The Obama Administration: Setting Up a Government

Understanding the Obama Presidency

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Abstract

This article provides a variety of concepts for understanding the Obama presidency as it proceeds. One can fruitfully comprehend the next four years in terms of Obama’s theory of presidential power, amount of political capital, progress in establishing a political regime, demonstration of political skills and ability to preserve and expand his political authority. The strengths and weaknesses of Obama’s personality – in terms of its levels of extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, openness and conscientiousness – will be evident in time. Together, these concepts will explain much about his presidency.

KEYWORDS: Obama presidency

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The election of Barack Obama to the presidency will undoubtedly offer many “features of interest,” in Sherlock Holmes’ phrase, to observers of our national executive. On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that the presidential office provides much continuity to the new president regardless of his distinctive personal traits. Several concepts developed by presidential scholars in recent decades should help us understand Obama’s presidency as it unfolds. My own recent analysis of the George W. Bush presidency (Schier 2008) gathered some of these, and there is at least reason to hope that they will aid us in understanding his successor as well.

Institutional Resources

The Obama presidency operates within the broad framework of American institutional development. This approach understands the political order as “the formative constructions of politicians in power” (Orren and Skowronek 2004, 92). At any given point in time, the decisions of power holders may still alter the course of institutional behavior and political alignments: “political order is circumstantial, something that officials within government institutions will create or not, sustain or not, depending on their own interests, on the available resources and on the obstacles to change” (2004, 92). As political leaders create political order, then, they produce “constructions of broad consequence” to the political system (2004, 9).

American presidents have great potential to maintain or disrupt the national political order. In these terms, the considerable ambitions motivating the presidency of Barack Obama—mammoth economic stimulus and major departures in environmental, health care, and social policy—aim to create precisely these constructions of extensive consequence. Such big plans are best understood in terms of the power and authority a president seeks to exercise.

Power involves the resources, formal or informal, that a president has in a given period to accomplish his goals. Success with power involves husbanding the resources of the office and deploying them strategically (Skowronek 1997, 18). Powers are both formal and informal. Formal powers are numerous and widely exercised by recent presidents, growing from constitutional authority, federal law, and court interpretation. They include the executive powers of appointment, budget preparation, and issuance of executive orders; legislative powers of the veto, pocket veto, and delivery of the annual State of the Union address; and judicial powers of appointment and pardons. The president’s foreign affairs powers are vast, including duties as chief diplomat, negotiator of treaties and executive agreements, appointment of military and diplomatic officials, and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The modern presidency, originating
under Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s, has grown considerably in budget, staff, and formal powers.

Presidential powers are subject to variable application, and one source of this variance is the theory of executive power that a particular president adopts. Political scientists Raymond Tatalovich and Thomas Engeman identified several approaches to the exercise of presidential power (Tatalovich and Engeman 2003). Early presidents often followed the Jeffersonian conception of the presidency, holding that presidents had no powers beyond those explicitly granted in Article II of the Constitution; no “implied” powers existed (Tatalovich and Engeman 2003, 33). Alexander Hamilton, in contrast, argued that the general grants of power to the president in Article II must include implied powers “Because it is impossible to foresee or define the extent and variety of national exigencies, of the correspondent extent and variety of the means which may be necessary to satisfy them.” (Hamilton, Jay and Madison 1961, 147). At the furthest extreme from Jefferson lay the expansive theory of “prerogative power,” first enunciated by political philosopher John Locke. Locke claimed that in emergencies, the prerogatives of office permit the executive to “act according to discretion for the public good, without prescription of law, and sometimes even against it” (Locke 1965, 422).

The constitutional dangers of such an approach are conspicuous, such that no president has formally adopted it in practice. Twentieth-century presidents frequently followed the “stewardship” theory of the presidency, first enthusiastically espoused and practiced by Theodore Roosevelt: “My belief was that it was not only his right but his duty to do anything that the Needs of the Nation demanded unless such action was forbidden by the Constitution or the laws” (Roosevelt 1925, 357). George W. Bush consistently adopted this “stewardship” theory, producing charges from critics that he had exercised power beyond the Constitution in a Lockean “prerogative” fashion. Obama, rhetorically at least, seeks to constrain some of the expansive powers claimed by Bush. Will he adhere to a “stewardship” theory in practice, as modern presidents generally have, yet still encounter critics who find his actions inappropriately reminiscent of Lockean prerogative? That seems likely.

In additional to formal powers, a president’s informal power is situationally derived and highly variable. Informal power is a function of the “political capital” presidents amass and deplete as they operate in office. Paul Light defines several components of political capital: party support of the president in Congress, public approval of the presidential conduct of his job, the President’s electoral margin and patronage appointments (Light 1983, 15). Richard Neustadt’s concept of a president’s “professional reputation” likewise figures into his political capital. Neustadt defines this as the “impressions in the Washington community about the skill and will with which he puts [his formal
powers] to use” (Neustadt 1990, 185). In the wake of 9/11, George W. Bush’s political capital surged, and both the public and Washington elites granted him a broad ability to prosecute the war on terror. By the later stages of Bush’s troubled second term, beset by a lengthy and unpopular occupation of Iraq and an aggressive Democratic Congress, he found that his political capital had shrunk.

Obama’s informal powers will prove variable, not stable, as is always the case for presidents. Nevertheless, he entered office with a formidable store of political capital. His solid electoral victory means he initially will receive high public support and strong backing from fellow Congressional partisans, a combination that will allow him much leeway in his presidential appointments and with his policy agenda. Obama probably enjoys the prospect of a happier honeymoon during his first year than did George W. Bush, who entered office amidst continuing controversy over the 2000 election outcome.

Presidents usually employ power to disrupt the political order they inherit in order to reshape it according to their own agendas. Stephen Skowronek argues that “presidents disrupt systems, reshape political landscapes, and pass to successors leadership challenges that are different from the ones just faced” (Skowronek 1997, 6). Given their limited time in office and the hostile political alignments often present in Washington policymaking networks and among the electorate, presidents must force political change if they are to enact their agendas. In recent decades, Washington power structures have become more entrenched and elaborate (Drucker 1995) while presidential powers – through increased use of executive orders and legislative delegation (Howell 2003) – have also grown. The presidency has more powers in the early 21st century but also faces more entrenched coalitions of interests, lawmakers, and bureaucrats whose agendas often differ from that of the president. This is an invitation for an energetic president – and that seems to describe Barack Obama – to engage in major ongoing battles to impose his preferences.

The Creation of a Political Regime

At the center of the conflict lies the desire of presidents to create political “regimes” supported by popular approval and constitutional authority (Schier 2004, 3). A regime is a stable authority structure that reworks Washington power arrangements to facilitate its own dominance. Presidential power is intimately tied to presidential authority, defined as the “expectations that surround the exercise of power at a given moment; the perception of what it is appropriate for a given president to do” (Skowronek 1997, 18). Authority, to Skowronek, rests on the “warrants” drawn from the politics of the moment to justify action and secure the legitimacy of changes. The more stable a president's grant of authority, the easier his exercise of power. If a president claims more authority than he actually
possesses, however, he invites challenges from rivals that can reduce his authority and power.

Obama, initially at least, has broad grants of power and authority. Yet as his political capital drops, the authority of his office will surely shrink. That has been the case with all recent presidents, and will occur during Obama’s time in the oval office. As adverse events arrive, as they inevitably will, he will find that his warrant of authority will fade first, long before his direct presidential powers face serious challenge.

Two of the most consequential presidents in American history – Lincoln and FDR – received large grants of authority from the dominant political regimes that they created in national government. A successful political regime can order events according to its own schedule, displacing the ability of permanent Washington to order events through its residues of power. It is a battle between presidential authority and other long-standing power centers in Washington. The ideal authority situation for any president is the entrenched dominance of a political regime in national politics and institutions with which he is affiliated.

Dominant regimes in American history have invariably been partisan regimes. Barack Obama’s announced ambitions suggest that he seeks the establishment of a lasting liberal Democratic regime, just as George W. Bush sought to create a durable conservative GOP regime. This seems a grandiose ambition, and it is undoubtedly a big goal, best understood in terms of the following definition by political scientist Robert C. Lieberman:

Regimes appear at a variety of levels, from formal institution (such as the structure of Congress and the administrative state) to the social bases of politics (such as party alignments and coalitions and patterns of interest representation); from ideas (such as prevailing beliefs about the proper role of government) to informal norms (such as patterns of congressional behavior). Nested within these broadly defined institutional arrangements are commitments to particular policies that become the touchstone for political action and conflict for leaders and would-be leaders over the course of a generation or more. (Lieberman 2000, 275).

By this definition, what might be the components of an Obama regime? Executive-legislative relations would be built upon close consultation with supportive partisan House and Senate majorities, and occasional overtures to GOP lawmakers in pursuit of bipartisan support. We have already seen this during Obama’s initial months in the White House. To compensate for the new president’s administrative inexperience, seasoned Washington hands have received important administration positions, such as Clinton White House aide
and Congressional Democrat Rahm Emanuel, now White House Chief of Staff and Clinton White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta, appointed as CIA director. Obama’s electoral coalition in 2008 depended heavily on the support of four groups: African Americans, Latinos, young voters, and highly educated voters, so maintaining their support will be a regime imperative. Obama gained strong backing in 2008 from trade unions, financial interests, and liberal social and environmental groups, so the cultivation of ongoing relations with them will be a cornerstone of administration strategies.

Obama embraces an expansive and activist role for the national government, one endorsed by most of the groups and voting blocs in his coalition. A major rhetorical imperative of his presidency will be to convince those not in his supportive coalition to embrace that view. The best way to accomplish this is through policy successes by his administration, admittedly much more easily said than done. Obama in his public demeanor demonstrates courtesy and an inclination for reciprocity and accommodation with others, and these informal norms might well come to characterize his regime.

Could such a broad regime initiative prevail? That turns on the magnitude of the impediments Obama encounters with his project. Skowronek argues that Ronald Reagan in the 1980s came the closest of any recent president to construct a lasting regime. To Skowronek, Reagan’s attempts to shape a regime “fell far short of the mark in revitalizing national government around his new priorities and opening a more productive course for development” (1997, 428). This was because of the “institutional thickening” that recent presidents have supposedly confronted, defined as “a pattern of greater institutional resilience in the face of these presidents’ order-shattering authority, of an ever-thicker government that can parry and deflect more of their repudiative thrust” (1997, 413). The permanent Washington of lawmakers, bureaucrats, judges, and interest groups was able to make Reagan’s attempted conservative regime change more rhetorical than real. Further, as a “highly personalized candidate-centered politics” developed in the late twentieth century, the ability to maintain a dominant partisan electoral coalition also waned (Skowronek 2001, 15).

Presidential regime construction becomes impossible only if institutional resistance to presidential initiatives grows as presidential powers do not. A major strategy of the George W. Bush presidency was the expansion of presidential prerogatives regarding confidentiality and executive authority. This approach was one of the pillars of the Bush administration’s efforts at regime construction. This Bush legacy is one Obama, despite his campaign rhetoric, is likely to build upon. Obama’s 2008 change of position to support domestic wiretapping, appointment of a national security team of moderates and conservatives and initial decisions about terrorist detainees indicate that he will likely be inclined to retain many of
Bush’s claims of executive authority and confidentiality in this policy area, at least.

What regime-building limits does Obama face? Cook and Polsky provide a useful classification of the limits confronting such regimes. One type involves the “endogenous limits that stem from the nature of the political agreement that binds participants” (2005, 580). How well does the coalition stick together? Over time, once the central items of consensus are addressed, a fraying coalition is most likely. But Obama’s presidency benefits from relatively few endogenous limits of this sort as he assumes office. Though grumbling from the political left appeared after some of his appointments, the general contours of his policy approach have been greeted with wide support within his party, although less resoundingly by the broader public.

*Exogenous constraints*, those arising from the political environment in which the regime operates, proved much more restrictive throughout George W. Bush’s presidency and may pose a greater challenge to Obama over time (Cook and Polsky 2005, 580-1). Bush encountered firm limits from these constraints. His administration’s emphasis on the maintenance of its supporting coalition spawned partisan polarization in Congress and the electorate. This placed a low ceiling on Bush’s job approval after the halo effect of 9/11 dissipated. It provoked Democrats to employ institutional rules like the filibuster and federal court challenges to impede the administration’s agenda and spawned grassroots liberal organizations like MoveOn to engage in ongoing media campaigns against the administration. In 2007 and 2008, the Democratic Congress aggressively investigated actions of the Bush administration and resisted his legislative proposals, imposing additional limits on Bush’s ambitions.

Many of these tools remain available to Obama’s partisan rivals. We can expect Republicans to engage in media campaigns against Obama (they have already begun to do so before his inauguration) and to employ procedural tools in Congress to impose their preferences whenever possible. The sixty votes needed for Senate cloture already seems the coming hurdle for much of the administration’s legislation. More broadly, Obama faces a tension between maintaining broad public support and the backing of his partisan coalition. He may have to choose whether to risk great exogenous or endogenous constraints as he moves forward. That tension is likely to grow as he faces occasions when he must decide whether to offend his partisans or the broader public. His problems on this score may come to resemble those of his immediate predecessor, but only if he hews to a partisan agenda. Rhetorically, he has eschewed that ambition, but his initial agenda defined his presidency frequently in partisan terms.
An Inventory of Skills and a Persona

At the heart of any presidency lie events and the political skills of the president and his administration. Presidents have discretion to create some events, but they also are subject to nondiscretionary events that just happen to them. Such events create positive and negative political impact for presidents. Presidents must demonstrate their personal skills in response to such events. ‘Professional reputation” is an important aspect of a president’s political capital (Neustadt 1990, 50-55). What are the component skills that create a strong presidential reputation?

- A president’s rhetorical skills can buoy public support and facilitate his dominance of national politics. Ronald Reagan, the “great communicator,” developed a public persona attractive to many Americans through his skilled use of rhetorical occasions. Obama is definitely in Reagan’s rhetorical league.
- Coalitional skills require a president to maintain the support of fellow partisans while occasionally reaching beyond them to build broader public and congressional support for his initiatives. Coalitional skills involve both partisan maintenance and situational outreach beyond fellow partisans. Obama’s brief legislative record yields little advance indication about his coalitional skills in practice. Internationally, major initiatives on matters as diverse as military action in Afghanistan and international environmental protection require ability at coalition formation and maintenance. The international goodwill greeting Obama’s election gives him an opportunity to develop coalitional skills in an internationally supportive public environment.
- A related bargaining skill allows a president to bring together rival power holders to gain necessary support. This can involve splitting differences among lawmakers over taxation and spending or hammering out consensus language among differing nations about U.N resolutions or international treaties. Obama demonstrated occasional ability to strike bipartisan bargains as a legislator. He will need to do much more of that as president.
- Managerial skills require clear lines of organization and accountability within the executive branch. The effective implementation of foreign and domestic policy is the consequence of able management. Obama, with no executive experience, will have to rely on skilled appointees to help him exercise such skills.
- Finally, heresthetic skills involve a “deliberate attempt to structure political situations so that opponents will either have to submit or be trapped. There is also the possibility of redefining political conflicts to permit new coalitions to be created. . . [this is] the science of manipulation and strategy of winning” (Hargrove 1998, 32; Riker 1986).
The ablest presidents have also been able herestheticians. Lincoln, for example, framed the slavery issue in a fashion to split his opposition and win the White House in 1860 (Riker 1986). Obama demonstrated some heresthetic skills in the 2008 campaign, by forcing John McCain to defend his association with the unpopular George W. Bush. McCain had to acknowledge the relationship or be trapped in a lie. As president, Obama consistently will need to set and spring such traps on his opponents in order to govern effectively. He has yet to demonstrate consistent mastery of those skills during his initial months in office.

Then there is the challenge of understanding Obama the person. Psychologists Steven Rubenzer and Thomas Faschingbauer in their psychological analysis of all American presidents (2004) provide a methodologically sound framework for classifying the personalities of chief executives. Rubenzer and Faschingbauer find that several recent presidents evidenced the personality type of an extravert, a type of president encompassing some of the most colorful and successful characters to inhabit the White House, including Jackson, Reagan, Clinton, Harding, William Henry Harrison, Franklin and Teddy Roosevelt, LBJ and JFK (2004, 74).

These presidents “indulged their impulses and showed their feelings through their faces and body language. They did things extemporaneously and had a flair for the dramatic, but were not dependable or responsible. They did not take pride in being rational or objective, did not plan carefully before taking a trip, made decisions prematurely, and acted without thinking” (2004, 75). Extraverts rank low in neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, but high in openness and extraversion (2004, 267).

Obama does not fit that category, according to a preliminary assessment of Obama by an anonymous psychologist (Derbyshire 2008). In this admittedly unscientific analysis, Obama was rated low on agreeableness, as are many presidents, but high on neuroticism, openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness. Obama, by this account, does not conform to any of the common personality types evident among his predecessors (Rubenzer and Faschingbauer 2004). He may well resemble several of his recent predecessors in his extroversion and in disagreeably asserting his preferences, while behaving more conscientiously than have some recent presidents. There is also the possibility of a troublesome neuroticism that he would need to keep in check in crises.

**Conclusion**

The above provides a conceptual checklist one can employ as the Obama presidency proceeds, which can be presented as a series of questions.
What theory of executive power is evident in Obama’s exercise of his office?

How does his store of political capital – public approval, support of fellow Congressional partisans, the fate of his appointees and his future electoral margin – fare over time?

Is he able to establish and maintain a stable and powerful political regime?

Does this preserve his political authority over the course of his presidency?

Do exogenous or endogenous limits pose a greater problem for his regime maintenance efforts?

How does his professional reputation fare through his use of rhetorical, coaltional, bargaining, managerial, and heresthetic skills?

How does his personality – that possible combination of extraversion, neuroticism, disagreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness that would be unique among presidents – affect his performance in the White House?

Answers to these questions will tell us much about Barack Obama’s presidency; they are certain to arrive in time.

Works Cited


