For better or worse, the public presidency envisioned and embodied by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson has become an essential part of the modern presidency—grafted onto, as it were, the constitutional presidency as defined by the Framers. It was Roosevelt who called the office “a bully pulpit.”¹ His cousin, Franklin D. Roosevelt (who served from 1933 to 1945), put the same thought differently. “The presidency is not merely an administrative office. That is the least of it,” he said. “It is preeminently a place of moral leadership.”² Their successors in the Oval Office have the responsibility of managing press and public relations as a constant and challenging part of the job.

For presidents, “going public” is inevitable and unavoidable. They are expected to honor the nation’s traditions, stir hope and confidence, and foster a sense of national unity and purpose. Moreover, as the quotes from the two Roosevelts imply, they can exploit their unique visibility as a strategy of presidential leadership. “Going public” is defined by political scientist Samuel Kernell as “a strategy whereby a president promotes himself and his policies in Washington by appealing to the American public for support.”³ According to Kernell, modern presidents make extensive use of this strategy because they confront mounting difficulties in bargaining directly with their constitutional counterparts (especially members of Congress) at the same time that new communications media make it easier for them to appeal to the general public over the heads of rival politicians.

An important link between presidents and the mass public is through their leadership of a political party. It is true that significant numbers of citizens claim independence from the two major parties, and that presidents themselves oftentimes want to break free of their party moorings. President Barack Obama, for example, fashioned himself as a “post-partisan” figure, appealing to members of both parties. But his initiatives revealed deep partisan divisions. After all, the major parties are still the largest and most inclusive political groupings in the country. Equally important from the president’s perspective, the parties have cultivated firm and mutually beneficial alliances with many...
influential interest groups and mass-membership organizations. For the Demo-
crats, such organizations include those claiming to represent African Americans,
women, environmentalists, cultural progressives, and most trade unions. Re-
publicans, in contrast, collaborate with groups claiming to speak for large and
small businesses, the defense establishment, and cultural conservatives.

One aspect of the public presidency that is not of modern origin is the
role of reporters and the press. In the early decades of the republic, many
newspapers were stridently partisan in tone. The very first president, George
Washington, complained bitterly about opposition papers’ vicious attacks
upon his administration. The Federalists were so vexed by these attacks that
in 1798 they enacted the infamous (and almost certainly unconstitutional) Se-
dition Act, which classified any criticism or attempts to organize any criticism
of the government or its leaders as criminal libel.

The Jacksonian era coincided roughly with the rise of the press as a mass
phenomenon: new high-speed presses supplied cheap newspapers to an increas-
ingly literate public. For nearly a century, the daily newspaper was the chief
conveyor of public information. (New York City had 14 mass circulation daily
newspapers in 1920; today it has only three.) Theodore Roosevelt, the very
model of a modern president, understood that the press craved news from au-
thoritative sources. So he began the practice of inviting small groups of reporters
to the White House for informal exchanges of information about his policies.
Formal press conferences were initiated by Woodrow Wilson. Since Wilson,
every occupant of the presidential office has endeavored to maintain good rela-
tions with the press, although with widely varying success. Today, presidential
effectiveness is often measured in terms of presidents’ mastery of electronic me-
dia. For example, Franklin Roosevelt communicated forcefully through radio
in the 1930s, and television was exploited effectively by John F. Kennedy in the
1960s, Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, and Bill Clinton in the 1990s.

Observers now realize that presidential campaigns are not confined to the
months leading up to the quadrennial elections. Presidents, and indeed other
federal elected officials, campaign virtually nonstop. In his elegant and thought-
ful essay, “The ‘Permanent Campaign,’” Hugh Heclo begins this section by
showing how this permanent state of contested politics came about, seemingly
inevitably from the changing nature of American public life: the decline of par-
ties, the rise of special-interest groups, innovations in media technology, the ad-
vent of political professionals (public relations, polling, and the like), the need
to finance the enterprise, and the continuing high stakes in national policies.

The theme of Gary C. Jacobson’s essay, “Legislative Success and Political
Failure,” is the gap between a president’s programmatic achievements and the
standing of the president and his political party. His challenge is to explain
why President Obama—who won a solid majority of the vote in 2008 and
succeeded in the passage of major legislation—seemed so repellent in 2010
that his party lost a near-record number of seats in the midterm elections.
The Republicans gained 64 House seats to seize control of the chamber, and
six Senate seats to place themselves strategically to take over the Senate in
2012. First, the 2010 elections were fought mainly over national issues and
concerns: the Great Recession and its lingering effects, especially a low level of job creation; and Obama’s negative image among key mobilized voter groups. Many of these highly motivated conservative voters demonized the president as unworthy of his job and as a bringer of mammoth expansion of the federal government. Thus the 2010 elections reflected the historic aspects of midterm elections: a referendum on the image and performance of the president and, by extension, his party. Also, Obama and the Democrats suffered because of structural attributes of the midterm electorate. In 2008, Obama and his party were lifted by a broad electoral base that included minorities (Blacks and Latinos). These voters tend to melt away in lesser contests, including midterm elections. In other words, no matter what Obama’s level of tactical or public skills, he and his party were bound to suffer in the midterm contests.

A central attribute of all occupants of the White House is what Jeremy D. Mayer terms (in his essay, “The Presidency and Image Management”) the “presidential image”—defined as “the impression Americans have of their leader as a leader and a human being.” This image is partly true and partly false, partly realistic and partly fantasy. It is concocted out of four elements: (1) the president’s actual appearance, character, and actions; (2) image management by the White House staff; (3) counterimages raised by the president’s foes; and (4) media “takes” about who the president is really is and what he represents.

George W. Bush provides a case study for Mayer’s concept of presidential imagery and image making. Bush and his advisors were remarkably disciplined at shaping the president’s image and placing him in public settings that enhanced that image. Although Bush performed reasonably well in more or less open-ended events (presidential debates, for example), he was uncomfortable in unstructured situations, especially audiences that included inquisitive or hostile individuals (press conferences, for example). Scripted, structured events were therefore preferred: The chief executive was usually seen speaking or interacting with selected audiences—often in military settings—in front of backdrops containing simple slogans drawn from the topic at hand.

Images of Bush that were prevalent were those of the “regular guy” and the “wartime leader.” Although Bush was by any definition the privileged offspring of a notable upper-class family, he won the likeability contest hands down against the geeky Al Gore in 2000 and the elegant but preachy John Kerry in 2004. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush refashioned his persona to become a war leader. Although his remarks on the day of the tragedy were unmemorable, his prepared speeches over the following weeks were high points in the history of presidential rhetoric. His steadfastness in pursuing military options burnished his leadership image and linked him with an institution highly regarded by the American public. But the American public eventually tired of the war, pulling Bush’s job ratings to modern low points. How his grafting of an Iraq war onto the terrorism effort will affect his long-term historical standing is, of course, still unknown.

George C. Edwards III begins his analysis in “The Presidential Pulpit: Bully or Baloney?” by noting our popularly held assumption that presidents achieve their policy goals by persuading the public and Congress about the wisdom
of presidential preferences. Theodore Roosevelt’s “bully pulpit” supposedly enabled the president to lead public opinion in the direction he thought best. Edwards challenges Roosevelt’s maxim and our conventional wisdom by taking up the case of Ronald Reagan, who was known as the “Great Communicator” because of his impressive powers of persuasion. He argues that Reagan in fact was not very effective at all in changing public attitudes about the policies he favored. Edwards also argues that despite his many roll-call victories in Congress, Bill Clinton was not very successful in convincing Congress to pass his major legislative initiatives. Edwards goes on to analyze the major factors that affect a president’s ability to influence public opinion and, in turn Congress, and he concludes that the cards are stacked against a president who hopes to change public attitudes. Edwards maintains that as in leading Congress, presidents can lead the public only “at the margins.”

The ultimate reckoning of the public presidency is of course the reactions and sentiments of the public itself. But how do we find out what people are thinking about the president? Elections are but a crude measure of public sentiment: They are infrequent and, as we saw in Section 3, they often convey a murky picture of what citizens really expect or want from the president. However, for the past 50 years or more, public opinion surveys have frequently probed presidential popularity. In such surveys, citizens are typically asked to rate the job the president is doing—excellent, pretty good, only fair, or poor. The responses are then dichotomized into “favorable” or “unfavorable” ratings. As a result, we now have a continuing and frequent referendum on the president’s public support. By comparing this long-running string of data with contextual events (for example, wars, crises, economic conditions, issues of current saliency), we gain a clearer picture of how people assess presidents and their performance.

Presidents themselves are extremely conscious of their standing in the polls. However much they may belittle poll results, they are eager to take advantage of favorable ratings and work to explain away low ones (a variety of spin control). High approval ratings, it is said, may compel other politicians to follow the president’s leadership or at least mute their criticisms; conversely, low ratings supposedly embolden criticism and encourage politicians to seek their own courses of action. Such claims are hard to prove empirically, but there is no doubt they are widely believed in the political community.

ENDNOTES
1. “Bully” was a favorite Rooseveltian term expressing great enthusiasm. Students inform us that “awesome” or “rad” convey something of the same meaning.
The term permanent campaign was first widely publicized early in the Reagan presidency by Sidney Blumenthal, a journalist who went on to work in the Clinton White House—and then was caught up in the semi-permanent campaign to impeach the president. Calling it “the political ideology of our age,” Blumenthal described the permanent campaign as a combination of image making and strategic calculation that turns governing into a perpetual campaign and “remakes government into an instrument designed to sustain an elected official’s popularity.”

SHOULD CAMPAIGNING AND GOVERNING DIFFER?

In one sense—a promissory sense—it seems clear that campaigning and governing should have much in common. Any democratic political system is based on the idea that what happens in government is related to people’s electoral choices. Elections and their attendant campaigns are not a thing apart from, but integral to, the larger scheme of democratic government, both in guiding responses to the past election and in anticipating reactions to the next. In the long run, without good-faith promise making in elections and promise keeping in government, representative democracy is unaccountable and eventually unsustainable.

Although the two necessarily relate to each other, good reasons exist to think that campaigning and governing ought not to be merged into one category. Common sense tells us that two different terms are necessary, because we know that promise making is not promise keeping, any more than effective courtship is the same thing as well-working marriage.

While the designers of the U.S. Constitution had little use for parties and popular electioneering, the campaign analogy was not threatening in the 19th century, precisely because popular appeals had to be shaped to the constitutional system the framers had designed. On the one hand, it was a system brimming with elections—eventually hundreds for the federal House of Representatives, dozens in state legislatures for the Senate, and dozens more for the presidency (through the state electors), not to mention the thousands of elections for the state governments of the federal system. On the other hand, no one election or combination of elections was decisive. No election could trump any other as the one true voice of the people. The people, through...
Section 4: The Public Presidency: Press, Media, and Public Approval

Elections shaped to the multiplex constitutional structure, were held at arm’s length. Governing was what had to happen inside the intricately crafted structure of the Constitution. Every part of that structure derived its authority from—and was ultimately dependent on—the people. But the people never all spoke at the same time, and they never had residence in any one part or in the whole of the government quarters. Inside those quarters institutions were separated, and powers were shared, so that there would be a lot going on inside—a rich internal life to governing, a place of mutual accommodation and deliberation—if only because no one could do anything on his or her own, although each could defend his or her own turf. The people were outside—in the open countryside to which their governors would have to come to give account of their stewardship.

In at least three important ways campaigning and governing point in different directions—that is to say, not always in opposite but in sufficiently divergent directions to matter.

First, campaigning is geared to one unambiguous decision point in time. In other words, campaigning must necessarily focus on affecting a single decision that is itself the outcome, the event determining who wins and who loses. Governing, by contrast, has many interconnected points of outcome through time—the line decision, so to speak, of the “going concern.” Anyone who has worked in a political campaign will probably recall the initial enthusiasms of launching the campaign, the accelerating pace and growing intensity, the crashing climax of election day, and the eerie stillness of cleaning out the campaign offices in the period immediately following. Governing is different. It is a long persistence with no beginning or final decision point, something like a combination of digging a garden in hard ground and the labors of Sisyphus. The time scale for campaigning has historically been short and discontinuous, while that for governing stretches beyond the horizon.

Second, within its fixed time horizon, campaigning is necessarily adversarial. Nineteenth-century political writers borrowed the military metaphor precisely because it captures the essential idea of a contest to defeat one’s enemy. The competition is for a prize that cannot be shared, a zero-sum game. In comparison with a campaign, governing is predominantly collaborative rather than adversarial. While campaigning would willingly drown out its opponent to maximize persuasion, genuine governing wishes an orderly hearing of many sides, lest the steersman miss something important. In that sense, campaigning is self-centered, and governing is group-centered.

In the third place, campaigning is inherently an exercise in persuasion. The point of it all is to create those impressions that will yield a favorable response for one’s cause. In contrast, governing places its greatest weight on values of deliberation. While good campaigning often persuades by its assurance and assertions, good governing typically depends on a deeper and more mature consideration. This is so because whatever conclusions governing comes to will be backed by the fearsome power of the state. Taking counsel over what to do and how to do it lies at the heart of the governing process. Of course, it has to be acknowledged that deliberation may sound too genteel a term for...
the knife fights that are often associated with governing, especially along the
banks of the Potomac. Nevertheless, the men and women governing public
policy do make up a going concern as they bargain and seek to persuade each
other inside the constitutional structure. The deliberation in view here means
nothing more profound or high-minded than that.

