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THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: SETTING UP A GOVERNMENT

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## Barack Obama, the Democratic Party, and the Future of the “New American Party System”

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# Barack Obama, the Democratic Party, and the Future of the “New American Party System”\*

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## Abstract

Ascending to the presidency in the midst of a severe economic crisis and an ongoing war on terrorism, Barack Obama faces numerous political and policy challenges. We examine an oft-observed facet of presidential leadership: the president's relations with his party. We argue that Obama has benefited from and abetted the development of a new relationship between the president and the parties that features presidents as strong party leaders who invest heavily in mobilizing voters, raising campaign funds, and articulating party doctrine. As we show, Obama's party leadership may hold both promise and peril for the practice of American democracy. Just as previous Republican presidents such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush used their powers in ways that bolstered their parties, Obama's exertions have strengthened the Democratic Party's capacity to communicate with constituents, mobilize voters, and raise funds. However, Obama must take care to avoid the pitfalls of presidential party leadership that ultimately undermined Reagan's and Bush's presidencies. In particular, recent history suggests that Obama must avoid forms of administrative aggrandizement that alienate citizens from government; and that he must forego leadership strategies that threaten the independence and integrity of the party apparatus.

**KEYWORDS:** American presidency, political parties, American political development, Barack Obama, party system

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Democratic Senator Barack Obama of Illinois offered the voters “Change We Can Believe In” during the 2008 presidential campaign. But his extraordinary two-year quest for the White House left unclear what kind of change he proposed. Calling on the people to trust in the “audacity of hope,” Senator Obama ran an idealistic campaign that sought to reprise the modern presidency’s role as progressive leader who could govern independently of political parties. He pledged to bring Americans together, overcoming the raw partisanship that had polarized the Washington community for nearly two decades and had begun to divide the country during George W. Bush’s eight years in office.

As Obama told the large, enthusiastic audience that gathered in Springfield, Illinois, in February of 2007, to hear him announce his candidacy for the presidency, “In the face of politics that’s shut you out, that’s told you to settle, that’s divided us for too long, you believe we can be one people, reaching for what’s possible, building that more perfect union.”<sup>1</sup> As the child of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya, a man of color raised in Hawaii and Indonesia, and a reformer schooled in Chicago politics as a member of the post-civil rights generation, Obama seemed to embody the aspirations of the entire nation—to transcend, as no previous modern president could, the racial, ethnic, religious, and economic differences that long had divided the country.

To be sure, Obama aroused considerable opposition among conservatives, who dismissed him as a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a doctrinaire liberal posing as a statesman who could lift the nation out of the muck of partisan rancor. His candidacy was also heavily criticized by his chief rival for the Democratic nomination, Senator Hillary Clinton of New York, the former First Lady who, as the first strong woman candidate for president, also had a legitimate claim to inherit the progressive mantle. To a remarkable degree, however, Obama overshadowed Clinton in inspiring the admiration of the country: he was cast perfectly, it seemed, to play the role chartered by leading architects of the modern presidency such as Woodrow Wilson, the Roosevelts, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson.

Yet Obama and his leading advisers also saw enormous potential in the national party politics that George W. Bush had practiced. Obama’s organizational efforts, in fact, were modeled on the techniques that Republicans had pioneered in 2004. Eschewing the Democrats’ traditional reliance on organized labor and other constituency organizations to mobilize the party faithful, Obama promised to strengthen the national party apparatus. He vowed to wage a 50-state campaign, build grassroots organizations in every state, help elect Democrats down the ballot, and register millions of new voters who would

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<sup>1</sup> Obama 2007.

support the party's commitment to depart from the domestic and foreign policies of the previous eight years.<sup>2</sup>

Obama's organizational strategy, which combined internet-based recruiting of volunteers, the use of data files to carefully target potential loyalists, and old-fashioned door-to-door canvassing, elaborated on the tactics that had worked successfully for Bush and the GOP in 2002 and, especially, 2004. The remarkable effectiveness of Obama's fundraising operation, which drew heavily on internet-solicited donations, further reflected lessons learned from the Bush campaign. Especially adept at soliciting small donations, Obama became the first major party candidate to refuse public funds for the general election campaign.

Just as Bush's partisan exploits benefitted from earlier measures to strengthen the GOP's national organization, so Obama's party leadership built on the previous commitments of Democratic officials to strengthen the party's capacity to contest elections. Obama's party-building activities further articulated developments in the relationship between the president and parties initiated by George W. Bush and, to a lesser degree, Ronald Reagan, developments that have spawned a "new party system." The traditional decentralized and patronage-based party system that prevailed from the early part of the nineteenth century to the latter part of the 1960s constrained presidential ambition. Indeed, the consolidation of the modern executive during Franklin Roosevelt's long tenure appeared to create an unbridgeable divide between presidents and parties. FDR, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon each took steps to replace party influence with administration centralized in the bureaucracy and the White House. Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush made efforts to reinvent presidential party leadership: they benefitted from, and played critical roles in advancing, an executive-centered party system that relies on vigorous party leadership in articulating party doctrine, raising campaign funds, mobilizing grassroots support, and campaigning on behalf of partisan brethren.<sup>3</sup> As Bush's troubled presidency revealed, this reconfiguration of the relationship between presidents and parties holds promise and peril for the practice of American democracy. It remains to be seen whether Obama will strengthen the Democrats as a collective organization that can mobilize popular support for party principles and policies or, instead, subject his party to the sort of White House dominance that ultimately contributed to the implosion of the Bush presidency and the precipitous decline of Republican fortunes.

