Mandates, Honeymoons, and the Obama Administration

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Abstract

This paper considers whether President Obama won a mandate during the 2008 election, and whether he is experiencing the expected honeymoon with the press, public, and Congress in 2009. It finds that the electorate did instruct him to “fix” the economy, but that given his relatively narrow victory and the electorate’s indecisive rejection of conservative principles, the limited mandate he won is not necessarily going to help him govern. This paper also argues that he is experiencing a normal first-year honeymoon with the press and public, while his partisan advantage in Congress overwhelms any Republican reluctance to be deferential to him. Between the limited mandate, high public approval ratings, and large partisan majorities in Congress, prospects for his first year in office look fairly good.

KEYWORDS: presidency, honeymoon, mandate, Obama

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When a new president comes into office, the punditocracy often asks itself two questions about the just-completed election and the new administration. The first is: did he win a mandate in the election? And the second is: what will his honeymoon look like? The short answer to both questions today is that in 2008 Barack Obama won a very limited mandate, and an even more limited congressional honeymoon. But even so, his prospects for success, especially legislative success, still look remarkably good.

**The Mandate**

In the immediate aftermath of the election of 2008, many in the press spoke or wrote about “Obama’s mandate.” However, few people in the spring of 2009 still talk about the election as having conferred any particular mandate-like advantage on the new president. So did he really win an electoral mandate? If so, to do what? And does he still have one?

What is a mandate? A mandate is an ephemeral claim that elected officials sometimes make, and that even their opponents sometimes accept, that the public through their votes has granted a newly elected official an added measure of legitimate authority to fulfill the promises made during an election campaign.

Beyond that general definition, though, there are several ways political scientists might approach the concept. A political scientist with a background in political behavior would view the whole idea of an electoral mandate with great skepticism. He or she could point to research showing that voters cast a vote for a great many reasons not limited to “the issues,” including socialized partisanship, group affinity, candidate personality, and even the desire to join a bandwagon. Most research on voting behavior indicates that relatively few voters are motivated primarily by policy or ideology. In addition, say the skeptics, candidates have incentives to avoid ideological and policy controversy during campaigns, so there is unlikely to be much information available to them. And in fact, studies show that relatively few voters are aware of the policy positions taken by candidates (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997). Finally, skeptics say, a mandate implies that a great mass of voters has spoken clearly, implying a relatively big electoral victory, whereas most elections are not landslides.

For an election to look like a “mandate” to a behaviorist, then, it would have to look like the presidential election of 1964, in which Republican Barry Goldwater ran an unabashedly conservative campaign, famously commenting that “extremism in defense of liberty is no vice, moderation in pursuit of justice is no

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1 A Lexis Nexis search for the terms “Obama” and “Mandate” between the election and the inauguration yields 1,446 U.S. newspaper stories including both terms.

2 For a summary of this argument, see Nelson W. Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky with David A. Hopkins, *Presidential Elections* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).
virtue,” while Lyndon Johnson ran promising to build a great society. Johnson won in a massive popular and electoral landslide, while significantly increasing the number of Democrats in Congress. His election was widely interpreted as a policy mandate, and combined with his huge partisan margins in Congress, he had a remarkably successful first year in office. Within months of the inauguration, he had won significant legislative victories, including passage of the Voting Rights Act and the creation of Medicare.

Was Obama’s victory in 2008 similar to Johnson’s victory in 1964? Not even close. Johnson beat Goldwater by 23% in the popular vote. Obama beat McCain by 6.7%. Johnson won 486 electoral votes. Obama won 365. Rather than a landslide, Obama’s 2008 victory is best characterized as “about average.” Since 1860, when the current two parties emerged, winning presidents have received, on average, 55% (s.d. 4.4) of the two-party popular vote. Obama won 52.6%. Since 1964, when the Electoral College total was set at 538, winners received, on average, 392 Electoral College votes (with a standard deviation of 85). Again, Obama’s total (365) is below average, though not by a significant margin.

Figure 1: Difference between winner and loser’s percentage of two-party vote
The other requirement for a mandate election, according to the behaviorists, is that the electorate speaks with a clear voice about public policy. There is some evidence that 2008 was one of those rare elections where the electorate conveyed a substantive message, though the vagueness of the message expressed by the electorate may already be causing problems for the new administration. There is no question that one issue predominated in voters’ minds when they cast their ballots on Election Day. Sixty-three percent of voters who responded to exit polls said that the economy was the most important issue confronting the new president, dwarfing such other important issues as the Iraq War (10%), Terrorism (9%), Health Care (9%) and Energy Policy (7%). Among those saying the Economy was the most important issue, Obama won handily (53%-44%).

