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“Change” or Plus Ça Change...?

Pondering Presidential Politics and Policy After Bush

Pietro S. Nivola and Charles O. Jones

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The catchword of the 2008 presidential election is “Change.” Barack Obama runs as the candidate of “change you can believe in.” So does John McCain, who proclaims that “change is coming.”

But how much *real* change will there be after January 20? Probably a good deal less than the campaigns assert. Their promises to makeover Washington, with ambitious new agendas, will most likely run afoul of old political realities: well-organized naysayers, partisan polarization in Congress, obstructionism in the Senate, bureaucratic inertia, an enigmatic Supreme Court, independent-minded state governments, a public that naturally likes a free lunch, a mostly non-discretionary budget, and of course, the rest of the world’s propensity to constrain America’s options. Further, for the first time since 1961, a sitting senator will be the next president. Whatever else his Senate experience (however long or short) imparts, it doesn’t amount to much of an executive education. The learning curve, in other words, will be steep. In addition, contrary to the belief of many critics, objective historians won’t write off the eight years of George W. Bush as a failed and forgettable interregnum. Despite various blunders, notable accomplishments happened on his watch, sometimes in the face of great adversity. Regardless of who takes office next year, parts of the Bush legacy will be extended, even emulated.

Granted, an unexpected crisis, a realigning election, or an exceptional display of executive prowess, could toss our assessment into a cocked hat. We suspect, however, that at least the last two of those preconditions have rather long odds.



© Reuters/Jason Reed - Snow covers the North Lawn of the White House in Washington.



Pietro S. Nivola is the C. Douglas Dillon Chair and a senior fellow in the Governance Studies program at Brookings.



Charles O. Jones is a nonresident senior fellow in the Governance Studies program at Brookings and the Hawkins Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The woes of the Republican Party are many, but an electoral tsunami akin to those in 1932, 1964 or 1980 remains unlikely. Equally improbable is the prospect that either party's nominee can easily morph into a transformational public manager.

The following essay proceeds in five steps. First, we discuss the institutional context and historical perspective through which to view realistically the jobs ahead for the competing change agents, Obama and McCain. In two subsequent sections, we examine probable policy outcomes, first at home and then abroad, of an Obama or a McCain presidency, and consider the extent to which they would depart from existing baselines. Fourth, the paper offers a few reflections regarding the kinds of political circumstances that historically have been propitious for large-scale policy changes, and about a factor further complicating the prospect this time: the senatorial backgrounds of the two contenders. We then conclude with a brief summary of our principal observations.

A Few Fundamentals

A political system that separates the institutions of government and makes them compete for power tends to resist rapid or radical change. That was the Founders' intent. The constitution they wrote was expressly designed to prevent sudden swings in the public mood from turning into radical redirections of policy. Not only were powers formally divided between the states and the central government but between and within its branches through staggered terms, bicameralism and an independent judiciary.

Political developments after World War II have often magnified the effects of these institutional constraints. Divided government—with one party holding the presidency, the other controlling one or both houses of Congress—has been the rule more than the exception. Also, since 1992, presidents have tended to be elected by relatively narrow margins, and a party's congressional majority has frequently been razor thin as well. American voters, in the past half-century, have seldom delivered clear mandates for change, the landslide elections of Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 and of Ronald Reagan in 1980 being the only unmistakable deviations.

Divided government means that presidents with ambitious legislative plans must either negotiate with opposition party leaders or work around them by hiving off enough of the opposition's backbenchers to build winning coalitions. Either way, compromise (at best) rather than dramatic change is what typically results. Further, when the executive and legislative branches are split between opposing parties, an agenda emanating from Capitol Hill may be in sharp competition with one from the White House. The usual upshot? Again, if anything at all, mutual adjustments and incrementalism, not grandiose undertakings.

