

CHAPTER 4

Political Forces on the Obama Presidency: From Elections to Governing

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THE POLITICS OF THE PRESIDENCY, whether with respect to elections or to governing, are ultimately structured by the push and pull on presidents of two broad constituencies: the president's ideological and partisan base and moderate swing voters who support the president.¹ On one side are pressures pushing presidents to take more ideologically pure or extreme policy positions aimed at satisfying the party's base. On the other are forces pulling presidents to compromise toward the political center with the hope of pleasing pivotal swing voters who are generally more moderate in their policy preferences. Presidents who adopt more centrist policies risk satisfying moderates at the cost of displeasing their partisan base. On the other hand, presidents who advocate more ideologically ambitious policies risk pleasing their base at the expense of alienating supporters in the political center.²

Every president confronts the dilemma of how best to respond to the push of the base and the pull of the center. The names change throughout history and across parties, but the fundamental political tension is a constant. Neither the base nor the center can be ignored. The numbers do not allow it. Support from both is generally required in order to win elections and to govern effectively. Neither party's base alone, whether in the electorate or in the halls of Congress, is normally large enough to win elections or to pass legislation.³

Since neither the ideological base of a party nor its supporters in the center can be ignored—and since both have different demands—presidents must arrive at some balance between them. In no small part, the success of presidents in governing depends on their success in striking the right balance between governing to please their party's base and governing to please the political center. Like every

presidency before his, this is the challenge for Obama's presidency. Its success in governing the nation, as well as the possibility of a second term, may hinge on how well the president strikes the right balance between appealing to his liberal base and simultaneously to his supporters in the political center.

Politics of the Base and Politics of the Center

The principal reason why a president's success in office depends on his ability to maintain the support of the president's electoral coalition (the combined partisan base and centrist supporters) is that this is also his governing coalition. Since political views are generally stable, a president should expect to receive most of his support while in office from the same quarters that supported him in his election. As a consequence, the success of a president in office depends to a great extent on his ability to maintain both the support of his base and the center. Just as the president's electoral success depended on maintaining his electoral coalition, his success in governing depends on maintaining the support of that same coalition. In effect, there is no bright line between the politics of governing and the politics of elections. In its most basic sense, the "permanent campaign" to maintain the president's constituency of supporters from election to office and on to the next election is fundamental to presidential politics.⁴

Though all presidents naturally emphasize the common views and unifying interests of their base and centrists and even those in the opposition, the views and interests of the base and the center are often not in accord. As a result, presidents are forced to make decisions that please one element of their constituency and not the other. The tension between the base and the center was expressed colorfully by former Vermont Governor and 2004 Democratic presidential hopeful Howard Dean when he sarcastically referred to his candidacy as coming out of "the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party," implying that moderate Democrats were not really Democrats. Conservative Republicans have similarly derided members of the more conciliatory or centrist wing of their party as "me too Republicans" or RINOs ("Republicans in Name Only").

The conflict between the base and the center is not one on which a president takes sides. Both have political leverage and presidents need support from both. Either wing of the coalition may withdraw its support if displeased by the president's policies. Centrist voters have a real option to vote for the opposing party in the next election and their representatives have the option to support the opposition party's legislative positions. While those in the base are unlikely to defect to the opposition, they may decide to sit out an election or withhold support for the president's program if they feel neglected. Differences in the turnout of partisans over the years have quite clearly affected the party vote divisions in both congressional and presidential elections.⁵ As a result, presidents must work to maintain

peace within their coalitions by simultaneously satisfying both base and centrist supporters as much as possible.

While neither the base nor moderates, as a practical matter, can get everything they want from a president, a central question for every president is whether he is able to steer a course between his base and the political center that holds their support for him. For President Obama, this led to the question: how could he best hold together the coalition of liberal Democrats and moderate swing voters who elected him in 2008? For analysts, the question is, how successful was he in doing this? The answer to the latter question may take us a long way toward understanding whether the public will regard the Obama presidency as a success, whether it provides him with support for his legislative agenda in the second half of his term and, ultimately, whether it confers a second term on him.

An Electoral Theory of Presidential Leadership

How should presidents attempt to balance the competing demands of their partisan base and their more centrist supporters? There is no one-size-fits-all presidential leadership of balancing these two constituencies.⁶ Different presidents attempt to govern under different circumstances and with different amounts of support coming from their base and from centrists. The recognition of these differences, however, provides the basis for an electoral theory of presidential leadership.

The theory is grounded on three premises. The first is simply that presidents require political support in order to govern effectively. While there have been studies suggesting that presidential success in getting legislative support does not depend on approval by the public, this probably reflects the complications of varying lags and temporary fluctuations in levels of public support.⁷ A thought experiment of extreme values suggests that there *must* be an association between public support and legislative support for presidents. Suppose a president's level of public support is complete. Everyone supports the president. It would be difficult to imagine a president with this much political capital not getting his way on just about everything. At the other extreme, suppose a president bereft of support. Would we seriously expect him to have any sway with Congress? Presidential success in governing depends on public support—not entirely, but substantially.⁸

The second premise of the theory is that presidents are most likely to find support in the same quarters that provided them support in their prior election. As public opinion studies since the 1940s have repeatedly demonstrated, there is a substantial inertia to opinions.⁹ Attitudes, even if often inchoate and roughly measured, are generally stable. Neither support nor opposition is easily or frequently changed. Whatever caused citizens to support the president as a candidate should also cause them to support the president in office.

A third premise of the theory is that every supporter, whether from the base or in the center, is about equally valuable to a president's coalition and about equally deserving of the president's attention. Some claim that centrist supporters are more important in that they are more moveable.¹⁰ However, though centrists may find it easier to drop their support for a president, they may also more easily return to the fold. In addition, centrist supporters are more replaceable. While some centrists may leave the president's coalition, others may join it. Once support is lost in the base, however, it is very difficult to restore. While centrists may move in and out of the president's coalition more freely, those in the base are more attentive to politics and watch their president more intently. While they are loyal, they also have high and often unrealistic expectations. They are not moved easily out of a president's coalition, but once they become disgruntled, their support is not easily regained. As a consequence, presidents need to nurture the support they receive from the base every bit as much as they need to attend to the preferences of supporters in the political center. The base cannot be taken for granted.

Though several other political considerations (including the appeal of the opposition party and the president's margin of victory) may come into play, and while the soundness of public policy as well as events may supersede politically calculated presidential decisions, all things being equal, the three premises identify an optimal presidential strategy for balancing responsiveness between the president's base and centrists. In general, from a political standpoint, *presidents should balance their overall leadership to their base and to the political center in proportion to the electoral support that they received from each.*

Another thought experiment taking presidential support levels to their extremes demonstrates the rationale for this. Suppose a president's base and centrists were far apart in their preferences and that all of the support that the president received in his election was drawn from his base. Having been elected by his base, it would be foolhardy to govern to the center. If centrists had provided no support in the election, they would not be especially likely to provide much support for the president's programs. Some centrists might move in his direction as a result of his newfound policy centrism, but this would likely be of marginal consequence. Meanwhile, the president's attention to centrists would earn him the wrath of his base. Having provided all of his support in the election, those in the base would have had every right to believe that they would be paid attention to when the candidate became president. Once they understood that they were being ignored, they would withdraw their support. A more politically astute president in this situation would tend to his base. These were the voters who elected him and who elected the representatives who would vote on his legislative program. Without them, he is without support.

The logic of the theory is the same if the president had been elected primarily by the support of centrists. It would be a political mistake for a president elected

by centrists to govern to please the base. Having failed to support the president in the election, many in the base would only come around slowly and grudgingly to support the president. Centrists, on the other hand, would quite immediately feel abandoned and fooled by a candidate who appealed to their moderate views in order to get their votes and then acted as an ideologue once elected. In the end, the president would have lost the support he needed to govern.

