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Polarized Post-Partisan Politics? (Or Just Politics?)

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INTRODUCTION

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Post-partisan politics is seen as providing a cure for whatever currently ails American politics. We presently have partisanship, which the conventional wisdom holds we must move beyond. Left unclear though is what comes next. Politics without political parties? Political parties without partisanship? Self-designated inspirational leadership?



© Reuters/Jason Reed -U.S. President Barack Obama (C) enters to speak before a joint session of congress on Capitol Hill.

This paper will explore post-partisanship and the various forms of partisanship that currently exist in Washington. After gaining a deeper understanding, I conclude that partisanship continues to serve as the basis for the workings of American politics. I take as my theme the clear and forceful statement of political consultant Mark Mellman: “Partisanship remains the pre-eminent structuring principle of our politics.” (*The Hill*, February 17, 2009)

Partisanship cannot simply be wished away. It is not an evil concept to be chased out by the angels among us. It is not a synonym for “polarization,” though it is likely to reflect polar opposites when they exist. Partisanship, simply put, is the way lawmaking works in representative government.

The standard patterns of partisanship (pure, bi-, competitive, and cross) require superior leadership skills so as to recognize the political conditions most favorable to one form over another. Bluntly, our politics are partisan-based and will remain so.

Yet a post-partisan remedy has been offered. So what is it? Is such transformation underway? If so, are we cured of partisanship?



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What is Post-Partisan Politics?

Language guardian William Safire found a reference to a “post-partisan era” in a *New York Times* article written during the 1976 Ford-Carter campaign. Watergate and a post-Vietnam War hangover put the public in a sour mood, for which post-partisanship was seen to be the cure. Safire references a Third Millennium group in the 1990’s that expressed exasperation with the workings, or, by their view, failure to work, of split party government so characteristic of the post-1968 era.

Philip Longman, in a February 2008 paper written for the New America Foundation, provided a summary of Third Millennium thinking. “Leadership as inspiration” was stressed as an antidote to policy making by partisan combat. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger were cited as prototypical post-partisans.

Barack Obama was spotted as a post-partisan political figure after his keynote address at the 2004 National Democratic Party Convention. His inexperience in national politics was viewed as an asset, seen as elevating him above “politics as usual” and enabling him to run as a “no scars” candidate in the 2007-08 nomination battle. Experience was interpreted as the old politics of partisanship, equated with polarization and political gridlock. In Obama’s case, *inexperience* was legitimized. His victory provided a test for a post-partisan era in American politics. It is, therefore, well worth asking: What does post-partisanship look like and are we currently in the midst of a political era notable for its lack of partisanship?

To find out, I sampled a few post-election responses to these questions. Shortly after the election, Donna Brazile, a prominent Democratic operative and analyst, viewed post-partisanship more as an urge than a style or an agenda. “The desire of Americans to see their leaders come together to solve problems without first resorting to finger pointing, name-calling and other childish games,” Brazile said. She expressed a hope to replace “partisan gridlock” with a “rise as one to preserve and propel forward our great and endangered nation.” (“What is post-partisanship?” *Washington Times*, November 24, 2008)

How might that happen? Brazile recommended that Obama work with John McCain “in building coalitions on Capitol Hill,” sounding much like

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bipartisanship, not a new political framework.

Democratic consultant Mark Mellman was not sanguine about bipartisanship being equated with post-partisanship. Writing shortly after Obama was inaugurated, Mellman did not foresee Republican cooperation with the new president. “For better or worse, we do not live in anything like a post-partisan world. In fact, partisanship remains a deeply ingrained feature of Americans’ political psyche.” Having resolved that our politics are partisan, Mellman did not speculate what a partisan-less polity might be. (“Bipartisan, post-partisan, just partisan,” *The Hill*, February 7, 2009)

In early December 2008, reporter John Harwood speculated about the soon-to-be Obama presidency in light of two developments: (1) [Obama’s] effort during the transition to persuade “partisan, ideological adversaries to see him in a less partisan, less ideological light” and (2) reaping “these plaudits without seeming to abandon his commitment to the same policies that conservatives routinely attacked during the campaign.”

Harwood puzzled about how these developments might be reconciled. In doing so, he revealed the difficulty of shaping a post-partisan presidency even when many believed it to be the ideal time. Three prospective courses of action were identified for the fledgling Obama presidency, each option being an alternative to “the partisan divisions that have marked recent administrations.”

- Option 1: “A bipartisan style of governance that splits the difference between competing ideological camps...” (*My comment: Bipartisanship does not require a new label. Rather it is a form of partisanship, as described subsequently.*)
- Option 2: “A post-partisan politics that narrows gaps between red and blue or even renders them irrelevant...” (*My comment: It is difficult to decipher what this means short of discovering a method for disallowing or substituting for political parties, essentially root and branch change.*)
- Option 3: “A series of left-leaning programs that draw on Americans’ desire for action and also on Mr. Obama’s moderate, even conservative, temperament, to hurdle the ideological obstacles that have lately paralyzed Washington.” (*My comment: This option appears to be a reversal of the magician’s routine. In this case: “Now you don’t see it; now you do.” Actually this sleight-of-hand was tried in 1993 by Clinton. The result? Unified Republican partisan opposition.*) (Quoted material from John Harwood, “‘Partisan’ Seeks a Prefix: Bi- or Post-,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2008)

Harwood’s valiant effort to clarify the workings of a new, non-partisan, non-ideological politics is helpful, to be sure. But it too falls short of specifying how post-partisanship works or the political conditions required to pull it off.