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Narrow electoral margins shrink a president's political capital. In 2004, George W. Bush was the first president in four elections to win, albeit barely, a majority of the popular vote. Narrow party majorities in the House of Representatives have been associated with greater party unity and discipline, but frequently the partisanship has been so intense and polarizing as to thwart bipartisan agreements, without which legislation often falters as it moves to the Senate. Meanwhile, in that chamber, presidential initiatives that fall short of 60 dependable votes have proven increasingly vulnerable to fatal filibusters.

With its separated institutions, our political system features multiple access points, thereby inviting intense pressure from interest groups whenever policies with large stakes are on the line. With relatively rare exceptions, the organized defenders of the status quo, not the groups eager to rock the boat, are the ones that deploy most effectively. More often than not, big change is a casualty. Consider a couple of classic examples from the two most recent presidencies.

Bill Clinton's campaign in 1992 had themes that sound very familiar today: It was about, in James Carville words, "change versus more of the same, the economy stupid, don't forget about health care." Clinton, however, got elected with only 43 percent of the popular vote in a three-way race. His party retained control of Congress but lost 10 seats in the House, and made no gain in the Senate. At the same time, Democratic control of both branches for the first time in a dozen years heightened expectations for major policy changes. In the new president's first year, two of his priorities, the budget and NAFTA, squeaked through (the latter without majority support among Democrats in either chamber). But following those close calls, his vaunted national health-care proposal, originally promised for the first 100 days, had to be deferred until late in the second year, by which time powerful adversaries had mobilized and could club it to death.

George W. Bush entered the White House in 2001 having lost the popular vote and bested Al Gore in the Electoral College by a mere five votes. The Republicans had suffered net losses in both the House and Senate. The party's majority in the Senate turned on the tie-breaking vote of Vice President Cheney, and even that tenuous balance was short-lived: Before long, one GOP senator (James Jeffords of Vermont) bolted, and the Democrats technically took over. Amid these less-than-auspicious conditions, the president notched a few significant victories in keeping with his "compassionate conservatism" theme—most notably the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) education reform and an impressive emergency plan for AIDS relief. He also achieved appreciable tax reductions. But like Clinton's health-care initiative, Bush's boldest domestic gambles, proposals to partially privatize Social Security and to fix immigration policy, were put off.

They came during his second term, after he won re-election by the slenderest margin since Woodrow Wilson's in 1916. Bush seemed convinced that the 2004

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election had constituted a solid popular endorsement: “I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it.” But, though having earned less of it than he thought, spend it he did. To no avail. His Social Security venture collapsed, and in 2006 and 2007, so did hopes of modernizing the nation’s dysfunctional immigration system.

These stories are not meant to suggest that, in terms of domestic policy, the past two administrations promised the moon and changed nothing. Clinton’s hard-won budget-balancing act and NAFTA were important. Even more impressive was the 1996 welfare reform, achieved despite (or, more accurately, thanks to) divided government. To an extent, Bush’s tax cuts and NCLB broke new ground—as did, later on, his amendment of Medicare to include prescription drugs. Still, both presidents had staked their reputations on grander projects, in one instance to restructure comprehensively the nation’s health-care system, in another its public retirement-income system. Change of such scope crashed and burned, much as one would expect inside the obstacle course of American political practices and institutions.

What to Expect at Home

The next president will face daunting challenges. Not the least of them will be how to finance a welter of expensive campaign promises. Both McCain and Obama stipulate that other government spending can be slashed, but the bulk of the federal budget—uncontrolled entitlements, obligatory debt service, and all but a pittance in defense—is effectively off limits. McCain vows he can make a big difference by ending earmarked outlays. Earmarks, however, are a drop in the bucket. Eliminating them, a utopian idea, would scarcely stanch a torrent of red ink (the federal deficit will exceed \$480 billion in 2009 and could approach \$900 billion, depending on the shape of the impending mega-bailout for financial markets). Obama suggests that winding down the war in Iraq and rolling back the Bush tax cuts for the affluent would save a fortune. Simultaneously, however, he favors ramping up the war effort in Afghanistan, providing universal health care, and further subsidizing everything from college educations to ethanol farms, initiatives that would erase the savings.