The sensible political strategy of presidential leadership is for presidents to learn from their elections about who supports them and to try to satisfy the base and the center in proportion to the electoral support that each provided. In essence, as the old saying goes, presidents should “dance with the ones that brung them.” Presidents who stray from the political balance between their base voters and swing voters that made their election possible do so at their own risk.

Values and Performance

Presidents receive electoral support for two fundamental reasons. Candidates are evaluated by some combination of what the public thinks of their values and of their performance—what candidates think should be done, and what incumbents have done. Perhaps the most prominent reference to the values–performance dimensions of evaluation in American politics came in the 1988 nomination acceptance speech by Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis when he told his party’s convention that “this election isn’t about ideology. It’s about competence.”¹¹ In fact, though the emphasis on each may reflect the circumstances of the time, every election is about both.

The distinction between values and performance as a basis for supporting a candidate or a president is essentially the age-old distinction between policy and results. You may support or not support a president because of his positions, what he stands for (policy), or because of what he has accomplished or not accomplished (results). This distinction in the realm of economic voting is essentially the difference between prospective and retrospective voting.¹² Presidents can be supported for their policies (prospective) or for the condition of the economy during their term (retrospective). In essence, citizens rate presidents and presidential candidates more favorably to the extent that they share the same views about what government ought to be doing (using the preferred policies/values) and to the extent that they regard the president or candidate as successfully administering the office (effectively achieving the desired results/performance). For candidates who are not incumbents, the performance of the incumbent president affects how voters evaluate the candidates.¹³

While both supporters in the base and those in the center care about both values and performance, they differ in the emphasis that they place on them. With a strong commitment to their ideological perspectives, those in the base give greater

weight to a president advancing their values (their preferred policies). Indeed, they even judge a president's performance through the lens of these values, giving a like-minded president the benefit of the doubt. Centrists, on the other hand, are less ideologically committed and care more about the performance of the administration. They demand results.

Just as elections provide guidance as to whether a president should govern to his base or the center, they also indicate whether a president should be more concerned about adhering to his party's principles (values) or ensuring that national conditions are satisfactory (performance). Certainly presidents want to do both, just as they want to please both their base and the center; but it is often necessary to prioritize and the reason for the president's election provides a clue to the politically healthiest priorities. Presidents who were elected primarily because of what they stood for should be less willing to compromise than presidents who were elected primarily because of their performance or the performance of their predecessor.¹⁴ In short, *presidents should govern to respond to the nature of the reasons why they were elected in the first place.*

Essentially, every president has a mandate to some degree. The idea of a mandate has often been dismissed by political observers, but this dismissal is of an extreme idea of a mandate.¹⁵ If a mandate is thought of as a set of specific directions from the public as to how a president should govern, then presidents seldom, if ever, are elected with a mandate. They are, however, elected for a general reason or a set of reasons. Elections are not randomly determined. In electing one candidate over another, voters are revealing what they want or do not want out of government. This should be regarded by leaders as their mandate—a general assignment from the electorate. Presidents are well advised to properly interpret what got them elected and to govern accordingly.

The Obama Presidency

With some theoretical guidelines in place, we can now turn to the Obama presidency. Based on what we know about the political landscape leading into the 2008 presidential election and his victory over his Republican rival John McCain, how should President Barack Obama have governed with respect to making a tradeoff between appealing to his liberal Democratic base and to his support among centrists? To what extent should he have geared his policy agenda to the liberal values of his party's base as opposed to the more moderate values and performance concerns of swing voters? Finally, has President Obama midway through his term followed the politically prudent and democratic course of presidential leadership to maintain his coalition?

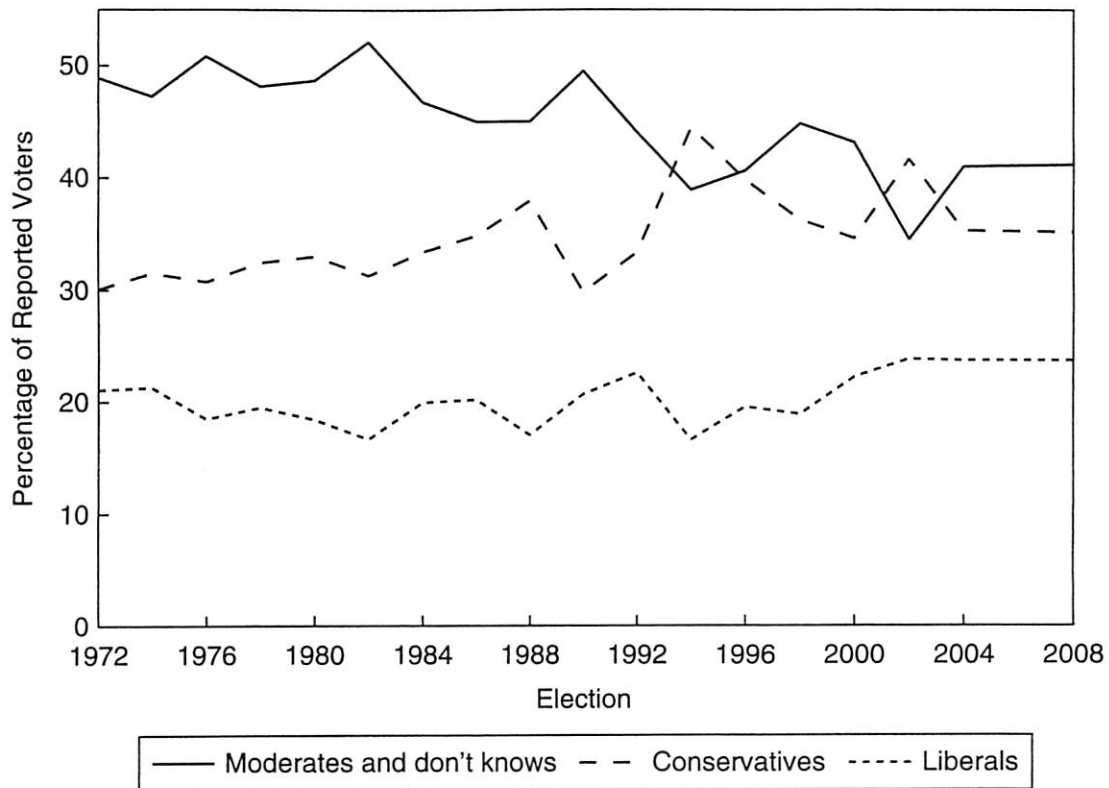
The short answer to the last question is "no." In light of both the mix of the base and centrist votes in his column and the reasons for his victory in the 2008

presidential election, President Obama's prospects for a successful presidency would have been greater had he governed more to please the center than his base and had he focused his energies on performance issues, particularly with respect to getting the economy back on track. He was elected, in no small part, because of centrist support based on the unsatisfactory performance of his predecessor and the Wall Street Meltdown that sent the economy into a tailspin during September and October of 2008. These factors should have dominated the Obama presidency from the outset, but they did not. President Obama, instead, during the first two years of his presidency governed more to the values of his party's base and had little success in fostering a robust recovery. As a result, he lost much of the centrist support that got him elected and energized the opposition leading into the midterm elections. President Obama may have understood the gamble that he was taking in his governing decision, but the Democrats' loss of sixty-four seats and control of the House and the loss of six Senate seats in the 2010 midterm elections may have been more than he had bargained for. It was the biggest loss of House seats for either party in sixty-two years and put more Republicans in the House than in any election since 1946.¹⁶ It was, in President Obama's own word, a "shellacking" that would greatly restrict and restrain him in the second half of this term.