Creating the Permanent Campaign
As noted at the outset, permanent campaign is shorthand for an emergent pat-
tern of political management that the body politic did not plan, debate, or
formally adopt. It is a work of inadvertence, something developed higgledy-
piggledy since the middle of the 20th century, much as political parties became
part of America’s unwritten constitution in the 19th century. The permanent
campaign comprises a complex mixture of politically sophisticated people, com-
munication techniques, and organizations—profit and nonprofit alike. What ties
the pieces together is the continuous and voracious quest for public approval.
Elections themselves are only one part of the picture, where the focus is typically
on personalities and the mass public. Less obvious are the thousands of orches-
trated appeals that are constantly underway to build and maintain favor of the
certain publics and targeted elites for one or another policy cause.

What we can identify and discuss without doing excessive injustice to the
subject are the political instrumentalities that give expression to the deeper
development of political culture. Those features proved important in creat-
ing the permanent campaign, and one can conveniently group them into six
categories. The point is not to describe each in detail but to show the logic
that has connected those emergent properties into a coherent pattern during
the past 50 or so years—the pattern of campaigning so as to govern and even
governing so as to campaign.

The Decline of Political Parties
Where parties have become much weaker is at the level of political fundamen-
tals—generating candidates for office and being able predictably to mobilize
 blocs of people to vote for them. The cumulative effect of many changes from
the late 19th century onward—ending the “spoils” system in public employ-
ment, electoral reforms and party primaries, suburbanization, and television,
to name a few examples—was largely to destroy the parties’ control over re-
cruitment and nomination of candidates for office. Concurrently, the general
trend since the middle of the 20th century has been a gradual decline in the
strength of voters’ identification with the two major parties. The 20th-century
change in American parties represents a general shift from party-centered to
candidate-centered elections, in an “every man for himself” atmosphere. Because
politicians cannot count on loyalties from party organizations, voting blocs
of the New Deal coalition, and individual voters, after the 1950s, politicians
have had every reason to try to become the hub of their own personal perma-
nent campaign organizations.
Although much weaker on the recruitment side, political parties have also become stronger in other dimensions that intensify the permanent campaign. In the last quarter of the 20th century, party coalitions grew more ideologically and socially distinctive. Simultaneously, the national party organizations’ ability to raise and distribute money vastly increased. The central headquarters of each party also became more adept at constructing national election strategies and campaign messages to attack the other party. At the same time, two-party conflict in Congress became more ideologically charged and personally hostile. With that development came congressional leaders’ growing use of legislative campaign committees to raise money, set agendas, and define the party image. All that has provided the financial wherewithal and career interest for more sustained and polarized political warfare. In short, both where parties have become weaker and where they have become stronger, the effect has been to facilitate a climate of endless campaigning.

Open Interest-Group Politics

A second feature creating the permanent campaign is the rise of a much more open and extensive system of interest-group politics. “Opening up the system” became a dominant theme of American politics after the Eisenhower years. On the one hand, to open up the system meant that previously excluded Americans—minorities, women, youth, consumers, and environmentalists, for example—demanded a voice and place at the table. The civil rights movement was in the vanguard, followed by many others. With the politics of inclusion came more advocacy groups and a nurturing environment for that minority of Americans who were inclined to be political activists. On the other hand, opening up the system also meant exposing all aspects of the governing process to public view. In the name of good government and participatory democracy, barriers between policy-makers and the people were dismantled. Open committee meetings, freedom-of-information laws, publicly recorded votes, televised debates, and disclosure and reporting requirements symbolized the new openness. The repeal of public privacy had a sharp edge. After Vietnam, Watergate, and other abuses of government power, deference to public officials became a thing of the past. Replacing that deference were investigative journalism and intense media competition for the latest exposé. People in public life became themselves the object of a new regime of strict ethics scrutiny and exposure—and thus tempting targets in a permanent campaign.

New Communications Technology

A third feature is the new communications technology of modern politics. The rise of television after the 1940s was obviously an important breakthrough in personalizing direct communication from politicians and interest groups to a mass public. Candidates for office could move from retailing their appeals through party organizations to direct wholesaling with the voting public. Likewise, groups could use protests and other attention-grabbing media events to communicate their causes directly to a mass audience. For both politicians and advocacy groups, communication
with the public bypassed intermediaries in the traditional three-tiered “federal” structure of party and interest-group organizations, where local, state, and national commitments complemented each other. In place of the traditional structure could grow something like a millipede model—direct communication between a central body and mass membership legs. Of course, the story did not stop with broadcast television but went on to include cable TV, talk radio, the 24-hour news cycle, “narrowcasting” to target audiences, and the Internet. Explosive growth in the electronic media’s role in Americans’ lives provided unfathomed opportunities to crossbreed would-be campaigners and governors.

As Walter Lippmann saw in analyzing the popular print media in the early 20th century, communication must be of a kind that translates into audience shares and advertising dollars. That has meant playing up story lines that possess qualities of dramatic conflict, human interest, immediacy, and strong emotional value. The easiest way for the media to meet such needs has been to frame the realities of governing in terms of political contests. The political-contest story about government makes complex policy issues more understandable, even if the “understanding” is false. It grabs attention with short and punchy dramas of human conflict. It has the immediacy of a horse race and a satisfying resolution of uncertainty by naming winners and losers. In addition, of course, it does much to blur any sense of distinction between campaigning and governing.

New Political Technologies The fourth feature underlying creation of the permanent campaign is what we might call new political technologies. At the same time as changes in parties, interest groups, and electronic media were occurring, the twin techniques of public relations and polling were invented and applied with ever growing professional skill in the public arena. Together, they spawned an immense industry for studying, manufacturing, organizing, and manipulating public voices in support of candidates and causes. The cumulative result was to impart a much more calculated and contrived quality to the whole political process than anything that prevailed even as recently as the 1950s.

Over time, consultants and pollsters moved into the political front office. After the 1960s, increasingly specialized political consultant services developed and were fortified by professional polling to cover every imaginable point of contact among politicians, interest groups, and the people being governed. The basic features of the political marketing landscape include the following services: poll and focus-group research, strategic planning, image management, direct-mail marketing, event management, production of media materials, “media buys,” opposition research against competitors, and orchestration of “grassroots” citizen campaigns.

Need for Political Money The fifth factor in the creation of the permanent campaign amounts to a logical consequence of everything else that was happening. It is the ever-growing need for political money. It turns out that most
of what political marketing does resolves into spending money on itself—the consultants—and the media. Hence, after the 1960s, an immense new demand grew for politicians and groups to engage in nonstop fund-raising. Even if the people managing the new technologies—media, polling, and public relations—were not in profit-oriented businesses, the new forms of crafted politics would have cost huge amounts of money to create and distribute. As it was, the splendid profits to be made helped add to even larger political billings. For example, in 1994, the 15 most expensive Senate campaigns in the United States devoted almost three-quarters of their funds to consultants’ services.

**Stakes Involved in Activist Government**

To close the circle of forces behind the permanent campaign, we need to revisit the obvious. Granted a massive and growing need for more political money exists. But why should anyone pony up the money? What we might easily overlook is the obvious point that the permanent campaign exists, because there is something big and enduring to fight about. The stakes involved in activist government are what make it worthwhile to pay out the money that keeps the permanent campaign going and growing. At the simplest level, one might call that the Microsoft effect. Only after Bill Gates found that the federal government had an Antitrust Division did Microsoft lobbyists and contributions to both parties begin appearing to demonstrate the company’s commitment to civic education and participation.

If the federal government were as small a part of people’s lives and of the economy as it was during the first half of the 20th century, we can be sure that there would be far less interest in the continual struggle to influence the creation, administration, and revision of government policies. Campaigning has become big and permanent, because government has become big and permanent. One is speaking here of more than the obvious benefits to be derived from influencing spending and taxation. . . . It is not even a matter of the federal government’s growing regulatory power over society and the economy. The deeper reality is a pervasive presence of public policy expectations. . . .

To say it another way, conceptions of who we are as a people became increasingly translated into arguments about what Washington should do or should stop doing. . . .

* * *

The campaign without end is not a story of evil people’s planning and carrying out nasty designs on the rest of us. Rather, it is more like a story of things all of us would do, given the incentives and what it takes to win under changing circumstances. The story’s central narrative is the merger of power-as-persuasion inside Washington with power-as-public-opinion manipulation outside Washington. The two, inside and outside, governing and campaigning, become all but indistinguishable—as they now are in any one of the big-box lobbying or consulting firms in Washington. The paradox is that a politics that costs so much should make our political life feel so cheapened.
CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT

. . . The permanent campaign is not the way Americans do politics, but the way politics is done to them. Without calling it by that name, the way most Americans do politics is by not doing what they consider “political” but by engaging in a myriad of local volunteer activities—politics in particular. That is all to the good and worth remembering. However, it is also true to say that the handiwork of professional consultant-crafted politics is now probably the only version of nonlocal politics that the average American ever experiences.

The pervasiveness of political marketing means that all national politics take place in a context of permanent, professionally managed, and adversarial campaigning to win the support of those publics upon whom the survival of the political client depends. Into the media are poured massive doses of what historian Daniel Boorstin discerned in the 1960 birth of TV politics and called pseudo-events. They are not spontaneous, real events but orchestrated happenings that occur because someone has planned, incited, or otherwise brought them into being for the purpose of being observed and swaying opinion. Leaks, interviews, trial balloons, reaction stories, and staged appearances and confrontations are obvious examples that most of us hardly recognize as “pseudo” anymore. It is difficult to know anything about national affairs that is not subject to the ulterior motives of professionals in political management or in the media, a distinction that itself is tending to dissolve.

What is the result of transforming politics and public affairs into a 24-hour campaign cycle of pseudo-events for citizen consumption? For one thing, the public is regularly presented with a picture of deeper disagreements and a general contentiousness about policy issues than may in fact be true when the cameras and microphones are turned off. Second, immense encouragement is given to the preexisting human tendency to overestimate short-term dramatic risks and underestimate the long-term consequences of chronic problems. Third, public thinking is focused on attention-grabbing renditions of what has gone wrong for which somebody else can be blamed. Thus, any attempt to debate policy continually reinforces a culture of complaint and victimization where seemingly dramatic conflicts never really settle anything or lead anywhere. . . .

The term that perhaps best describes what happens in the permanent campaign is instrumental responsiveness. It is a hands-on approach to leveraging and massaging opinion to make it serve one’s own purposes. The campaigners do not engage the public to teach people about real-world happenings and thereby disabuse them of false hopes or encourage forbearance against harsh realities. Rather, the permanent campaign engages people to tell them what they want to hear in ways that will promote one’s cause against others. Such instrumental responsiveness appears to be the system’s functional philosophy, even while mimetic responsiveness—doing the people’s will—is its confessional theology.

Why should one care? Because our politics will become more hostile than needed, more foolhardy in disregarding the long-term, and more benighted in mistaking persuasions for realities. The case for resisting further tidal drift into the permanent campaign rests on the idea that a self-governing people should not wish to become more vile, myopic, and stupid. Apart from that, there probably is not much reason to care.
The idea that a president’s legislative and political success go hand in hand is starkly contradicted by the first two years of Barack Obama’s presidency. With the help of Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, Obama pushed through a huge economic stimulus package targeting the deep recession he had inherited, initiated comprehensive reforms of the nation’s health care system, and signed a major redesign of financial regulation aimed at preventing a repeat of the financial meltdown that had made the recession so severe. These legislative achievements made the 111th Congress among the most productive in many years, and they were fully consistent with promises Obama made during his successful campaign for the White House. Obama also kept his campaign pledge to wind down the United States’ involvement in Iraq and to reallocate American forces to confront the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan.

In short, Obama had done what he might reasonably believe he was elected to do. His reward was to see his Democratic Party suffer a crushing defeat in the 2010 midterm elections, with Republicans gaining 64 House seats to win their largest majority (242–193) since 1946, and six Senate seats, putting them within easy striking distance of a majority in that chamber in 2012. Not only did the president and his party reap no political benefit from their legislative accomplishments, they were evidently punished for them. The congressional Republicans’ strategy of all-out opposition, adopted not long after Obama took office, turned out to be remarkably successful, delivering a stunning setback to a majority party that had won a sweeping victory just two years earlier.

Scholars will be debating explanations for this swift turn of events for some time to come. The Obama administration’s priorities, legislative strategies, and political acumen are sure to come under critical scrutiny. My purpose here is somewhat different. I focus on the state of public opinion regarding Obama and his party during his successful election campaign and on its evolution during his first two years in office, looking for clues about where, why, and how legislative and even policy successes turned into political failures that ended up devastating Obama’s party on election day.

BACKGROUND: THE 2008 ELECTION

Public opinion toward Obama during his first two years in office featured wide partisan divisions, unusually intense hostility among his detractors, and extraordinarily strong connections between popular opinions of Obama, his party, his policies, and, ultimately, voting decisions in the 2010 elections. The evidence presented in this article suggests that Obama has become a stronger anchor for political attitudes, positive and negative, than even his predecessor, George W. Bush. Bush had been a highly polarizing figure, inspiring the widest partisan differences in presidential evaluations since the advent of modern polling. By 2008, however, even Republicans had lost some of their enthusiasm for him, and he was receiving exceedingly low marks from Democrats and independents (Jacobson 2011a). Bush’s unpopularity, mainly a legacy of the Iraq War, but reinforced by the financial crisis and sharp economic downturn near the end of his term, tarnished his party’s image, drove independent voters toward the opposition, and contributed crucially to Obama’s victory (Jacobson 2010a).