The debate over economic issues took on a decidedly ideological tone in the later stages of the campaign, and the voters seemed narrowly to accept the left-of-center economic positions offered by the Obama campaign. Just a few days before the election, Rudy Giuliani, McCain surrogate and former New York City mayor, said, “They are going to raise your taxes. And they are going to raise government spending. And that will be bad for the economy we are now facing.”

McCain himself called Obama “more liberal than a senator who used to call

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himself a socialist. In his controversial response to “Joe the Plumber,” Obama said, “My attitude is that if the economy’s good for folks from the bottom up, it’s gonna be good for everybody….I think when you spread the wealth around, it’s good for everybody.” This argument managed to convince 22% of exit poll respondents that their taxes would go up only if Obama won, and another 49% that their taxes would go up whoever won the election. McCain won a majority of those voters who thought their taxes would go up under either new administration.

At the same time, Obama won handily (76%-33%) among the narrow majority (51%) of exit poll respondents who said that the government, generally, was “not doing enough.” More importantly, a huge 81% of the electorate left the voting booth “worried that the economic crisis would hurt their family.” Those worried Americans voted for Obama over McCain 58% to 40%.

So what message did voters convey? First, the voters said that the economy should be the number one job for the new president. Voters were (and remain) worried about their own lives, and want the president to bring them some economic security. They didn’t necessarily want their own taxes to go up, but neither did the majority believe that government intervention, itself, is a bad thing. Combined with the narrowness of Obama’s electoral victory, this mixed message probably contributed to the partisan divide over the economic stimulus plan in early 2009.

Given the limited size of his victory and the mixed message sent by the electorate, strict behaviorists would probably not characterize this as a “mandate.” However, there are other arguments about mandates. Patricia Conley argues that regardless of what objective conditions might create a mandate, presidents do claim to have won mandates under relatively predictable conditions, and those claims are sometimes accepted by other political elites (Conley 2001). Specifically, Conley argues that presidents make, and the political class acknowledges, a mandate claim when members of the political class are somewhat surprised by the election outcome, and when they have some reason to believe that the president can motivate voters to support his policies. She argues that politicians of both parties look to elections for information, and anything that is out of line with their predictions is likely to be over-interpreted.

Political observers also look to election returns for information about whether the new president will be able to translate his electoral win into continuing support for him and his policies. Both the size of his victory and whether the voters gave him a friendly Congress to work with can lead the political class to conclude that the president’s electoral popularity might be a

4 Ibid.
continuing asset to him. To the 1964 election, she would add recent elections like Reagan’s win in 1980 and Clinton’s victory in 1992 as mandate elections of this type.

So does Obama’s 2008 victory meet Conley’s mandate conditions? First, was the result surprising? On the one hand, the Obama victory was fairly predictable from a political scientist’s point of view. When a president has near record-low job approval ratings, and his party is looking for a third term in a bad economy (which only gets worse as the election season wears on), the opposition party would generally be heavily favored. Indeed, of ten presidential forecasting models published in the October edition of the journal *PS: Political Science and Politics*, seven predicted an Obama victory (see Abramowitz 2008; Cambpell 2008, Cuzan and Bundrick 2008; Erikson and Wlezien 2008; Holbrook 2008; Klarner 2008; Lewis-Beck and Tien 2008; Lockerbie 2008; and Norpoth 2008).

Still, there were some surprises in the details on election night. First, Obama improved over John Kerry in nearly every demographic group (women, men, whites, blacks, Hispanics, Protestants, Catholics, those who attend church once a week, residents of big cities, small cities, suburbs, and rural areas). Particularly surprising might be his improvement over Kerry’s performance among whites, given his status as the first African-American major-party nominee. He also won Electoral College votes in states that might have surprised some. Obama won the great white whales of recent Democratic politics (Florida and Ohio) and the mountain West (Colorado and Nevada), though some might remember that Bill Clinton had won there in the 1990s. Obama also won some recent Republican strongholds (Virginia, North Carolina, and Indiana), though demographic trends in Virginia and North Carolina would seem to have favored the Democrat.

