

From Campaigning to Governing: Politics and Policymaking in the New Obama Administration

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Barack Obama's impressive victory in the 2008 American elections, the most decisive win for a new Democratic president since Franklin Roosevelt's in the depths of the Great Depression, raised high expectations – in the United States and around the globe – for significant changes in politics and policymaking. Obama's election came against the backdrop of an extended, deeply dispiriting and dysfunctional period in American public life, one characterized by a sharp ideological polarization of the political parties, a demise of genuine deliberation within and between the branches of government, a brutish tribalism among party and ideological activists and their media enablers, a public overwhelmingly of the view that the country was seriously off track and its government unable or unwilling to move it in the right direction, historically low presidential and congressional approval ratings, and a greatly diminished U.S. standing around the world.

While the country yearned to purge the political system of its pathologies and move on to a new era, Obama took the oath of office on January 20 facing a most daunting set of immediate policy challenges. A global financial meltdown and severe recession threatened to deteriorate into deflation and depression. Massive global trade and investment imbalances and huge inherited budget deficits complicated the task of emergency economic policymaking and constrained promised efforts to tackle widely acknowledged problems with health care, energy security, climate change and education. The foreign policy landscape was littered with dangers – a withdrawal of U.S. military forces from a far from stable Iraq, deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iran apparently moving closer to achieving a nuclear weapons capacity, a moribund Middle East peace process, a bellicose Russia, a rising China not yet integrated into global economic and security systems, and Mexico threatened by drug cartels selling drugs and buying arms in the U.S.. The list goes on.

What are the prospects for President Obama healing and revitalizing a broken political system and successfully tackling these massive domestic and foreign policy problems? Near the end of the new leadership team's first hundred days in office, what can be surmised broadly from his achievements and setbacks and specifically from the organization and staffing of the administration, the setting of policy priorities and their sequencing, approaches to both parties in Congress, and strategies for building, maintaining and mobilizing public support?

The First Hundred Days – A Useful Indicator of Presidential Success?

Ever since Franklin Roosevelt's remarkable launch of his presidency in 1933 – fifteen major measures introduced and signed into law, unprecedented executive actions, and a riveting series of Fireside Chats – the first hundred day record has been an irresistible yardstick for measuring presidential progress. But as historian David Greenberg reminds us, no subsequent president has come close to matching FDR's record. The most successful – Lyndon Johnson in 1965 and Ronald Reagan in 1981 – took much longer than one hundred days to achieve path-breaking but fewer and more limited policy initiatives. In Roosevelt's case, the incomparable sense of urgency from the dire circumstances of the Depression combined with the historic magnitude of his electoral victory

-muted the political opposition and made his early successes possible. Nothing approaching the magnitude of these economic and political conditions has materialized to provide the basis for a comparable episode of presidential leadership.

That is not to deny that how presidents begin their tenure importantly shapes their fortunes. There is something of a natural political dynamic in the presidency that dictates seizing opportunities created by their election as quickly as possible. Honeymoons with Congress and the media often end early and abruptly with some political miscue or aggressiveness by the opposition. The close proximity of the midterm election leads potentially vulnerable members of Congress to focus more intently on their own electoral fortunes by the end of the president's first year in office. The traditional loss of seats by the president's party in that midterm weakens his base of support in Congress for the final two years of his initial term. If re-elected, the president immediately becomes a lame duck.

In reality, each presidency has its own political dynamic, shaped by the size of the initial election victory, the contours of the economy, conditions of war or peace, public impressions, and legislative victories and defeats. Political capital is not a finite commodity generated in the election and then quickly depleted in battles to enact a policy agenda. It can be replenished through early legislative victories, reassuring leadership, and improving conditions at home and abroad. Presidents have often garnered significant policy victories well after their first year in office. The challenge is to begin one's presidency in a way that banks some initial achievable goals, avoids personal missteps and legislative defeats, and lays the political groundwork for sustained leadership throughout the life of his administration.