Deepening the predicament are McCain’s and Obama’s proposed tax concessions. Both would reduce revenues by trillions of dollars and, counting interest payments, increase the national debt by additional trillions. With the U.S. economy already over-leveraged—and finally signaling that we can no longer sustain a penchant for living beyond our means—the tax and spending proposals of either candidate would make the bad habit worse.

In sum, both candidates are trying to sail a boatload of costly policies against stiff fiscal and economic headwinds. Frustrated, the next occupant of the White House will almost certainly have to alter this course, and throw a lot of his

promised changes overboard.

How can this off-load happen, particularly amid near-certain gains for the Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress and plenty of pent up demand to enact a robust progressive agenda? The wish-lists of congressional Democrats could get a lift from an Obama victory. Presidents, in circumstances of unified party control of both branches, are not given to holding the line against their own party's pet projects. And having himself campaigned on some, it would be especially awkward for a President Obama to disown or downsize all of them.

On the other hand, his fellow Democrats might also be inclined to cut him considerable slack, should he deem it expedient to renege on a thing or two. A pledge to raise the capital gains tax, to cite an obvious example, has already been scaled back. The sputtering economy seems to have coaxed the downward adjustment. In any event, even if an Obama administration remained stuck with some of the populist residue from the campaign, pursuing ideas like a sharp capital-gains tax hike would likely fall to pieces in the Senate. For there, only a bullet-proof supermajority assures you of carrying the day.

Such considerations would also force an Obama administration to jettison its troubling stance on the trade issue. Here, too, look for more continuity with respect to long-standing U.S. policy. However dear to labor unions, the hardball Obama played during the primaries, if pursued any further, would unsettle not only trading partners, U.S. exporters and world markets but big guns in the Democratic donor base (Wall Street and Silicon Valley contributors, for instance), and would certainly face ample bipartisan push-back in the Senate. So talk of, say, renegotiating NAFTA would likely cease once Obama was sworn in.

What of "affordable and portable [health care] coverage for all"? For now, the Democratic Party's embrace of this goal implies that the central problem with the American health-care system is not so much its escalating costs, which threaten to crowd out resources needed to meet a host of other social needs, as its incomplete coverage. The commitment to universal coverage looms as a potential budget-buster, but given its centrality to the Obama campaign, his administration would almost certainly have to plump for it. Prevailing over a recalcitrant Senate won't be easy. Were he to succeed, however, the feat would be noteworthy. Some, no doubt, would call it revolutionary. Others might consider it less of a game-change than just the latest gain of yardage in a long drive: the relentless growth of the American welfare state. Viewed from this wider angle, Obama's health-care plan, like Bush's enlargement of Medicare (covering prescription drugs), isn't swerving in an entirely new direction.

Now, what if McCain were to win? It is important to keep in mind that McCain is not always going to slam the brakes on big government, either. For example, aspects of his own health-care framework, such as the aim of insuring high-risk patients by expanding federal support for state high-risk insurance pools, could turn out to be anything but cheap.

Still, McCain would often be at odds with the Democratic-controlled Congress, on everything from judicial appointments to fiscal priorities. From one end of Pennsylvania Avenue would come new measures to relieve middle-class economic anxieties, tax oil company profits, fix “unfair trade,” aid the auto manufacturers, and so on; at the other end, the president would brandish his veto pen. And the vetoes would usually stick, since the Democrats on Capitol Hill would rarely muster enough votes to override. In one sense, therefore, electing McCain would mean greater gridlock.

But in another sense, it wouldn't. A Republican president exercising some restraint on a congressional spending spree may spell unwelcome gridlock to the spenders but not to deficit hawks. Moreover, there also would be significant questions on which President McCain would find more common ground with the Democrats in Congress than with many members of his own party. Climate change, immigration, aspects of stem cell research, executive powers, interrogation and detention of suspected terrorists—in these areas, to name a few, a McCain administration would see Democratic cooperation.