So while very close observers of presidential politics might have been able to predict the outcome accurately, other members of the professional chattering classes might have found enough surprises in this election victory to fuel stories about 2008 as a “decisive” victory, or even a “mandate” election. In keeping with Conley’s theory, many press references to the mandate won in the election refer to precisely these types of “surprises.”

A stronger claim for an Obama mandate comes with Conley’s second criteria. She argues that presidents are able to make successful mandate claims when they win in ways that convince commentators and potential adversaries that their win carries the possibility of continuing popular support for the president. In line with that criterion, perhaps the biggest political story of 2008 was the way in which Obama and his campaign successfully mobilized millions of Americans to not only vote for him, but to volunteer and give money. Indeed, that story carried

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right through to the inauguration, when 1.8 million people crowded the Mall in freezing weather to hear him take the oath of office. Obama was thus able to build a personal following virtually unrivaled in modern politics, and even skeptics would have to believe that he has a deep well of goodwill with these people, and with many others who voted for him. Combined with his potentially ongoing email contact with these enthusiasts, the result would seem to be powerful political assets for a president, especially one who decides to go public as a legislative strategy.

The election of 2008 also meets Conley’s other criterion for the communication of political staying power: Obama had coattails. Not since Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980 has a new president entered office with more than 20 new House members of his own party. While this continues a Democratic (or perhaps anti-Bush or anti-Republican) trend that began in 2006, enthusiastic voter turnout on the Democratic side, led by the Obama campaign organization, certainly played a role in some of those victories.

Figure 3: Does the president’s party gain seats in the House?

The coattail effect is even more clearly seen on the Senate side. Democrats picked up eight seats, more Senate seats than any presidential party since 1980 and a number exceeded only one other time in the post-war era. Moreover, Obama’s popularity, turnout operation, and campaign coffers probably directly affected the outcome of at least four of those races. Obama ran ahead of Udall in

http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol7/iss1/art4
Colorado, Shaheen in New Hampshire, and Merkley in Oregon. He ran slightly behind Kay Hagan in North Carolina, but few would argue that North Carolina would have been in play if it had not been for the pro-Obama tide in that state. And given the closeness of the race in Minnesota, pro-Obama enthusiasm might have made the marginal difference there, as well.

So, on the question of mandates, we have an average electoral victory in an issue-centered but ideologically divided electorate, some small election night surprises, and some very sizeable congressional coattails. Objectively, Obama’s claim to a mandate is a modest one, at best. The voters probably conferred on him a directive to “fix” the economy, but did not communicate a clear message about how to do so. He was able to win a congressional environment, however, that is highly favorable to him.

Honeymoons

Let us turn now to the second topic that is always raised about a new presidency: the presidential honeymoon. The notion that the president receives a honeymoon implies two related ideas. The first is that the new president can expect a free ride, or at least special treatment, from various actors (Congress, the press, the public)
during his first few months or year in office. The second is that this time is the best in his administration, and as such, he should do everything he can to take advantage of it because he will never again have it so good. Political science has shown there to be both some truth and some myth to the honeymoon concept, so before we consider Obama’s, let us separate fact from fiction.

First, the honeymoon should be expected to be a slightly different phenomenon depending on which set of actors is considered. Beginning with the press, it has been shown to be the case that presidents do receive, on average, less negative press coverage during the early parts of their administration (Grossman and Kumar 1981, 259-265; 275-279). This honeymoon with the press, though, does not exist because reporters or editors give the president a break. Rather, it is because the press’ imperative is to write about the news, and there is simply more news to report when an administration takes office. There are new people to profile (staff, cabinet secretaries, presidential families, adorable children, prospective puppies, etc). There are also new executive orders and new legislative proposals, the details of each of which are potentially newsworthy.

Even speeches and appearances by the president himself, which remain newsworthy long into an administration, can be expected to receive extra attention early on, as supporters and opponents alike are curious about how the new president will conduct himself. So if a president avoids obvious mistakes and rolls out news skillfully, the press, on balance, should have more neutral to good things to say about him early on in his presidency than they will later, when the inherent newsworthiness of the new administration has worn off. In addition, of course, the press will cover opposition to the president, and to the degree that the opposition leaders are nicer than usual to the new president, that will affect press coverage as well.