An Initial Tally

Not surprisingly, Obama's start does not come close to matching FDR's but his initial achievements stack up well with that of intervening occupants of the Oval Office. On the legislative front, he interceded with Congress even before taking office to head off a move to deny release of the second installment of funds under the increasingly unpopular \$700 billion Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP). Working with Congress on several legislative measures that were stymied in the previous year by filibusters or vetoes, he signed into law bills to ease the restrictions on wage discrimination lawsuits, expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program, and protect two million acres of public lands as wilderness areas. A very ambitious \$787 billion fiscal stimulus package was enacted, albeit after painful negotiations with a small group of Senate moderates finally garnered the sixty votes needed to invoke cloture and end the Republican filibuster. The stimulus bill – unprecedented in its size and scope, totaling two percent of GDP – was passed into law less than four weeks into the Obama presidency, a very impressive achievement. It also incorporated substantial down payments on his campaign promises to cut middle class taxes and invest in health information technology, renewable energy, and education. And Obama delivered to Congress a \$3.6 trillion fiscal year 2010 budget that incorporates the staggering costs of coping with the financial meltdown and deep recession as well as funds to launch his major initiatives in health, energy, and education. In spite of the sticker shock, the budget resolutions approved by the House and Senate largely accommodate Obama's priorities and keep his proposals alive to fight another day.

Drawing on his executive authority, Obama took a number of significant unilateral steps to deliver on campaign promises. He ordered the closing of the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay and banned torture by CIA interrogators. He struck the rule that prohibited the awarding of U.S. family-planning funds to any organization offering abortion or abortion counseling; removed limitations on federal support of embryonic stem cell research; reversed three previous orders governing labor unions and federal contractors; and increased transparency in government through new directives to agencies under the Presidential Records Act and the Freedom of Information Act.

In the foreign policy arena, he ordered a phased withdrawal of military forces from Iraq, announced a new strategy for and deployment of additional troops to Afghanistan, took new diplomatic initiatives with Iran, re-launched arms control negotiations with Russia, and outlined a vision of a nuclear weapons-free future. Obama came through his first international incident by successfully using military force to rescue the captain of a cargo ship taken hostage by pirates off the coast of Somalia. He also participated in the London G-20 summit to coordinate a global response to the financial meltdown and deep recession.

The latter came after the Administration first struggled at home to develop and unveil a strategy for stabilizing the financial markets and restoring liquidity to the economy. Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner was sharply criticized for announcing steps that were said to be too little and too vague – in part because the administration moved too slowly to get its top political appointees in place at Treasury to help Geithner put the package together. By the eve of the London meeting, however, the administration had in place the four pillars of its strategy to revive the banking system -- stress tests and capital infusion of financial institutions, mortgage relief, easing credit for small business and consumer loans, and a public-private partnership to price toxic assets and remove them from financial institutions. Many critics remained deeply skeptical of the workability of these steps and convinced that a nationalization of troubled financial institutions was essential. But a plausible and politically achievable plan was in place and was soon followed by a serious plan for reducing systemic risks in the financial system. For the moment, at least, fear of a complete meltdown eased.

The other significant step taken by the Obama Administration during this period was to lay the groundwork for a major restructuring of the automobile industry. The provision of temporary life support to General Motors and Chrysler was tied to aggressive demands by federal officials. Chrysler was given thirty days to merge with Fiat or go bust. GM was allowed sixty days to meet the stringent conditions of the administration's auto task force. The CEO was fired and half the board designated for replacement. GM was effectively forced into a compressed bankruptcy process, either within sixty days with the administration calling the tune, or after with a judge supervising the restructuring.

