposite party or from outside of politics altogether. Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower relied heavily on the “neutral competence” of the Bureau of the Budget in shaping their domestic policies. John F. Kennedy appointed Republicans as Secretaries of Defense and Treasury and as National Security Advisor; Jimmy Carter often preferred technocrats or corporate executives to fill top positions. Lyndon Johnson had nonpartisan

task forces, dominated by academics and other specialists, formulate his leading policy proposals. Richard Nixon appointed as his first domestic policy advisor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Democrat and veteran of the two preceding administrations; his first Cabinet was so ideologically diverse as to lack coherence.³⁰

While Nixon's "administrative presidency" strategy was often interpreted as a means of a president "governing alone" without the support of a political party, it can also be a means of turning the executive branch into a tool of partisan governance, as both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush have shown.³¹ The administrative strategy lends itself especially well to an era when party activists are motivated more by ideology than by patronage; there are numerous professionals who are committed to the president's agenda and are competent enough to enact it. Yet one cannot dismiss the role of material incentives entirely; today, a prominent government position can open the door to a lucrative lobbying career – perhaps a new kind of patronage.

Richard Nixon set the pattern for presidents taking greater control of the executive branch. Frustrated by the tendency of appointees to "go native" and by continuing power of civil servants and clientele groups, Nixon sought to remake his administration in 1972-73.³² He centralized power in the White House and in a handful of trusted aides, he increased the power of the White House Personnel Office, he appointed loyalists to cabinet and sub-cabinet positions, he tried to use the Office of Management and Budget to rein in regulatory agencies.³³

While Nixon's efforts were thwarted by Watergate, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush showed that his methods could reorient government in a more conservative direction. Both presidents selected ideologically sympathetic subordinates, centralized

policy and personnel decisions in the White House, and used the OMB to curb regulatory excess. Bush took the “administrative presidency” a step further by seeking to curb the power of public employee unions.³⁴ In January 2007, George W. Bush issued an executive order requiring regulatory agencies to create regulatory policy offices staffed by political appointees, who will analyze costs and benefits of new rules. The Reagan and George W. Bush administrations also sought to secure greater partisan/ideological control of the judiciary, by creating recruitment processes that emphasized philosophy as much as competence or political connections.³⁵

Neither Reagan nor Bush II showed much regard for “neutral competence” or disinterested expertise. Both men pursued policies widely denounced by scientific “experts”: supply-side tax cuts; opposition to efforts to curb environmental dangers such as acid rain and global warming; support for socially conservative policies such as abstinence-based sex education, teaching “intelligent design,” and opposition to the “morning-after” pill.

Like his Democratic predecessor Bill Clinton, Barack Obama does not seem to share Republicans’ instinctive hostility to the career bureaucracy. Indeed, his cabinet features a substantial share of nonpartisan technocrats such as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner. His top appointees also include several longtime Democratic figures – such as Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke, and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius – as well as veterans of the last Democratic administration – Attorney General Eric Holder, Office of Management and Budget director Peter Orszag, and White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel.

Unlike other presidents, Obama has not brought a large retinue of personal intimates from his home state. Even those Chicago figures who accompanied Obama to the White House are mostly national Democratic insiders, such as Emanuel and advisor David Axelrod. This mixture of technocrats and party veterans reminds one of the cabinets found in European governments.

Partisan Media

Many scholars of the presidency see as the model for presidential-press relations as the amiable back-and-forth between reporters and presidents like Franklin D. Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy; they may also envision the reliance of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan on televised addresses, presumably aimed at the nation as a whole. Neither paradigm fits the reality of media relations in this partisan era. Since Nixon, administrations have tried to actively manage the news through the White House Office of Communications.³⁶ With the rise of the Internet and cable television, the audiences for presidential addresses, except in crisis situations, have been declining; there is some evidence, at least for George W. Bush, that those audiences have also become partisan.³⁷ Evidence continues to mount that presidents can do little to shift public opinion.³⁸ Under those circumstances, and given the polarized state of public opinion, why shouldn't presidents focus their public relations efforts on motivating support from their loyalists?