Obama’s election did not signal any narrowing of partisan divisions. According to the 2008 American National Election Study,\(^2\) party-line voting, at 89.1%, was second only to 2004’s 89.9% in the ANES series going back to 1952.\(^3\) Self-identified Republicans accounted for only 4.4% of Obama’s voters, the smallest crossover vote for any winning presidential candidate since John F. Kennedy in 1960. Moreover, voters who had supported his opponent, John McCain, tended to accept the McCain campaign’s portrayal of Obama as a radical leftist (Conroy 2008; Dorgan, and Barabak 2008; Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson 2010). As Figure 18.1 shows,

**FIGURE 18.1**

Voters’ Placement of Obama on the Liberal-Conservative Scale.

Source: 2008 ANES.
41% judged him an “extreme liberal” and another 34% “liberal” on the ANES’s 7-point liberal-conservative scale; only 23% put him in the middle three categories (slightly liberal, middle of the road, slightly conservative). Obama’s voters, in contrast, saw him as much more moderate; 49% placed him in the middle three categories, 32% classified him as a liberal, and only 7% rated him an extreme liberal.

McCain voters, on average, placed Obama at 2.0 on the 7-point scale, further left than Republican voters had placed any previous Democratic candidate, including George McGovern in 1972. They also placed him further to the left of their own ideological location, by an average of 3.1 points, than Republican voters had placed any previous Democratic candidate (the average distance for candidates from McGovern through John Kerry was 2.1 points). Moreover, the more conservative McCain voters were themselves, the more liberal they perceived Obama to be (Figure 18.2), whereas the more conservative the Obama voters, the more conservative they considered Obama. Obviously, the psychological processes of contrast (among McCain voters) and assimilation (among Obama voters) were powerfully at work (Sherif and Hovland 1961).4 On average, Obama’s voters placed him slightly left of center (at 3.3, where 4 is dead center) and slightly to their own right, an appropriate location for a leader of the Democratic Party’s diverse center-left coalition.

The campaign by McCain (and especially his running mate, Sarah Palin) to brand Obama as a radical leftist, while insufficiently persuasive to defeat him, certainly resonated with many conservatives. This is no surprise, for Obama’s race, background, personality, and political style were guaranteed to antagonize

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**FIGURE 18.2**
Perceptions of Obama’s Ideology by Respondent’s Ideology (7-Point Scale).

Source: 2008 ANES.
identifyable factions on the political right. An African American carrying a foreign-sounding name with “Hussein” in the middle, Obama also has an Ivy League education, a detached manner, and a nuanced, cerebral approach to politics. He passed a portion of his childhood in predominantly Muslim Indonesia. Entering politics as a community organizer on Chicago’s South Side, Obama maintained links with local black activists and leaders, some with fairly radical views, including his long-time minister, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Obama was thus bound to vibrate the racist, xenophobic, anti-intellectual, and antielitist as well as antiliberal strands woven into the fabric of right wing populist thinking. Among people sharing this mindset and others who simply accepted the McCain campaign’s depiction of Obama as an unreconstructed 1960s-style radical with a socialist agenda, his election was bound to be alarming, his every action scrutinized for signs of his “true” intentions. The 2008 campaign thus planted the seeds for the intense aversion to Obama and his policies that later blossomed in the Tea Party movement.

The 2008 election also featured the highest levels of party loyalty among House and Senate voters and lowest levels of ticket-splitting between president and House or Senate candidates in more than four decades. As a consequence, the number of split districts was also unusually low, and relatively few congressional Republicans shared a significant portion of their electoral constituents—the people whose votes had elected them—with Obama. This is evident from data in the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, which with 32,800 respondents is large enough to provide estimates of partisan voting at the House district level. Figure 18.3 displays the frequency distribution of House districts across 5-point ranges of Obama’s 2008 vote share according to the percentage

![Figure 18.3](image_url)

**FIGURE 18.3**
The Distribution of Shared Electoral Constituencies Across House Districts.

*Source: 2008 CCES.*
of voters in the district who also supported the winning House candidate. Few Republicans in the 111th House represented districts where their own supporter had also given Obama significant backing; in 87% of Republican districts, fewer than 20% of Republican voters also voted for Obama. There was a slightly larger number of districts where a substantial proportion of voters for the winning Democrat preferred McCain; still, in 82% of Democratic districts, more than 80% of the Democrats’ electoral constituents also supported Obama. The electoral connection thus gave a large majority of congressional Republicans little incentive to support the president’s agenda and little to lose by adoption of a strategy of all-out opposition. It also established conditions for continuing high levels of partisan polarization in Congress.

In sum, the 2008 election laid a foundation for both the elite and mass responses to the Obama and his policy agenda observed during the first two years of his presidency. The next section examines how and why successful action on that agenda failed to deliver political dividends.

**FIXING THE ECONOMY**

**TARP**

On taking office, Obama’s first necessity was to address the deep recession that had begun in December 2007 and was to last for the next 18 months. The financial crisis that came to a head in the summer of 2008 in the wake of a collapse in housing prices had accelerated the economic downturn. Large financial institutions with huge positions in mortgage-backed bonds faced bankruptcy, a prospect that threatened to freeze the credit markets essential to the functioning of the American and international economies. The Bush administration responded with the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), a $700 billion rescue package for banks and other financial institutions that passed with bipartisan support in September 2008. As Senator and candidate, Obama had supported the bailout, and his administration adopted TARP as its own, including its expansion to cover loans designed to keep General Motors (GM) and Chrysler from going out of business.

TARP was unpopular from the start, for its immediate effect was to bail out the banks and insurers whose greed and recklessness had done so much to create the problem. That it actually worked did not make it any more popular. TARP stabilized the financial sector, revived the credit markets, saved Chrysler and GM from bankruptcy, and is projected to cost taxpayers no more than $25 billion of the $700 billion allocated, a modest price indeed if it helped prevent a rerun of the Great Depression (Rooney 2010). The stock market rebounded, and by early December 2010 the S&P 500 was up 79% from its March 2009 low. TARP did not, however, prevent steep increases in unemployment, mortgage foreclosures, and business failures as the recession deepened. Thus, notwithstanding a broad consensus among economists that allowing the big banks and auto companies to fail would make the economic downturn much worse, most Americans were not convinced that TARP helped. The opinions about the benefits of the TARP loans expressed in the August 2010 NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey are typical (Table 18.1); more people thought the loans hurt than
thought they helped the country, with particular skepticism about the bank bailout. Only regarding the auto company loans and only among Democrats were assessments of TARP more positive than negative. The political problem was that TARP had plainly failed to help the millions of Americans who had lost their jobs, homes, and businesses, while few people who remained employed, housed, or in business because the economic contraction had not been even more severe attributed their good fortune to TARP. And although TARP had been initiated by the Bush administration, by the summer of 2010, more people believed it was Obama’s program than remembered it had been Bush’s idea.7

The Stimulus Bill

Obama’s own initiative for addressing the recession was the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, a $787 billion package (later grown to $814 billion) combining tax cuts and incentives, expanded unemployment and other social welfare benefits, and spending on infrastructure, energy development, education, and health care. The bill passed in February, 2009, with no Republican votes in the House and only three in the Senate. As with the bank bailout, the benefits of the stimulus package for ordinary Americans were at best ambiguous. It may have increased economic growth by as much as 4.5% and saved as many as 3.3 million jobs, as the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) concluded,8 but the unemployment rate was higher in December 2010 (9.8%) than it had been when the bill was passed (8.2%). Partisan divisions on the efficacy of the stimulus bill mirror its partisan origins (Table 18.1), but only half the Democrats thought it had helped and majorities of independents joined Republicans in deeming it more hurtful than helpful.

The Obama administration not only failed to convince most Americans that the stimulus had helped but also failed to get across the point that it had given 94% of working Americans a tax cut and that federal taxes had thus gone down—by about $240 billion—rather than up, during Obama’s tenure (Przybyla and McCormick 2010). A September 2010 CBS News/New York Times survey found that one-third of public held the mistaken belief that taxes had increased, while only 8% recognized taxes had in fact decreased, with the remainder saying they had stayed the same.9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 18.1: Opinions on the Effects of Obama’s Policies on the Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank loans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Auto company loans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic stimulus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial regulation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Financial Regulation

The Obama administration’s other principal response to the economic crisis was embodied in the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which became law July 21, 2010. This broad revision of the rules regulating the financial sector was designed to prevent a recurrence of banking crisis, avoid future bailouts, and protect consumers from predatory banking and credit practices. The action was supported by a solid majority of Americans, including a substantial share (although still a minority) of Republicans. However, most Americans remain undecided on its efficacy (Table 18.1), a reasonable position because most of the rulemaking needed to realize the new regulatory regime has yet to be completed. Moreover, despite its popularity, the bill may have actually hurt Democratic candidates in 2010, for it fed perceptions in the financial sector and elsewhere in the corporate world that Obama and the Democratic congressional leaders were unsympathetic to business interests, a perception helped finance lavish independent campaigns aimed at ending Democratic control of Congress (Jacobson 2011c).

Taken together, the data in Table 18.1 underline political ineffectiveness of the Obama administration’s response to the economic crisis. Most Americans did not hold Obama responsible for the recession; every survey taken during Obama’s first two years in office found more people blaming Bush for the current state of the economy than Obama, typically by ratios of more than two to one, and when “Wall Street” and “Congress” are added to the list of possible culprits, the percentage of respondents assigning Obama primary responsibility has been in single digits. But most Americans also believed that his administration had failed to address the problem effectively, for the economic recovery that began in the summer of 2009 produced too few jobs to cut the unemployment rate. Although Obama’s popular standing with the public was certainly...
affected by issues besides unemployment, it is worth observing that his approval ratings fell in lock step with the rise in unemployment during his first year in office and subsequently remained flat as unemployment also held more or less steady (between 9.5 and 10.1%) for the next 15 months (Figure 18.4).

**HEALTH CARE**

Important as they were, Obama’s policies for addressing the recession were not nearly as politically consequential as his efforts to restructure the health care system. The passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, signed into law on March 22, 2010, fulfilled a central promise of Obama’s 2008 campaign, but both the process and the product proved controversial and divisive. Implementation of the complex legislation is not scheduled to be completed until 2014, and its effects on the cost and quality of health care will not be known for many years. Its political effects, however, were immediate and profound.

**The Tea Party Movement**

First, people susceptible to the McCain-Palin campaign’s depiction of Obama as a radical leftist took his health care reform initiative as confirmation, fueling the emergence of the Tea Party movement, which became the locus and loudest transmitter of fervently anti-Obama sentiments. Egged on by conservative voices on talk radio, Fox News, and the Internet, some Tea Partiers came to see Obama as not merely an objectionable liberal Democrat, but as a tyrant (of the Nazi, Fascist, Communist, Socialist, Monarchist, or racist variety, depending on the critic) intent on subjecting Americans to, variously, socialism, communism, fascism, concentration camps, or control by United Nations, Interpol, international bankers, the Council on Foreign Relations or the Trilateral Commission (Barstow 2010). Not all Tea Party adherents (12 to 18% of the public) or sympathizers (about a third of the public) entertain such fancies, but they are nearly unanimous in their antipathy toward Obama and belief that his policies are moving the country toward socialism. They are also overwhelmingly white, conservative, and Republican or independent leaning Republican (83 to 88%, depending on the survey); few—on the order of 10%—had voted for Obama in 2008. Although some Tea Partiers express disdain for the Republican establishment, the movement’s sympathizers fit seamlessly into the party’s conservative core, expressing opinions typical of ordinary Republicans, only with more thorough conservative orthodoxy (Jacobson 2011b). They also tend to hold attitudes locating them toward the high end of the racial resentment scale (Parker and Barreto 2010).

Tea Party sympathizers and other Republicans manifest their disdain for Obama by, among other things, denying his American birth (and thus eligibility to be president) and Christian religion. An April, 2010 CBS News/New York Times poll found 32% of Republicans and 30% of Tea Party activists saying that Obama was foreign born, with only 41% saying he was born in the United States; other polls report similar results. About the same proportion of
Republicans—31% in an August, 2010, Pew survey—also said that Obama is a Muslim, more than thought him a Christian (27%). A *Time* survey taken the same month found an even more remarkable 46% of Republicans expressing this misconception; among the 60% of Republicans calling themselves conservatives, 57% said Obama was a Muslim, with only 14% saying he was a Christian. This was not meant as a compliment; 95% of Republicans who thought Obama was a Muslim disapproved of his job performance.

Examination of a pair of Pew surveys suggests that causality runs more strongly from opinions of Obama to beliefs about his religion than in the opposite direction, for as Obama’s approval ratings fell, the proportion calling him a Muslim grew. Between Pew’s March 2009 and August 2010 polls, Obama’s approval rating dropped from 59% to 47%, and the proportion saying he is a Muslim rose from 11% to 18%, while the proportion of disapprovers saying he is a Muslim held about steady (21% in the first survey, 23% in the second). These beliefs help to explain why 52% of the Republican respondents to the August 2010 *Newsweek* poll said it was definitely (14%) or probably (38%) true that “Barack Obama sympathizes with the goals of Islamic fundamentalists who want to impose Islamic law around the world.” That so many of Obama’s detractors voice such bizarre notions is testimony to how thoroughly alienated from the president they have become.