Electoral Forces

There were three important and successive sets of conditions that ultimately determined the 2008 presidential election and affected the extent to which the liberal Democratic Party base or voters in the political center would provide the basis for Barack Obama's election and whether his election would reflect the appeal of his values or would reflect assessments of the performance of his predecessor and his party. The first set encompassed the long-term political predispositions of the voters. Americans in 2008 were highly polarized, very partisan, and quite evenly divided in their perspectives on politics. Normally, this would be an overriding consideration in the election, and though it was important, it was superseded by a second set of important conditions in the election: evaluations of the departing administration. Though America was nearly a 50-50 nation in its long-term political orientations, it was more like a "two-thirds to one-third" nation in its evaluation of the Bush presidency going into the 2008 election season.¹⁷ Normally, this might have been the end of the story, but not in 2008. Retrospective evaluations of the Bush presidency meant only so much in an open seat contest with an unusually moderate Republican candidate in Arizona senator John McCain. In the end, both the balance of long-term political predispositions and the negative pre-campaign retrospective evaluations of President Bush's job performance were trumped by the third set of critical electoral forces: the financial crisis that became known as the Wall Street Meltdown. In mid-September of 2008, it sent the economy spiraling into

FIGURE 4.1 The Political Ideologies of Voters, 1972–2008



Source: Calculated from VCFo803 (ideology) in the ANES Cumulative Data File dataset. Weight variable VCF0009A was used. Note: The percentages are of reported voters. Those who would not classify themselves are grouped with the moderates. Conservatives include the slightly conservative, conservative, and extremely conservative. Liberals include the slightly liberal, liberal, and extremely liberal. ANES data were obtained from: <http://www.electionstudies.org/>.

a deep recession, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and sent Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama to the White House.

A Polarized and Partisan Nation. The electorate that Barack Obama and John McCain faced in their 2008 election was highly polarized. It had been so for many years, but became even more so in the early 1990s.¹⁸ Figure 4.1 presents the percentages of reported voters in the American National Election Study (ANES) who were moderates, conservatives, and liberals. Both self-described moderates and those who said that they did not know how to classify themselves ideologically are counted as moderates. Conservatives include those who declared themselves slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative. Liberals also include the equivalent three degrees of commitment to the liberal label. The data series begins in 1972, the first year that ANES asked the ideology question.

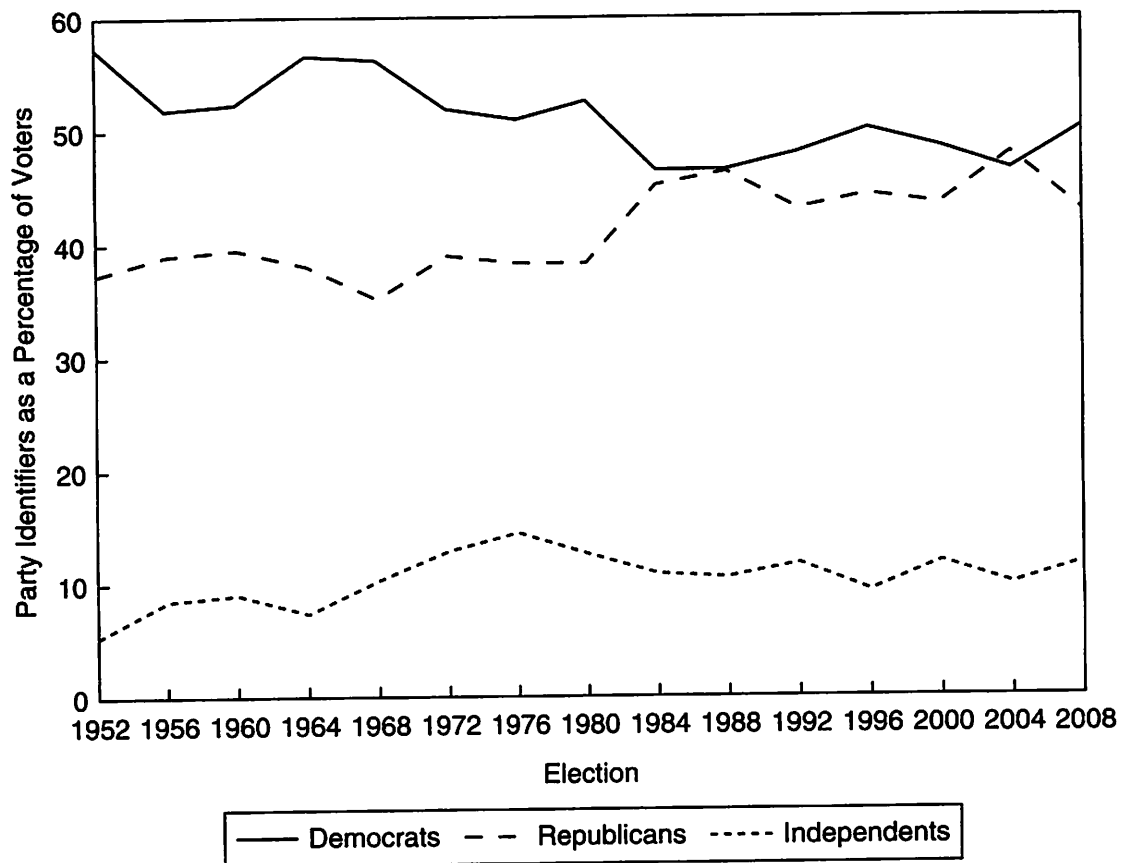
The figure indicates a rise in the number of conservatives and liberals and a decline in non-ideological moderates. According to ANES data, about half of all voters were moderates in the 1970s and 1980s. Their numbers declined in the late 1980s and 1990s. Since 1990, compared to those with a definite ideological perspective, moderates have been a minority of voters in every election. Moderates now typically comprise about 40 percent of the electorate. The number of conservatives since 1994 has rivaled and on occasion exceeded the number of moderates (including "don't knows"). In 2008, 35 percent of voters called themselves conservatives (37 percent in Gallup data). And while the percentage of self-identified liberals has increased slightly since the 1970s, they remain less than a quarter of all voters (22 percent in Gallup data). The electorate is unmistakably center-right.

The 2008 electorate was also highly partisan and evenly divided. Figure 4.2 presents a plot of the distribution of party identification among voters in elections since 1952. The ANES data have been adjusted to bring them into line with actual turnout rates and vote choice divisions.¹⁹ The figure indicates that the large party identification advantage that Democrats held over Republicans largely disappeared in the 1980s. Since 1984, the gap between Democrats and Republicans has bumped around between near-parity and a slight Democratic edge. The small differences from election to election reflect the political climate of the particular elections. In good years for Republicans (1984, 1988, 2004), there was virtually no gap. In good years for the Democrats (1992, 1996, and 2008), Democrats had an edge. Some of this may be the political climate temporarily pulling people into the party or pulling partisans to the polls, but the operative word is "temporarily." For all intents and purposes, partisanship as a long-term disposition in the American electorate has seen Democrats and Republicans at a nearly equal division since the mid-1980s.

Partisanship in the American electorate is not only evenly divided, it is intensely divided. Nearly 38 percent of voters in the 2008 election indicated a strong identification with either the Democratic or the Republican Party. In the short period of partisan dealignment in the 1970s, fewer than 30 percent of voters indicated an allegiance this strong. One important reason for the strength of partisanship is the ideological polarization that undergirds it.

What are the implications of a polarized partisan electorate near parity (say that three times fast!) for the potential of building a winning presidential coalition out of each party's base and from the political center? First, polarization makes it more difficult for presidents to assemble and maintain their coalitions. It is easier to please voters with a smaller range of views than voters whose perspectives are more diverse. Second, polarization affects the composition of coalitions. It increases the potential number of votes in both parties that might be drawn from their base of supporters. By the same token, with fewer moderates in the electorate, centrists

FIGURE 4.2 Party Identifications of Voters, 1952–2008



Source: James E. Campbell, "Explaining Politics, Not Polls: Examining Macropartisanship with Recalibrated NES Data," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 74, 4 (October 2010): 616-42. ANES data were obtained from: <http://www.electionstudies.org/>. The data have been corrected to reflect the actual divisions of voters and nonvoters and the partisan division of the presidential vote. Note: Leaners are counted as partisans.

are likely to make up less of a president's coalition than they did in the past. Still, the percentage of the electorate in the middle is a large pool of votes that is likely to be a significant component of any winning coalition.