To reconcile his personal ambition with the strengthening of the Democratic Party, Obama will have to avoid two pitfalls that appear endemic to the modern presidency. First, modern presidents are sorely tempted to exercise

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<sup>2</sup> Galvin 2008.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of these developments, see Milkis and Rhodes 2007a, 2007b.

power unilaterally. Even presidents deeply invested in party-building, such as Reagan and Bush, have aggrandized executive administration, so much so that the Republican Party came to be viewed as a means to enhance their own political programs. The “administrative presidency,” as Richard Nathan termed it, has sometimes advanced objectives widely supported by party loyalists.<sup>4</sup> But both Reagan and Bush resorted to administrative tactics that did great damage to their presidencies and their parties. Faced with an ongoing War on Terror and one of the most serious economic crises in the nation’s history, Obama will not easily resist the temptation to make extraordinary use of executive power. Like Reagan and Bush, therefore, he might seek to impose his will through the bureaucracy in the pursuit of policies that substantially outstrip congressional and public support.

A second related trap follows from these presidents’ best intentions: the very vigor of strong party leaders threatens the integrity of political parties as collective organizations with a past and a future. Bush’s energetic party leadership tended to erode the distinction between the presidency and the Republican Party, and thereby weakened the capacity of the GOP to hold its leader to account. Because Republicans were so tightly tied to their president, they were unable to escape voter retribution for Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq, and the financial crisis. The Democrats have traditionally respected the autonomy of the party’s various constituencies to a much greater extent than have the Republicans. However, Obama’s personal popularity and talent for organizing make him a natural party leader, and the economic crisis will only magnify his prominence in party circles. The challenge for Democrats will be to benefit from Obama’s popularity without being subsumed by it.

Whatever its strengths and weaknesses, there is reason to suspect that the national structure of the party system—and a politics that privileges national issues and conflicts—will endure. Although the Democrats have renounced the fierce partisanship that the White House and Republican Congress practiced during the first six years of the Bush presidency, many liberal public officials and strategists have expressed more than grudging admiration for the effective party-building that has buttressed partisan rancor in the nation’s capital. The 2008 election made clear that Barack Obama and the Democrats learned a great deal from the political tactics employed by the Republicans. More to the point, given the way national parties have abetted executive ambition, earnest presidential party leadership is likely to be an important feature of American politics for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>4</sup> Nathan 1983.

### The President, the Parties, and Constitutional Development

The challenges facing President Obama and his party are deeply ingrained in the fabric of American constitutional government. The architects of the Constitution established a nonpartisan president who, with the support of the judiciary and Senate, was intended to play the leading institutional role in checking and controlling “the violence of faction” that the framers feared would rend the fabric of representative government. Even after the presidency became a more partisan office, its authority continued to depend on an ability to remain independent of party politics, especially during national emergencies such as the Civil War and the Spanish-American war.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the institutional imperatives of the executive appear at first glance to be inherently at odds with the character of political parties.

Party organization seems better suited to legislative bodies, which have a collective action problem, than to an executive dedicated to vigorous and expeditious administration. Conversely, presidents can best display their personal qualities “above party,” as Wilson Carey McWilliams observed. By contrast, “Congress cannot be effective, let alone powerful, without the institution of party...A legislature can rival the executive’s claim to public confidence only to the extent that it is accountable, which presumes a principle of *collective responsibility*.”<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, presidents and parties need each other. By the 1790s, Thomas Jefferson and his Republican allies attacked the original constitutional presidency, which Alexander Hamilton and the Federalist Party championed, as an agent of “consolidation” that would create an unacceptable divide between the government and society. By enmeshing the president in a localized party system, those who adhered to Jeffersonian principles hoped to avoid the unified and energetic executive envisioned by Hamilton and thereby create a presidency “safe for democracy.” A principal role for presidents in formulating policies and carrying them out would make the more decentralized and republican institutions—Congress and the states—subordinate, thus undermining popular sovereignty. Parties were formed during the first three decades of the nineteenth century to hold the constitutional presidency accountable to a highly decentralized and fiercely competitive party system that relentlessly organized and mobilized the American voter.<sup>7</sup>

Presidents thus became dependent on parties, both in campaigning and governing, to shore up their electoral fortunes in a political culture highly resistant

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<sup>5</sup>Ketcham 1984.

<sup>6</sup>McWilliams 1989, 35, emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup>Milkis 1999: Chapter 2.

to centralized administration. Even presidential quests for independence have required the support of party. Throughout American history, but especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, presidents have needed the support of their partisan brethren in Congress to establish institutions and programs that secured authority to exercise executive power autonomously.

At the same time, parties have relied on presidential candidates and presidents to convey a coherent message and to infuse their organizations with energy. From the 1830s to the 1890s, the highly localized parties found their strength principally in the political combat of presidential elections—a battleground that encouraged Democrats and Whigs in the antebellum period and Democrats and Republicans after the Civil War to overlook their differences in the interest of victory. Parties became more dependent on presidents in the twentieth century as campaigns became more focused on national candidates. Even so, presidents continued to represent the ideals and principles of their parties to the nation.