The Republican Strategy

A second major effect of the health care debate was to convince Republican congressional leaders that a strategy of all-out opposition to Obama was their ticket back to majority status. The anger and energy manifested by the Tea Party movement, and, more important, the election of Republican Scott Brown in January 2010 to the late Edward Kennedy’s Senate seat in Massachusetts on a platform opposing Obama’s health care plan, inspired united Republican opposition to changes in the health care system that, as its Democratic defenders were fond of pointing out, look very much like those Republican presidential aspirant Mitt Romney had pushed through when he was governor of Massachusetts and that Republicans had proposed as alternatives to Bill Clinton’s plan in 1993. Republican leaders even adopted the Tea Party’s apocalyptic rhetoric in denouncing the legislation: House minority leader John Boehner called the struggle over the final vote “Armageddon” because the bill would “ruin our country.” His Republican colleague, Devin Nunes of California, declared that with this “Soviet”-inspired bill, Democrats “will finally lay the cornerstone of their socialist utopia on the backs of the American people.”

Public Opinion on Health Care Reform and Obama

The public was and remains fairly evenly divided over the extraordinarily complicated health care reform package; more people offer unfavorable than favorable reviews (by about 5 percentage points on average), but some do so because it promises too little rather too much government involvement.
Some of the legislation’s elements are quite popular, some not; predictably, majorities tend to like the benefits and to dislike paying the costs required to produce them. But reflecting and reinforcing the partisan battles in Washington, opinions on the overall package were sharply divided along party lines, contributing to the even wider divisions in assessments of Obama’s job performance (Figure 18.5). Although this partisan divide has yet to reach the record levels inspired by Bush during his second term, it is wider than under any president before Bush.

The extent to which health care became a touchstone issue for assessments of Obama’s presidency is evident in the extraordinarily strong cross-sectional relationship between opinions of Obama’s job performance and his health care reforms. On average during 2010, 89% of respondents offered consistent opinions of Obama and the legislation, approving of both or disapproving of both. To put these numbers in perspective, opinions of Obama and his health care proposals were even more tightly linked than were opinions of Bush and the Iraq War (an average consistency rate of 83%; see Jacobson 2008, 80). Opinions on Obama’s handling of the issue were also more closely related to his overall job performance rating than were his ratings on the handling of any other issue.

The pivotal role of the health care issue in comparison with other major sources of assessments of Obama is confirmed by the equations in Table 18.2.

FIGURE 18.5
Partisan Opinion on Health Care Reform and Obama’s Job Performance.

Source: See footnote 24.
The May, 2010, NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll asked respondents to rate their feelings toward various public figures and institutions, including Barack Obama and the Tea Party movement, as very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, or very negative. It also asked opinions on the health care bill and the efficacy of the stimulus bill, how the respondent voted in the election, and other factors. The results are shown in Table 18.2.

### Table 18.2: Source of Opinions of Barack Obama

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>1. OLS Regression</th>
<th>2. Logit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification (7-point scale)</td>
<td>.06** (.02)</td>
<td>.36 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology (5-point scale)</td>
<td>.05 (.03)</td>
<td>.20 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Obama</td>
<td>.39*** (.09)</td>
<td>.87 (.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for McCain</td>
<td>-.48*** (.09)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-.28*** (.06)</td>
<td>.28 (.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion of the Tea Party</td>
<td>-.15*** (.03)</td>
<td>.60 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5-point scale)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion of the health care bill</td>
<td>.33*** (.06)</td>
<td>1.32 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5-point scale)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy of the stimulus bill</td>
<td>.22*** (.03)</td>
<td>.66 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4-point scale)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.38*** (.07)</td>
<td>-.92 (.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²/Pseudo R²</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log Likelihood</td>
<td></td>
<td>-220.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of observations</td>
<td>1,033</td>
<td>971</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** The dependent variable in the OLS equation is a 5-point scale ranging from 2 (very positive view of Obama) to −2 (very negative view of Obama); in the logit equation it takes a value of 1 if approved of Obama’s job performance, 0 if disapproved; party identification scored in the Democratic direction; ideology is scored in the liberal direction; the presidential vote variables and “white” are 1 if yes, 0 otherwise; opinion on the Tea Party movement is a 5-point scale ranging from 2 (very positive) to −2 (very negative); opinion on health care reform is a 5-point scale (2 = good idea, strongly; 1 = good idea, not so strongly, 0 = unsure or no opinion; −1 = bad idea, not strongly; −2 = bad idea, strongly); efficacy of the stimulus is a 4-point scale, (2 = has helped the economy, 1 = will eventually help the economy, 0 = unsure, −1 = will not help the economy). Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

For the OLS equation, effect is the estimated difference in the dependent variable between the highest and lowest values of the independent variables; for the logit equation, it is the difference in the probability of approving Obama’s performance between the highest and lowest values of the dependent variable with the other variables set at their mean values.

2008 presidential election, and the standard party identification, ideology, and demographic questions. Opinion on the health care bill is the strongest predictor of feelings about Obama of any of these variables (Equation 1). This is not surprising, for the simple correlation between feelings about Obama and health care reform, .79, is noticeably higher than for any other pairing, including party identification (.65) and the two 2008 vote variables (.66 each). The same result appears when approval of Obama’s job performance is the (now dichotomous) dependent variable and the model is estimated using logistic regression (Equation 2); views on the health care bill have by far the largest estimated effect on the respondent’s probability of approving. The equations show that opinions of Obama in 2010 were also strongly related to the reported 2008 presidential vote,27 opinions of the Tea Party movement, and assessments of the efficacy of Obama’s stimulus bill.

The causal arrows here clearly run in both directions, so these equations are intended to assess the relative strength of relationships rather than to provide structural estimates of a causal process. They do, however, demonstrate that attitudes toward Obama reflect far more than mere partisanship and ideology, and they point to some of the underlying sources of the highly polarized responses to the Obama presidency. For example, among the approximately one-quarter of respondents who viewed the health care legislation positively and the Tea Party movement negatively, 98% approved of Obama’s job performance and 96% viewed him positively. Among the similarly sized faction who expressed negative opinions of health care reform and positive opinions of the Tea Party, 96% disapprove of Obama’s job performance and 90% viewed him negatively.

Losing the Independents

A third crucial aspect of health care reform politics is that a solid majority of independents rather consistently sided with Republican identifiers in opposing the bill as too intrusive and too expensive.28 In surveys taken in 2010, an average of 37% of independents favored the legislation, 52% opposed. In aggregate, independents’ views of health care reform and Obama converged (Figure 18.5) and not at a level that was helpful to Obama and his party. Obama’s decline in support was particularly noticeable among conservative independents, many of whom adopted the Tea Party’s view of him as an extreme liberal. As Figure 18.6 shows, just before his inauguration, and regardless of their own ideological locations, independents surveyed by the NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll placed him on average between 2 and 3 on a 5-point liberal-conservative scale (on which 1 is very liberal, 2, somewhat liberal, 3, moderate, 4, somewhat conservative and 5, very conservative). A year later, conservative independents were placing him on the far left end of the scale. As a consequence, their feelings toward him (measured on a scale where 5 is very positive, 4, somewhat positive, 3, neutral, 2, somewhat negative, and 1, very negative) became much more negative. Obama’s loss of support among independents is the most politically consequential change in public opinion during his first two years in office, a point I return to in discussing the 2010 elections.
Obama’s Wars

Obama inherited two ongoing wars and so never had the option of attending exclusively to the economy and other domestic policy issues. Popular disaffection with the Iraq War had contributed crucially to Barack Obama’s nomination and election in 2008 (Jacobson 2009a; 2010a). On assuming office, Obama proceeded to fulfill his campaign promise to wind down that war and redirect forces to fighting the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan. Both moves enjoyed broad public backing. Partisan divisions on Obama’s conduct of the wars have been much smaller than on domestic policy (Figure 18.7), no doubt because his policies toward both have pleased Republicans as much (Iraq) or more (Afghanistan) than Democrats. The draw-down of U.S. forces in Iraq follows a timetable negotiated by the Bush administration and is consistent with Republicans’ assessment of Bush’s “surge” of 2007–2008 as a great success, so their opposition has been muted. Although Democrats tend to prefer a hastier exit (explaining their tepid approval ratings of Obama’s performance in this domain), they can at least see a trajectory that should finally extract the United States from what most of them now judge a disastrously misconceived venture (Jacobson 2010b).

Obama’s Afghan policies have divided partisans internally. For example, Republicans’ support for his December 2009, decision to commit another 30,000 U.S. troops to the fight averaged 70% in polls taken in the months after it was
announced, 33 points higher than their approval of his handling of the Afghan war, while Democrats’ approval of the escalation averaged 49%, 14 points lower than their approval of his handling of the war (Jacobson 2010b). Thus, many Republicans approved of the president’s decisions but not his handling of the war, whereas many Democrats approved of his handling of the war but not his decisions. In neither case, however, did opinions on Obama’s performance in this domain (or regarding Iraq) have an appreciable effect on his overall approval ratings.

As the data in Figure 18.7 show, Republican approval of Obama’s general job performance averaged 20 points lower than their approval of his handling of the wars, while Obama’s overall approval among Democrats averaged 18 and 11 points higher than his respective ratings on Afghanistan and Iraq. In sharp contrast to evaluations of his predecessor, then, overall assessments of Obama’s performance have so far reflected reactions to his domestic far more than his foreign policies, a natural consequence of both his legislative agenda and the recession’s severity. Thus, the domain provoking the least partisan contention has not been sufficiently salient to dampen partisan differences in overall evaluations of his presidency.

**FIGURE 18.7**
Partisanship and Approval of Barack Obama’s Performance in 2010, by Domain.

*Note: The number of surveys averaged is in parentheses.*


**OBAMA AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY**

The failure of Obama’s legislative and other policy achievements to deliver any tangible political dividends and continuing economic discontent affected not only his own popular standing, but also that of the Democratic Party. Presidents have a powerful effect on popular attitudes toward their parties
Section 4
The Public Presidency: Press, Media, and Public Approval

One of Bush’s signal contributions to Democratic victories in 2006 and 2008 had been the damage done to the Republican Party’s popular standing during his second term. By the time Obama took over, his Democrats enjoyed a wide lead in party favorability (Figure 18.8). Since then, Republican favorability has undergone a modest rebound from its low point in early 2009, while views of the Democratic Party have become substantially less favorable. The average 23-point advantage Democrats held on this dimension during the first quarter of 2009 had by the final quarter of 2010 fallen to 2 points.

As with Bush, the data show a strong linear relationship between aggregate views of Obama and his party. Figure 18.9 plots party favorability against presidential approval during the two administrations and displays equations estimating the linear relationship between the two variables, also plotted in the figure. Note that the slope has been steeper during the Obama administration; the difference is statistically significant (p < .001), another sign of Obama’s unusual centrality to the organization of public opinion during his presidency. Also as with Bush (Jacobson 2009b), Obama’s popularity had a much smaller effect on favorability ratings of the opposing party. Regressing Republican favorability on Obama’s approval rating produces a coefficient of −.24 (standard deviation, .12) and the fit is quite poor (adjusted R² = .05). Presidents who lose popularity hurt their own party’s standing, but they do not help the opposition party’s standing to nearly the same degree.

Figure 18.8

Trends in macropartisanship (the aggregate share of partisans identifying with the parties) have also been found to track aggregate presidential approval (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 1998; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 1998; Jacobson 2009b; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989), and this remains true for the Obama administration. Both the CBS News/New York Times and Gallup party identification series show that Bush’s declining approval ratings during his second term were reflected in an increasingly Democratic mass electorate (Figure 18.10). That trend was reversed early in Obama’s presidency and by the end of his second year in office, all of the Democrats’ gains in the Gallup series, and most of the gains in the CBS/New York Times series, had been erased. Treating independents who say they lean toward a party as partisans does not alter the picture, although their inclusion tends to exaggerate the degree of change. As with party favorability, macropartisanship is directly related to presidential approval during both the Obama and Bush administrations (Figure 18.11). Again, the slope is steeper for Obama, although in this instance the difference is not statistically significant.
FIGURE 18.10

FIGURE 18.11
Presidential Approval and Macropartisanship, George W. Bush and Barack Obama Administrations (Monthly Averages).
THE 2010 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

The accumulated consequences of lingering high unemployment and the failure of Obama’s legislative and policy accomplishments to generate political benefits inflicted severe damage on the Democratic Party in the 2010 midterm elections. The referendum component common to all midterm elections was strengthened in 2010 by Obama’s emergence as an unusually powerful anchor for political opinions. The proportion of respondents saying their congressional vote would be cast to support or oppose the president, 56%, was the highest for any of the nine midterms for which data are available (Jacobson 2011c). The balance of supporting (27%) and opposing (29%) voters was nearly even, but Obama’s opponents were much more eager to participate in the election: on average, 63% of Republicans said they were more enthusiastic about voting than usual (the highest proportion of such voters recorded in midterm data going back to 1994), compared with 44% of Democrats (Jacobson 2011c). And Obama’s Tea Party antagonists were the most enthusiastic participants of all.

Analysis of aggregate election data confirms that the 2010 election was nationalized to an extraordinary degree and that the president was the primary focus. For example, the relationship between the midterm House vote and the president’s district-level vote in the previous election was the closest on record. This relationship has been growing stronger for decades (Figure 18.12), but 2010 produced, by a considerable margin, the highest correlation in the series.