Both the Clinton and Bush II Administration have had notably testy relationships with the White House press corps. Both have sought to bypass the conventional media: Clinton by using the "alternative media" (such as the Internet and cable television), and Bush by using conservative media outlets such as Fox News and conservative talk

radio.³⁹ Bush often “narrowcasted” his message by appearing on the Outdoor Life Network (to appeal to the “hook and bullet” crowd) and by courting the Christian media. Both Bush and Dick Cheney appeared on Rush Limbaugh’s talk radio program, and conspicuously favored Fox News.

While most media outlets have audiences that reflect the partisan diversity of the general public, a few have striking tilts in viewership. A 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 34 percent of Republicans “regularly watch” Fox News; only 20 percent of Democrats do. One in ten Republicans regularly listen to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show; only 1 in 100 Democrats do.⁴⁰ The Project for Excellence in Journalism notes the growth of a “journalism of affirmation” (e.g, Republicans watching Fox News) and a “journalism of assertion” (e.g., a blogger or talk show host making unsubstantiated charges).⁴¹ This contrasts sharply with the Progressive ideal of objective, scientific journalism conducted by experts.⁴²

The Obama era has only seen these trends accelerate. As in previous administrations, nothing encourages partisan media than being out of power. Conservative commentators (both longstanding figures such as Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter, and relative newcomers like Glenn Beck and Michelle Malkin) have increased their visibility during Obama’s few months in office. When Democrats wanted to attack Republican leaders during the early days of the Obama presidency, they chose former Vice President Dick Cheney, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, and Limbaugh, rather than any currently serving officeholders. Obama himself has cultivated the Democratic “partisan press,” including liberal bloggers and talk show hosts such as Ed Schultz. In his press conferences, he has called upon representatives of the

liberal web site *Huffington Post*, the African-American magazine *Ebony*, and the Spanish-language media.

This “new partisan press” has real political implications; conservative outlets hyped the “Swift Boat” charges against John Kerry when the mainstream media ignored them. Jacobson finds that the failure to find weapons of mass destruction or to demonstrate a connection between Saddam Hussein and the attacks of September 11 undermined the support of Democrats and Independents for the Iraq War.⁴³ But Republicans continued to accept these justifications and so remained supportive of the war. This differing perception of reality may be due to Republicans’ consumption of conservative media that has consistently supported Bush’s rationales for war.⁴⁴ Similarly, polls have found large numbers of Republicans believing that Barack Obama was not born in the United States.

Barack Obama and the Partisan Presidency

Barack Obama pledged to end an era of partisan division, but his ambition seems to borne little fruit. His rhetoric of national unity appealed to a public desire for harmony – but there is no policy consensus that could give form to it. Obama’s charisma does allow for some outreach beyond the Democratic base to the young, some independents, and those transfixed by a pop-culture phenomenon. Many parts of his personality, however, serve to alienate his conservative opponents. A biracial, Ivy League-educated intellectual who grew up outside the continental United States and spent most of his adult life in urbane locales like Hyde Park and Morningside Heights naturally grates on the sensibilities of some Americans. But one could make similar statements about a often-

inarticulate Texas evangelical born to oil wealth or a onetime McGovern supporter and admitted marijuana user with a history of marital infidelity. And Obama's personal popularity (while hardly staggering) remains higher than his job approval as president or support for the Democratic Party.

Unlike Bill Clinton or George W. Bush, Barack Obama was not the choice of party insiders. But once he won the nomination, he benefited from a united Democratic Party eager to regain the White House. He also was aided by the rise in Democratic party identification during George W. Bush's second term. Despite his "post-partisan" rhetoric, Obama has polarized the electorate much as Bush did, and has advanced an agenda that has so far proved to have little cross-party appeal.

Implications of the Partisan Presidency

The "partisan presidency" may have some positive effects on our political system. Voter turnout has increased in the past two presidential elections, which both featured strikingly polarized views of the candidates among voters.⁴⁵ Voters report clearer images of the two parties, images with greater ideological coherence than in the past. The 2004 National Election Studies showed the highest number of voters ever who cared who won the election and who tried to influence someone else's vote. The decline of the Progressive doctrines of "objectivity" in journalism and "neutral competence" in administration may have undermined the credibility of the mass media and the authority of the federal government. An "objective" media, however, can also demobilize voters, turning citizens into spectators, while turning over government to unelected experts can undermine democratic control.