The implications of the polarization and partisan parity of the electorate, while important to both parties, are not the same for each party. There is more potential for Republicans to draw from their base than there is for Democrats to draw from theirs. There are two reasons for this. First, as figure 4.1 showed, conservatives continue to outnumber liberals by twelve to fifteen percentage points. Second, the realignment of partisans in the 1980s increased Republican ranks, and these new Republicans were particularly likely to be conservatives.

According to ANES data in 2008, while there are roughly the same number of strong Democrats and strong Republicans (about 19 percent with corrected data each averaged over 2004 and 2008), strong Republicans were almost twice as likely to be conservatives as strong Democrats were to be liberals. Among strong Democrats, 45 percent claimed to be liberals. Among strong Republicans, 85 percent claimed to be conservatives. Even with the general increase in polarization, the potential for drawing support out of their base is greater for Republicans than it is for Democrats.

Retrospective Evaluations of President Bush. As important as polarization and reinvigorated partisanship were to setting the context for the 2008 election, they were no match in importance to the widespread frustration with the performance of the Bush presidency. When President Bush was reelected in 2004, his approval rating stood at 51 percent. For the first half of 2005, his approval rating averaged 49 percent. Though not strong, these were respectable ratings, but they would head steadily downward throughout his second term.

One issue after another took its toll on President Bush's support. As the Iraq and Afghanistan wars dragged on, support dropped. Then there was Hurricane Katrina and the mishandling of the relief and reconstruction efforts. Support among independents and Republicans eroded. Then the administration advocated a comprehensive immigration reform that was anathema to the conservative Republican base. With unrelenting criticism from conservative media pundits, support among Republicans dropped from nearly 90 percent to only 70 percent.

Table 4.1 presents the average Gallup approval ratings for Bush at various periods of his second term among all respondents and for each of the party identification groups. Bush was reelected with substantial support of his base, some support from independents, and negligible support from Democrats. From early 2005 to early 2008, his approval ratings dropped eighteen percentage points to only 31 percent. By historical standards (where approval averages 49 percent), this signaled widespread dissatisfaction with his performance. Most Democrats in 2005 had already rejected him on both values and performance grounds. By early 2008, most independents and many Republicans had lost confidence in the administration, and this was where things stood as late as mid-September. Between 2005 and mid-September of 2008, President Bush's approval dropped about fifteen points among independents and twenty points among Republicans.

Nonetheless, despite the poor grades that President Bush had been given, the presidential race was remarkably close through mid-September. Since 1948, in the seven elections in which a president had an approval rating of over 50 percent in July's Gallup poll, the in-party presidential candidate had a lead over his opponent

TABLE 4.1 Approval Ratings for President Bush, 2005 to 2008

<i>Time Period</i>	<i>Overall</i>	<i>Democrats</i>	<i>Independents</i>	<i>Republicans</i>
2005, January to June (21 polls)	49	17	41	89
2008, January to June (15 polls)	31 (-18)	7 (-10)	24 (-17)	69 (-20)
2008, June to mid-September (6 polls)	32 (+1)	5 (-2)	27 (+3)	70 (+1)
2008, late-September to Election Day (6 polls)	27 (-5)	5 (0)	21 (-6)	61 (-9)

Source: Computed from Gallup Poll data available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116500/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-George-Bush.aspx> (accessed March 25, 2011).

Note: The percentage point change from the earlier period is in parentheses.

in the preference polls at Labor Day. At the other end of the spectrum, each of the six in-party candidates who ran when their party's president had ratings of 45 percent or less trailed their opponent at Labor Day.

The race in 2008, however, was different. Despite President Bush's approval ratings of just over 30 percent in July (tied for the lowest since 1948), McCain held a lead over Obama at Labor Day (52.7% to 47.3%). In fact, considering the baggage of President Bush's basement dwelling approval ratings, the race had been surprisingly close through much of August, and McCain came out of the conventions with a poll lead that lasted until mid-September. The average of Gallup's pre-convention polls (August 1 to 24) had the race at 51.3 percent Obama to 48.7 percent McCain, a gap of less than three points. With the higher propensity of registered Republicans to turn out to vote and the closing of the gap in the ten days before the conventions (50.6 Obama to 49.4 McCain), the race going into the conventions was a toss-up. Despite Iraq, a sluggish economy, an unpopular president, and all the elements of the Democratic year, McCain was still quite clearly in the game and Obama had not "sealed the deal."

An important reason for the race being competitive until mid-September was that the Democrats' advantage on performance grounds, reflecting the poor approval numbers for President Bush, was offset by the Republicans' advantage on values grounds. As noted above, the nation is center-right ideologically. McCain was a center-right candidate (too centrist for many conservatives) and Obama had a liberal record (decidedly not center-right).²⁰ Northern liberal Democrats have not had much electoral success in national elections since the late 1960s. Five have

run and five have lost: Humphrey in 1968, McGovern in 1972, Mondale in 1984, Dukakis in 1988, and Kerry in 2004. Polls in 2008 also indicated that Obama's ideological perspective was not an asset. An October Gallup poll indicated that 29 percent of respondents regarded Obama as "very liberal" while only 16 percent found McCain to be "very conservative." ANES data indicate that more voters placed themselves closer on the ideological scale to McCain (47%) than to Obama (40%). In the exit polls, 42 percent of voters considered Obama to be "too liberal" and 89 percent of them voted for McCain.²¹ Of the 30 percent of voters in the exit polls saying that the candidate quality that mattered to them most was whether the candidate "shares my values," McCain beat Obama by two-to-one (65% to 32%). With values considerations on McCain's side of the scale and performance considerations on Obama's side, the election was on course to be narrowly decided—but then all hell broke loose. The campaign and the economy collapsed with the financial crisis.

The Wall Street Meltdown. In mid-September, the 2008 presidential campaign was derailed by the unforeseen economic crisis. It was unforeseen not only by political leaders in both parties, but even by economic forecasters just weeks before the collapse. In mid-August of 2008, the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia released a survey of forty-seven prominent economic forecasters who predicted a third-quarter real GDP growth rate of 1.2 percent, a sluggish economy, but certainly not one in recession.²² Despite the fact that this forecast was made midway through the quarter being forecast and the meltdown occurred only in the last month of the quarter, the actual GDP growth rate for the quarter according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis was *negative* 4.0 percent, more than five points lower than the forecast made *during* the quarter!²³

The initial signs of the brewing crisis began in early September when the government seized control of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the two government-sponsored mortgage institutions. In the next several weeks, Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy, Bank of America bought a distressed Merrill Lynch, the government bailed out insurance giant AIG, the FDIC seized Washington Mutual, and President Bush proposed and Congress passed the \$700 billion Bipartisan Emergency Economic Stabilization Act. From September 8 to October 9, the stock market lost a quarter of its value (a 25 percent drop in the Dow Jones index and a 28 percent drop in the Standard and Poor's index). Though the economy had been sluggish, the meltdown deepened and prolonged the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The meltdown had an immediate impact on public opinion about the economy, about President Bush's performance, and about the race between McCain and Obama. A *USA Today* and Gallup poll in late September asked respondents how they would describe "the current situation." Forty percent said that it was "the

biggest financial crisis in [their] lifetime.” Another 24 percent said that it was “a crisis but not the worst in [their] lifetime.” The percentage rating economic conditions as poor (the lowest rating) jumped from 46 percent in August and early September to 68 percent in October.²⁴

The political fallout was clear. Despite President Bush’s low approval ratings going into the election and the polarization of the electorate, his ratings sank even lower after the meltdown. They dropped from an average of 32 percent in mid summer and early fall polls to just 27 percent from late September to Election Day. As Frank Newport and his colleagues at Gallup observed, the meltdown was “the turning point in the campaign.”²⁵ Senator McCain’s preference poll numbers dropped from 51 percent to 45 percent in the three weeks between September 14 and October 6. The polls in the remaining four weeks bounced around a bit without much real change. The election had been decided in Obama’s favor.