FIGURE 18.12

Source: Compiled by author.
.92, compared to .85 and .84 for the two next-highest midterms (1954 and 2006). The same statistic for 2010 Senate elections calculated from state-level data, .84, was also highest among midterms going back to Dwight E. Eisenhower’s first term. To an extraordinary degree, then, how well Democratic candidates did in 2010 depended on how well Obama had done among their constituents in 2008. The interelection swing in the House vote between 2008 and 2010 was also more uniform across districts than usual, and estimates of the incumbency advantage were the smallest since the 1960s (Jacobson 2011c). All evidence, then, identifies 2010 as the most nationalized midterm election in at least six decades.

With high unemployment and widespread popular discontent about the direction of the country, a highly nationalized election obviously favored the Republicans. Shifts in the structure of electorate between 2008 and 2010 also worked to the Republicans’ advantage. Obama had attracted unusually high turnout among younger and minority voters in 2008, demographic categories that include a disproportionate share of marginally involved citizens with a lower propensity to vote in midterm elections, setting up a classic “surge and decline” scenario (Campbell 1966). As noted earlier, the balance of party identifiers had also shifted in the Republicans’ favor since Obama’s inauguration (Figure 18.10), and independent voters, essential to Democratic victories in 2006 and 2008, had turned against the president (Figures 18.5 and 18.7). Both changes clearly hurt the Democrats. According to the exit polls, party-line voting was very high (at 94% for Republicans, 92% for Democrats) in 2010, underlining the significance of the shift in mass partisanship. More crucially, independent House voters, who had split 57-39 for the Democrats in 2006 and 51-43 in 2008, voted for Republicans, 56-37 in 2010 (Jacobson 2011c). A comparable shift occurred in Senate elections. According to the 2008 exit polls, seven of the eight Democrats who took Senate seats from Republicans that year had outpolled their opponents among independents; in 2010, all of the Republicans who took seats from Democrats were supported by majorities of independents. The failure of Obama and his party to maintain their appeal to independent voters was the single most important source of the Democrats’ losses in 2010.

CONCLUSION

During his first two years in office, in fulfillment of prominent campaign promises, Barack Obama pushed through landmark legislation attacking the recession and its causes, initiated sweeping reforms in the health care system, and shifted U.S. forces from Iraq to Afghanistan. The public’s response was to hand his party a decisive defeat in the 2010 midterm election, leaving him to face a hostile Republican majority in the House and sharply diminished Democratic majority in the Senate for the final two years of his term. The political failure of Obama’s legislative and policy successes had multiple sources. The most important was that the economy did not rebound strongly enough to make a significant dent in the unemployment rate. The main benefits of TARP
and the stimulus legislation lay in keeping the economy from getting much worse, but the counterfactual (how much more severe the recession would have been without these actions) did not carry much force against the reality of a painfully slow recovery, and most Americans came to see these policies as ineffective or even harmful. The survey respondents identifying the beneficiaries of “the government’s economic policies since the recession began in 2002” who placed large banks and financial institutions (74%) and large corporations (70%) far ahead of poor people (31%), middle-class people (27%), and small businesses (23%) could hardly be faulted; stock prices and corporate profits rebounded (arguably, a necessary step toward more general prosperity), but the benefits have been slow to trickle down to middle- and working-class Americans. Similarly, health care reform may someday be celebrated like other major New Deal-type programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, but its immediate political effect was to polarize the public and inspire the upsurge of populist conservatism and intense hostility to Obama manifest in the Tea Party movement. His foreign policy decisions were less controversial and divisive, but they were not central to the public’s evaluation of this president.

Could Obama and his allies have done anything to produce a more positive response from the public to his initiatives? Perhaps at the margins, but realities beyond his control place severe constraints on any president’s ability to move the public (Edwards 2009), and Obama is no exception. It was not for want of his “going public” that his health care reforms were not more popular. Aside from the straitened times that curb generosity, there was also the problem that, even if they care about the uninsured and worry about rising costs, most Americans are satisfied with their own medical arrangements and skeptical that changes will improve them. Obama could hardly have avoided addressing the issue, given its prominence in his campaign; and had he tried to do so, his own partisans would have felt betrayed. The administration might have managed congressional action on the legislation more effectively, but there would have been no tidy way to get around the implacable Tea Party-infused Republican opposition in the Senate.

The recession Obama inherited was probably more severe than he and his advisors anticipated, and a larger and better-focused stimulus bill might have been more effective. But it is doubtful he could have gotten pushed through the Congress, and public fears about the mounting deficit limited subsequent options for boosting consumer demand and job formation. In any case, it is difficult to imagine any feasible government action that would have significantly accelerated the recovery during Obama’s first two years, if only because the devastated housing market admitted to no quick fix, and the international economy was also plagued by the legacy of the banking and housing crises.

Opinions of Obama were sharply divided along partisan and ideological lines even before he took office, reinforcing congressional Republicans’ reflexive instincts to oppose and obstruct. The Tea Party view of the president also preceded his election, so almost any domestic action consistent with his position as a moderately liberal Democratic president was likely to provoke the wrath of the McCain voters and other populist conservatives who considered
him a radical leftist. And Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, and company were in business to make sure that it did.

In short, even if Obama had been a more astute politician and effective advocate for his policies, conditions prevailing during his early presidency suggest that he would still have faced a jobless recovery and intractable opponents and that he and, by extension, his party would still have suffered a serious erosion of public support. Conditions may or may not improve for Obama during the remainder of his term (even if the economy picks up steam, the problem of Afghanistan looms), but his ability to recover popular support and revive his party’s fortunes will continue to be constrained by circumstances he cannot control.

REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1. Democrats will have to defend 23 seats, Republicans only 10, in 2012.


3. Party line voting was also second highest to 2004 in the equally lengthy Gallup Poll series; see http://www.gallup.com/poll/139880/Election-Polls-Presidential-Vote-Groups.aspx (accessed December 6, 2010).

4. “Contrast” occurs when people perceive someone they dislike as having opinions more distant from their own than is actually the case; “assimilation” occurs when people perceive someone they like as having opinions closer to their own than is actually the case.

5. According to ANES data, loyalty in the 2008 House elections was the highest since 1962; in Senate elections, it was the highest since 1938; the rate of president-House ticket splitting was second lowest since 1964 (it was slightly lower in 2004); president-Senate ticket splitting was lowest since 1952.

6. The analysis here is confined to districts in which there were at least 10 voters for the winning candidate; this includes 158 Republican districts and 199 Democratic districts. The mean number of Republican voters in the Republican districts in the data set is 27.7, with a standard deviation of 7.9; the mean number of Democratic voters in the Democratic districts in the data set is 25.6, with a standard deviation of 8.8. For a description of the 2008 CCES, see Ansolabehere (2009a; 2009b).

7. Questioned in a July 1–5, 2010, Pew survey, 47% of respondents said it had been Bush’s program, 47%, Obama’s. Responses did not differ significantly across partisan categories; http://pewresearch.org/databank/dailynumber/?NumberID=1057 (accessed December 7, 2010).

9. The breakdown on the question (increase vs. decrease in taxes) was 55-3 for Republicans, 31-7 for independents, and 19-13 for Democrats; thus even Democrats were more likely to get it wrong than right. See the CBS News/New York Times Poll, September 10–24, 2010, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20016602-503544.html?tag=contentMain;contentBody.

10. In the August 27–30 Gallup Poll, for example, 61% of Americans approved of the legislation, including 76% of Democrats, 62% of independents, and 42% of Republicans (from my secondary analysis of the survey provide by the Roper Center, University of Connecticut).

11. In the survey reported in Table 18.1, 20% said they did not know if the legislation hurt or helped the country, and another 37% said it was too soon to tell.

12. In the 11 surveys taken between March 2009 and August 2010, asking if Obama or Bush were more to blame for the economy, an average of 25% blamed Obama, 54%, Bush. In the six surveys including Wall Street and Congress as potential culprits, an average of 5% blamed Obama, 33%, Bush, 24%, Wall Street, and 13%, Congress. Only in the first series was there a modest increase in blaming Obama over time. The first series is from polls conducted by ABC News/Washington Post, NBC News/Wall Street Journal, Fox News, Quinnipiac, Newsweek, Democracy Corps, National Public Radio, and Time; the second series is from CBS News/New York Times and Fox; data are reported at http://www.pollingreport.com and the sponsors’ Web sites.

13. Monthly unemployment and Obama's average approval rating correlate at −.92 over his first 12 months in office.

14. Google “Obama” in conjunction with any of these labels to see how routinely they are used—and defended—on the Internet.

15. In 19 surveys taken between January and October 2010, between 18 and 41% said they had a favorable view of the Tea Party movement (average, 32%), and from 12 to 50% had an unfavorable view of it (average, also 32%); the rest were uncertain or did not know enough about it to have an opinion; from NBC News/Wall Street Journal, CBS News/New York Times, Quinnipiac, Fox News, AP-GfK, and ABC News/Washington Post polls available at http://www.pollingreport.com/politics.htm (accessed November 7, 2010).


19. Eleven percent of Democrats and 17% of independents also thought he was a Muslim; *Time Magazine*/Abt SRBI Poll: Religion, August 16–17, 2010, available from the Roper Center, University of Connecticut; secondary analysis by the author.


23. Typically, most people favor requiring insurance companies to cover preexisting conditions and to continue to cover people who become sick, providing subsidies so that poor families can buy insurance, and requiring employers to provide health insurance to workers. The idea of universal coverage also generally wins majority support. But majorities also tended to oppose the components necessary to pay for these features: taxing the most generous health care policies, limiting some Medicare reimbursements, and requiring everyone to buy health insurance (so that the risk pool is large enough) and enforcing this requirement through fines; see the extensive compilation of survey questions and responses at http://www.pollingreport.com/health.htm (accessed November 10, 2010).


25. An average of 90% of Republicans, 88% of Democrats, and 82% of independents offered consistent evaluations; analysis is based on 10 surveys by Gallup, NBC News/Wall Street Journal, and CNN taken between February and August and available for secondary analysis from the Roper Center, University of Connecticut.

26. In the June 2010 Pew survey, 88% of respondents gave consistent evaluations of Obama’s performance on health care and his overall job performance; on eight other issues, including the economy, the deficit and the Iraq and Afghan wars, consistency ranged from 69% to 85%.

27. The relationship could be inflated by faulty memories, but the distribution of the reported two-party vote (54.9% for Obama, 45.1% for McCain) is very close to actual vote in 2008 (53.7% to 46.9%).


29. Party favorability is measured by the proportion of respondents who reply “yes” when asked, “Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of the Republican [Democratic] Party?”

30. The slope from analysis of comparable data from the Clinton administration was .49 (standard error, .12, adjusted $R^2 = .35$, $N = 29$), so this cannot be attributed to the difference between Republican and Democratic presidents.
Scene One: A triumphant president lands in a jet on an aircraft carrier, to celebrate with loyal troops a stunning victory over a tyrannical despot. The sailors greet him with boisterous cheering, and he gives a speech from the deck as the sun sets perfectly in the Pacific, the last golden rays of the sun illuminating a patriotic banner reading “Mission Accomplished.”

Scene Two: In the midst of a photo opportunity with Florida second-graders about reading, a president is told in whispers by his chief of staff that the second tower at the World Trade Center has been hit by a terrorist attack. As two other hijacked planes speed toward Washington, the confused president picks up “The Pet Goat” and stays on photo-op autopilot for at least seven long minutes, chatting about goats and literacy (Paltrow 2004).

These two images of the same president, George W. Bush, illustrate the challenges of presidential image management in the 24-hour video era. One shows the president in a carefully planned setting of patriotism, victory, masculinity, and daring. The other shows a president taking no actions, making no decisions, as crucial minutes tick away. The Bush administration’s success
at image management is demonstrated by the fact that most Americans saw the unprecedented carrier landing, while almost none viewed the complete footage of Bush complimenting Ms. Daniels’s children on their reading abilities while the towers burned.

The image of the president—the impression Americans have of their chief executive as a leader and a human being—is vitally important to the success of any modern president. Public views about their leaders’ personal characteristics have been part of successful governance since before the Athenian age of Pericles, and certainly pervade the long history of the American presidency. Image has become more central to the presidency in the decades since television became the primary mode of political communication. Image is both a source of power and a measure by which presidents and their staffs are judged. This essay will briefly explore how presidential images are created and assess how the Bush image managers are doing at their task. It will conclude by raising questions about the future of presidential image management.

THE COMPONENTS OF PRESIDENTIAL IMAGE

What is image? It is both truth and lie, both accurate perception and the gap between reality and perception. It is not policy or substance. It is, however, connected to both. Image is built up day by day, slowly accreting sediment at the bottom of the lake of public opinion. Images can be startlingly resilient, in part because of the media’s tendency to reinforce whatever the public image has become. At a certain point in a presidency, it becomes easier to change policy than it is to change image, for this very reason. As one of the great presidential image managers, Reagan aide Michael Deaver, observed, “in the television age, image sometimes is as useful as substance” (Waterman, Wright, and St. Clair 1999, 53).

The public image of a president is produced in a complex interaction among four elements: the “reality” of the president’s character, actions, and policies; the image management of his staff; the attempted redefinitions of his political opponents; and the cacophony of media assessments of the man in the White House. Together, they create the inchoate and shifting image within the collective minds of Americans.

The “reality” that is the supposed root of image begins with the president’s character, talents, worldview, and style. It also encompasses, in the no-privacy modern era, such things as family life and sexual behavior. The president’s policies and political background are relevant as well, to the extent that they color the public’s perception of the president as a man. Policies that are seen as mean spirited, thoughtless, or dangerous have all affected the personal image of presidents. It also includes his physical appearance, as well as his diction and his accent.