Throughout his first few months in office, Obama has been deeply and visibly engaged in a number of big issues at home and abroad, not through passionate and aggressive presidential demands but instead with a leadership style that is cool, cerebral, and substantive – one designed to listen, inform and persuade, not proselytize. The scale of his policy ambitions could hardly be greater. He seeks to link responses to the immediate crisis with longer-term steps that in his view are essential for positioning the United States to prosper in rapidly changing global economic and security systems. He is aware of the considerable political and economic obstacles in his path and pragmatic enough to settle, where necessary, for something well short of those ambitious. He has a vision and a compass, as well as an abiding faith in the power of persistence. He is off to a quick start but is clearly banking on two full four-year terms to build a successful record.

Organizing and Staffing the Administration

Recent Democratic presidents (Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter) were notoriously ineffective in using the long transition period to prepare to govern. Obama was a study in contrast. Months before the general election, he recruited former Clinton White House Chief of Staff John Podesta to plan for and build a transition team and charter. Lessons from previous transition failures and successes were codified. Plans for the order and timing of key personnel were set. The White House Chief of Staff would come first, not last, and key counselors, deputies, and office directors would follow shortly. Experience in Congress and in previous administrations was most welcome. The next priority was given to filling key economic and foreign policy Cabinet positions. Hillary Clinton was courted as Secretary of State. Robert Gates was asked to stay on at the Pentagon. Retired Marine General James Jones was selected as national security advisor. New York Fed Bank

President Timothy Geithner was chosen for Treasury. Former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle was picked to lead the health reform campaign as head of HHS and of a new White House office. Altogether, they comprised an impressive Obama team, strong on stature, experience, and moderation.

Just as most observers were concluding that Obama had managed the transition flawlessly, the first bumps were encountered. New Mexico Governor and former presidential candidate Bill Richardson withdrew from his appointment as Secretary of Commerce in the wake of a Justice Department investigation of an alleged pay-to-play scheme in the Governor's office. Geithner acknowledged that he failed to make timely payroll tax payments on income from the World Bank, turning a consensual choice into a very controversial one and delaying his Senate confirmation. Obama's choice for chief performance officer in the White House withdrew, presumably for failure to pay District of Columbia taxes on a household employee. Daschle's confirmation proceedings in the Senate stalled because of tax problems, in his case a failure to treat as taxable income a car and driver provided by an investment firm which employed him part-time. Days after it was first reported, Daschle withdrew from both his appointments.

The vaunted Obama team stumbled badly, souring what had been the sweetest of presidential transitions. Moreover, the vetting of potential nominees in the White House and Senate, which intensified after the Geithner and Daschle embarrassments, slowed the appointment process further and left key departmental secretaries bereft of sub-cabinet appointees. Tough new restrictions on lobbyists joining and leaving the Administration and increased fear of long delays and embarrassing publicity led a number of designees to withdraw from consideration. Geithner labored for almost two months without a single Senate-confirmed assistant; Clinton had no key undersecretaries or assistant secretaries in place during the same period.

To be sure, others were present to bear some of the workload during these early months. These included some holdovers from the Bush administration, senior career civil servants, and scores of political appointees not subject to Senate confirmation. Nonetheless, the costs of delay in filling these positions are real. Obama is doing no worse than Clinton and George W. Bush but that is a woefully inadequate standard. He faces a global financial and economic crisis and two hot wars demanding all hands on deck.

The organization and staffing of the new Administration reflects Obama's operating style and preferences. He is immensely self-confident, prepared to engage substantively a wide array of issues, open to debate and disagreement among senior advisors, more attracted to informal advice from individuals than formal reports from organizations, and ready to make decisions quickly and decisively. No surprise that he chose a number of individuals with independent political standing for his team; was attracted to the use of special envoys of considerable stature to deal with hotspots around the world; and further centralized power in the White House by appointing "czars" to lead policy initiatives on climate change and energy, health reform, the economy, and urban affairs. Obama also released a directive mandating formal procedures for the consideration of national security issues during his administration that appears to expand the reach of the National Security Council into areas now led by other senior White House officials expert in their respective fields. Mac Destler, co-author of *In the Shadow of the Oval Office*, questions the workability of this structure and the fit of General Jones. While he enjoys bipartisan respect for his integrity, Jones has never worked closely with Obama and is accustomed to operating within hierarchical structures, with business moving up and down the organization through reliable channels—a model that sounds a far cry from normal operating procedures in the White House and from Obama's open and fluid style of decision making.