But citizens also report greater ideological distance between themselves and presidents, which may be associated with increased distrust.⁴⁶ (Political trust has fallen substantially since the mid-1960s; one effect has been to suppress presidential approval ratings)⁴⁷. Our last three presidents generated unusually intense support and opposition, often distorting the national debate. The relentlessness of the “permanent campaign” makes it difficult for politicians of opposite parties to work together.

United government in this partisan era may lead to greater productivity, but may also lead to the adoption of policies out of sync with public sentiment. Politicians may then respond more to ideological (or interest-group) currents within their party than to public desires or to objective expertise; many of George W. Bush’s legislative proposals – the faith-based initiative, private accounts for Social Security, estate tax repeal – seem to reflect such thinking.⁴⁸ Divided government may lead to Bush I-era gridlock or to Clinton-era political warfare. Nor do strong parties in our era produce processes of collective decisionmaking that might restrain presidents; instead they often serve as cults of personality adoring the occupant of the Oval Office.

Has the Twenty-First Century produced a throwback to the politics of the Nineteenth? Party loyalty has replaced individualism, patronage (of a sort) has replaced good-government Progressivism, and a new partisan press has replaced objectivity. But today’s highly centralized, ideologically coherent, presidency-centered parties bear little resemblance to the decentralized, philosophically diverse parties of 150 years ago.

Are we perhaps seeing the Europeanization of American politics? Legislatures with tight party discipline, an openly biased media, and ideologically fervent partisanship were all once seen as characteristic of the politics of Great Britain or France but not that

of the United States. European parties once famously drew upon divisions of class and religion (e.g., the support of industrial workers for Socialists or that of practicing Catholics for Christian Democrats), while American parties could not rely on such loyalties. But the support that African-Americans give to Democrats or that white evangelicals give to Republicans show exactly that sort of commitment. Indeed, the talk of “Red States” and “Blue States,” itself reflecting the increasing geographic polarization of American politics, brings to mind the historic differences between “White Bavaria” and “Red Berlin” or “White Veneto” and “Red Emilia-Romagna.”⁴⁹ The 2008 election found such geographic and demographic divides only expanding, despite Obama’s pledging of national healing.

Even in this polarized era, our political system continues to restrain presidential partisanship. The separation of powers often produces conflict that does not follow party lines; it also allows for divided government that can force cross-partisan coalitions, although they have become more difficult to form in recent years. The numerous counter-majoritarian features of our system – ranging from the Supreme Court to the Senate filibuster – continue to make party government only a limited possibility. Individual politicians concerned with their own political futures may choose to break with an unpopular president, although George W. Bush maintained a surprising hold over congressional Republicans, especially on the issue of the Iraq War.

Despite Barack Obama’s efforts to reach across the partisan aisle, few Republicans have reached out to grab his hand. Nor, given the content of Obama’s policies and the attitudes of the GOP base, has there much reason for them to do so. Perhaps the war in Afghanistan will remake the partisan divide, if Democratic doves turn

against their president (as they did to Lyndon Johnson) and Republicans rally around the commander-in-chief. Liberal activists have been disappointed by Obama's policies on gay rights and the closing of Guantanamo Bay, but given his rock-solid support among minority voters (many of them culturally conservative), a primary challenge from the Left appears unlikely. Some Rust Belt Democrats have turned critical of climate-change legislation that might negatively affect coal-burning utilities, but it is hard to imagine party leaders completely ignoring their concerns.

Perhaps the moderate wing of the Republican Party will revive. Many of the leading GOP prospects for the 2010 elections are centrists, including Senate candidates Charlie Crist, Mark Kirk, Mike Castle and Rob Simmons. Perhaps if Obama looks strong for re-election, and the GOP nominee is a Mike Huckabee or Sarah Palin, they will choose to mute their opposition to this administration.