Second, it is true that a president’s approval ratings are generally high at the beginning of his administration. However, though they are high on average, they are rarely the highest point of an administration, and they can be inconsistent. What is really going on, as noted by Richard Brody, is that presidential approval ratings are bolstered early on by people who have not made up their minds yet, and who say they have no opinion at all about the new administration (Brody 1991, 28-44). Only die-hard partisans should be expected to disapprove of an administration after only a few weeks on the job, unless the president has been unusually incompetent and the press has reported him as such.

Third, there is the question of whether members of Congress will be more likely to vote for his initiatives, or bills he supports, more often in his first few months in office than they do later in his term. On average, Congress has tended

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8 Research by Cook and Ragsdale (2000) and by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2002) indicates that the press’ honeymoon with the president may have diminished over time, but the effect noted by Grossman and Kumar is likely to persist in some form.
to be more supportive of a president in his first few months (up to the first full year) in office (Dominguez 2005; Lockerbie, Borrelli, and Hedger 1998). Yet this effect seems to be driven by the president’s partisan opponents (Dominguez 2005). For presidents who face divided government, congressional success scores9 tend to be significantly higher in the first few months in office, whereas for presidents who face unified government, this effect is less pronounced, as the majority in Congress tends to support their own president throughout his term. As such, we would not expect Obama, who faces unified government, to benefit from much of a congressional honeymoon. Yet we might expect that partisan opponents would be deferential to him early in his term—or at least more deferential than they will be later on.

So, given all of this, how much of a honeymoon should we have expected to see in 2009? Early indications looked quite rosy. The Obama team chose its senior staff and cabinet heads earlier than any other president in recent memory, and seemed to have cleared their cabinet choices with most of the relevant U.S. Senators before announcing them. As a result, it seemed as if controversy would be avoided, and the honeymoon with the press would be a long-lasting and robust one. But the controversies over the failure of several nominees to pay back taxes did generate some negative press coverage for the administration, as did the subsequent Republican unwillingness to go along with the stimulus package. Without doing a complete content analysis of the early coverage of the Obama administration, the press seems to have responded in predictable ways: covering the newness of the administration in favorable feature stories, as well as covering any controversies that arise with real criticism.

Public opinion has also followed a typical honeymoon pattern. One month into his administration, his approval ratings remain high, with 62% approving of his job performance, relatively unchanged from the 65% approval he received on his first day in office. At the end of his first month in office, (2/20/2009) Gallup daily tracking polls show an above-average number of respondents (13%) still offering no opinion of his job performance. (For comparison, only 5% of respondents, on average, offered no opinion of George W. Bush’s job performance during the four years of his first term.) At the same time, over Obama’s first month in office, the percentage of respondents who disapproved of his job performance has increased from 12% to 25%, probably mostly due to committed Republicans finding actions of which to disapprove and responding to criticism of the president from prominent Republicans (Brody 1991; Zaller 1992).

Finally comes the honeymoon with Congress. Congressional Republicans have not offered any unusual (really, any) support to the new president. But like other presidents who face unified government, Obama has already achieved one

9 Congressional success scores are measures of how often the Congress votes in line with the president’s stated position on a bill.
major legislative victory and is likely to score many others, simply due to his own party’s predominance. The minority party’s refusal to “be nice” to the new president may not have been the historical norm, but it is not confined to the Obama administration. Republicans, also in the minority when Bill Clinton came into office in 1993, offered a similarly sour welcome. In 2001, with Republican control of the House but a very narrowly divided Senate, George W. Bush scored most of his major legislative victories after the events of 2001 and the consequent increase in his approval ratings and in a decline in partisanship in Washington.

In the end, then, Obama’s honeymoon with the press and public seems fairly typical, and the lack of a honeymoon with the congressional minority seems unlikely to pose significant obstacles in his first year.

**Prospects for the Future**

Several aspects of the political environment are highly favorable to President Obama. Certainly, world events, the health of the economy, and his own skill will affect his eventual successes and failures. But the circumstances of his election and his unusual status as a former United States Senator give him important potential advantages.

First, his party’s margins of control in both the House and Senate are important assets. Democrats control the House 255-178, a healthy margin of 77 votes. Some number of these are conservative Democrats, particularly some that were elected in 2006 and 2008. However, because the Obama campaign tide may have lifted some of those new members into office in 2008, and because many members first elected in 2006 may owe some of their victories to then-chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (and now White House Chief of Staff) Rahm Emanuel, the Obama administration is in a good position to negotiate with these House members. Of course, the hierarchical organization of the House, including centralized power in the Speaker’s office, makes the voices of these rank and file members less important to controlling the agenda and legislative output. Effectively, Obama and Emanuel need only deal with Speaker Nancy Pelosi, probably more successfully if they keep in mind her own political position relative to her caucus.