Although a combination of principle and strategy has created a degree of symbiosis between presidents and parties, the relationship has frequently been tense. Before the New Deal, presidents who sought to exercise executive power expansively, especially in the service of centralized administration, were thwarted “by the tenacity of [a] highly mobilized, highly competitive, and locally oriented democracy.”<sup>8</sup> With the consolidation of executive power during the 1930s and 1940s, the president, rather than the Congress or the party organizations, became the leading instrument of popular rule—in Theodore Roosevelt’s capacious phrase, “the steward of the public welfare.” Many scholars thus viewed the rise of the modern presidency in the wake of the Great Depression and Second World War as signaling the end of an old institutional order based on decentralized political control and the beginning of a permanent ascendance of national, non-partisan executive administration.<sup>9</sup>

The birth of the modern presidency and the decline of traditional localized parties better equipped the federal government to carry out vital tasks at home and abroad. At the same time, this development appeared to portend an era of chronically low public engagement and voter turnout, along with an increasingly fractious national politics.<sup>10</sup> The erosion of old-style partisan politics, however, simultaneously allowed for a more national and issue-based party system to develop, forging new links between president and parties. Republican presidents like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush dedicated themselves to building a national party organization that might mobilize popular support for, and devote

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<sup>8</sup> Skowronek 1982: 40.

<sup>9</sup> See Schlesinger 1949.

<sup>10</sup> Lowi 1985; Milkis 1993; Shea 1999.

governing institutions to, a new conservative political order, perhaps even the emergence of a new presidential leadership synthesis and a “new” party system.<sup>11</sup>

These presidents made Republican ideology more palatable to the mass electorate and bolstered their party’s organizational strength by raising funds, stumping for candidates, and strengthening grassroots organization. In so doing, they helped consolidate conservatives’ influence in national politics, setting the stage for profound departures in domestic and foreign policymaking. The most innovative, and potentially consequential, component of the “new party system” was the rise of the “national party machine” during Bush’s presidency. The “machine,” which emerged from Bush-Cheney and GOP strategists’ disappointment with Republican turnout in the 2000 presidential election, was an effort to systematically organize and mobilize the party’s grassroots supporters.

Relying on a combination of centralized hierarchy and decentralized volunteer effort, the GOP’s grassroots campaign sought to develop personal lines of communication between the Bush campaign and local activists. Campaign volunteers, recruited by professional staff on the ground and through e-mail and the internet, were charged with responsibilities for reaching specific goals developed by the Bush-Cheney headquarters: recruiting additional volunteers, organizing rallies and campaign events, writing letters to the editor, registering voters, or canvassing particular neighborhoods. Campaign officials in the states oversaw grassroots activity with tough love, holding volunteers accountable for meeting performance targets set by higher local officials.

The campaign was highly successful in mobilizing supporters and voters: campaign officials estimate that between 1.2 and 1.4 million individuals volunteered for the campaign nationwide. Significantly, the grassroots machine was calibrated not only to bolster the president’s reelection bid but to advance GOP prospects across the board. The Bush organization, coordinating with the Republican National Committee, emphasized reaching and turning out “lazy Republicans” who were predisposed to vote for Republicans at all levels but who were unreliable in their voting habits.<sup>12</sup>

Although this executive-centered Republican Party pioneered innovative methods to connect presidential and grass-roots politics, presidential party-building also portends dangers for constitutional government. The Reagan and Bush administrations worked relentlessly to concentrate power in the executive branch, using executive orders, signing statements, and staffing practices to implement policy through the bureaucracy. Although GOP activists and members of Congress often applauded the policy ends, these administrative practices

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<sup>11</sup> Milkis and Rhodes 2007a.

<sup>12</sup> Milkis and Rhodes 2007a.



weakened the rule of law, undermined collective responsibility, and threatened the stability of the Republican coalition. Indeed, the Reagan White House's most ambitious administrative maneuvers—its efforts to cut Social Security benefits and support Contra insurgents in Nicaragua—produced politically debilitating embarrassments for the president and his party.<sup>13</sup>

In much the same way, the Bush administration's vigorous claims to authority in waging the War on Terrorism were ultimately converted into self-inflicted wounds. Determined to wage war on its own terms, the Bush administration made a series of unilateral decisions that departed from historic and legal convention: it would deny "enemy combatants" captured in the War on Terrorism the right of *habeas corpus*; abrogate the Geneva Conventions and sanction torture of detainees during interrogations; and engage in warrantless surveillance of American citizens suspected of communicating with alleged terrorists abroad.<sup>14</sup> When these controversial decisions were revealed, they provoked widespread public condemnation and damaged the GOP's public support. The administration's insistence on a free hand to manage the war in Iraq resulted in the erosion of public confidence in the Republican Party as it became clear that the administration had badly botched reconstruction efforts.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, presidential party leadership in the Reagan-Bush mold has threatened to transform the GOP into a weapon of executive aggrandizement. This tendency was especially evident during the Bush presidency. Under Bush's leadership, the GOP became a useful instrument in campaigns and elections, but it was not seen by administration officials as a serious contributor to the White House's programmatic decisions. As Karl Rove, the chief "architect" of the Bush administration's political strategy, put it, the national parties that have emerged since the 1980s are "of great importance in the tactical and mechanical aspects of electing a president. But they are less important in developing a political and policy strategy for the White House." In effect, national parties serve as critical "means to the president's end."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, having benefited from Bush's patronage, the Republican Party became dependent on the president for its political sustenance. As a result, when Bush's popularity began to wane in the wake of Iraq, Katrina, and the financial crisis, the GOP was unable to extricate itself from its close embrace of the president.