Even in a polarized system, Democrats could win a clear governing majority. 2008 seemed to have produced such a result. But the widespread use of the filibuster may have imposed an insuperably high hurdle in this era – it is hard to imagine a party winning more than 60 seats in the Senate. Democrats will probably suffer significant losses in 2010, if only those typical of a midterm election, and prospects of partisan dominance will grow fainter. A deep recession could hand Republicans a governing majority in 2012, although it would require them to swim against a demographic tide. They may have reached the limits of their support among non-college-educated whites, and Obama makes it unlikely that Republicans will make an inroads among minority voters. This leaves college-educated whites as the most logical target for GOP growth,

and perhaps Obama's economic policies will lead them to see him as a big-government "class warrior."

But most of the factors contributing to the Partisan Presidency appear to be long-term, not short-term; we are not likely to see a return to the above-the-fray style of the Eisenhower Administration anytime soon. Perhaps polarization is the normal state of American politics, not just now, but throughout history, with the Modern Presidency era as the exception, not the rule.

Table 1: The “Modern Presidency” and the “Partisan Presidency”

<i>Subject</i>	<i>“Modern Presidency”</i>	<i>“Partisan Presidency”</i>
<i>Congressional Relations</i>	President’s party often divided; work across party lines	Partisan polarization: president works closely with own party, has difficult relations with opposition
<i>Executive Administration</i>	Rely on nonpartisan experts, civil servants; patronage in decline	“Administrative presidency” for partisan/ideological ends
<i>Policy advice</i>	Nonpartisan experts	Political consultants, ideological think tanks
<i>Public opinion</i>	Gain support across party lines	Polarized public
<i>Media Relations</i>	Cooperative; use broadcasting to reach mass public	Antagonistic use “alternative media” or “partisan press” to reach niche publics
<i>Electoral Politics</i>	Candidate-centered politics; play down party affiliation; win support across party lines	Increasing polarization; revival of party organizations

Endnotes

¹ The author wishes to thank Harold Bass, James MacGregor Burns, Susan Dunn, John C. Green, Robert Lowry, Sidney Milkis and Barbara Sinclair for their comments and suggestions.

² James W. Davis, *The President as Party Leader*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992). Sidney Milkis, *Political Parties and Constitutional Government: Remaking American Democracy*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Sidney Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System Since The New Deal*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Charles O. Jones, "Presidential Leadership in a Government of Parties: An Unrealized Perspective." In John C. Green and Paul S. Herrnson, eds. *Responsible Partisanship? The Evolution of American Political Parties Since 1950*. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002). Fred I. Greenstein, "Change and Continuity in the Modern Presidency." In Anthony King, ed, *The New American Political System*. (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1978).

³ Greenstein, "Change and Continuity."

⁴ Milkis, *The President and the Parties*.

⁵ In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars discussed a "postmodern presidency," which could also be called a "postpartisan presidency." This concept most clearly applied to Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and, to a lesser extent, to Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, particularly at their political nadirs. Presidents could no longer count on their party to provide them with a base in the electorate or in Congress. The weakening of parties and the decentralization of power on Capitol Hill left presidents with few allies able to deliver support. Due to the reform of the nomination process, an "outsider" like Jimmy Carter was able to reach the presidency without gaining the support of traditional party leaders; presidents increasingly "went public" to appeal to voters directly. The executive branch was increasingly dominated by bureaucrats and issue activists detached from party politics. See Greenstein, "Change and Continuity"; Richard Rose, *The Postmodern Presidency*. 2nd edition. (Washington: CQ Press, 1994). Richard P Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1983). Nelson Polsby. *Consequences of Party Reform*. (Berkeley, CA: Institute of Governmental Studies Press, 1983). Samuel Kernell. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. 4th edition. (Washington: CQ Press, 2006).

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⁷ Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House*.

⁸ Milkis, *Political Parties and Constitutional Democracy*.

⁹James L Guth. "Clinton, Impeachment, and the Culture Wars." In Steven E. Schier. *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000). Nicol Rae. "Clinton and the Democratic Party." In Steven E. Schier. *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000). Diane Hollern Harvey. "The Public's View of Clinton." In Steven E. Schier. *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Gary C. Jacobson. *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People*. (New York: Pearson Education, 2007). .