Setting Priorities and Sequencing Policy Initiatives

New presidents who get off to a good start almost always have agenda control. They focus on a limited number of issues, keep extraneous matters from stepping on their priorities, and avoid

overloading the circuits in Congress. Carter sent a flood of proposals to Capitol Hill with little concern for priority or sequencing. He reaped little in the way of legislative harvest from them and the public began to wonder if he was up to the job. Reagan focused relentlessly on cutting taxes and spending, ultimately succeeding in shifting policy for decades. Clinton allowed the issue of gays in the military to overwhelm his policy priorities at the outset of his administration and then misjudged the market for a small economic stimulus in the Senate and suffered a humiliating defeat.

Obama identified stabilizing the financial markets and shortening the recession as his highest initial priority. His early efforts to ensure the release of \$350 billion in TARP funds, pass a large economic stimulus bill, and develop a new strategy for dealing with the troubled banking system reflected that priority. Nonetheless, he was widely criticized for diluting his focus on economic crisis management by linking it to reform of health policy, energy and education. Critics argued that his economic recovery leadership and proposals were not up to the seriousness of the crisis, that the staggering costs of the recession and bailout made health, energy and education reform wildly unrealistic, and that his huge agenda would overwhelm the capacity of Congress to deliver on its central components.

Obama insisted that the linkage was essential to long-term economic security and prosperity and refused to back down. At his insistence, the stimulus bill contained very generous allocations for health technology, renewable energy and education. The fiscal year 2010 budget he submitted to Congress made room for major health reform, a cap-and-trade carbon emissions system, and an expansion of federal investment in education from pre-K through college. He called on Congress to begin deliberations on legislation to deliver on his promise to overhaul health and energy policy. And to born-again deficit hawks alarmed by the massive increases in projected debt, he countered that the only credible way of dealing with the long-term fiscal imbalance is to spend generously now to increase aggregate demand and avoid an extended recession or depression and to make the investments essential to ultimately controlling exploding health care costs and to developing a new economy based on renewable energy.

My view is that Obama and his advisors are fully aware of the obstacles he faces in achieving his legislative ambitions. Neither ideological rigidity nor political naïveté are qualities I would associate with this White House. Nor is there any shortage of real-world experience working in and with Congress. Sticking with an ambitious agenda at this early stage does not mean Obama expects to achieve major reform on every element in six months or a year. Paying for an ambitious health reform package remains a daunting challenge. Congress has already signaled its unhappiness with several measures proposed by Obama to raise the necessary revenues. And administration officials very likely will not arrive in Copenhagen this December with cap-and-trade in hand. Banking what is possible in this first round will not exhaust the possibilities for policy change; indeed, in contrast to deferring action on all major policy goals not tied directly to the immediate economic crisis, it might well improve prospects for achieving his long-run objectives over the full course of his presidency.

Approaches to Congress

Several patterns are evident already in Obama's approaches to Congress. Unlike his immediate predecessor, he is respectful of the constitutional standing of Congress as the first branch of government and solicitous of the views of its members on both sides of the partisan divide. While careful not to compromise what he considers to be legitimate presidential prerogatives, Obama has pulled back from Bush and Cheney's expansive assertions of the inherent powers of the presidency (although not fully enough to mollify some critics). He already appears to have had personal meetings in the White House and on Capitol Hill with more members of Congress of both parties than Bush did during his eight years in office. Obama has been comfortable having Congress take the lead in drafting legislative language after he has publicly signaled the importance and general thrust of the policy initiative.