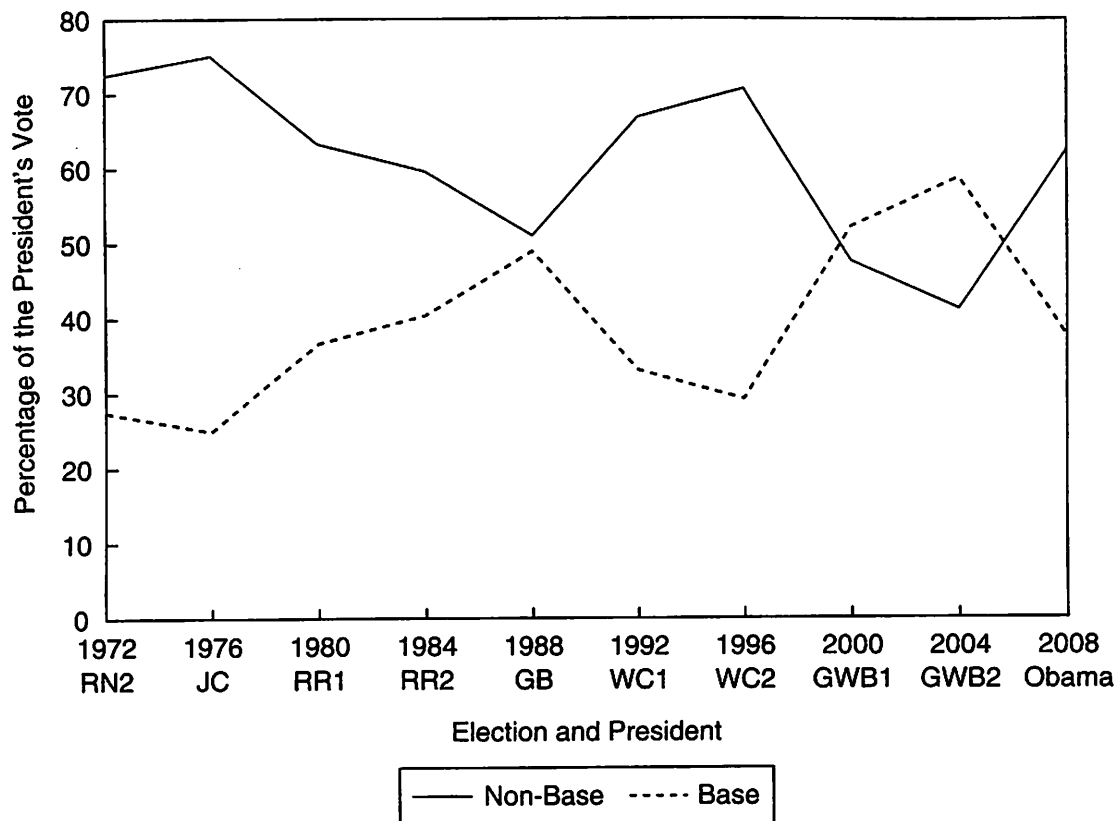
On Election Day 2008, the exit polls confirmed as much. They indicated that 71 percent of voters disapproved of how President Bush had performed his job as president and Barack Obama received about two-thirds of their votes. An overwhelming majority of voters, 63 percent, said that the economy was the most important issue facing the nation. This was more than six times the number who said that the Iraq War was the most important issue and seven times the number who said health care was. Of the 81 percent of voters who said that they were worried that the economic crisis would hurt their families, 58 percent voted for Obama. Only 40 percent voted for McCain.

The standoff for some voters between regarding Republicans positively on values and negatively on performance was settled. Enough was enough. There were the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Katrina fiasco, the ballooning deficits, the illegal immigration quagmire, and now the financial institution meltdown. Each took its toll on Republican support, but for a critical number, the meltdown was the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.²⁶ It was one crisis too many. On performance grounds, voters turned to Obama and the Democrats.

The Base and the Center in Perspective

President Obama was elected because of voter dissatisfaction with his predecessor’s performance in office, particularly the inability to prevent the financial meltdown that sent the economy into a tailspin. He was not elected because a center-right electorate embraced his liberal perspective of change in public policies. This suggests that President Obama’s election may have depended more on the support of pragmatic centrists than the idealistic liberals of his base, but we now turn to the direct evidence of this. To what degree did President Obama’s winning coalition depend on support from his liberal base and to what degree did it depend on

FIGURE 4.3 The President's Base and Non-Base Vote, 1972-2008



Source: Calculated from variables VCFo803 (ideology) and VCFo705 (presidential vote) in the ANES Cumulative Data File dataset. Weight variable VCFo009A was used. ANES data were obtained from: <http://www.electionstudies.org/>. Note: The base vote consists of party identifiers claiming an ideological perspective consistent with the president's party (e.g., liberal Democrats for a Democratic president, conservative Republicans for a Republican president). The non-base vote consists of moderates, don't knows, and those with ideological views opposite of those of the president. Both percentages are of reported voters for the president.

centrists? How does the mix of President Obama's coalition compare to those of previous presidents? How much emphasis should President Obama have placed on promoting liberal policies to please his party's base as opposed to policies that were effective from the standpoint of satisfying the concerns of those in the political mainstream?

Figure 4.3 displays the mix of base and centrist support in the ten presidential elections since 1972. The percentages of support from both groups were calculated from ANES data. The analysis begins with the 1972 election, since that is the first in which ANES respondents were asked about their ideological disposition. Voters in the president's base are defined as those identifying with the president's party

who also are ideologically disposed to that party (conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats), and voted for their party's winning presidential candidate.²⁷ Moderates in the president's coalition are those who voted for the president and were either self-described moderates or did not know their ideological disposition. The inclusion of those failing to claim an ideological perspective may cause an over-count of centrists, since there are undoubtedly some who have conservative or liberal perspectives on politics but just are unfamiliar with the labels. However, it is probably safe to assume that most who are unaware of ideological labels are also not very ideological. Finally, there is always a small, but nontrivial, number of voters who vote for the winning presidential candidate but hold ideological views that are opposite those associated with the president's base—self-described conservatives who vote for a Democratic president and self-described liberals who vote for a Republican president. These voters are counted with the centrists since they are clearly not in the president's base. They were certainly centrist enough that they opted to vote for the candidate from the opposing perspective rather than their own or not voting at all.

As the figure indicates, the coalition that elected President Obama in 2008 drew more support from centrists than from the liberal base of the Democratic Party. Of Obama's total popular vote, 62 percent came from moderates (and some conservatives) and 38 percent came from his liberal base. A separate examination of the exit polls in 2008 indicates precisely the same mix of 38 percent of the Obama vote from his liberal base and 62 percent from moderates and a few conservatives.

Putting these numbers into the perspective of past presidencies, there appear to have been three general compositions of presidential coalitions. First are those of presidents who depended heavily on centrist support (two-thirds or more of their support from centrists). This would include the pre-polarization presidencies of Richard Nixon in 1972 and Jimmy Carter in 1976 as well as Bill Clinton in both 1992 and 1996. A second group of presidents are those who relied more on votes from the center than from the base, but whose division of support was not lopsided. This would include Reagan's coalitions in 1980 and 1984. Finally, there are the coalitions that were evenly balanced between the base and the center or in which the base predominated. In this group are George H. W. Bush in 1988 and George W. Bush's coalitions in both 2000 and 2004.

Of all the previous presidents examined, President Obama's mix of base and centrist votes most resembles that of President Reagan's in 1980. Both relied quite a bit on the votes of centrists in their elections, but the ratio of base to centrist votes in both cases was less than two to one. It is certainly in contrast to the coalition of his predecessor. Unlike President Obama, President George W. Bush received more of his vote from his base than from the center.