Obama's presidential campaign and early governing stance hold some of the same benefits and perils of executive party-building. Although he champions

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<sup>13</sup> Derthick and Teles 2003; Barilleaux and Kelley 2005; Wilentz 2008: Chapter 8; Ehrman 2005: Chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> Pfiffner 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Jacobson 2008; Schier 2009: Chapter 5.

<sup>16</sup> Rove 2001.

foreign and domestic programs that would mark a fundamental departure from the Bush years, Obama has further perfected many of the partisan practices undertaken by his predecessor. In this sense, his presidency, even if it proves to be popular, may aggravate the troubling features of the “new party system.”

### **Obama’s Path to Success and Its Benefits for the Democratic Party**

Like the formidable Bush-Cheney machine of 2004, the Obama-Biden organization relied in part on the regular party apparatus. DNC chairman Howard Dean decided in 2006 to strengthen Democratic organizations throughout the country, an approach that state and local party leaders credited with abetting the party’s impressive victories then and in 2008.<sup>17</sup> Just as the Bush-Cheney machine of 2004 resulted in a wide-ranging Republican victory, so did the Obama-Biden campaign of 2008 yield not just a decisive triumph at the presidential level but also substantial gains in House and Senate races. Just as the Bush-Cheney campaign strengthened the Republican base, so the Obama-Biden grass-roots organization followed a more inclusive strategy that strongly appealed to moderate Republicans and independents.

### ***Organizing and Elaborating the “National Machine”***

Beginning in the Democratic primaries and expanding during the presidential campaign, Obama elaborated the “national machine” strategy pioneered by Bush and the Republican Party during the 2000-2006 election cycles.<sup>18</sup> The Obama campaign used internet networking techniques and old-fashioned recruiting at Obama events to develop its own massive grass-roots organization, which ultimately reached 13 million email addresses (including 3 million donors), involved 2 million active participants, and helped generate 35,000 local social-network groups on MyBarackObama.com.<sup>19</sup> Once supporters’ information was acquired, the campaign exploited modern communications tools—email, text messaging, YouTube, and podcasts—to explain the candidate’s positions; fire up campaign enthusiasts; encourage supporters to recruit friends and relatives; and alert activists to rallies, fundraisers, and other campaign events.

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<sup>17</sup> Berman 2008. Elaine Kamarck, former aide to Vice President Gore and now Harvard Professor, offers preliminary evidence that Dean’s contributions did make a difference in the 2006 campaigns. See Kamarck 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Obama’s strategy was also influenced by Howard Dean’s influential 2003-2004 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, and by his activities as the chairman of the Democratic National Committee. See Galvin 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Heilemann 2009.

Combining centralized direction and neighborhood activism, the campaign asked supporters to use standard campaign materials and messages, but also encouraged them to personalize their efforts by organizing their own events, posting their own campaign testimonials, and bundling donations from friends and colleagues. Like the Bush campaign in 2004, the Obama organization and its paid staffers in battleground states monitored the efforts of local volunteers and held them accountable for reaching performance targets. Volunteers achieving targets were rewarded with various perks, including campaign paraphernalia and opportunities to meet with high-ranking staff (and even the candidate himself).<sup>20</sup>

The online campaign was directly tied to a sophisticated get-out-the-vote (GOTV) effort. Convinced by the success of the 2004 Bush-Cheney campaign that face-to-face interaction with familiar community members would be more effective than more impersonal forms of contact, the Obama organization empowered local activists to target voters.<sup>21</sup> Combining data gathered from its campaign website with corporate consumer data and Census information, the campaign was able to develop a sophisticated voter database that could be analyzed to identify and target likely Democratic voters. Campaign officials trained thousands of local precinct captains, recruited through the internet as well as local party and activist networks, to lead grass-roots efforts to contact, register, and mobilize these voters.

The Obama army was fortified through the enlistment of online supporters to participate in door-knocking, precinct-walking, and registration drives. Social-network sites organized on MyBarackObama.com further buttressed the grass-roots efforts, with network members agreeing to canvass in the areas they represented. The get-out-the-vote process had a recursive quality: successful contact efforts yielded new voter information, which was used to update the voter database and refine subsequent GOTV activities. Indeed, voter mobilization was not a one-off effort on Election Day, but a steady process of communication throughout the primary and general election campaigns.<sup>22</sup>

The internet-based grass-roots campaign was effectively linked with Obama's conventional advertising strategy. Using the internet, the Obama campaign was able to develop long campaign ads (some upward of 15 minutes) that could be "broadcast" via YouTube and other internet outlets at a very low cost compared to conventional TV advertising. Moreover, the Obama campaign could use the internet-based grass-roots network to spread its productions virally: supporters plugged into the campaign network could forward Obama messages to

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<sup>20</sup> For overviews of Obama's internet-based grassroots campaign, see Doster 2008; Vargas 2008; Whoriskey 2008; Dickinson 2008.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Stelter 2008.