In the Senate, when Minnesota Democrat Al Franken eventually gets seated, the president will benefit from a 59-vote majority. As such, the president will need at least one Republican vote to close debate. This puts a great deal of power into the hands of that pivotal actor (Krehbiel 1998) but probably means that the filibuster will not be a big obstacle if the Obama administration pays careful attention to the right Senators.

First, they will need to negotiate with the marginal members of the Democratic Party in the Senate. There are at least seven Democrats who have
displayed a tendency to defect. These voted with their party less than 85% of the
time during 2007: Ben Nelson (NE), Mary Landrieu (LA), Evan Bayh (IN), Mark
Pryor (AR), Max Baucus (MT), Jon Tester (MT), and Joe Lieberman (CT). Four
of these, though, (Baucus, Landrieu, Nelson, and Tester) supported Obama over
his rivals for the Democratic nomination, acts which are perhaps indicative of
their support for his approach to governing. Obama also won Lieberman’s home
state of Connecticut and Bayh’s Indiana, so his popularity there might put indirect
pressure on those two members. Given that both Obama and, perhaps more
significantly, Vice President Joe Biden, served in the Senate, lines of
communication and negotiation with these members should be expected to be
open, reducing the chances that they will defect from the party on a cloture vote.

If he can hold his own party together in the Senate, President Obama only
needs one vote from the opposition (though he would always prefer to have
more.) On the Republican side, there are at least six Republicans that might be
amenable to joining the administration, though only three of these did so on the
economic stimulus vote in February of 2009. These six voted with their party in
the Senate less than 80% of the time in 2007, and almost all had American
Conservative Union scores less than the average of 80. Obama also won all of
their states, mostly by sizeable margins.

The three Republican Senators who voted with the Democrats on the
economic stimulus package in early 2009, Sens. Olympia Snowe (ME), Susan
Collins (ME), and Arlen Specter (PA), top this list of potential defectors. All three
voted with their party half or less than half the time in 2007 and represent states
that Obama won by double-digit margins in 2008. One, Specter, is up for re-
election in 2010. The others, Richard Lugar (IN), Charles Grassley (IA), and
George Voinovich (OH) also represent states that went to Obama, and have
worked across the aisle in the past. Lugar, in particular, worked with Obama
himself on legislation to secure loose nuclear weapons during Obama’s brief stint
in the Senate. Between Obama and Biden’s personal relationships and the
political realities confronting these Senators, enough bipartisanship should be
present in the Senate to help the administration achieve its goals, especially if it is
willing to negotiate with and make concessions to moderates like these in the
Senate.

We have already seen these dynamics work to Obama’s advantage. With
strong, nearly unified support from his own party and concessions to key Senate
Republicans, he was able to win passage of a massive economic stimulus package
after less than one month in the White House. Economic environment
notwithstanding, this is a major legislative achievement. The bill included almost
$800 billion worth of spending, including increases in areas like basic research,
renewable energy, and education that are priorities of many in the Democratic
Party. Here, he may have been helped along by even the limited mandate he won.
during the election, which communicated both support for him personally and support for doing something to fix the economy.

On a less hopeful note for Obama, the lack of a honeymoon with congressional Republicans, while not determinative of legislative success, helped to drive up Obama’s negative approval ratings quite quickly. Republican discipline in resisting the stimulus bandwagon may be partly due to the fact that his electoral victory was not an overwhelming one, or one in which conservative ideology was soundly or clearly defeated. In essence, the weak mandate may have emboldened the opposition. Republican members of Congress have reason to believe that the public might turn back to them, so that they face reduced incentives to support the new president.

In addition, Obama ignores at his peril the research that shows that the more a president puts on his congressional agenda, the less successful he will be in achieving his goals (Rivers and Rose 1985). Early indications are that he will pursue an ambitious legislative agenda anyway, relying on negotiating skill and partisan support to pass it.

However, with continued high approval ratings and careful attention to moderates in his own party and a willingness to compromise with them and with a handful of Republicans, Obama’s prospects for continued legislative success are unusually good for a new president, even one with an ambitious agenda.

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