This analysis indicates that President Obama owed his election substantially to the votes of centrists. Though President Obama's victory surely owed much to

the support from and enthusiasm of the base, its votes were not as important as the support he received from those in the political center. Combining this finding with the analysis of the issues that determined the 2008 election (reactions to the Wall Street Meltdown) and the political implications for politically sensitive governing are clear: President Obama should have given a much higher priority in governing to pleasing centrists on the matters of performance that they were most concerned about than to the more value-based issues of concern to his liberal Democratic base. Of course, presidents may gamble that they can do both—or that they can tend to the base and that those policies will eventually be appreciated by centrists (Reagan in 1980)—but there is often a price to be paid for a gamble of this sort. And in the 2010 midterm, Democrats paid that price.

From Elections to Governing

The composition of his electoral coalition and the circumstances under which he was elected in 2008 should have caused President Obama to govern to the center and to make setting the economy on a path of sustained growth his highest priority. This was not, however, the course he followed. President Obama's priorities in governing were more consistent with those of his liberal base than the political center. The left got a number of big items on its "wish list," including a national health care law, a large stimulus package of domestic spending and targeted tax cuts, and the appointments of two liberal Supreme Court justices in Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan.²⁸ In contrast, moderates were disappointed on policy grounds, but even more so on performance grounds. Midway through Obama's term, the economy had yet to recover from the recession. Moreover, a large majority of Americans did not think that real recovery was imminent or that the administration's policies to that point had been helpful.

Not Enough for the Left

Though President Obama was more attentive to those in his base than to his centrist supporters, the base was not altogether pleased midway through the term. As one might expect from the polarization of political views as well as from the unrealistic expectations generated by the rock-star-like idolization of Obama as a candidate (dubbed "Obamamania"), there were inevitable disappointments on the left. They did not get everything that they wanted (and some might not have been satisfied with anything less than everything). Though President Obama pushed a historic national health care bill through Congress, he backed off on supporting the "public option" health care reform favored by the most liberal elements of his party. Though he ran as the antiwar candidate, albeit accepting the Afghanistan war as a necessary war, to the displeasure of the very liberal elements

of his coalition, he continued to prosecute both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. (In the case of the Iraq war, this was as much a concession to reality as to centrists, since that war had taken a positive turn in the last year of the Bush presidency.) While the administration made plans to close the terrorist detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, a measure advocated by many on the left, the prison remained in operation two years into Obama's presidency. The "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding gays in the military, a policy opposed by those on the left, was not an early priority (though it was repealed after the midterm). The "card check" bill, also known as the "Employee Free Choice Act," was the chief priority of labor unions, but failed to make legislative headway. Though he made an effort in its behalf, efforts to pass the left's environmental and energy "cap and trade" proposal were stalled in the Senate. There were undoubtedly other areas of disappointment, as well, for Obama's liberal supporters.

Policy Disapproval from the Center

Though the left had some disappointments, centrists suffered many more. These were of two sorts. First, the administration pursued a number of policies that were not popular with political moderates. Most notable of these was health care reform. A *USA Today* and Gallup poll in late August of 2010 indicated that 39 percent approved of the health care overhaul, but 56 percent disapproved of it. A CBS News and *New York Times* poll in mid-September similarly found 37 percent approval of the health care law, 49 percent disapproval, and 14 percent unsure.²⁹ The Kaiser Health Tracking Poll in November 2010 found that 49 percent of Americans wanted to repeal all or part of the new health care law and only 40 percent wanted to keep or expand it.³⁰ Some angry with the law, to be sure, felt it was not expansive enough. But the bottom line is that the single greatest legislative achievement of the Obama administration upset many more Americans than it pleased and this included many centrists who had made Obama's election possible. One analysis estimated that Democrats lost between two and three percentage points of the national congressional vote because of health care reform.³¹

Other administration policies also met with centrist disapproval. In an effort to reinvigorate the economy and speed up the recovery, the administration and congressional Democrats enacted an \$800 billion stimulus package. This contributed to a ballooning of the federal deficit and was seen by many Americans as ineffective and misguided. An ABC News and *Washington Post* poll in early October of 2010 reported that 68 percent of respondents considered this spending as "mostly wasted."³² The exit polls of 2010 found that 31 percent of voters thought that the stimulus plan made "no difference" and that another 34 percent thought it had "hurt the economy." Only 32 percent said that they thought the stimulus had "helped the economy."³³

Other policies and actions, generally falling under the heading of policies that were widely perceived as left-leaning, rankled centrists (e.g., the Justice Department's legal challenge to Arizona's law targeting illegal immigration.) They also had the effect of energizing a disparate conservative opposition of various stripes, from the traditional to the emerging Tea Party movement. Overall, the exit polls of 2010 indicated that 53 percent of voters thought that President Obama's policies would "hurt the country" and only 43 percent thought they would "help the country."

Disappointment with Performance

The second set of centrist disappointments—which likely have had larger political repercussions—dealt with performance. The mandate that President Obama should have carried away from the election of 2008 was that voters expected him to govern more effectively than his predecessor, whether with respect to the economy, to environmental disasters, or to any other issue. Government should work. Midway through his term, many moderates were not convinced that things had gotten any better on this score. Neither President Obama's handling of the economy, nor of the BP oil drilling catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, inspired confidence in his leadership.³⁴

The basis for Obama's victory over McCain, the turning point in the 2008 election, was the Wall Street Meltdown. The meltdown greatly deepened the recession into which the economy was slipping. The severity of the recession saw the real gross domestic product (GDP) shrink in four consecutive quarters beginning in the third quarter of 2008. Barack Obama was elected to turn this around. Despite the fact that the National Bureau of Economic Research declared the recession over in June 2009, roughly five months into Obama's term, most Americans did not believe this—or felt that the recovery was so anemic as to be equivalent to a continuing recession.

As the Obama presidency moved toward the half way point of its term, there was a broad consensus that the economy remained very weak. Notwithstanding NBER's announcement of the recession's end, 74 percent of those surveyed in late September of 2010 said that they thought that the economy was still in recession. There were good reasons to think this. As the 2010 midterm election approached, the economy had not grown for three consecutive quarters at even a weak 2 percent growth rate in two and a half years. As of November 2010, the nation had suffered its eighteenth straight month with unemployment rates of at least 9.4 percent. This was the longest number of consecutive months of 9.4 percent or higher unemployment rates since the Bureau of Labor Statistics started reporting monthly unemployment rates in 1948.³⁵ As of this writing in January 2011, that figure stands at twenty months and counting.

When Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008, his mandate was clear: revive the economy. The yardstick for determining whether this was done was the number of Americans deeply worried about the economy. In the exit polls of 2008, 93 percent said that the economy was “not so good” or “poor” and 63 percent said that the economy was the nation’s most important problem. No other problem was mentioned by more than 10 percent of respondents. Two years into the Obama presidency, 90 percent indicated that the economy was “not so good” or “poor” and still 63 percent said the economy remained the most important problem facing the nation. More simply put: mission not accomplished.

President Obama’s approval rating in the Gallup Poll dropped from an average of 63 percent in the first three months of his presidency to an average of 45 percent in October through the first week of November in 2010. Having governed more to the base than to the center, but having left some in the base disappointed—and having fallen well short of expectations with respect to the performance of the economy—Obama’s approval rating dropped twelve points among liberals and twenty points among both moderates and conservatives.

A Crisis Is a Terrible Thing to Waste

Why did President Obama give priority to the policy goals of his base rather than his centrist supporters when he had greater support from the centrists than from his base? And why did the administration fail in its attempt to put the economy on the track to a robust recovery? There are a number of plausible answers to these questions. Some claim that the inherited recession was so severe that no policy could have turned the economy around by the midterm. While there might be some merit to this, and while the public’s patience for results is certainly short, the administration raised expectations of a quicker recovery than it could deliver and many in the public doubted that the administration’s economic policies were helping matters.