¹¹ Rae, "Clinton".

¹² Kernell. *Going Public*.

¹³ Gary C. Jacobson 2005. "The Public, the President and the War in Iraq." Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois.

¹⁴ Jacobson, "The Public, The President," *A Divider, Not a Uniter*, "Terror, Terrain and Turnout: The 2002 Midterm Election," *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (1-22, 2003), and "Polarized Politics and the 2004 Presidential and Congressional Elections," *Political Science Quarterly* (199-218, 2005) . Also see Michael Dimock. "Bush and Public Opinion." In Gary L. Gregg II and Mark J. Rozell, eds. *Considering the Bush Presidency*. (2004, New York: Oxford University Press).

¹⁵ Jacobson, "The Public, The President" and *A Divider, Not a Uniter*. A debate continues to rage over whether elite polarization has genuinely led to mass polarization, or just simply an ideological "sorting." See Morris Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*, and Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, "Is Polarization A Myth?," paper presented at the 2006 annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, New Orleans, Louisiana.

¹⁶ See Gary C. Jacobson, "Referendum: The 2006 Midterm Elections." *Political Science Quarterly* 122 (1-24, 2007).

¹⁷ Gary C. Jacobson, "Partisan Polarization in Presidential Support: The Electoral Connection." Paper presented at the 2002 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁸ Jacobson, *A Divider Not Uniter*. Larry Bartels, "Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952-1996." *American Journal of Political Science* 44. (35-50, 2000); Marc J. Hetherington. "Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization." *American Political Science Review* 95 (619-31, 2001). Marc J. Hetherington. "Putting Polarization in Perspective." Paper prepared for workshop on Political Polarization at the Ash Institute, John F. Kennedy School of Government, June 1-2, 2007. Geoffrey C. Layman and Thomas M. Carsey. "Party Polarization and 'Conflict Extension' in the American Electorate." *American Journal of Political Science* 46. (786-802, 2002). David G. Lawrence, "On the Resurgence of Party Identification in the 1990s" in Jeffrey E. Cohen, Richard Fleisher and Paul Kantor, eds. *American Political Parties: Decline or Resurgence?* (Washington: CQ Press, 2001). Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds. *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics, Volumes I and II*. (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2007). Geoffrey Layman. *The Great Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). Jeffrey M. Stonecash. *Class and Party in American Politics*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

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²⁰ Jacobson, *A Divider Not a Uniter*.

²¹ Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel and John Zaller. *Beating Reform: The Resurgence of Parties in Presidential Nominations*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Forthcoming). Bert A. Rockman, "Presidential Leadership in a Time of Party Polarization – The George W. Bush Presidency" in Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, eds. *The George W. Bush Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects*. (Washington: CQ Press, 2004).

²² Davis, *The President as Party Leader*. Milkis, *The President and the Parties*. Jones, "Presidential Leadership."

²³ David W. Rohde, *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Richard Fleisher and Jon R. Bond. "Evidence of Increasing Polarization Among Ordinary Citizens." In Jeffrey E. Cohen, Richard Fleisher and Paul Kantor, eds. *American Political Parties: Decline or Resurgence?* (Washington: CQ Press, 2001). Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins. *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²⁴ Barbara Sinclair, "Hostile Partners: The President, Congress, and Lawmaking in the Partisan 1990s" in Jon R. Bond and Richard Fleisher, eds., *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era*. (Washington, DC, CQ Press, 2000). .

²⁵ Fleisher and Bond, "Evidence of Increasing Polarization Among Ordinary Citizens."

²⁶ Sinclair, "Hostile Partners." Polsby, *Consequences of Party Reform*.

²⁷ Stephen Wayne, "Bush and Congress: Old Problems and New Challenges" in George C. Edwards III and Philip J. Davies, ed. *New Challenges for the American Presidency*. (Longman: New York, 2004). , John E. Owens, "Challenging (and Acting For) the President: Congressional Leadership in an Era of Partisan

Polarization,” in George C. Edwards III and Philip J. Davies, eds. *New Challenges for the American Presidency*. (New York: Longman, 2004).

²⁸ Sinclair, “Hostile Partners.”