I conclude that post-partisan politics is more hope than reality. Accordingly, discussions of this phenomenon are fictional portrayals of a courteous politics practiced by well-intentioned leaders seemingly skilled at managing partisan organized institutions. Accompanying this reverie is the hint of halcyon days of two-party teamwork, typically lacking references to specific times, cases, or leaders, save for a few inexplicit references to the Progressive Party of the early twentieth century.

What is Partisan Politics?

Partisanship is a dynamic concept. Its form changes by issues, election results, and political leadership.

Having failed in the effort to find a working definition of post-partisanship, I add my own comments onto Mellman's "pre-eminent structuring principle of our politics." Since 1856 at the national level, we have had Democrats and Republicans. These two parties shape our partisan politics.

Partisanship is a dynamic concept. Its form changes by issues, election results, and political leadership. The several variations offer a fascinating array of policymaking opportunities. Mastering the American forms of partisan politics requires substantial political experience and skills, beginning with an acute awareness of leaders' strengths and weaknesses in pursuing agendas. The place to start is with straight, "we won, you lost" partisanship, followed by other forms: bipartisanship, competitive partisanship, and cross-partisanship.

Pure Partisanship.

Occasionally conditions favor, if not exactly guarantee, coalition building exclusively within the majority party. A prerequisite, of course, is same party dominance in the elected branches—the presidency, House of Representatives, and Senate. But the numbers make a difference too—substantial majorities in Congress (60 plus nowadays in the Senate) and a landslide win for the president. Additionally, pure partisanship requires a policy component, essentially a campaign agenda that can be interpreted as having authentic public backing. In other words, election results should evidence support for the new, not merely rejection of the old.

History shows this to be a tall order, especially after FDR. The purest case in the post-World War II period is the Democratic win in 1964—landslide for Lyndon Johnson, two-thirds House and Senate Democratic majorities, some evidence of public support for the unfinished Kennedy agenda, as embellished by Johnson in 1964. Even still, serious negotiation was required in enacting Great Society legislation because of the strength of the southern Democrats, fiscally conservative contingent in Congress. Thus, for example, President Johnson was well aware that Medicare had to get through Wilbur Mills' House

Committee on Ways and Means and that Mills often had a working relationship with ranking Republican John Byrnes. The legislation passed with contributions from both Mills and Byrnes. Mills saw to that. Further, not even two-thirds majorities protected LBJ from majority party criticism of an unpopular war.

From 1969 to 2009, there have been but three cases of single-party victories in the three elected institutions: Carter, four years; Clinton, two years; and George W. Bush, four plus years. In not one of these instances did the majority party meet the conditions for pure partisanship. Carter barely won and had difficulties gaining Congressional Democratic support for his agenda. Clinton won with a popular vote plurality of 43 percent, and faltered so badly in promoting an ambitious agenda that in 1994 Republicans won mid-term majorities in both the House and Senate for the first time in 40 years. And George W. Bush had among the least political capital of any president, barely winning election and reelection and having to cope with narrow margins in both chambers on Capitol Hill.

Winning the White House, Senate, and House of Representatives can, by itself, mislead majority party leaders into believing that pure partisanship will work. This view may be enhanced by expectations for striking change, as in 1992 for the Democrats following 12 years of Republican White House control, or in 2008 when Congressional Democrats added to their House and Senate majorities and Obama won a solid, if not landslide, victory for president.

“We won, you lost” sloganeering is pure, not post-partisanship. It requires resolute purpose, experienced leadership, and forceful discipline across a range of issues, foreign and domestic. Reliance on this method encourages disciplined unity by the opposition, not to mention an accompanying “pure” majority party accountability. These factors may have little effect in the short run if the margins are large and persistent. But it is politically risky in a system of separated elections (two-year cycles) and partitioned term lengths—staggered in the Senate—of 2, 4, and 6 years.

Bipartisanship.

This form of inter-party lawmaking begs for greater clarity in common usage. For instance, Senator Olympia Snowe’s lone Republican favorable vote for the Senate Finance Committee’s health care proposal was said to give “the Democrats the right to claim that their bill is technically ‘bipartisan.’” (“Washington Sketch,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2009) That would be one Republican vote for Democratic-sponsored health care bills from three House and two Senate committees. Not exactly resounding support from across the aisle.

It is important to specify what bipartisanship is not. Two or three members of the minority co-sponsoring or voting in favor of a bill is not bipartisanship. A

leader declaring an intention to work with the minority is not bipartisanship, nor is announcing that opposition party proposals will be taken into account.

For it to be analytically useful, bipartisanship on an issue is best understood as a continuous working relationship between leaders (party, committee, presidential) from both parties. It is, at minimum, a place at the table along the way, not merely being informed of a conclusion reached by the majority.