How much of a *change* all this would represent, though, is another matter. During the Bush years, the fire-wall against reckless spending was at its weakest when the president's party controlled both branches. With notable exceptions (such as the bailout of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac), Bush stiffened his spine under divided party control. On the fiscal front, in other words, a McCain administration would now pretty much pick up where the Bush administration left off.

Either a McCain or an Obama presidency would facilitate some sort of climate-change legislation, a departure from Bush's position. In all probability, however, this change would turn out to be more symbolic than bold—something even milder than the Lieberman-Warner cap-and-trade bill (the net effect of which would be to postpone by about two years, at best, a projected global temperature increase for 2050). The reason is quite simple: a draconian, hence punishing, assault on greenhouse gases lacks popular consent, in this country and every other. That fundamental political fact of life will not be leaving town with Mr. Bush in January 2009.

What passes for energy policy is similarly circumscribed. At first blush, this hot topic of the campaign appears to be one where the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates decidedly diverge, and where an Obama administration would break with the status quo. Obama is uncomfortable with the GOP's off-shore drilling solution, as well as sensibly skeptical of McCain's gas-tax holiday. Of far greater significance than such distinctions, however, is what both candidates, along with President Bush, have in common: All three share the flawed premise that, somehow, the United States can be “independent” of foreign sources of energy. McCain, like Bush, would pursue this Holy Grail by trying to encourage more domestic production—but so would Obama, albeit

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through a somewhat different crop of home-grown products, emphasizing such sources as biofuels and windmills.

Why does each of these politicians subscribe to the notion that "independence" is a path to national prosperity, and that bolstering home-made energy begets "independence"? Surely, all three understand that all crude oil, foreign *and* domestic, is priced in the same world market, and consumers will continue to pay the world price regardless of whether we produce more fuel at home or buy a share of it through international trade. (A couple of under-recognized facts: Nearly 90 percent of America's total demand for oil is met by U.S. wells and those of suppliers outside the Middle East. Both our NAFTA trading partners supply us more oil than Hugo Chávez's Venezuela does, and both supply more than Saudi Arabia as well.) Whatever the reasoning behind the self-sufficiency pitch, it sounds valiant as well as relatively painless, and therefore touches a popular chord. Never mind that a more interesting alternative—levying a substantial excise on consumption—would prompt us to burn less fossil fuel, emit less carbon dioxide, and possibly displace other taxes (on payrolls, for instance). It's a non-starter politically. So much for the prospect of authentic change in energy policy.

On the equally sensitive subject of immigration, there may be even less difference between McCain and Obama—and between either of these men and Mr. Bush. For the most part, all three have been consummate, indeed at times courageous, centrists in this debate. Whether either President Obama or President McCain would have better luck than President Bush actually revisiting and passing some version of the compromise legislation they all supported in 2007 is anybody's guess since the 2008 election is unlikely to clarify the issue. Perhaps, if he is willing to brush aside his party's unsparing platform plank, McCain might have the best shot at revisiting the immigration question pragmatically. Were he to revive his past endeavors, they would have substantial support among Democratic senators, as would one by Obama, but maybe with the added advantage of fewer spoilers in the GOP defying the president.

As for second-tier issues such as the treatment of terrorist suspects, the expansion of executive authority, and the scope of federally-supported stem cell science, Bush's practices have already been substantially challenged and superseded—by Supreme Court decisions, renewed congressional oversight, and countervailing policies in various big states (witness California's liberal funding of stem cell research). In each of these domains, the transition from the Bush regime to McCain, or even Obama, would no longer present a remarkable contrast. Within some, in fact, a shift from President Bush to President McCain or Obama might be almost seamless. Don't count on either of the newcomers to abandon the use of presidential signing statements, for example.