<sup>22</sup> See MacGillis 2008; Stirland 2008; Taddeo 2009; Madden 2008.

unaffiliated friends and colleagues. Finally, the campaign attempted to use its online videos to bypass the traditional media and speak directly to voters, especially in periods—for example, immediately after Obama decided to forego public financing—when media coverage was more critical of the candidate.<sup>23</sup> During an election cycle in which 46% of Americans used the internet, email, or text-messaging to obtain news about, and to participate in, the campaign, these efforts greatly augmented the more traditional TV-based advertising strategy.<sup>24</sup>

Obama's "national machine" politics imposed centralized control over the general election campaign. Rejecting longstanding tradition, the Democratic National Committee's political operations were moved from Washington, DC, to Chicago, in order to be fully integrated into the Obama campaign. The Obama campaign also rejected direct assistance from independent liberal "527" organizations, a significant departure from the organizational strategy deployed by Senator John Kerry in his 2004 presidential race. Indeed, Obama's national finance chair, Penny Pritzker, explicitly admonished big campaign contributors not to donate to the independent organizations.<sup>25</sup>

The Kerry-Edwards campaign had, in effect, outsourced responsibility for voter mobilization and fund raising to Americans Coming Together, a "shadow party" composed of volunteers, paid campaign staff and canvassers, union members, and public interest activists. Obama's more centralized efforts reflected the view that the Kerry campaign's fragmented organization was less efficient than the more centralized Bush-Cheney apparatus. Moreover, so dependent on a coalition of auxiliary organizations for fundraising and voter contact, the Kerry campaign found it impossible to keep the different strains of the campaign on message.

Obama and his advisors also believed that the more centralized machine politics they practiced was better suited to governing. Soon after the election, Obama officials revealed their intention to transform the massive campaign apparatus into a more permanent institution, Organizing for America, in order to press the president's agenda and lay the groundwork for his re-election.<sup>26</sup> As David Plouffe, Obama's campaign mastermind, explained, "Most of what this entity will be doing is building grass-roots support for issues and politics. Let's say there's an energy effort, an energy plan, that the president and some of Congress would like to get passed. People would get out there and talk to their neighbors and try to build support."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See, e.g. Carr 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Fraser and Dutta 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Taddeo 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Wallsten 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Taddeo 2009.

In a further indication of Obama's interest in institutionalizing the campaign machine, the administration declared its intent to house Organizing for America within the Democratic National Committee (albeit as a separate nonprofit), which is headed by Obama's close ally, former Virginia governor Tim Kaine.<sup>28</sup> The near-unanimous resistance of Congressional Republicans to the president's overtures for bipartisan support of his emergency economic stimulus bill in February of 2009 appeared to confirm the need to sustain a strong grass-roots organization.<sup>29</sup> During the debate over the economic stimulus package, the administration urged Obama supporters to organize "Economic Recovery House Meetings" to bolster Obama's recovery plan, with the president delivering a video address to drum up enthusiasm.

It remains to be seen whether Obama's Organizing for America—dubbed by insiders as Obama 2.0—is the advance guard of a national Democratic organization that can be effective in *governing* as well as in *campaigning*.<sup>30</sup> But the Obama campaign's 2008 grass-roots organization and Organizing for America suggest how the new president might further advance rather than transcend the executive-centered politics that his Republican predecessors had pioneered.

### ***Fundraising and Party-Building***

Obama was the most successful political fundraiser in modern electoral history, ultimately raising more than \$600 million dollars during the campaign. The conventional wisdom is that Obama raised enormous sums from small donations, reflecting his broad base of political support. Although a significant portion of Obama's take did arise from small donations, he also depended heavily on larger donors. Through October 15, 2008, about 24% of Obama's total campaign funds came from people who gave no more than \$200 dollars; about 76% came from larger donors.<sup>31</sup> As such, Obama's fundraising was not really revolutionary; it expanded on the "bundling" technique pioneered by George W. Bush, whose campaign encouraged wealthy donors to use their social connections to raise

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<sup>28</sup> Sidoti 2009; Lefko 2009; Vargas 2008.

<sup>29</sup> The House vote was 246 to 183, with just 7 Democrats joining all 176 Republicans in opposition. In the Senate, the vote, 60 to 38, was similarly partisan. Only 3 centrist Republicans joined 55 Democrats and 2 independents in favor. Herszornhorn 2009. The party-line schism, coupled with the withdrawal of Republican senator, Judd Gregg, Mr. Obama's nominee to be Secretary of Commerce, appeared to demonstrate the futility of the president's effort to move Washington toward post-partisanship at a time when the parties are so divided on the most important issues facing the country. See Baker 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Stolberg 2008; Rutenberg and Nagourney 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Malbin 2008; Luo and Palmer 2008.

additional campaign funds. All in all, 561 “bundlers” compiled at least \$63,200,000 for Obama during the 2008 election cycle.<sup>32</sup>

Even though Obama’s internet-based grass-roots organization might not have been as critical to his record-breaking campaign treasury as widely believed, there is no question that the historic fundraising effort proved an invaluable asset to the national campaign machine. When tied effectively to a populist message, campaign media can contribute substantially to voter enthusiasm and turnout. Obama’s massive campaign war chest allowed him to spend more than \$360 million dollars on media (and \$312 million on broadcast media alone), including a 30 minute “infomercial” in the last week of the campaign. Flush with campaign funds, the Obama campaign also was able to field between 5 and 10 times more paid field staff in swing states than Republicans; and, according to some reports, it almost doubled the GOP’s total number of field offices.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the Obama campaign was able to bolster its mobilization efforts by affording more than \$3 million in per diem expenditures to grassroots volunteers.<sup>34</sup>

Obama was not only an effective fundraiser for his own campaign; his fundraising prowess, particularly with very wealthy donors, allowed him to aid the Democratic Party. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Obama’s presidential campaign donated more than \$40 million dollars to national, state, and local party committees during the 2008 election cycle, primarily in battleground states.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Obama created a joint fundraising committee, the Obama Victory Fund, in collaboration with the Democratic National Committee. This joint committee was able to raise nearly \$200 million dollars, which was subsequently split between the Obama campaign, the DNC, and certain state party committees.<sup>36</sup> These developments suggest that Obama may be willing to make further contributions to the Democratic Party’s financial health in the coming years.