Consider how the exigencies of image politics limit who can actually be president. While the American general population is perhaps the most obese
in the world, the last president to be truly overweight was William Howard Taft in 1912. The last bald man elected president was Dwight Eisenhower. Given that estimates of the number of bald or mostly bald men older than 35 in the general public range from 40 to 70 percent, it should astound us that the 16 men who ran for the major party nominations in 2000 and 2004 were all follicularly gifted. Not one of them was overweight, and the eventual winner in 2000 was remarkably svelte. Washington may be, as one quip has it, Hollywood for ugly people, but at the top, it is now run by people who are quite attractive, or at least not unattractive. If we consider Kennedy the first president of the television age, the trend toward physical attractiveness becomes clear. The last five presidents (Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, Obama) are far more attractive than the preceding four (Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter). The reality of personal appearance may be the clearest example of the power of image in politics.

The image manager’s task begins with deciding which of these aspects of the president to emphasize and which to submerge. Sometimes, reality must be directly contradicted. A divorced president who has dysfunctional relationships with some of his own children is portrayed as a benevolent father figure (Reagan). A famously unfaithful husband lectures American teenagers about sexual propriety (Clinton). A president raised in wealth and privilege lets it be known that his favorite food is pork rinds and his favorite music is the Oak Ridge Boys (Bush I). The danger of such tactics is that image manipulation that directly contradicts reality may strike the public as fake—a perception corrosive to all future attempts at image repair and manipulation (Waterman et al. 1999, 186). The best image management leaves no traces, no fingerprints of public relations professionalism. Thus, the call to “let Reagan be Reagan” or its equivalent is often heard. The typical protest from image managers is that their job is to let the public get to know the “real” president. In truth, the job is to let the public believe they know the real person.

Political opponents of the president know if they can increase the number of Americans who hold unfavorable impressions of the president as a person, they will have much greater success at defeating his policies. Many observers remark on the increasingly vituperative tone of politics in the nation; the main cause is the emphasis on personal image. Politics became more personal because the personal is far more potent today than ever before. Thus, image politics have had concrete effects. Because so many in both parties have come to believe that the opposition party’s leaders are not just wrong on policy but are actually bad people, it is difficult for leaders to reach across the gulf between the parties without potentially alienating core supporters. Campaign finance reform may be to blame. By making parties and candidates dependent on thousands of upper-middle class donors, rather than the ultra-wealthy few, campaign finance reform has forced fundraisers to demonize their opponents. For example, a hypothetical partisan letter emphasizing the positive aspects of Barack Obama’s platform would raise much less money than one that disparaged the personalities of John McCain or Sarah Palin. The politics of personal destruction pays as well as plays.
The ability of a White House to maintain a relatively neutral or positive personal image for the president has been changed by these increased incentives for opponents to wage war against the president as an individual. This can be done through a number of different venues. First, changes in the media permit “narrowcasting” messages to partisan groups. When Americans watched three broadly marketed television networks, the need to appear objective and even respectful toward the office of the presidency limited the dissemination of truly egregious and partisan characterizations of the president. Those who seek to distribute a negative image of the president will find many willing viewers on the Internet if not somewhere on cable television.

The media serve as referees of the ongoing fight over the president’s image, adjudicating which depictions are credible through their decisions about what to broadcast. The media have also changed their standards as to what is news and what is private. In 1962, a woman picketed outside the White House, carrying a sign stating that John Kennedy was an adulterer and that she had photographic proof. Not a single media outlet broadcast her allegations, or even investigated them, even though many reporters and editors were aware of such rumors, and some knew them to be accurate (Reeves 1997, 242–43). Today, a half-baked, nearly unsourced allegation of adultery is on the Web within a few hours of its emergence, as occurred with John Kerry in 2004. The quality of a president’s marriage is widely discussed in parts of the media, down to the sincerity of a kiss between husband and wife (for example, Tipper and Al Gore in 2000, and the media’s obsessive interpretations of public physical gestures between Bill and Hillary Clinton). While the partisan press era of the early republic did feature some scandalous assertions about the sexual practices and characters of occupants of the White House, the personalized coverage today is far more intrusive.

Some of the most powerful media shapers of presidential image are not even journalists. The monologues and sketches on *Leno*, *Letterman*, and *Saturday Night Live* are at least as important as the nightly news broadcasts when it comes to the image of our leaders. These shows, which focus on the most simplified aspects of the public face of the president, both influence the presidential image and are perhaps the best barometer of the public’s current judgment about him.

These media depictions of presidents and their challengers quickly become hardened into almost irrefutable realities: George W. Bush—dumb; Bill Clinton—letch; Al Gore—wooden prig and serial liar; Bob Dole—old and cold. Through selective reporting, the media’s own practices help set these images in concrete. Perhaps the best example of this was Bush I’s encounter with a grocery store scanner. Widely perceived as an aloof patrician, Bush found this image particularly damaging when the economy was doing badly in 1990–1992. Bush was alleged by the media to have looked at a checkout laser scanner with the wonder befitting a multi-millionaire insulated from the daily concerns of average Americans—when the economy was in recession. While the first reporter who wrote of Bush’s apparent bewilderment was not even there, it quickly became a hardened “fact” repeated endlessly, even by...
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However, a videotape of the event shows Bush was not surprised at all by the scanner, as an apology from the publisher of *The New York Times* conceded (Kurtz 1992).

In a complicated and shifting interaction, these four forces (reality, image management, image attack from the opposition, and the media) shape the image of every president. What methods did the Bush White House use to convince Americans to perceive Bush positively?

**THE BUSH IMAGE TEAM: DISCIPLINE AND SET DESIGN**

The Bush White House was tremendously successful at image management in his first term. Two components stand out: the message discipline of the White House, and the quality of the set design that served as the backdrop for the president.

Although Bush seldom claimed to have profited from his sterling education, it was unquestionably to his advantage to be our country’s first MBA president. Bush ran his administration like a CEO. “This is the most disciplined White House in history,” said an admiring Michael Deaver (Auletta 2004). Particularly in its staff conduct and ethos, a White House reflects the values and priorities of the president. Clinton, famously addicted to open-ended debate, had a White House that leaked constantly. Bush, by contrast, was a martinet for loyalty and discipline. Nearly every account of the internal operation of Bush’s White House included a testimony to its leak-proof nature (Millbank 2002).

How did Bush manage to do what every president attempts? In addition to his MBA and his obvious administrative talents, Bush was the only modern president to have had a ground-level view of the operations of a White House staff. During his father’s term in office, Bush was an informal enforcer of discipline and a loyalty checker (York 2001a). He inspired a tremendous sense of personal loyalty in staffers, as well as some level of intimidation, which worked together to stop self-aggrandizing or policy-based leaking. The Bush White House also wisely limited the number of people who regularly interacted with the press. In previous White House administrations, top aides were frequently made available to give interviews or at least make comments on stories. At the Bush White House, top staffers boasted about being inaccessible to the media. President Bush somehow inspired a selfless White House staff that put his image ahead of their own celebrity (Auletta 2004). Indeed, the men and women of the Bush White House came closer to achieving the ideal “passion for anonymity” than any other recent presidential staff.4

The Bush White House was also remarkably successful at convincing the rest of the executive branch to work with the White House on image management. The centrifugal forces of Washington bureaucracies and the personal ambitions of Cabinet secretaries often defeated such efforts in
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In the past (Maltese 1992). To combat these tendencies, the Bush administration appointed loyalists throughout the communications offices of the various agencies and departments (Kumar 2003a, 384). Adding to the uniformity of positive depictions of the president and his policies was a new level of coordination and control of message with the Republican leadership on Capitol Hill and with linked interest groups.

All of the discipline on image control gives the White House extraordinary ability to force the media to cover the pictures and narratives it provides. If no one from the White House contributes to a negative image of the president, then the media are almost forced to cover the portrait of the president designed for them by Bush’s image handlers.

**PRESIDENTIAL SET DESIGN**

How a president should be shown to the public is the heart of presidential image management. Believing that most Americans will not read a newspaper article on any given day, or perhaps even watch through an entire news story, the Bush staff crafted an image of the president that suited the person flipping channels (Kumar 2003a, 387). The attention to detail, which became legendary, was thus to be expected; if Americans only see one picture of their president each day, it had better be a good one. At some events, wealthy Republican supporters in the shot behind the president were instructed by the advance team to remove their ties, so that an image of normal Americans supporting Bush would be conveyed (Shella 2003). The backdrop was often composed of repetitive slogans, far too small for the live audience to see, but just right for television. Whether there was any marginal “subliminal” effect on the viewer of seeing slogans associating Bush with jobs, security, and strong families was unknown, but it again served the busy channel-shifting American, who got the White House message of the day. As Dan Bartlett, communications director put it:

> Americans are leading busy lives, and sometimes they don’t have the opportunity to read a story or listen to an entire broadcast. But if they can have an instant understanding of what the president is talking about by seeing 60 seconds of television, you accomplish your goals as communicators (Bumiller 2003).

In pursuit of the perfect video shot, events were scheduled like Hollywood movies, to get the cherished director’s “golden hour” of setting sunshine. When the timing or weather prevented this, the staff was known to spend tens of thousands of dollars on renting rock concert quality lighting sets for single televised events (Bumiller 2003).

Perhaps any White House would adopt this strategy today. Surveys suggest that amid the cacophony of the Internet and dozens of cable options, few Americans watch presidential speeches, and even when they do, few retain more than one simple message from a 30-minute speech (Welch 2003, 353). If the public has a bias toward absorbing information through pictures,
then the White House will work to feed that preference. But in Bush’s case, it was also an inevitable response to the weaknesses of his presentation of self. Unlike Reagan or Clinton, Bush was a poor public speaker. On rare occasions, he could fill a room with passion and inspire a nation with his vision and courage, as he did in his seminal September 20, 2001, speech to Congress. With a good speech, a supportive audience, and inspiration, Bush was frequently competent. He was, however, at his worst in unscripted interactions with non-supporters. Thus, perhaps the most crucial image-handling decision in his first term was to insulate him as much as possible from questions and conflict (Suskind 2004, 147–48). When Bush held an economic conference in Waco early in his administration, the president “spontaneously” wandered from panel to panel, with his comments prepared for each session. The conference was a Potemkin’s village of discourse. Instead of actually discussing the economic issues of the day—as presidents as diverse as Ford and Clinton had done at similar events—the points to be made were pre-screened, the conclusions about the policies already reached before discussions began (Suskind 2004, 269–73). How could there be any debate at this “conference”? Almost all participants were fervent Bush supporters.

Deft awareness of Bush’s limitations explains why Bush had fewer solo press conferences than any other recent president (Kumar 2003b). But it went beyond avoiding tough questions from reporters. Bush enveloped himself in a security bubble in all of his public appearances. Those with anti-Bush signs or chanting anti-Bush slogans were relegated to distant areas with the Orwellian title of “free speech zones,” far from television cameras. Although the claim of security was made, Bush supporters with similar-sized signs were permitted to stay on the motorcade route, or outside a presidential event (Lindorff 2003). If the danger were assassination, surely those who wish the president harm would be smart enough to carry a sign that says “Bush-Cheney.” The claim that the post-9/11 security environment required such control of dissent also rings hollow: Bush as governor was known for forbidding protesters outside his mansion in ways no previous occupant had ever done (Baldauf 1999). The picture of Bush confronting a hostile demonstrator or even driving by angry crowds has rarely if ever been on American television. This image management conveyed, wordlessly, subtly, and powerfully, the impression that those who disagreed with the president were irrelevant and weak. They must be fringe elements: they were physically on the outskirts of every presidential event.

**BUSH’S TWO MAIN IMAGES: PRESIDENTIAL MEDIA ROLES**

What images did the Bush White House convey of the president of the United States? While several were tried—such as First Christian, Racial Uniter, and President CEO—the two major ones were the Average American and the War Leader.
Average American with Common Values

President Bush boasted one of the most elite backgrounds of any president, and was only the second son of a president to become president. As of November 2004, the Bush family name had been on six of the last seven presidential ballots. Bush also had an educational record far above the American norm, or even the average for presidents: Andover, Yale, and a Harvard MBA. Yet this man of such rarefied background successfully sold himself to the public as a man of the people, a person of typical values and simple small-town beliefs.

In part, the reality of Bush made it easy for the image to be conveyed. Even in comparatively harsh accounts of his presidency, the fact that he made time for secretaries, cooks, and others shines through. Bush did not pretend to dislike intellectuals in order to woo voters. His disdain toward intellectuals, particularly East Coast intellectuals, is one of the most constant themes in Bush biographies, dating back to his time at Yale if not earlier. Unlike his father, who shielded the fact that he spoke French from the press until after his election, Bush gave little evidence of academic gifts in need of hiding. Confronted with questions about the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Bush brushed them aside as of concern only to those in “elite circles”—as if Bush had not spent his life in such circles.

One of the ways Bush demonstrated his everyman status was through his eager and sincere enthusiasm for sports, especially baseball. One of the major image initiatives of the first nine months of his presidency was hosting tee-ball games at the White House. By inviting small children to play an iconic American sport on the lawn of the White House, Bush was sending a simple message, according to a senior administration official:

. . . tee ball isn’t the reason people like him, but it’s initiatives like this . . . that show the wholesomeness factor and will allow him to be one of the more successful presidents (York 2001b).