Obama and McCain are dueling for the mantle of chief reformer, both vowing (often with very similar language) to restore ethics, curb the influence of

lobbyists, halt the revolving door, ensure the integrity of campaign finance, and empty the pork barrel. Since both are passionate about these concerns, and much of the public seems to be, too, we don't doubt that there will be action on some. Historically, however, today's two champions are hardly the first to have inveighed against special interests, money in politics, pork barrel spending, and other such political impurities. If past is prologue, the latest reform efforts will have a few desired and durable results, and plenty of unintended and impermanent ones. If "reforming Washington" were simple, lasting relief from our supposedly "broken" politics would have arrived ages ago.

One could go on. On issue after issue the change quotient, so to say, may well fall short of expectations. It might be thought that a centerpiece of Bush's domestic policy platform – the NCLB law – will soon give way to an entirely new education policy. Congress scarcely seems eager to reauthorize the controversial NCLB experiment. Yet, neither McCain nor Obama have called for its repeal. Both candidates say they will fund NCLB, and improve its assessments and accountability systems. McCain is inclined to add teeth (in the form of more school choice and vouchers), but to an extent, so is Obama (by shifting to performance pay for teachers). In sum, chalk up another Bush bequest that probably will be passed along, with only marginal alterations.

Foreign Policy

The many Americans who view the so-called Bush Doctrine as little more than a series of unilateral misadventures overseas have high hopes for big changes in international relations after the 2008 election. But these voters may be in for a surprise, regardless of who prevails in November. The world awaiting the next president will be just as distressing as it is right now, and he will have to cope with it in much the same way.

Begin with a perennial headache: North Korea. The Bush administration's approach – which, in the form of the six-party talks, has been quintessentially multilateral – is said to have made progress dismantling Kim Jong-Il's nuclear program. In fact, evidence so far to support that proposition is mixed. Pyongyang still threatens to restore facilities that could produce enough plutonium for several bombs. Conceivably, whoever sits in the Oval Office in the next couple of years could face a replay of the dilemma that confronted Bush in 2006, which, in turn, was a reprise of the one encountered by Bill Clinton in 1994: Whether to pursue a negotiating track fraught with frustrations or contemplate a perilous pre-emptive strike. Both those presidents defaulted to the first option. And, looking less like a change than like déjà vu all over again, so in all likelihood would Obama or even McCain.

Iran, another charter member of the Axis of Evil aspiring to nuclear weapons, poses a similar, indeed worse, conundrum. If Bush's Doctrine were taken at face

value, the Iranian menace might have been dealt a significant setback by now. Instead, multilateralism—the EU-3 modality—has been the preferred vehicle for dealing with this rogue state as well. The talks have gone nowhere. With impunity, Iran forges ahead with development of its own nuclear fuel cycle, including enrichment. At one point, Obama appeared to imply that a novel step—direct high-level discussions between Washington and Tehran—could break the impasse. Recently, though, the Bush administration tried that tactic, too, sending Under Secretary of State William J. Burns to join other foreign envoys meeting with Iran’s top nuclear negotiator in Geneva. Nothing changed.

Later, in Berlin, Obama sounded more like McCain and indeed Bush. With Europe, he declared, the United States has to send a “message to Iran that it must abandon its nuclear ambitions.” How that “message” would differ from all those that had already been sent—and how the “must” imperative would be effectuated—was less clear. If one had to bet, an Obama administration—or, for that matter, a McCain administration—would not be in a position to offer much new, and in fact few hints of novelty have emerged in the course of the election campaign. The next president would probably start by recycling the extant multilateral overtures. If these continued to falter, as is likely, his administration would soon face an unattractive choice: try by force to disable or retard the Iranian nuclear capacity, or learn to live with it. The latter scenario is the odds on favorite, alas, given the unacceptable risks and uncertainties of the alternative. Ditto if George W. Bush had another four years.

While nuclear nonproliferation policy is not about to take a sharp new turn, what about the war on terrorism? Both Obama and McCain have called for a substantial build-up of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Obama considers Afghanistan to be more strategically pivotal than Iraq, and calls it “the central front” in the confrontation with terrorism. Withdrawing combat troops from Iraq would, according to Obama, free up “at least” two additional brigades for the Afghan war. McCain, as is well known, opposes any timeline for pulling out of Iraq, but nonetheless thinks “at least” three additional brigades can be dispatched to the Afghan front.