### ***“Change” and the Democratic Party’s Ideology***

Obama’s organizational and fundraising innovations have been wedded to a rhetorical effort to adapt the Democratic Party’s principles to the contemporary political environment. Obama has been characterized as “pragmatic,” “post-partisan,” and “difficult to pin down philosophically.”<sup>37</sup> In truth, Obama’s

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<sup>32</sup> Center for Responsive Politics 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Farnam and Haynes 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Luo and McIntire 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Center for Responsive Politics 2009b.

<sup>36</sup> Center for Responsive Politics 2009c; see also Morain 2008; Luo 2008; Mosk and Cohen 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Packer 2008; Becker and Drew 2008; Dionne 2009; Harwood 2008.

ideology is difficult to pinpoint because he has sought not only to honor core Democratic commitments, but also to redress some of the party's perceived weaknesses. George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism" attempted to reconcile the Republican Party to "big government"; Obama's rhetoric of "change" has endeavored to make contemporary Democratic liberalism more amenable to markets, religious devotion, and muscular internationalism. The president appears to believe that such efforts will help expand the Democrats' support and defend it against the perennial Republican charge that it is the party of "taxing-and-spending," "secularism," and naiveté in foreign affairs.<sup>38</sup>

In domestic policy, Obama has revealed his desire to balance activist government measures with respect for the market.<sup>39</sup> During the 2008 campaign, he argued that the tax code should be used to redress only the most egregious maldistribution of wealth: he proposed to cut taxes for 95% of citizens while raising them exclusively on wealthy Americans who benefitted from the Bush administration's tax program. Since becoming president, Obama has expressed his wish to work with Republicans in dealing with the economic crisis, and has shown willingness to pair new, admittedly massive government spending programs with tax cuts in order to stimulate the economy. These efforts to broach hardened party lines, while unrequited in the fight over the stimulus package, drew praise from moderate partisans and independents.<sup>40</sup>

To be sure, Obama was sharply critical of the Bush administration's deference to the investment industry in its handling of the Toxic Asset Relief Program (a program designed to aid financial institutions). Yet he accepted (at least so far) the premise that the TARP should prop up deeply troubled, private financial institutions rather than nationalize them or force them into bankruptcy.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, in an important departure from Democratic orthodoxy, Obama has suggested he may shape a new Social Security and Medicare "bargain" that would control costs and stem the growth of benefits to aid recipients.<sup>42</sup>

Fearing that the Democrats had failed to address citizens' moral and spiritual concerns, Obama has made visible efforts to reach out to religious Americans. On the campaign trail, Obama spoke regularly and openly about his faith. The Obama campaign also made systematic efforts to reach out to religious Americans—particularly young evangelicals—believing that a broad social

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<sup>38</sup> For liberals' questions about Obama's policy decisions, see Wallsten 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Leonhardt 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Hulse 2009.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g. Andrews and Dash 2009; Labaton and Andrews 2009; Irwin 2009.

<sup>42</sup> For alternative views, see Shear 2009; Greider 2009; Froomkin 2009.

justice mission would resonate with social conservatives' concern for community.<sup>43</sup> Obama has taken concrete steps to address religious Americans' concerns since becoming president. In a move that antagonized many Democrats, Obama selected Pastor Rick Warren, a sharp critic of homosexuality and abortion, to deliver the invocation at his inauguration. Obama defended the move by saying he disagreed with the minister's views on these topics, but that there should be room for "dialogue" on difficult social issues.<sup>44</sup> Obama has also announced support for the Office of Faith Based Initiatives, a Bush-era program to channel federal funds to religiously-inspired social service providers, and has implemented plans to continue and expand its work.<sup>45</sup>

Obama also bucked the progressive wing of the Democratic Party in order to pursue a muscular, if far more multilateral, stance in foreign policy. Obama pleased Democrats by criticizing the Bush administration's unilateralism and promising to work more closely with America's allies. Nevertheless, although an early and fervent critic of the war in Iraq, Obama has expressed support for the doctrine of preemption that underpins the broader War on Terror. The candidate pledged on the campaign trail that he would order strikes against terrorists stationed in Pakistan, if necessary without Pakistani approval, in order to destroy al-Qaeda. Indeed, Obama criticized the Iraq war in part because it detracted from the war in Afghanistan, which he proposed to intensify. Obama's early decisions as president make clear that his promise to uphold a muscular, albeit recast, approach to foreign affairs was not merely rhetorical flourish. The president mollified the party's base, and lived up to campaign promises, by initiating proceedings to close the Guantanamo Bay detention center, promising to hold direct talks with Iran, and establishing a timetable to withdraw troops from Iraq.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, Obama opted to retain George W. Bush's second-term Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, and nominated Hillary Clinton, a relatively hawkish Democrat, as Secretary of State. Recently, the administration has promised to expand the War on Terrorism by sending 17,000 more troops to Afghanistan; and has signaled it may retain some of the Bush administration's controversial practices regarding treatment of enemy combatants.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> E.g. Goodstein 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Salmon and Slevin 2008; Zeleny and Kirkpatrick 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Zeleny and Goodstein 2009.