The percentage of Americans who believed that Bush “shares your values” never dropped below 50 percent in his first term, according to Gallup, and often ranged much higher. The cause lay not only with the adroit handling of his image by his staff. Rather, it was also a product of his opponents’ inability to broadcast a consistent counter-image. Those who opposed Bush could never decide whether he was a dumb man pretending to be sophisticated and failing, or if he was a sophisticated man pretending to be dumb for political reasons. It seems likely that Bush’s tendency to fail at subject-verb agreement, to mangle relatively simple words, and to regularly demonstrate an inability to handle nuance served as much to insulate him from the charge of privilege as it did to support the charge that he lacked the intellectual depth some see as vital to the presidency. The best image for a president suits his personality as well as his political needs. Bush clearly believed that he was in many significant ways a typical American, and this lent sincerity to the depiction, regardless of its accuracy.
War Leader
One of the chief constitutional duties of president is to lead the armed forces. Every recent American president has had to deploy the American military into hostile areas. However, the scope and intensity of the conflicts that Bush has launched made it a far more central part of his presidential image, perhaps more so than any president since Roosevelt. As the president during the most significant attack on the country since Pearl Harbor, Bush’s image inevitably became mixed with the perception of his handling of military leadership.

Bush put himself into many positive military settings, including the high-profile aircraft carrier landing. When “major hostilities” were ended in Iraq in April of 2003, President Bush’s communications staff wanted to arrange a compelling event to celebrate the good news of rapid victory over Iraq. They chose to put the president on an aircraft carrier full of sailors returning from the Mideast. In an unprecedented step, the commander in chief landed on the deck of the carrier in a pilot’s uniform; shifting to civilian gear, Bush spoke in front of a banner reading “Mission Accomplished.” The entire event was full of the mood of victory and celebration. Some Democrats complained initially about the jingoism and use of the military for partisan purposes, alleging that the event unnecessarily delayed the sailors return to port, and that Bush had been showboating to land by airplane. However, the event was generally viewed as wonderful politics, and evidence of the skill of the White House image team. As television pundit Chris Matthews asked: “Why are the Democrats so stupid to attack the best presidential picture in years?” (Whitney 2003).

The other iconic image of Bush as war president occurred in Thanksgiving of 2003. The president secretly traveled to Iraq to celebrate the classic American holiday with the troops, an act of personal courage given the security situation in Baghdad. The trip resulted in the perfect photo of Bush offering the troops a turkey on a platter. In this dramatic image, most of the tactics of the Bush image management team were on display. Few White Houses would have had the discipline to undertake such a surprising and risky gesture with no leaks. As with Bush’s economic conference or the words posted behind him at public events, the turkey on the platter did not actually nourish any living person at the event—a display turkey, it only nourished the president’s image at home. Finally, the military screened all non-Bush-supporting troops out of the event, thus extending Bush’s no-dissent bubble even to the overseas environment (Sealey 2004). Had a single soldier challenged the president about weapons of mass destruction, extended deployments, or simply said, “Send me home, Mr. President,” all the positive outcomes for the president’s image would have evaporated. Instead, the president’s standing in polls improved significantly following the trip (Jacobson 2003).

Bush’s image as a war leader was an essential aspect of his popularity. Bush hovered just above 50 percent approval in the polls for the first eight months of his presidency. Following the attacks of 9/11, his popularity soared to unprecedented heights and remained lofty for months as he led a successful and remarkably swift and low-casualty invasion of Afghanistan. A few months after the removal of the Taliban, a slow bleed began in his popularity.
Just at the point where it was reaching its pre-9/11 levels, hostilities with Iraq loomed. Once the Iraq war began, Bush’s numbers soared again, although not to the heights of September–February 2001–2002. Following that war, once again Bush’s numbers began a slow decline (Jacobson 2003). While Americans “rally ‘round the flag” and the president during any conflict, conflict seemed to be crucial to Bush’s popularity.7

**THE FUTURE OF PRESIDENTIAL IMAGE MANAGEMENT**

The centrality of image to the American presidency is likely to grow. We may be only at the dawn of the era of the “short attention-span presidency,” in which substantive policy proposals become entirely props in the pursuit of effective image conveyance. It is difficult to think of a countervailing political, technological, or cultural force that could stop the increasing salience of images to the voting preferences of the American public. In this sense, the gloomy jeremiads of Neil Postman (1985) and other communication scholars appear to have been confirmed in the decades since their baleful predictions were first aired.

Some might agree with Postman that Americans are thus “amusing themselves to death,” the title of Postman’s most important book. Will modern presidents pursue gossamer and ephemeral images, at the expense of long-term historical accomplishments? Consider Truman and Eisenhower, the last two presidents before the image became the dominant means of political communication. No American president has been lower in the polls at the end of his term than Truman was in 1953.8 Yet despite the image of a country bumpkin too small for the presidency, which he took with him back home to Independence, Missouri, Truman’s stock has risen in the esteem of historians in every poll on presidential greatness since 1953. In Eisenhower’s case, he was apparently content to let the public think he was less sharp than he actually was, in order to achieve substantive policy goals of moderate conservatism. One might observe that Truman and Eisenhower correctly put their time and efforts into matters of substance. Yet their presidency is not the one George W. Bush was sworn into on January 20, 2001. Image is now so directly linked to the ability to achieve substantive policy goals that tactics such as Eisenhower’s may no longer be feasible. Even a president committed to achieving substantive goals will have to follow the logic of image management.

Yet there is another possibility, more hopeful than the inevitable subjugation of substance to image. Critical theorist Walter Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, made two key claims for the virtues of mechanically reproduced images: They would free the masses from elite filters because of the immediacy of their conveyance, and they would reveal previously hidden aspects of life. In the case of one iconic image of George W. Bush—the aircraft carrier shot—we can see evidence of Benjamin’s prescience. Although widely viewed at the time as a brilliant exploitation of Bush’s victory over Saddam, by June of 2006, many more Americans had died in the occupation of Iraq than in its liberation. Unlike the largely positive pictures that came
out during the initial war in Iraq, the images of young Americans burned alive in Fallujah, bombed in Ramadi, or maimed in Mosul were very tough for the Bush White House to spin; their immediacy was far less subject to elite filtering, as Benjamin would have anticipated.

Similarly, one aspect of life that has been largely hidden from most citizens during the nation-states era is the true face of warfare and occupation. No matter how vivid the texts of a Stephen Crane, a Leo Tolstoy, or an Ernest Hemingway, print could never take a nation to the frontlines the way video can. Previous presidents could occupy the Philippines or Haiti and fight a long bloody guerrilla war, secure in the knowledge that the public would never see the inevitable human costs of occupation. The images of death and upheaval in “liberated” Iraq forced a slow retreat from “Mission Accomplished” by the Bush White House. What had looked like the acme of image management later became an image blunder. At first, the president implied that the Navy, not his staff, had chosen the banner (Conason 2003a). Eventually, the White House admitted that they had planned and produced the banner, although the Navy had physically put it up on the ship (Conason 2003b). Karl Rove, the man most responsible for Bush’s image, conceded in an interview that “Mission Accomplished” had not been a wise move. Largely because of dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq, Bush eventually sank lower in presidential popularity than all but three postwar presidents. Contra Postman, the triumph of image over substance, of spin over reality, may be farther off than it initially seemed.

ENDNOTES

1. Although our anorexic media (particularly David Letterman) often labeled Clinton as “fat,” in fact, he was among our more telegenic presidents. Indeed, his image handlers probably did not mind the label, because it gave him something in common with millions of Americans, much the same way Bush’s fractured diction does. Clinton got the best of both worlds—he did not look fat on television, which would have been disastrous, but got to be seen sympathetically by obese Americans regardless.

2. Obviously, we are not considering the two female candidates, and we are also not getting picky about those two candidates with thinning hair problems.

3. And as seen by the rumors of plastic surgery swirling around John Kerry, even this reality is subject to alteration.


5. See, for example, the letter by former White House staffer John DiIulio, which makes clear Bush’s common touch, as well as Paul O’Neil’s account as told in Ron Suskind, The Price of Loyalty (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

6. The White House denies that it knew the decorative turkey would be there, or that Bush picking it up for the cameras was planned. Mike Allen, “The Bird Was Perfect but Not for Dinner: In Iraq Picture, Bush Is Holding the Centerpiece,” Washington Post, December 4, 2003, p. A33.
7. The Bush administration may also be controlling the image of the president at war in a subtle way, by enforcing with new vigor a policy denying media access to the arrival of military casualties from Iraq and Afghanistan at Dover Air Base. These images of coffins draped in flags had been emblematic of the costs of previous military conflicts.


9. It has even been compared to Michael Dukakis’s head bobbling over the top of an M-1 tank, the previous nadir of self-inflicted image wounds.

REFERENCES

Welch, Reed L., 2003. Presidential Success in Communicating with the Public through Televised Addresses,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33 (2).
We do not think of presidents as passively accepting the current state of public opinion. Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed, “People used to say of me that I . . . divined what the people were going to think. I did not ‘divine’ . . . I simply made up my mind what they ought to think, and then did my best to get them to think it.”

On the other hand, when asked about his “biggest disappointment as president,” George H. W. Bush replied, “I just wasn’t a good enough communicator.” In a discussion of his problems in governing, President Clinton declared that he needed to do a better job of communicating. “[I]t’s always frustrating to feel that you’re misunderstood . . . and you can’t quite get through.”

What is happening here? Leading the public is perhaps the ultimate resource of the political leader. It is difficult for others who hold power to deny the legitimate demands of a president with popular support. Theodore Roosevelt declared the White House to be a “bully pulpit,” yet contemporary presidents typically find the public unresponsive to many issues at the top of the White House agenda and unreceptive to requests to think about, much less act on, political matters.

How should we evaluate the presidential pulpit as a tool for achieving passage of the president’s programs in Congress? Should we accept the assumption of many journalists and scholars that the White House can persuade and even mobilize the public if the president simply is skilled enough at using the “bully pulpit”? Or have these commentators mistakenly attributed failures of presidential leadership to presidents’ rhetorical deficiencies while ignoring broader forces in American society that may influence the leadership of public opinion? More broadly, are we looking in the right direction as we seek solutions to the problems of governing?

In another work, I outlined two contrasting views of presidential leadership. First, the president is the director of change, establishing goals and leading others where they otherwise would not go. The second perspective is less heroic. In this view, the president primarily is a facilitator of change, reflecting, and perhaps intensifying, widely held views and exploiting opportunities to help others go where they want to go anyway.

The director creates a constituency to follow his lead, whereas the facilitator endows his constituency’s views with shape and purpose by interpreting and translating them into legislation. The director restructures the contours of the political landscape and paves the way for change, whereas the facilitator exploits opportunities presented by a favorable configuration of political forces.

Source: Original essay written for this volume.
This essay explores the potential of the presidential pulpit for leading the public—and thus increasing the chances of the president’s policies passing in Congress. We will try to determine whether the presidential pulpit allows the president to be a director rather than a facilitator of change.

**A TALE OF TWO PRESIDENTS**

To obtain a better grasp of the challenges that presidents face in using the presidential pulpit to lead the public, let us examine the experiences of two recent presidents, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, in attempting to lead the public.

**Ronald Reagan**

Ronald Reagan often was called “the Great Communicator.” Was he able to move the public to support his policies if it were not already inclined to do so? Like presidents before him, Reagan was a facilitator rather than a director of change. The basic themes that Reagan espoused in 1980 were ones he had been articulating for many years: Government was too big; the nation’s defenses were too weak, leaving it vulnerable to intimidation by the Soviet Union; pride in country was an end in itself, and public morals had slipped too far. In 1976, conditions were not yet ripe for his message. It took the Carter years—with their gasoline lines, raging inflation, high interest rates, Soviet aggression in Afghanistan, and hostages in Iran—to create the opportunity for victory. By 1980, the country was ready to listen.

But not for long. In his memoirs, Reagan reflected on his efforts to ignite concern among the American people regarding the threat of communism in Central America and mobilize them behind his program of support for the Contras (rebels fighting the leftist government in Nicaragua):

> For eight years the press called me the “Great Communicator.” Well, one of my greatest frustrations during those eight years was my inability to communicate to the American people and to Congress the seriousness of the threat we faced in Central America.\(^5\)

> Time and again, I would speak on television, to a joint session of Congress, or to other audiences about the problems in Central America, and I would hope that the outcome would be an outpouring of support from Americans who would apply the same kind of heat on Congress that helped pass the economic recovery package.

> But the polls usually found that large numbers of Americans cared little or not at all about what happened in Central America—in fact, a surprisingly large proportion didn’t even know where Nicaragua and El Salvador were located—and, among those who did care, too few cared enough about a Communist penetration of the Americas to apply the kind of pressure I needed on Congress.\(^6\)

Reagan was frustrated not only in his goal of obtaining public support for aid to the Contras in Nicaragua;\(^7\) his leadership problem was broader than
this. On other national security issues, including military spending, arms control, military aid and arms sales, and cooperation with the Soviet Union, public opinion by the early 1980s had turned to the left—ahead of Reagan.8

Numerous national surveys of public opinion have found that support for regulatory programs and spending on health care, welfare, urban problems, education, environmental protection, and aid to minorities increased—contrary to the president’s views—during Reagan’s tenure.9 On the other hand, support for increased defense expenditures was decidedly lower at the end of his administration than when he took office.10 (This may have resulted from the military buildup that did occur, but the point remains that Reagan wanted to continue to increase defense spending, and the public was unresponsive to his wishes.)