It could also be argued that the polarization of the parties has made governing to the base the only legislatively viable approach to governing. Because of the extent of polarization, the prospects for bipartisanship are greatly reduced from what they once were.³⁶ Liberal Democrats insist on having things their way and conservative Republicans are similarly unwilling to compromise.³⁷ Even as liberally oriented as the first half of President Obama’s term appeared to be, there were a significant number of very liberal Democrats who felt short-changed by President Obama’s policies.

While these are plausible explanations, two others should also be considered. The first of these concerns the failure of the administration, at least at the outset, to get the economy up on its feet. It may be the case that the administration did what it thought was appropriate to reinvigorate the economy, but that these were

ineffective or counterproductive policies that had the unintended effect of prolonging the recession and delaying and dampening the recovery. A number of stimulus programs, from the huge stimulus package itself to programs regarding first time home-buying, home weatherization, “cash for clunkers,” and other programs, may have had the effect of simply time-shifting economic activity. The policies gave incentives for undertaking economic activity sooner rather than later, but this may have depressed economic activity in the later period. Other policies such as those that delayed foreclosures and extended unemployment benefits may have simply stretched out the pain of the recession.

Related to the polarization explanation for the administration’s attentiveness to the liberal base is an explanation suggested by a comment made by President Obama’s first chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel. Alluding to the Wall Street Meltdown and the deepening recession in which the new administration took office, Emanuel told an interviewer that “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.”³⁸ In essence, a crisis gives a president a virtual blank check. Policies that would have little prospect in normal times are plausible in times of crisis when everyone is inclined to support the president. Add large Democratic Party majorities in both the House and the Senate and decades of frustration for liberal Democrats in promoting a national health care plan, and the opportunity to push the health care plan through Congress may have been simply too tempting to resist. Though the large Democratic congressional majorities had little to do with the public’s support for a national health care plan, they could be used to pass the plan and they were.

It is true that President Obama’s unfulfilled mandate of restoring the economy’s health and his pursuit of a policy agenda more to the liking of the liberal base than centrist supporters exacted a huge political price for Democrats in the 2010 midterm elections. It is worth remembering, however, that Presidents Reagan and Clinton both gambled on policies that appealed more to their bases than to centrists after their 1980 and 1992 elections. They also inherited economic problems from their predecessors and their parties sustained significant midterm seat losses. Two years later, both were reelected—President Reagan in a landslide, President Clinton by a healthy margin. As the experience of these presidents suggests, a great deal can happen between a midterm and the next presidential election. While the nation is polarized and the parties are invigorated and near parity, President Obama’s prospects for reelection in 2012 would seem to once again depend on what centrists think of the in-party’s performance in office.

The Post-Midterm Obama Presidency

Two developments in the aftermath of the 2010 midterm offered early clues about the politics of the second half of President Obama’s term. First, after years of decrying the Bush tax cuts of 2001 as a shameless give away to the very wealthy, and

pledging not to renew the tax cuts for those making over \$250,000 a year, President Obama relented in the face of the incoming Republican House. In the lame-duck session of the outgoing Congress, Obama reached a compromise with Republicans to extend the Bush income and estate tax cuts for two years along with extending unemployment benefits, a number of stimulus targeted cuts, and adding a one-year cut in the payroll tax to stimulate employment.³⁹ Despite the president's taking the lead in putting the deal together, many liberal members of his base opposed the measure because the cuts included those at the highest income levels. While 139 Democrats in the House voted with the President, 112 opposed him. Republicans, on the other hand, more cohesively supported the tax cut renewal package (138 to 36).

The second development shedding light on post-midterm politics were reactions to the tragic attempted assassination of Democratic Representative Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Arizona, in early 2011. The shooting killed six (including a nine-year-old girl), wounded thirteen, and left the congresswoman clinging to life. The massacre set off a political firestorm. A number on the left leveled accusations that the gunman had been motivated by the vitriolic rhetoric of conservative commentators and politicians. Conservatives defended themselves, responding that the charges from the left were baseless, reprehensible attempts to politically exploit the tragedy. In his speech at the University of Arizona, President Obama took the high ground, observing that the gunman was mentally deranged and that the tragedy had nothing to do with politics. He then urged greater civility in political discussion, not because it had engendered the shooting, but because "only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to our challenges as a nation, in a way that would make [those lost in the tragedy] proud." Praise for the speech came from both ends of the political spectrum.

These two developments in the first weeks of the second half of President Obama's term suggest two features likely to shape the politics of the next two years: a recalcitrant, frustrated, and ill-tempered liberal base and a Democratic president ready to or forced to reach out to the political center and even to the right. First, the 2010 midterm election left a depleted Democratic congressional caucus, but also one that was more liberal. Those members and their supporters had seen their expectations raised to great heights and (with apologies to Dylan Thomas) they will "not go gentle into that good night."⁴⁰ Dealing with the tempestuous impulses of the liberal base is likely to be a big concern for President Obama in the second half of his term.

The second insight from these developments is that President Obama may make greater use of one of the most important advantages available to presidents: the ability to seize the high ground. In both the tax compromise and in the tragedy in Tucson, President Obama had the opportunity to be a uniter and he seized

it. He was seen as welcoming bipartisanship on the tax cut compromise and transcending partisanship in his speech in Tucson. The latter was the unifying silver lining to the dark cloud of every national tragedy, but the former was a unifying event of political origins, the Republican victory in the midterm.

The most effective tone of politics (particularly with those in the political center) is always that which appears least politically partisan. That President Obama now has little choice but to reach toward the political center may draw disenchanting moderates back into the fold. It is more than a little ironic, given his earlier choices, that this could ultimately prove to be to his benefit in 2012.

Notes

1. The president's base includes those individuals who are most ideologically attuned to the president and his political party. It should be recognized that the categories of base and center simplify, perhaps oversimplify, the degrees of ideological commitments. There are those in the base who are somewhat inclined to the ideology of the president and his party and there are those who are fanatical in that commitment. By the same token, there is a range of commitments among centrist supporters from those who have views that are just a shade less ideological than those in the base to those who are verging on support for the opposition party.
2. This, in essence, is the classic tension of representation. On the one hand, popular government demands representatives who act as delegates to reflect the popular will. On the other, as Edmund Burke put the case so well centuries ago, representatives owe the public their good judgment and this quite likely reflects the views of fellow partisans. For an early empirical assessment of orientation of legislators see John C. Wahlke, Heinz Eulau, William Buchanan, and LeRoy C. Ferguson, *The Legislative System: Explorations in Legislative Behavior* (New York: Wiley, 1962). The push and pull of the center and the party base has also been studied in political campaigns. See Benjamin I. Page, *Choices and Echoes in Presidential Elections: Rational Man and Electoral Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
3. Control of the legislative process by the base not only requires party control of both chambers of Congress, but control of them by the party's base and a sixty-seat majority in the Senate by the party's base to invoke cloture on filibusters. This rarely, if ever, occurs.
4. Contrary to the progressive-era view of politics still held by many, there is and should be no "bright line" separation between the politics of elections and governing. From a theoretical standpoint, electoral politics and governing should not be divorced from one another in a representative democracy. A government that rests on the will of the people, expressed in an election, should govern with that will in mind. More practically, the political divisions evident in elections do not disappear once the votes are counted and those who supported (or opposed) the president in the election are likely