Critics see in these approaches signs of passivity and partisanship. By deferring to Congress to write the stimulus package, they allege, Obama allowed the Democratic leadership to highjack his vehicle and substitute its own priorities and interests. The 2009 omnibus spending bill, which contained thousands of earmarks, flaunted the President's promise to reduce and reform such pork-barrel spending. The same pattern is likely to follow on health care and energy legislation, where he has declined to weigh in on most of the critical drafting decisions.

Those same critics see his passivity with Congress a reflection of his underlying partisanship. In spite of his rhetoric of bipartisanship and symbolic gestures of meeting with and listening to Republicans in Congress, he has sought to govern almost entirely with his own party base. This, they say, has produced legislation incorporating only Democratic ideas and interests and party-line votes.

While Obama has been respectful of the independent role of Congress and of its leaders, Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, I see little evidence of submissiveness in Obama's approach to Congress. The stimulus legislation, especially the version that passed the House, was almost entirely consistent with Obama's blueprint. That reality was obscured by Republican criticism of and media attention to a handful of minor measures included in the House leadership package that proved politically embarrassing. (I actually thought re-sodding the National Mall was a terrific idea: a shovel-ready, jobs-producing stimulus that produces a public good.) Key Obama aides worked before and after the inauguration with Democratic committee and party leadership staff on the dimensions and content of the package. The stimulus potency of the package was diluted in the Senate as a consequence of negotiations with a handful of moderate Democrats and Republicans whose support was necessary to garner sixty votes for cloture. The final conference report was reached with the active participation of the Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and Office of Management and Budget Director Peter Orszag. The 2009 spending bill priorities mirror those of Obama and substantial progress was made in reducing the number and costs of earmarks relative to the last Republican-controlled Congress.

Moreover, congressional assertiveness in writing legislation for presidential priorities is quite common in presidential-congressional relations. Medicare under Johnson and No Child Left Behind under George W. Bush are good examples. Clinton's unsuccessful experience with health care reform, in which he submitted a 1,342-page draft bill to Congress before engaging in serious negotiations with its members, is hardly the model Obama would choose to follow.

It is undeniable that the parties in Congress remain deeply polarized. As I shall argue shortly, this polarization is not simply an affectation of petty politicians in Washington; it reflects an ideological chasm between Democratic and Republican voters across the country. Obama's overtures to the opposition party have been unsuccessful to date because Republicans reject the central components of his agenda, including his economic recovery program. In less polarized times, the seriousness of the crisis and decisive nature of the Democratic electoral victory would have produced a significant number of Republican votes for the fiscal stimulus. But not a single Republican in the House and only three in the Senate voted for the stimulus; most have since gone on record supporting a repeal of the stimulus, a freeze on federal spending, and a massive, permanent, across-the-board tax cut – a combination of Herbert Hoover and Arthur Laffer – because that is what they believe. How can Obama split the difference with the Republican opposition without vitiating a stimulus he believes is the minimum required to avoid a serious risk of deflation and depression?

To be sure, Obama is likely to continue overtures to the Republicans on health care, energy, education and foreign policy and to court constituencies with high stakes in these policies that have traditionally aligned with the Republican party. Those overtures could eventually pay dividends that have been notably absent during his first months in office. Some of these issues do not break as readily along partisan lines. For example, Obama's approach to Afghanistan drew favorable reviews from many leading Republicans (including John McCain) who were critical of him on other fronts.

Building and Mobilizing Public Support

Obama enjoyed the typical bounce in public support after his election and began his presidency with over two-thirds of the public approving of his performance. That early peak dropped to the low sixties – where it has held steady in spite of very difficult economic times and an aggressive political opposition. The number disapproving has doubled from fifteen to thirty percent, and is concentrated among Republican identifiers. In fact, the partisan pattern of approval or disapproval of Obama's performance is consistent with the increasing polarization of presidential assessments in recent decades. The partisan difference in ratings of the performance of new presidents in this early stage of their tenure increased sharply from Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy to Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton. George W. Bush proved to be the most polarizing president of them all, but by this early measure he is topped by Obama, who set a record of a sixty percentage point difference in approval between Democrats and Republicans. However, headlines suggesting Obama is more polarizing than Bush ignore an important fact: the number of Republicans has declined sharply since 2007, leaving a hard core of conservatives who disapprove deeply of Obama. The departees have mainly gone into the camp of independents, whose approval of the president remains robust.