Let us ponder what is at stake here. The two presidential candidates of the 2008 election are *not* about to de-escalate the war on terror over which Bush has been presiding since 2001. Quite the contrary, they are proposing to crank it up. Shifting its venue does not alter the fundamental implication of what the candidates are advocating. Indeed, if anything, moving more of the fight to Afghanistan could well imply a longer, bloodier conflict than the Iraq war (think of the Soviet debacle between 1978 and 1988 or the two disastrous British campaigns in the 19th century). Short of conducting major incursions into the sanctuaries of Western Pakistan, an extremely combustible formula, all may never turn quiet on “the central front.”

At a minimum, a serious and sustained Afghan surge could require

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considerably more than the two or three brigades presidents Obama or McCain would promptly deploy. To reduce the need for a much larger U.S. deployment, the next president would have to convince our NATO allies to greatly increase their troop strength and revise their rules of engagement. Obama and McCain, no doubt, would find that conversation just as exasperating as it has been for Mr. Bush.

Our main point is not that refocusing militarily on Afghanistan is necessarily wrong-headed, only that intensifying a war in Central Asia, even as another gradually ebbs in the Middle East, won't seem like much of an overall change a year or two from now—at least for the millions of Americans who this November thought they were voting for “peace.”

Turning elsewhere, it strains credulity to suppose that an Obama or McCain presidency would bring a tectonic shift in policy toward Latin America, Africa, India, China or even Russia. The Bush administration has managed relations with most of these other parts of the world prudentially. FARC rebels are losing ground in Colombia, thanks in part to U.S. support. In Venezuela, Chávez baits and blusters but the United States has not overreacted. A quantum leap in U.S. aid to Africa has done much good, and has duly enhanced America's reputation in most of that continent. Libya, taking notice of Saddam Hussein's fate in Iraq, seems to have learned that assenting to the West is safer than defiance. Ties between the United States and India have never been better. Tensions with the disagreeable regimes in Beijing and Moscow have been kept within bounds, and will probably stay that way for the foreseeable future.

McCain's unequivocal commitment to free trade, like Bush's, pleases the Chinese. Obama's hedged position makes them faintly nervous. Also, his foreign policy advisors might be inclined to press China a bit harder than Bush to improve its human rights record, and to help the international community halt the atrocities in Darfur. Once settled in, however, an Obama administration would pretty much follow in Bush's footsteps and tread prudently with this gigantic U.S. commercial partner.

The Bush Doctrine's emphasis on promoting and protecting democracies in former Soviet satellites, and (like the Clinton administration) folding them into NATO, irks Russia. At the same time, Bush has mostly declined to challenge Vladimir Putin's heavy hand. McCain, by comparison, has been less reticent. He would oust Russia from the G8. Although Obama, like Bush, has not yet gone that far, all three men have recently converged following Russia's military moves against Georgia in August. U.S.-Russian relations are in flux. But at the end of the day, a similar mixture of interposition in neighborhoods bordering Russia but also post-Cold War circumspection will probably persist irrespective of who is elected.

The foreign policy of George W. Bush, in short, is not headed for history's trash bin. To be sure, there will be stylistic modifications under a new

administration. With Barack Obama or John McCain at the podium, routine White House press conferences as well as some other presidential rituals would not look and sound like Bush's. Such tonal contrasts could make an important impression, especially in the early going, but how much of a *substantive* change they would signify over the longer haul is harder to tell. During the Bush years, there was no starker contrast than the audio-visual difference between the American president and Britain's former prime minister, Tony Blair. In international affairs, the latter explained and articulated his policies with exceptional aplomb. Yet, in the end, Blair's communications skills proved to be an asset of limited consequence. For, substantively, what he was championing largely paralleled the Bush Doctrine, parts of which were hopelessly unpopular.