Americans did not follow the president and move their general ideological preferences to the right.11 Indeed, rather than conservative support swelling once Reagan was in the White House, there was a movement away from conservative views almost as soon as he took office.12 According to Mayer, “Whatever Ronald Reagan’s skills as a communicator, one ability he clearly did not possess was the capacity to induce lasting changes in American policy preferences.”13

Thus, Ronald Reagan was less a public relations phenomenon than conventional wisdom indicates. He had the good fortune to take office on the crest of a compatible wave of public opinion, and he effectively exploited the opportunity that voters had handed him. When it came time to change public opinion or to mobilize it on his behalf, however, he typically met with failure. As his press secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, put it, “Reagan would go out on the stump, draw huge throngs, and convert no one at all.”14

Bill Clinton

Ronald Reagan’s difficulties in changing public opinion stretched over an eight-year period. Even in the short run, however, presidents face just as great a challenge. An examination of President Clinton’s efforts to lead the public demonstrates this fact.

When the president’s first major economic proposal, the fiscal stimulus plan, was introduced, it ran into strong Republican opposition. During the April 1993 congressional recess, Clinton stepped up his rhetoric on the bill; he counted on a groundswell of public opinion to pressure moderate Republicans into ending the filibuster on it. (Republicans, meanwhile, kept up a steady flow of sound bites linking the president’s package with wasteful spending and Clinton’s proposed tax increase.) The groundswell never materialized, and the Republicans found little support for any new spending in their home states. Instead, they found their constituents railing against new taxes and spending. The bill never came to a vote in the Senate.15

The president’s next major legislative battle was over the budget. On August 3, 1993, he spoke on national television on behalf of his budget proposal, and Senate Republican leader Robert Dole spoke against the plan. A CNN overnight poll following the president’s speech found that support for his budget plan dropped.16 Several million calls were made to Congress in response to both Clinton and Dole, and the callers overwhelmingly opposed the president’s plan.17
When the crucial rule regarding debate on the 1994 crime bill was voted down in the House, the president immediately went public. Speaking to police officers with flags in the background, he blamed special interests (the National Rifle Association) and Republicans for a “procedural trick,” but his appeal did not catch fire. Meanwhile, Republicans were talking about pork-barrel spending and tapping public resentment. Clinton’s public push yielded the votes of only three members of the Congressional Black Caucus, so he had to go to moderate Republicans and cut private deals.

Most painful of all to President Clinton was his inability, despite substantial efforts, to sustain the support of the public for health care reform. Nevertheless, the White House held out against compromise with the Republicans and conservative Democrats, hoping for a groundswell of public support for reform. Again, it never came. Indeed, by mid-August 1994, only 39 percent of the public favored the Democratic health care reform proposals, while 48 percent opposed them.

**AN UNUSUAL SUCCESS**

Presidents are not always frustrated in their efforts to obtain public support. In rare instances, the White House is able to move the public to communicate support for a president’s policies directly to Congress. Mobilizing the public can be a powerful weapon to influence Congress. When the people speak, and especially when they speak clearly, Congress listens attentively.

Perhaps the most notable recent example of a president mobilizing public opinion to pressure Congress is Ronald Reagan’s effort to obtain passage of his bill to cut taxes in 1981. Shortly before the crucial vote in the House, the president made a televised plea for support of his tax cut proposals, and he asked the public to let their representatives in Congress know how they felt. Evidently this worked, because thousands of phone calls, letters, and telegrams poured into congressional offices. How much of this represented the efforts of the White House and its corporate allies rather than individual expressions of opinion probably never will be known. Even so, on the morning of the vote, House Speaker Thomas P. (“Tip”) O’Neill (D-Mass.) declared, “We are experiencing a telephone blitz like this nation has never seen. It’s had a devastating effect.” With this kind of response, the president easily carried the day.

Of course, the White House is not content to rely solely on presidential appeals for a show of support. It may take additional steps to orchestrate public pressure on Congress. For example, Samuel Kernell described the auxiliary efforts at mobilization of Reagan’s White House in 1981:

Each major television appeal by President Reagan on the eve of a critical budget vote in Congress was preceded by weeks of preparatory work. Polls were taken; speeches incorporating the resulting insights were drafted; the press was briefed, either directly or via leaks. Meanwhile in the field, the ultimate recipients of the president’s message, members of Congress, were softened up by presidential travel into their states and districts and by grass-root lobbying.
Section 4 The Public Presidency: Press, Media, and Public Approval

campaigns, initiated and orchestrated by the White House but including RNC and sympathetic business organizations.21

Reagan’s White House tapped a broad network of constituency groups. Operating through party channels, its Political Affairs Office, and its Office of Public Liaison, the administration generated pressure from the constituents of congressional members, campaign contributors, political activists, business leaders, state officials, interest groups, and party officials. Television advertisements, letters, and attention from the local news media helped to focus attention on swing votes. Although these pressures were directed toward Republicans, Southern Democrats received considerable attention as well, which reinforced their sense of electoral vulnerability.

The administration’s effort at mobilizing the public on behalf of the tax cut of 1981 is significant not only because of the success of the presidential leadership but also because it appears to be a deviant case—even for Ronald Reagan. His next major legislative battle was over the sale of AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia. The White House decided that it could not mobilize the public on this issue, however, and adopted an “inside” strategy to prevent a legislative veto.22

During the remainder of his tenure, President Reagan went repeatedly to the people regarding a wide range of policies, including the budget, aid to the Contras in Nicaragua, and defense expenditures. Despite his high approval levels for much of the time, he never again was able to arouse many in his audience to communicate their support of his policies to Congress. Most issues hold less appeal to the public than do substantial tax cuts.

**WHY THE PUBLIC IS DIFFICULT TO LEAD**

Why did two outstanding American politicians such as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton have so much trouble influencing the public to support their policies? There are many answers, but to understand presidential leadership, we must first understand the nature of the president’s potential followers.

**Gaining the Public’s Attention**

To influence the public directly, the president must first obtain its attention. This usually poses a substantial challenge. On April 18, 1995, President Clinton gave his fourth prime-time news conference. Only CBS covered it live, while ABC and NBC showed reruns of the popular sit-com shows. We should not be surprised that only a small portion of the public saw the president.

Obtaining an audience is difficult, even when television coverage is greater. On August 3, 1993, President Clinton made a nationally televised address on the budget. Only 35 percent of the public saw even “some” of the speech.23 A month later, he gave a major address on the defining issue of his administration: health care. Forty-three percent of the public saw little or none of the speech.24 In general, the size of the audience for televised presidential speeches has declined over time.
Even if presidents gain the public’s attention, they must hold onto it if they expect to change opinion and get Congress to respond accordingly. Keeping the public focused is very difficult, however. Focus requires limiting attention to a few priority items, and success in this endeavor will be determined to a large extent by the degree to which issues, including international crises, impose themselves on the president’s schedule and divert attention from his priority agenda.

In the summer of 1994, as the White House entered the final negotiations over its high-priority bills on crime and health care reform, it had to deal first with the Whitewater hearings and then a huge influx of Cuban refugees. When the White House tried to put off focusing on welfare so as not to undermine its massive health care reform proposal, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), then chairman of the Senate Finance Committee that had to handle much of health care reform, threatened to hold health care hostage until the White House devoted at least some attention to welfare reform.25

Often, the White House can do little in such situations. As Clinton advisor George Stephanopoulos put it,

On the campaign trail, you can just change the subject. But you can’t just change the subject as President. You can’t wish Bosnia away. You can’t wish David Koresh away. You can’t just ignore them and change the subject.26

The Public’s Receptivity

No matter how effective presidents may be as speakers, or how well their speeches are written, they still must contend with the receptivity of the audience. Unfortunately for the White House, Americans rarely are attentive listeners and most are not very interested in politics.

Television is a medium in which visual interest, action, and conflict are most effective, and presidential speeches are unlikely to have these characteristics. Although some addresses to the nation occur at moments of high drama, such as President Johnson’s televised demands for a voting rights act before a joint session of Congress in 1965, this is not typical. Style sometimes can give way to substance because of circumstances, but it usually is an uphill battle.

The relative importance that the typical person attaches to a president’s address is illustrated by the attention that presidential staffs give to setting a date for the president’s annual State of the Union message. They must be careful to avoid pre-empting prime time on the night that offers the current season’s most popular shows while at the same time trying to maximize their national viewing audience.

The public’s lack of interest in political matters can be very frustrating for the White House. It is difficult to get a message through; the public may misperceive or ignore even the most basic facts regarding a presidential policy. As late as 1986, 62 percent of Americans did not know which side the United States supported in Nicaragua despite extensive, sustained coverage of the president’s policy and the congressional debate by virtually all news media.27

Similarly, in June 1986, only 40 percent of the public had heard or read at
least something about Reagan’s highest domestic priority, the tax reform bill before the Senate.28

Americans are difficult to persuade and mobilize, not only because of their apathy but also because of their predispositions. Most people usually hold views and values that are anchored in like-minded social groups of family, friends, and fellow workers. Both their cognitive needs for consistency and their uniform (and protective) environments pose formidable challenges for political leaders to overcome. In the absence of a national crisis—which fortunately is a rare occurrence—most people are not open to political appeals.29

Instead, citizens have psychological defenses that screen the president’s message and reinforce their predispositions. A study of persons watching Ronald Reagan speak on television found that those who were previously supportive of him had a positive response to his presentation, whereas those who were previously disapproving became irritated.30

Finally, although Americans are attracted to strong leaders, they do not seem to feel a corresponding obligation to follow their leadership. Cultural predispositions continue to bedevil presidential leadership.

Presentation

One factor that may affect the ability of presidents to obtain public support is the quality of their presentations to the people. Not all presidents are effective speakers, and not all look good under the glare of hot lights and the unflattering gaze of television cameras. All presidents since Truman have had advice from experts on lighting, make-up, stage settings, camera angles, clothing, pacing of delivery, and other facets of making speeches. Despite this aid, and despite the experience that politicians inevitably have in speaking, presidential speeches aimed at directly leading public opinion typically have not been very impressive. Only Kennedy, Reagan, and Clinton have mastered the art of speaking to the camera.

Presidents not only must contend with the medium but also must concern themselves with their messages. The most effective speeches seem to be those whose goals are general support and image building rather than specific support. They focus on simple themes rather than complex details. Calvin Coolidge successfully used this method in his radio speeches, as did Franklin Roosevelt in his famous “fireside chats.” The limitation of such an approach, of course, is that general support cannot always be translated into public backing for specific policies.

Speeches also seem to be more successful when the political climate surrounding the policy topic at hand serves to reinforce the image of the president as a national leader and problem-solver. When the situation presents the president as inept or controversial, the image is not matched and the results are not favorable for the president.31 Most legislative matters on which the president seeks public support fall into the “controversial” category.

Presidents may be hindered by their inability to project clear visions of public policy. The need for simplicity in public messages places a premium on
coherence and consistency, both in the presentation of the administration’s goals and the means for meeting them. Presidents often find this demand on their rhetoric difficult to satisfy, however. With the exception of Ronald Reagan, most recent presidents have been criticized for lacking a unifying theme and cohesion in their programs and for failing to inspire the public with a sense of purpose. Democratic presidents typically have large, diverse agendas, while Republicans such as Nixon and Bush I may combine a complex blend of traditional values and moderate policy stances, thus making it difficult to establish central organizing themes for their administrations.

CONCLUSIONS

A belief in the importance of obtaining public support for legislation is not surprising for presidents who have attained their office through lengthy campaigns and virtually constant communications, and for White House political advisers who have employed communications techniques adeptly during the preceding presidential campaign. There are important differences between campaigning and governing, however, and presidents must adjust if they are to succeed.

The transition between campaigning and governing rarely is smooth. As Charles O. Jones put it, “After heading a temporary, highly convergent, and concentrated organization” in a presidential campaign, the winner moves into the White House and becomes the “central figure in a permanent, divergent, and dispersed structure.” Communication becomes more difficult as the president loses control of his agenda and has to convince people not that he is superior to his opponent(s)—a relatively simple comparative judgment—but that his calls for specific policies deserve support.

Public support is not a dependable resource for the president, nor one that he can easily create when needed to influence Congress. Most of the time, the White House can do no more than move a small portion of the public from opposition or neutrality to support, or from passive agreement to active support. Even a seemingly modest shift in public opinion, however, can be very useful to the president. For example, a change of 6 percentage points could transform a split in public opinion to a presidential advantage of 56 percent to 44 percent. Presidential leadership operates at the margins of the basic configurations of American politics, but these margins can be vital to a president’s success.

There also are some occasions in which the president may wish to keep a low public profile. To attract fence sitters in Congress on issues of relatively low visibility, the White House may choose to “stay private.” By doing so, the president may be able to avoid arousing opposition to some of his proposals. He also may avoid the appearance of defeat if he loses. Finally, staying private eases the path of reaching agreement with Congress, because to eschew public posturing provides maneuvering room for concessions and avoids the appearance of inconsistency when compromises are made.
In the end, the cards seem to be stacked against a president who tries to influence public opinion. John Kennedy once sardonically suggested an exchange from *King Henry IV, Part 1*, as an epigraph for a famous work on the presidency:

*Glendower*: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.  
*Hotspur*: Why, so can I, or so can any man. But will they come when you do call for them?\(^3^4\)

### ENDNOTES