²⁹ Milkis, *The President and the Parties*

³⁰ Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency*. Terry M. Moe. “The Politicized Presidency.” In John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson, eds. *The New Direction in American Politics*. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1985).

³¹ Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency*. Moe, “The Politicized Presidency.” Joel D. Aberbach, “The State of the Contemporary American Presidency” in Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, eds. *The George W. Bush Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects*. (Washington: CQ Press, 2004).

³² Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency*.

³³ Nathan, *The Administrative Presidency*.

³⁴ Moe, “The Politicized Presidency.” Aberbach, “The State of the Contemporary American Presidency.”

³⁵ Robert J. McKeever, “Presidential Strategies in the New Politics of Supreme Court Appointments” in George C. Edwards III and Philip J. Davies, eds. *New Challenges for the American Presidency*, (New York: Longman, 2004). David M. O’Brien. “Ironies and Disappointments: Bush and Federal Judgeships.” In Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, eds. *The George W. Bush Presidency: Appraisals and Prospects*. (Washington: CQ Press, 2004). David A. Yalof, “The Presidency and the Judiciary.” In Michael Nelson, ed. *The Presidency and the Political System*. 7th edition. (Washington: CQ Press, 2002).

³⁶ John Anthony Maltese. *Spin Control: The White House Office of Communications and Management of Presidential News*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). 2nd edition, revised.

³⁷ For example, the Gallup Poll found that the audience for Bush’s address on June 27, 2005, in which he defended his Iraq policy, was 50 percent Republican, 27 percent Independent and 23 percent Democratic – a much more Republican group than the nation as a whole. Not surprisingly, three-quarters of viewers approved of the speech. A similar partisan pattern has prevailed for many Bush addresses. See E. J. Dionne, “Who’s Listening to the President,” *The Washington Post*, 1 July, 2005; Kenneth Bazinet, “Bush Jumps in Polls After War Speech.” *Daily News* (New York), 30 June, 2005. At the time, the most recent Gallup Poll showed only 45% of Americans approved of Bush’s performance as president, with only 42% approving of his handling of Iraq.

³⁸ George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

³⁹ Maltese, *Spin Control*. Howard Kurtz, *Spin Cycle: Inside the Clinton Propaganda Machine*. (New York: The Free Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. “Online Papers Modestly Boost Newspaper Readership; Maturing Internet News Audience Broader Than Deep.” 30 July 2006. <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=282>. Accessed on September 16, 2007.

⁴¹ Project for Excellence in Journalism. “State of the News Media.” .

⁴² Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*. (New York: The Free Press, 1997. [1922]).

⁴³ Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*.

⁴⁴ Diana C. Mutz and Bryon Reeves, “The New Videomalaise: Effects of Televised Incivility on Political Trust.” *American Political Science Review*. (2005: 99: 1-15). Audiences for commentary-based shows, however, remain much smaller than those for evening newscasts. See Hetherington, “Putting Polarization in Perspective” and Markus Prior, “Any Good News in Soft News?: The Impact of Soft News Preference on Political Knowledge,” *Political Communication*. (2003: 20:149-171). As such, given their politically skewed audiences, such programs are more likely to mobilize existing supporters, rather than convert new

ones. Indeed, one could argue that the communications strategy of George W. Bush and the Republican Party may have relied so heavily on mobilization that it has neglected conversion.

⁴⁵ Alan I. Abramowitz and Walter J. Stone. "The Bush Effect: Polarization, Turnout, and Activism in the 2004 Presidential Election." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. 36:141-154. (2006). Marc J. Hetherington. "Turned Off or Turned On?" The Effects of Polarization on Political Participation, Engagement, and Representation." In Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady, eds. *Red and Blue Nation? Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics, Volume II*. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2007).

⁴⁶ Hetherington, "Resurgent Mass Partisanship."

⁴⁷ Marc J. Hetherington. *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). While this decline occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, the polarization of the current era may have retarded a rebound in trust.

⁴⁸ Hacker and Pierson, *Off Center*.

⁴⁹ David A. Hopkins, "Geographic Polarization in American Presidential Elections." Paper presented at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois.