

The Scouting Report: President Obama's First 100 Days

President Barack Obama marks his first 100 days in office April 29, a traditional day for pundits, politicians and the public to assess a new presidency.

How far has he come, and what are the biggest challenges he has yet to face? *Politico* senior editor John Anderson moderated a live chat with Brookings Vice President Darrell West on the start of this historic presidency. The transcript of this chat follows.

12:30 John Anderson: Greetings everybody. I'm John Ward Anderson, a senior editor at POLITICO, and I'll be filling in for Fred Barbash as the moderator of today's chat, which will focus on how President Obama has done during his first 100 days in office.

We're joined today by Darrell M. West, the vice president and director of Governance Studies at Brookings. He's an expert on campaigns and elections, political advertising, mass media, public opinion, technology policy and electronic government.

Darrell is a member of Arena, our daily debate among policy makers and opinion shapers at POLITICO, and by way of background, I was the editor of POLITICO's special glossy magazine marking Obama's first 100 days.

Okay, enough of the self-promotion. As moderator, I always give myself the prerogative of asking the first question. So Darrell, indulge me and feed the simplistic journalistic obsession with rankings (which also might give us a sense of where you're coming from): What grade does Obama deserve for his first 100 days?

12:32 Darrell West: He deserves an A grade. He passed the centerpiece of his domestic agenda in the economic recovery package. His poll numbers are in the mid to high 60s. He has opened dialogue with allies and adversaries abroad. He is off to a terrific start on his presidency.

12:32 [Comment From Rebecca] Why is the "100-day" mark so significant?

12:33 Darrell West: First impressions matter so the first 100 days set the tone for the rest of the term. Presidents who make key mistakes in the first few months often have difficulty overcoming those early impressions. And if you have a few successes early on, it puts you in a stronger position for later accomplishments.

12:33 [Comment From Erin] How does Obama's first 100 days compare to those of other presidents?

12:35 Darrell West: I would compare Obama to Reagan. Each faced an economy in serious trouble and was able to pass legislation that laid out a new approach to fiscal policy. When things got better for Reagan, he cruised to re-election. It obviously is early to judge the current economy. GDP declined 6.1% in the first quarter, but consumer confidence is rebounding and more are becoming more optimistic about the future.

12:36 [Comment From Ron] Where has Obama fallen short thus far?

12:37 Darrell West: The biggest deficiency has been the huge growth of the federal deficit. This clearly is an issue that poses serious problems for the economy and the country down the road. Once the economy comes back, this will be something he needs to address. These huge deficits may force him to do what Democrats typically don't like to do, which is entitlement reform.

12:37 [Comment From Rolinda] Do you have any thoughts on Michelle Obama's first 100 days as first lady?

12:39 Darrell West:

The First Lady has had a terrific debut. She earns high marks from people who have dealt with her. She was a huge hit on the European trip. And her idea of a vegetable garden at the White House is a great idea during a time of economic crisis. She looks like she will be a major asset for this administration.

12:39 [Comment From Heather] Arlen Specter joining the Democratic Party is no indication of a shift in his views and will not be an automatic vote for the issues on the Democratic agenda. It does however, underscore the loss of moderation in the Republican Party. The only moderate Republican Senators left are from my state of Maine; Senators Collins and Snowe. They are popular here on both sides of the political spectrum and can't see them making a move like Specter. I think they'll hold their ground, and find themselves without support from their own party.

12:41 Darrell West: Specter's switch merely ratifies what already has become obvious. Republicans have moved far to the right and are having difficulty figuring out how to deal with the new political era. They still are using the same arguments that have worked well in the past (tax cuts and small government), but don't seem to realize the public wants a more activist government at a time when financial institutions have melted down and unemployment is up to 8.5 percent.

12:41 [Comment From Dan Edie] We've talked a lot about criticism of the Obama Administration that were not sticking here lately (for example, the socialist label). What criticism do you see that are actually relevant to the current administration, and are they issues that might take hold and have an impact on the midterm elections next year?

12:43 Darrell West: The big spending label will be an issue down the road because of the growing deficits. Democrats also clearly own the national political process now so they will be judged on what they deliver. If the economy comes back, they may govern for a long time. But if we don't start to see economic improvement by early 2010, then voters will take another look at their stewardship.

12:43 John Anderson: The polls seem to show that people blame Republicans more than Obama for the lack of bipartisanship. But isn't he steam rolling the opposition? And can he separate himself on this issue from the partisan behavior of Pelosi and Reid and others Democrats on the Hill?

12:45 Darrell West: He is steam rolling the opposition because 1) Democrats have the votes and 2) Republicans have displayed virtually no interest in working with him. He does have to be careful that he create some distance between himself and the congressional leadership because the latter are likely to take positions more to the left than he wants to be. But right now, polling suggests no backlash to Democrats being in charge.

12:45 [Comment From Brandon] Can he separate himself? He clearly already has. Are you people looking at the poll numbers? They show that people are impressed with Obama so far and that they are willing to give him quite a bit of leeway in terms of how long it takes the economy to recover...

12:45 [Comment From Tim] Do you think that the activism and sheer volume of work that he has done will minimize the attention paid to the recent torture memos? Republicans are going ballistic over it.

12:47 Darrell West: With all the attention to the economy, it is hard for other issues to gain traction. The torture memo release has generated a lot of concern from Republicans, but that issue hasn't really caught fire among the public at large. So far, people like the job Obama is doing. Like Reagan, he is the Teflon President.

12:47 [Comment From Stefan] How do you explain the "cognitive capture" of Obama by Geithner/Summers et al.?

12:49 Darrell West: I haven't seen much difference of opinion between the president and his economic team so clearly they all are on the same page. Each of them believes we need more rigorous regulation of financial institutions, and more active intervention in the overall economy. I don't think this is "capture" as much as shared values.

12:49 [Comment From kamullins] As of late, I have not heard much about Pelosi and the President's relationship. Do you think she will be far reaching with a filibuster proof congress?

12:51 Darrell West: The risk of any party with a big political majority is over-reaching. Dems did that in the past and so did Gingrich in the 1990s. Democrats have to recognize that although they have huge majorities in the House and Senate, it only takes a national public opinion shift of 5-6 points for them to lose the presidency. Their national mandate is more limited than the congressional numbers would suggest.

12:52 [Comment From Scott] How big an issue is it that Obama still has so many appointed positions unfilled. Did other administrations have large amounts of unfilled seats after 100 days?

12:53 Darrell West: It is a huge problem. At a time of massive policy changes, you need to have your full team on the field. The administration's problem is that it has been using Mother Theresa standards in a city where there are few saints. We should set our ethical standards so high there is no one who can meet them.

12:53 [Comment From Jeremy Anderson] It seems to me that Obama is doing an excellent job of working so quickly that opponents can't ever form well-defined messages that target his policies instead of him. Perhaps they could, if they weren't used to moving at the pace of a president who was literally on vacation for a third of his time in office. Mr. West, do you think the president's speed has been part of the opposition's difficulty in targeting him?

12:54 Darrell West: I would agree with that. The president is active on so many different issues it has been a challenge for the GOP to attack him before he is on to something else. Republicans still have not figured out how to deal with the president. All the polls show GOP numbers far behind either Obama or those of Democrats.

12:55 John Anderson: Obama has talked about shifting the military and budgetary focus from Iraq to Afghanistan, and while that is looking increasingly necessary (because of events in Afghanistan and Pakistan), it is also looking increasingly problematic (because of events in Iraq). Can Obama pull this rabbit out of his hat in his first term? His second?

12:57 Darrell West: Afghanistan certainly poses a major foreign policy challenge to the new president. The problem is not just with how Republicans will respond, but what his own Democratic base is going to think. Unless things improve in Afghanistan, you can see Democratic activists getting impatient pretty quickly. There also is a problem of what constitutes success in Afghanistan. We need to have limited objectives if there is any hope of claiming credit there.

12:57 [Comment From Michael] Several commentators have recently opined that the increasingly marginalized and resentful Republican base, who are now as incensed at their own party elites as at Democrats due to what they see as neglect of their core issues, may result in further shrinkage and even disappearance of the Republican party as we know it...reminiscent of the Whigs or Know-Nothings. Would you care to comment?

12:59 [Comment From Stefan] Our intensively warlike posture is costing us a fortune. I don't see how we can repair our economic shambles and continue to cruise the world armed to the teeth.

12:59 Darrell West: I don't see Republicans becoming Whigs because the beauty of modern parties is they adapt when they have. And now we have a situation where the GOP is out of touch with the national mood. But they have governors around the country who are dealing with policy problems in a pragmatic way and retaining political popularity. The party needs to look to those people to figure out how to position itself for the future.

1:00 John Anderson: Can I jump in? Here's something that probably no one will find surprising. The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism issued a report on how the media has covered the Obama Administration and found "positive stories about Obama have outweighed negative by two-to-one (42% vs. 20%) while 38% of stories have been neutral or mixed." So Darrell -- Is that a passing grade for cheerleading? A failing grade for watch-dogging?

1:02 Darrell West: The press tends to follow the political currents. When Bush was popular, its coverage was pretty favorable to him. Then when Bush lost popularity, the press piled on. Obama right now is in the middle of his honeymoon so he is getting positive stories. But if the economy doesn't improve, you will see the press become much more critical of him.

1:02 [Comment From Dave (MD)] Does anyone have any thoughts on the fact that half our country's population is NOT in support of Obama?

1:02 [Comment From Dave (MD)] Sure, Obama has high approval ratings. But there's still a huge portion of the population that is NOT in support of his policies...at all.

1:05 [Comment From Jeremy Anderson] I'd say the same was true of Bush four years ago, but he was still the President. This is how Democracy works.

1:05 Darrell West: People like Obama personally, but there are people who either don't like his policies or are withholding judgment until they see what works. But keep in mind that Reagan did well in his 1984 re-election even though national polls indicated more people agreed with Mondale than Reagan on the issues. Voters ultimately will have a bottom-line orientation on this presidency. If it delivers on the economy, Democrats will do well in the future.

1:05 [Comment From Joanna] Don't you think the Obama's are sort of "cashing in" (in a figurative sense) on their celebrity? I mean Michelle has been on the cover all the major celebrity magazines, and Barack -even though he's busy as president - seems to have a lot of free time on his hands for things like NCAA brackets. What's up with that?

1:06 Darrell West: Of course, he is cashing in on his celebrity status. This is what any leader would do. You use whatever political assets you have. In Obama's case, his major assets are: he's not George Bush, people like him personally, they think he is trying hard in a difficult situation, and yes, he is a celebrity.

1:07 John Anderson: Is there anyone out there in the GOP who can challenge Obama today? Who is the spokesman for the Republicans? Anyone on the horizon to be the party's true leader?

1:07 [Comment From kamullins] NBC/Wall Street Poll found that 81% of Americans like him and 51 percent supported his policies, he knew the latter going in.

1:08 [Comment From kamullins] President Bush did not do much by way of entertainment, yet he found the time to run this country into the ground; I wish he would have got out more.

1:08 [Comment From Will Keillor] Now isn't a good time to be the Republican party's true leader.

1:08 Darrell West: I don't see any of the current national Republican party leaders as being very effective in challenging Obama. They seem stuck in the past and have not adapted to the new public opinion climate. Future GOP leaders are going to come from the states. Keep in mind that most of our recent presidents have been governors (Carter, Reagan, Clinton, and Bush). Obama is an exception to this pattern. But it shows that Americans like leaders from outside of Washington and who have a demonstrated ability to solve problems.

1:09 [Comment From kamullins] Do you believe Pres. Obama will keep Bernake in lieu of Summers?

1:10 Darrell West: It all depends on the macro-economy. Bernake has one more year on his term. If things improve, he may keep his job. And if it doesn't, he becomes the convenient fall guy. Even if Bernake gets replaced, I am not sure Summers would be the guy. He has made himself pretty indispensable within the White House.

1:11 [Comment From Laurie] 100 days still seems arbitrary to me – but when do the problems that used to be chalked up to the Bush Administration become Obama's problems? When, if ever, is that honeymoon over? Will people remember how many problems he inherited?

1:12 [Comment From Stefan]

Obama is a terrifically appealing guy. I absolutely want him to succeed. But I am fearful that his failure to enact real banking reform and his further drift into aggression overseas are going to spoil his presidency.

1:13 Darrell West: Most presidents have a honeymoon of 3-4 months. Obama will have a longer one just because he inherited a bigger mess and voters understand it will take longer to overcome these problems. By the ineffective way they are opposing Obama's policies, Republicans are lengthening Obama's honeymoon. I think Obama will have until the Fall. After that, people will associate whatever good or bad that is happening with him, and he will fully own the problems.

1:13 [Comment From John Gnesin]

Do you believe that Obama and his administration waffling on a clear position on the torture issue or outright rejecting the idea of commissions or prosecutions is a conscious stalling tactic while they wait for a critical mass of evidence and resulting outrage from the public, congress, etc... to justify them taking the posture/political cover that prosecutions or commissions are something they 'didn't want to do, but now have no choice'....Just my wishful theory as someone who supports Obama but wish he was harder on the past admin.

1:14 [Comment From kamullins]

The Republicans need to decide to govern center-right before they can find a leader; Tom Ridge name has been coming up as of late; moderate Republicans must unite against the status quo.

1:15 Darrell West: Obama is trying to walk a fine line between distinguishing his administration from the past one in not using torture, but not wanting to appear too partisan in investigating the past. I think Obama needs to focus more on the future than the past in regard to the torture issue. Truth commissions or prosecutions are useful when we need to learn the facts or impose accountability. In the current situation, we know the basic facts that the United States tortured and there was accountability in the 2006 and 2008 elections. Bush was repudiated and Republicans lost control of the House and Senate. That is the ultimate rejection for the past administration.

1:16 John Anderson: There is a lot of simmering anger out there about Obama being a socialist – even a communist – and selling US security interests down the river. It is a constant theme. Is any of that going to stick? Does Obama need to worry about it?

1:19 Darrell West: None of these charges are sticking now. With the current mismanagement on Wall Street, Americans cheer when the administration takes an aggressive stance on financial institutions. People aren't viewing increased regulation as socialist, not being tough on the bankers. Where the socialism line could start to stick is down the road when government spending as a percentage of GDP rises several percentage points. At that point, Americans will have to decide whether they like a bigger government. The jury is out on how they will feel at that point. Which may be the reason Obama will be forced to do entitlement reform after the 2010 election.

1:19 [Comment From Stefan] Our fire departments are socialist. Our police departments are socialist. Our public schools are socialist. There are a lot of us who think reforming health care and socializing all its costs would be a good idea.

1:19 [Comment From kamullins] It is interesting that when most of the resources support the rich and a bogus war no one calls it a dictatorship, however, when resources are used to help the least amongst us it 's called socialism.

1:19 [Comment From Jason] Obama's had to deal with a plethora of issues – from the economy to swine flu. Has any other president's first 100 days in office been so chaotic?

1:20 John Anderson: Ten minute warning everybody. So send your parting thoughts and questions....

1:21 Darrell West: This has been the most challenging, chaotic, active, and amazing first 100 days I can remember. Rarely have there been so many big issues on the agenda at the same time. Yet part of this is due to the backload of unresolved issues. We have seen congressional stalemates limit action on a number of important issues so now the dam has broken and the water is flowing down stream again.

1:21 [Comment From Fred] It took Obama 98 days to complete his cabinet. Why did this take so long?

1:23 Darrell West: It has taken a long time to complete his Cabinet because the administration set its ethical standards very high and it has been difficult to get people through the vetting process. Nominees have to submit three years of tax returns and be able to document every deduction taken. If you claimed a deduction, but don't have a receipt for that deduction, you get flagged as a potential problem.

1:23 [Comment From Andrew] DO you think the US is making progress in terms of foreign relations with Obama in office? It seems like many countries are starting to "like" us again. What do you think?

1:24 Darrell West: The U.S. is making progress around the world. Foreigners like Obama (in some places even more than Americans do). They appreciate the fact that he is different and is bringing a different tone to American foreign policy. In the long-run, they will judge him by the policy changes he brings. But right now, his foreign reception has been extremely positive.

1:24 John Anderson: I'm going to give myself the last question. Darrell -- what are the main themes we're going to be chatting about when we do this on the 200 day anniversary of the Obama Presidency?

1:26 Darrell West: The 200 day mark will come roughly at the beginning of August. At that point, unemployment still will be rising. People will start getting impatient. They will ask when the president's policies actually are going to start working. It probably is going to take until the 300 day points (November) to see improvement in the national economy.

1:26 John Anderson: Thanks very much to Brookings and Darrell, and to all of the people who participated in today's chat. Keep an eye on the Brookings site for the time and topic of our next session!