Exceptional Circumstances

Grand policy changes are hardly impossible in the American political system, but when they occur, swiftly and in bulk, special conditions are usually needed. A prerequisite typically is an electoral earthquake. An electorate hungry for change handed Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson mandates and congressional supermajorities that enabled these presidents to generate big bursts of historic legislation.

Obviously, this is not to say that the winners of less lop-sided elections are invariably doomed to playing (as George W. Bush put it) only "small ball." In the 1968 election, Richard M. Nixon edged out Hubert H. Humphrey with 43.4 percent of the vote to 42.7 percent. Despite the wafer thin margin, Nixon began revolutionizing U.S. relations with China, and soon managed to gain passage of several salient pieces of domestic legislation. In 1960, John F. Kennedy had eked out an even narrower win, 49.7 percent to 49.5 percent. Even so, Kennedy in his first year also scored a number of notable legislative victories, and in the fateful fall of 1962 successfully rallied the nation in its epic confrontation with the Soviet Union. Close elections do not axiomatically hobble presidents. It remains safe to say, though, that without an electoral breakthrough of at least the scope of Ronald Reagan's in 1980, modern presidents ordinarily have had to settle for far less than their campaign slogans advertised.

A major national or international crisis can alter that general rule of thumb. That a crisis atmosphere can be a catalyst for action in this democracy, as in most others, is a verity so obvious it almost requires no elaboration here — except in the following sense. Whether you think of them as mere strokes of luck or (as we do) successes for which President Bush deserves considerable credit, the fact is that the terrorist onslaught has been deflected and the Iraq war is finally being won. (Two years ago, the mess in Iraq seemed poised to have catastrophic consequences throughout the Middle East.) There have been no further terrorist attacks on American soil. Nor, unlike the 1990s, has Al Qaeda been able to blow

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up more American embassies, naval vessels, or military barracks abroad. (A car-bombing in Yemen this month failed to breach the embassy compound, but could be regarded as an exception.) However, if the positive developments were to take a sudden and dramatic turn for the worse, or if some new calamity or grave peril (a further financial meltdown, for instance) were to beset the country in the weeks or months ahead, the next administration would spring into action on steroids. It would be emboldened, and perhaps empowered, either to take Bush's policies to a new level or innovate more vigorously in other ways.

There is at least one other wild card that could strengthen the next president's hand even in the absence of an electoral shapeup or of crisis conditions. Call it exceptional leadership and managerial talent. Whether Obama or McCain is among the fortunate few endowed with this gift will not be known until one of these men is tested in office. Nonetheless, it is worth taking a little time in our remaining pages to weigh a problem both of these men share: their lack of executive experience.

The contest between Obama and McCain is the first in U.S. history between two sitting senators. Not only that, but the two senators have spent almost their entire political lives in legislatures. Legislative and executive life differ in important ways. Whereas agenda-setting, tenacity, hierarchy, and broad accountability characterize the role of the executive, the legislative role is reactive, compromising, collaborative, representative, and accountable to narrower constituencies. Executives have to answer for all policies enacted into law. Legislators can pick and choose which ones to be tethered to. Executives can duck but can't hide. Legislators can do both.

To be sure, gradations exist within these prototypes. Bill Clinton came to Washington exclusively with an executive background. In time he proved to be an able compromiser, triangulating with the GOP-controlled Congress. By virtue of his forceful personality, convictions and seniority, John McCain could be counted among the frontbenchers of the Senate—like Ted Kennedy, a proactive lawmaker, prepared to take risks, assume greater responsibility and be judged by a national audience. Backbenchers such as Barack Obama, no matter how capable and ambitious, are not in a position to play the same game. Their junior status limits their opportunities.

For all the nuances, the fact remains that precious few former legislators became presidents who accomplished a great deal. The most conspicuous exceptions, of course, were Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson. These important figures, however, had been vice presidents who took over upon the death of their predecessors. Just three sitting members of Congress have ever been elected president. They were Representative James A. Garfield, Senator Warren G. Harding, and Senator John F. Kennedy. All three died while in office. We will never know everything Kennedy or Garfield might have achieved, had their presidencies not been cut terribly short by assassins' bullets. We do know that

Harding is widely considered to have ranked among the nation's worst presidents.

What does this backdrop imply with regard to McCain and Obama? In terms of executive knowhow, both are largely a blank slate. Yes, through his extensive senatorial career, McCain has shown a range of policy interests, a willingness to work across the aisle, and a reputation as a risk taker (confirmed most recently by his choice of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate). But how patient and effective he would be, for example, with the grunt-work of dealing with the executive bureaucracy, a challenge for agents of change or reform, remains uncertain.

As for Obama, his time in the Senate has been brief, and his stint in Washington so far leaves few reliable tips. Much is made of his liberal votes, and the fact that his name is not associated with any major legislative landmark, but those supposed telltales may be less indicative than you think. Almost perforce, any *junior* Democratic senator eyeing a race for the presidency would likely have compiled pretty much the same kind of record. A better clue to Obama's leadership and management abilities might be the discipline and skill with which he led a campaign that overcame a formidable competitor, Senator Hillary Clinton.

In the best case, Obama's very lack of deep roots on Capitol Hill could be to his advantage; he might bring to the White House fewer of the ingrained senatorial habits that aren't particularly useful to a chief executive. Thus unencumbered, and with a reputation as a quick study, he could make things happen. In the worst case, his learning curve might be so vertiginous, his first term could open with missteps and disappointments.

Summing Up

Sweeping changes in public policy and governance are the main motif of the 2008 presidential election, and seem to be anticipated by a significant segment of the electorate. They face difficult odds. America's political system was deliberately designed to restrain the scale and pace of change. Amplification and acceleration occasionally happen, but when they do, unusual factors are normally necessary. Among them would be an electoral landslide, a severe economic or national security crisis, or a president with a truly uncommon ability to lead and manage.

Gazing into the crystal ball for 2009 and immediately beyond, we do not foresee most of these circumstances aligning in a fashion that would facilitate the extent of change or reform seemingly envisioned by either the Obama or the McCain campaigns. The system will stymie or scale down a great deal of what they have promised. So will budgetary constraints, economic exigencies, international realities, and some immutable public attitudes. To bend these

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The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202.797.6090
Fax: 202.797.6144
www.brookings.edu/governance.aspx

Editor

Gladys L. Arrisueno

Production & Layout

John S Seo

numerous barriers would take an outsized electoral triumph, leadership and managerial skills of an astonishing sort, or some kind of national emergency that would cede exceptional leverage to the commander-in-chief. We can't rule such things out, but we would deem them surprising.

What's more, when the campaigning stops and the next president gets to work, he will regard the precedents laid by his immediate predecessor not always as mistakes to avoid or correct but in many cases as policies worth maintaining. Obama as well as McCain are both likely to leave key elements of Bush's legacy intact, rather than seek to upend it root and branch. No incoming president, in other words, will call off the war on terror, opt to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in Iraq, be oblivious to how and why Muammar el-Qaddafi capitulated, fundamentally reverse the direction of the Pentagon under the sober management of Defense Secretary Robert Gates, or shrink the Department of Homeland Security. Nor will the forthcoming administration ditch the Millennium Challenge Account, reverse America's extraordinary AIDS relief initiative for Africa, undo the prospective U.S. nuclear agreement with India, start a trade spat with China, Mexico or Canada, reject the accountability concept behind NCLB, restore the status quo ante for the regulation of financial markets, roll back all of the Bush tax cuts, or eradicate the political influence of special interests.

This is hardly to say, of course, that there will be no modulation whatsoever in several of these areas, as well as imaginably in such fields as health care, climate policy, energy, and immigration. All told, though, the prospects for a great political metamorphosis are remote.

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