- to support (or oppose) him in his attempt to govern. Presidents would be naive to ignore this and negligent not to try to keep their supportive coalition intact.
5. My previous research documents these partisan turnout effects. See *The Presidential Pulse of Congressional Elections*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), pp. 174-87, and *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote*, 2nd ed. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), pp. 84-86. There are some high-profile cases of centrist coalitions in which the president's legislative base voted against him. Perhaps the most well-known of these is the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement under President Clinton. This was passed with the votes of moderate Democrats and Republicans. Liberal Democrats, aligned with labor unions, generally opposed the measure. President George W. Bush's immigration plan in 2007 also lost the support of his party's base. Finally, President Obama's base "took a walk" on the compromise reached after the 2010 mid-term on renewing the Bush tax cuts.
 6. Most studies have treated the issue as though all presidents respond and should respond to their partisan base and to the center in the same way. See B. Dan Wood, *The Myth of Presidential Representation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
 7. George C. Edwards III, *At the Margins: Presidential Leadership of Congress* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); and see Edwards's chapter in this volume.
 8. Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership from FDR to Carter* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980) pp. 64-73.
 9. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).
 10. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957). Downs's theory hypothesized that centrists, especially the median voter, would have the greatest leverage in the process. This greatly underestimated the ability and willingness of stubborn members of the base to withdraw their support if they feel they are being taken for granted. The real option of those in the base acting as "political amateurs" and "taking a walk" if displeased gives them leverage over their party.
 11. Michael Dukakis, "1988 Nomination Acceptance Speech," Democratic National Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, July 21, 1988. The American Presidency Project's Document Archive: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25961#axzz1HeFUdT68> (accessed March 25, 2011).
 12. Retrospective voting essentially refers to voting based on evaluations of past performance of those in office. There is an extensive literature on retrospective voting. See Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925); Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); and James E. Campbell, Bryan J. Dettrey, and Hongxing Yin, "The Theory of Conditional Retrospective Voting: Does the Presidential Record Matter Less in Open Seat Elections?" *Journal of Politics* 72, 4 (2010): 1083-95.
 13. An in-party candidate's evaluation rises and falls with the performance of the incumbent president. Similarly, the fortunes of out-party candidates rise on bad ratings of the incumbent's performance and fall when the incumbent performs well.

14. If the president is of the same party as his predecessor, then he may have been elected because of the positive performance of that predecessor. If the president is of the opposite party, he may have been elected because of the poor performance of his predecessor.
15. Robert A. Dahl, "Myth of the Presidential Mandate," *Political Science Quarterly* 105, 3 (Autumn, 1990): 355-72. For a defense of the idea of presidential mandates, see Patricia Heidotting Conley, *Presidential Mandates: How Elections Shape the National Agenda* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
16. James E. Campbell, "The Midterm Landslide of 2010: A Triple Wave Election," *The Forum* 8, 4, article 3 (December 2010).
17. The average of four Gallup polls from late July to early September 2008 indicated a 32 percent approval rating for President Bush. The data were obtained from the Gallup website: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116500/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-George-Bush.aspx>.
18. Alan Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2010). For a contrasting view, see Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004); and Paul DiMaggio, John Evans, and Bethany Bryson, "Have American Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?" *American Journal of Sociology* 102, 3 (1996): 690-755.
19. James E. Campbell, "Explaining Politics, Not Polls: Examining Macropartisanship with Recalibrated NES Data," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 74, 4 (October 2010): 616-42.
20. The Senate voting records for McCain and Obama document their ideological positions. Combining the liberal Americans for Democratic Action roll call scores with the American Conservative Union roll call scores (flipped to make them comparable) for 2006 and 2007, McCain had a rating of 24 percent liberal. He was almost perfectly positioned between a 50 percent moderate score and a perfectly consistent conservative score. Obama, on the other hand, voted 95 percent of the time in the liberal direction.
21. CNN, "Election 2008: Exit Polls," <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#val=USPooP1> (accessed March 25, 2011). It is interesting to note that the exit poll in 2008 did not even ask about McCain's position on the issues as being too liberal or too conservative. This might be interpreted as the ultimate testimony to McCain's centrism.
22. Survey of Professional Forecasters, Third Quarter 2008, Release Date: August 12, 2008. Released by the Research Department of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, <http://www.philadelphiafed.org/research-and-data/real-time-center/survey-of-professional-forecasters/2008/survq308.cfm> (accessed March 25, 2011).
23. Bureau of Economic Analysis. National Economic Accounts, Gross Domestic Product, Percent Change from Preceding Period, <http://bea.gov/national/index.htm#gdp> (accessed March 29, 2011).
24. The consumer confidence ratings are from Gallup at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1609/Consumer-Views-Economy.aspx>. Respondents are asked, "How would you rate economic conditions—as excellent, good, only fair, or poor?" The ratings are averages of three polls in August and early September and two polls in October.

25. Frank Newport, Jeffrey M. Jones, Lydia Saad, Alec M. Gallup, and Fred L. Israel, *Winning the White House 2008: The Gallup Poll, Public Opinion, and the Presidency* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2009), p. 584.
26. The performance-based loss of support for President Bush is also supported by Arthur Lupia's analysis that showed that "Bush voters' decisions not to vote or to support Obama were a sufficient condition for Obama's victory." Arthur Lupia, "Did Bush Voters Cause Obama's Victory?" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 43, 2 (April 2010): 239-41.
27. Respondents who said that they "leaned" toward the Democratic or Republican Party are classified as partisans rather than independents. As Bruce Keith and his colleagues concluded, these "independent leaners" in nearly every important respect are like other partisans and unlike independents who do not indicate a leaning. See Bruce E. Keith, David B. Magleby, Candice J. Nelson, Elizabeth Orr, Mark C. Westlye, and Raymond E. Wolfinger, *The Myth of the Independent Voter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
28. For a contrasting view, see the Aberbach chapter in this volume.
29. Jeffrey M. Stonecash, "The 2010 Elections: Party Pursuits, Voter Perceptions, and the Chancy Game of Politics," *The Forum* 8, 4, article 11 (December 2010). Stonecash cites a Gallup poll from September 11-13, 2009, that finds that only 37 percent of all Americans and 34 percent of political independents thought that "the government should be primarily responsible for making sure that all Americans have health insurance."
30. Robert P. Saldin, "Healthcare Reform: A Prescription for a 2010 Republican Landslide?" *The Forum* 8, 4, article 10 (December 2010): 8.
31. Costas Pangopoulos, "The Dynamics of Voter Preferences in the 2010 Congressional Midterm Elections," *The Forum* 8, 4, article 9 (December 2010): 7.
32. *Washington Post*-ABC News poll, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postpoll_10052010.html (accessed March 25, 2011). The question is item 27 in the report of survey results.
33. CNN Politics, Election Center, "Full National House Exit Polls," <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2010/results/polls/#val=USHoop3> (accessed March 25, 2011).
34. Three separate polls conducted between late June and mid-July by Fox News, by CNN and Opinion Research, and by ABC and the *Washington Post* indicated that approval of President Obama's handling of the BP oil spill ranged between 41 and 45 percent and that disapproval stood at 52 or 53 percent. See PollingReport.com on Energy at <http://www.pollingreport.com/energy.htm> (accessed March 25, 2011).
35. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Databases, Tables and Calculators by Subject, Unemployment Rates, <http://data.bls.gov/PDQ/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet> (accessed January 8, 2011).
36. David Mayhew, *Divided We Govern*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).
37. See the Sinclair chapter in this volume.
38. Jack Rosenthal, On Language, "A Terrible Thing to Waste," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2009. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/magazine/02FOB-onlanguage-t.html> on March 29, 2011. As Rosenthal observes, the sentiment expressed

by Emanuel did not originate with him. Rosenthal attributes the more pithy original version of this observation, "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste," to Stanford economist Paul Romer.

39. The compromise left the highest tax rate at 35 percent. Without the compromise all income tax rates would have increased and the highest rate would have jumped to 39.6 percent.
40. From Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" (1940). See <http://oldpoetry.com/opoem/show/2906-Dylan-Thomas-Do-Not-Go-Gentle-Into-That-Good-Night> (accessed March 29, 2011). From their perspective, the liberal base is likely to, as the poem concludes, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light."