<sup>46</sup> E.g. Cooper and Landler 2009; Lawrence 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Cooper 2009; Savage 2009; Richey 2009.



### **Obama's Leadership of the Democratic Party: Some Potential Pitfalls**

The question remains whether the further advance of an executive-centered party system will bring a national party system to fruition or continue the long-term development of a modern presidency that renders collective partisanship impractical. Indeed, there is a real sense in which the “new” party system may be a creature of, and dependent on, the modern presidency. When asked how his initial appointments to administrative positions, many of whom were old Washington hands, would carry out the campaign’s promise to transform national politics, President-elect Obama replied, “What we are going to do is combine experience with fresh thinking. But understand where vision for change comes from first and foremost. It comes from me.”<sup>48</sup> This assertion of presidential prerogative dovetailed with Obama’s plan to concentrate more power in the West Wing than any president since Richard Nixon and to put his own brand on the Democratic Party.

#### ***Administrative Centralization***

Administrative politics permitted Reagan and Bush to accomplish programmatic objectives that could not be achieved legislatively. At the same time, their aggressive deployment of executive administration mired their presidencies in constitutional controversies and policy disputes. By retreating to the politics of administration, these presidents implicitly admitted that their ambitions exceeded what could plausibly be achieved through more collaborative means. The subsequent alienation between policy and public opinion thus set the stage for popular backlash.

How will Obama govern? While it is early in his presidency, a few tentative conclusions can be drawn. In organizing the White House Office, he assembled a group of policy “czars” who would have broad programmatic authority to “cut through—or leapfrog—the traditional bureaucracy” in matters of national security, climate change, economic policy, health care, housing, and education. Similarly, President Obama’s early days in the White House saw him reverse a number of important domestic and foreign policies with the stroke of the pen.<sup>49</sup> As was the case with Reagan and Bush, many of these administrative actions appealed to important party constituencies. For example, Obama signed several executive orders reversing Bush policies that worked against the interests of organized labor.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Corn 2008.

<sup>49</sup> Dinan 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Dinan 2009; Hunter 2009; Hedgpeth 2009.

Living up to his campaign pledge to formulate an ambitious climate change policy, Obama also signed orders to advance environmentalist concerns: one important measure directed the Environmental Protection Agency to review a Bush-era ban on particular state-level efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; another called on the Transportation Department to complete rules raising fuel economy standards to 35 miles per gallon by 2020.<sup>51</sup> Most important, the president countermanded several of Bush's commands related to the War on Terrorism, ordering that the CIA close its detention facilities, that the Guantanamo Bay prison eventually cease operations, and that US personnel conform to treaties and laws that forbid torture of detainees.<sup>52</sup>

The severe financial crisis the country faced reinforced Obama's penchant for concentrating policy authority in the White House. His handling of the controversial Toxic Asset Relief Program (TARP) proposed to use the emergency funds for different purposes than had Bush, but he clearly retained his predecessor's emphasis on executive prerogative. Bush wielded the sweeping authority contained in the TARP aggressively, using it to channel funds to large financial service providers with relatively little oversight. Obama not only has promised to impose more restrictions on bank use of the TARP funds but also to redeploy part of the program's resources to beleaguered homeowners.

The central component of Obama's new Homeowner Affordability and Stability Plan will direct \$75 billion from TARP to provide incentives to lenders to work with borrowers to modify the terms of subprime loans and thereby allow more borrowers to keep their homes.<sup>53</sup> Like the Bush administration, however, Obama plans to implement this new and significant measure based on TARP's authority, that is, unilaterally. Responsibility for shaping economic and budgetary policy, in fact, fell for the most part on Lawrence Summers, White House Economic Council director, in partnership with his longtime associate Timothy Geithner, Secretary of the Treasury. During the early days of the administration, there were growing complaints that having so much authority centralized in the hands of Summers and Geithner was creating a "chokepoint, preventing key constituencies from being heard."<sup>54</sup>

Early evidence thus suggests that Obama will match, and may well surpass, modern presidents' aggressive use of executive authority to achieve his policy objectives. Although the economic crisis will deflect criticism for some time, Obama will have to take care not to create the sort of palace-guard mentality

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<sup>51</sup> Hansen, Duncan, and Karey 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Lawrence 2009.

<sup>53</sup> For details, see Stolberg and Andrews 2009; Santos 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Cho 2009.

that will cut his administration off from the bureaucracy, the Congress, and the public.

### ***Presidential Domination of Party***

Paradoxically, George W. Bush's party leadership both strengthened the GOP's organizational and fundraising capacity and eroded its integrity as a collective organization that could hold the president accountable to party principles and policies. The results, as dramatically revealed in the 2006 and 2008 elections, were disastrous. Obama's party leadership, which has matched—or exceeded—Bush's in its vigor, also beholds both great promise and dangerous possibilities for the Democratic Party.

Obama's popularity could be a major asset for the Democrats. Polls are quite favorable to the new president, with his job approval and favorability ratings dwarfing those of his party brethren in Congress, including House leader Nancy Pelosi and Senate head Harry Reid.<sup>55</sup> Obama's popularity, in turn, enhances his organizing and fundraising prowess, which could strengthen the Democratic Party in the 2010 midterm elections. It remains to be seen, however, whether Obama's organization will redound to the benefit of Democrats in the future. Obama's grass-roots apparatus was forged in significant part on the candidate's unique personal appeal, rather than on traditional party principles or emotional loyalty to the Democratic Party.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the grass-roots effort was run out of the Obama-Biden headquarters. The architects of the Obama campaign praised Dean's 50-state strategy, but they insisted on keeping control over the presidential campaign, often to the irritation of state Democratic leaders. In fact, the campaign relied almost completely on their own staff, money, and organization, not only to compete in battleground states but also to make incursions into traditional Republican territory.