This pattern of deep and growing partisan polarization extends to voting in presidential and congressional elections, ideological self-identification, and positions on the most salient issues. It reflects major shifts in the composition of the electorate and in the coalitional bases of the two parties. Democrats are increasingly a party of minorities and liberal whites, Republicans of conservative whites. Washington Post reporter Dan Balz reported that exit polls show that 64 percent of Republicans who voted in November 2008 called themselves conservatives. That compares with 54 percent in 2000 and 49 percent in 1992. The youngest cohort and well-educated professionals in metropolitan areas are increasingly attracted to the Democratic party, older and rural voters to the GOP. The Democrats' base is now larger than the Republicans' and growing, but they must compete successfully for enough support (not necessarily a majority) of white moderates to win elections and govern effectively.

Obama's approach to building and maintaining popular support is multi-faceted. First, the public's overriding concern about the dire state of the economy is the central focus of his administration. This entails reinforcing the prevalent public view that he has inherited an economic disaster from his predecessor and that it will take some time to turn things around; empathizing with and channeling the populist anger at economic elites; and taking bold steps to stabilize the financial system and revive the economy while projecting confidence that they will succeed.

Second, even in the face of the economic crisis, critical campaign commitments to the base are to be honored: ending the war in Iraq, restoring a respect for science in national policymaking, fighting for health reform, renewable energy and increased access to quality education, supporting key priorities of organized labor, and beginning the difficult journey to comprehensive immigration reform.

Third, the evident partisan shape of politics and policymaking, and his heavy reliance on Democrats in Congress, will not keep Obama from reaching out to Republicans in Congress and the country, talking about the need for a new kind of politics, and sticking with a rhetorical style absent of bluster and venom.

How best to reach the public? Obama has chosen to err on the side of overexposure. Hardly a day goes by without his public presence, including speeches, press conferences, and meetings with members of Congress, CEOs, policy experts, and ordinary citizens; exclusive interviews with network anchors and the national press; new access to minority media and sympathetic bloggers; an appearance on Jay Leno and a return to 60 Minutes; weekly trips around the country, with extensive local and national news coverage; and an eight-day trip to Europe and Iraq jammed pack with news-worthy public appearances. If he keeps up this pace, he may wear out his welcome. But for now, all signs suggest that his public outreach is welcome and successful.

What of the promise of digital democracy? The transition from campaigning to governing has been far from seamless. The Obama campaign set a new standard in using the Internet for fundraising (a half billion dollars in online donations), social networking, video releases, campaign organization and policy discussions. Visions of high-tech transparency and accountability in government flowed naturally from that experience but the effort is just getting off the ground.

The administration's web presence, whitehouse.gov is filled with useful information about the new administration and the business of government but a number of important executive orders and official presidential correspondence have gone un-posted and the promise to post non-emergency bills on the Web for five days of public comment before the President signs them has not yet been kept. Critics note that the site features more public persuasion than documentation, more interpretation of events than access to primary documents. On the other hand, Obama appears to be fully exploiting the video possibilities of the new media by producing and distributing a steady stream of online video clips that are now routinely picked up by YouTube and other major sites. A new website designed to provide the public with information on how funds are being spent under the \$787 billion stimulus package – recovery.gov – is unprecedented in its scope and ambition. It is too early to know how accurate, complete and consequential that information will be.