Thus, even though the administration has embedded the grass-roots organization within the DNC, some Democrats fear that Obama's "machine" is an apparatus of personal power rather than an instrument of collective party welfare. They question whether the machine will be used to benefit Democrats up and down the ticket. Indeed, some state and local Democratic leaders have worried that Obama's grass-roots operation, in the words of one journalist, might "become a competing political force that revolves around the president's ambitions while

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, polls available on PollingReport.com. For Obama's popularity, see [http://www.pollingreport.com/obama\\_job.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/obama_job.htm) and [http://www.pollingreport.com/obama\\_fav.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/obama_fav.htm); for Reid, see <http://www.pollingreport.com/r.htm>; for Pelosi, see <http://www.pollingreport.com/p.htm#Pelosi>.

<sup>56</sup> Nagourney 2008.

diminishing the needs of down-ballot Democrats.”<sup>57</sup> Jerry Meek, chairman of the North Carolina Democratic Party, expressed this concern, “state parties exist for more than serving the objectives of the president.”<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, some congressional Democrats have worried that Obama might use the “machine” to pressure members from within their own districts to support controversial legislation. Although the administration has denied this intention, many Obama supporters hope the president will use the network to help it achieve *his* objectives, regardless of its consequences for the Democrats. If deployed too aggressively, this strategy could backfire. As one analyst notes, “Reelecting Obama is one thing, and nudging members of Congress to back Obama’s programs is another. It’s possible that Democratic members of Congress will resent the pressure coming from their own president.”<sup>59</sup>

Beyond the 2008 election, then, the Democrats will be challenged to sustain a collective commitment independent of their devotion to President Obama. The Bush administration was split between those who wanted to meld the campaign organization and the GOP and presidential loyalists. The Obama administration, following a campaign that promised to transcend the partisan rancor of the Bush years, is likely to be even more divided between advisors who want to integrate the campaign into the party structure and those who view the vast network of activists, neighborhood organizers, and volunteers as a force that should remain “an independent entity—organized around the ‘Obama brand’”.<sup>60</sup> Although Obama’s statecraft surely may benefit the Democratic Party, recent history makes clear that dominant presidential leadership, even with the best of intentions, can damage the party in the long run.

### **Conclusion: Barack Obama and the New American Party System**

As Theodore Roosevelt’s description of the modern presidency trumpets, the “steward of the public welfare” was allied, at least in intention, to the objective of strengthening American democracy. But its development prompts us to ask whether the executive of a vast modern nation-state can truly be the direct representative of the people. Robert Dahl speaks for a host of critics when he argues that, in reality, the modern presidency must instead necessarily be “a pseudo-democratic institution.”<sup>61</sup> This is a critical enduring concern that has

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<sup>57</sup> Wallsten 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Connery 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Larry Sabato, quoted in Blake 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Wallstein and Hamburger 2008.

<sup>61</sup> Dahl 1990.

shaped partisan and constitutional conflict over popular leadership in American political life for the last three quarters of a century.

Perhaps the reinvigorated national parties that have arisen during the past two decades will re-bind the modern presidency to America's democratic tradition. Improving on the innovative techniques that the Bush-Cheney campaign developed in 2004, Barack Obama further refined "a reciprocal top-down and bottom-up campaign strategy" that promises to mobilize followers "to realize their collective strength."<sup>62</sup> Although Republicans mocked Obama's background as a community organizer during his quest for the White House, community organizing might have been, as Hugh Heclo has suggested, "excellent preparation" for a leader who hopes to reconcile executive prerogative and democratic accountability.<sup>63</sup>

Without question, the Democrats' success in 2008 followed, in large measure, from voter unhappiness with Bush, who had mired the country in an unpopular war and a severe financial crisis. But Obama's sophisticated grass-roots campaign linked a vast network of volunteers, elicited enormous enthusiasm among potential supporters, and mobilized the highest turnout since 1968. Coming on the heels of the substantial increase in voter participation in the 2004 election, the 2008 campaign appeared to confirm the emergence of a national party system that was ameliorating the chronic voter apathy that had afflicted the presidency-centered administrative state.

Nevertheless, recent developments suggest that executive aggrandizement will likely continue to complicate efforts to achieve greater collective responsibility. The rise of the modern presidency has put a premium on candidate-centered campaigns and organization. More important, given the nature of the modern executive office, it summons individuals whose ambition is best served by establishing an electoral coalition and method of governing outside of party politics. The rise of the modern presidency thus encourages each occupant of the White House to exploit the full splendor of the executive office at the expense of public debate and resolution that best take place in Congress and state legislatures.

Such encouragement can only be abetted by a seemingly permanent War on Terror, which President Obama has vowed to continue. In a political environment of perpetual emergency, made all the more acute by the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression, presidential party building, pursued by a gifted politician, might degenerate into a novel strain of plebiscitary politics that exposes citizens to the sort of public figures who will exploit their impatience with the difficult task of sustaining a healthy constitutional democracy. Although

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<sup>62</sup> Heclo 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

President Obama may be too decent and moderate a leader to prosecute such a dark chapter in American political development, he must guard against forging a dangerous path that less responsible leaders might exploit in the future.

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