The toughest challenge for Obama is figuring out how to utilize the thirteen million e-mail addresses he gathered in the campaign to mobilize public support on behalf of his legislative agenda. Because of legal restrictions on the use of public funds for lobbying and politicking, the effort is being led by Organizing for America, a new unit within the Democratic National Committee. Its first project – supporting the President's budget before a vote in Congress – generated only 214,000 signatures and swayed few, if any, members of Congress. Until these lists reach a critical mass in key congressional districts and states, they are unlikely to displace or importantly complement more traditional forms of persuasion.

Conclusion: Prospects for 2009 and Beyond

The leitmotif of the 2008 election campaign – change – is clearly evident in the first months of the new administration. The most unpopular president in contemporary American history has been replaced by a very popular one – in the U.S. and around the globe. The percentage of Americans who believe that the country is headed in the right direction has soared from a trough of ten percent before the election to over forty percent today. In spite of dire economic news, a substantial number of Americans are feeling more upbeat about the economy than a few months ago. Even ratings of Congress have increased markedly under the new unified Democratic party government.

The sharply partisan structure and tone of politics and policymaking remains in place, reflecting the gaping ideological differences between the parties in Washington and around the country. The incendiary rhetoric of right-wing cable commentators Glen Beck, Sean Hannity, and Rush Limbaugh – portraying Obama as dangerously fascist and unpatriotic and openly hoping that he fails – is an extreme indicator of the passionate feelings of the political opposition. It turns out that it takes both parties to deliver a new kind of politics – one less partisan, more civil, respectful of policy differences and open to persuasion.

For the present, at least, Obama and the Democrats have the upper hand. The President is trusted over the Republican opposition to deal with the serious problems confronting the country by a margin of more than two-to-one. The Republican party has gotten smaller, more conservative, and less popular. The public sees its unified stance against Obama's proposals as political (the party of "no") and not constructive. That opposition stance has helped unify Democrats in support of their president and tilted Independents decisively in his direction. And that in turn makes Obama even more likely to rely heavily on his own party in moving important policy changes through Congress. For example, it makes inclusion of reconciliation instructions in the budget resolution – a procedure permitting a simple majority to approve bills in the Senate – even more likely. Health care reform,

whose prospects have improved markedly since defeat of the Clinton plan in 1994, probably needs reconciliation as a threat to keep Republicans from filibustering it to death.

But there are good reasons to question whether this more partisan approach to governing, however necessary it may be now, is sustainable over the long haul. There are real limits to procedural end runs around the Senate's supermajority hurdle. No one appreciates that reality more than Senator Reid, who has worked assiduously to give Republicans ample opportunity to debate and amend proposals coming to the Senate floor during the first months of this year. Democrats will have difficulty holding their moderates in line on difficult votes on taxes and regulation in the face of unified Republican opposition. For example, Democrats representing high coal-producing and -consuming states and districts will be reluctant to support any cap-and-trade schemes to curb carbon emissions without a broader agreement being reached with the affected interests and at least some Republicans. The same is likely to be true with financial regulation, immigration, tax reform, and efforts to deal with the projected long-term fiscal imbalance.

Obama is likely to stick with his philosophy of inclusiveness even as he manipulates the partisan levers that are a critical resource at the beginning of his presidency. His ambitious progressive agenda is tempered with an instinctive pragmatism. As presidential scholar Fred Greenstein has noted, Obama elevates workability and political feasibility over abstract doctrine in his leadership style. At times this will require playing partisan hard ball but even then with an even temperament that laments its necessity to get some big things done. If the smattering of green sprouts in this spring's economy accurately forecasts a bottoming out of the severe downturn later this year and a gradual recovery, Obama has a good chance of harvesting some important legislative victories in the fall, minimizing the 2010 midterm loss of seats by his party in the House (and possibly gaining the one seat needed in the Senate after Al Franken of Minnesota is seated to make fifty-nine, allowing the Democrats to reach the magic sixty), putting himself and the Democrats in Congress in position to pursue their agenda over six or eight years, and making significant strides toward bolstering their majority status in the country.