In this spirit, bipartisanship begins in the early stages of lawmaking—defining the issues and designing the initial proposals. It carries through to passage and the signing ceremony. The stimulus for cooperation and conciliation typically is an agreed-upon crisis, notably economic or national security in nature (for example, European recovery after World War II, post-9/11 national security legislation, recovery packages following the fall 2008 jolts to the economy). Often fast action is required and the work is done in good faith negotiations between the executive and legislative branches and between the two political parties.

Apart from an economic calamity, domestic issues rarely feature bipartisanship as defined here. Lacking a consensus on whether a crisis exists, ordinary partisan preferences prevail in enacting major legislation. Recent exceptions include the 1997 budget agreement between President Clinton and the Republican Congress and President George W. Bush's 2001 invitation for key congressional Democrats to participate in framing what eventually passed as the "No Child Left Behind" legislation. Social Security reform emanating from the bipartisan Greenspan Commission in 1983 is another domestic example, in that case following President Reagan's disastrous effort initially to go it alone.

It is useful to note that bipartisanship is a form of politics. It can be very contentious, but the process features authentic participation from both parties throughout.

It is also worth observing that crisis is not ordinarily sensitive to political conditions. It can occur despite who occupies the White House, and single- or split-party government. Crisis is issue and policy-specific. It has what other issues often lack: focus. As such, it typically scrambles the existing agendas with the effects of 9/11 on George W. Bush's mostly domestic agenda, or the fall 2008 economic meltdown on the priorities on which Obama had campaigned. Oftentimes presidents try to define their priorities as related to the crisis at hand, as was the case with George W. Bush in the fall of 2001 when he sought to associate proposals for energy, homeland security, economic stimulus, and trade authority to the post-9/11 threat. It didn't work. Pre-crisis competitive partisanship prevailed on these issues. Obama tried to do much the same with his pre-recession campaign priorities of climate change and health care reform. As with Bush's effort, selling these massive new government programs as aiding

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an economy in recession has been viewed as a stretch.

Bipartisanship is not to be undervalued just because it is rare. Under crisis conditions it has been vital in demonstrating national support for decisive action. It is also the case that the Senate more than the House fosters bipartisan inclinations by reason of its procedures and representational bases (whole states). Certain senators are inclined to work across the aisle in the initiating stages of legislation, for example, John McCain and Charles Grassley among Republicans; Edward Kennedy and Max Baucus among Democrats.

Competitive and Cross Partisanship.

Whatever the initial intentions, most lawmaking on major issues fits into these partisan patterns. The two parties compete, often with intensity, in framing and enacting legislation. Or a segment of one party joins the greater part of the other party to form a majority coalition in favor of or in opposition to a proposal. I discuss these forms in concert because they often are related. For example, portions of competing partisan packages may be melded in a manner as to attract cross-party support.

Genuinely competitive partisanship is most likely to occur when both parties can legitimately claim political capital. Washington has seen these circumstances frequently in recent decades: a president of one party, one or both houses of Congress in the hands of the other party, and narrow margins all around. Declaring a “mandate” under those conditions rings hollow, though apparently nothing prevents the use of this inapt concept among pundits.

The point is that each party has sufficient political justification to participate actively in designing policy alternatives. And there is every legitimate incentive, given tangible measures of public support, to press for the party plan just as far into the process as possible.

Cross partisanship is common in lawmaking. Typically mislabeled “bipartisanship,” this form may be the result of resolving intense policy struggles between the parties (competitive partisanship) or of identifying a segment of the other party likely to support a proposal. Examples of the first in recent years are welfare reform during the Clinton presidency and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in the George W. Bush presidency. Both were enacted with cross party majorities, three times in the case of welfare reform due to Clinton vetoing the first two versions.

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) during the Clinton administration and the 2001 tax cuts for George W. Bush are examples of the second type—that is, dependence on a segment of the other party for building a majority. Democratic presidents typically can rely on Congressional Republicans for supporting trade agreements, so much so that in the case of NAFTA the

president needed to search his own party for the required segment to make a majority.

The so-called “conservative coalition” of southern Democrats and Republicans was a classic case of predictable cross partisanship on certain issues before regional realignment. The success of the Republican southern strategy during the 1970’s dramatically reduced Democratic House and Senate seats in the south with the effect of shrinking the coalition. Similarly potential alliances between northeastern Republicans and Democrats were lessened with the reduction of Republican representation from that region.

These and other developments, as reviewed and analyzed in *Red and Blue Nation?* (Brookings, 2006, 2008), have amplified party divisions, raised the level of intensity on policy issues, and consistently divvied up political capital rather equally between Democrats and Republicans.

The House majority party has favorable rules for taking the path of pure partisanship, as has been practiced by both Republicans and Democrats since 2001. The Senate majority party has not had that option until 2009 because the filibuster sets the majority number at 60 rather than 51. Accordingly, we have regularly witnessed pure partisanship in building majorities in the House, intense competitive and cross partisanship in the Senate, along with occasional bipartisanship in that chamber as inspired by crisis. Post-partisanship has yet to make an entrance, granting we may not know it if we saw it.

President Obama and Partisanship

How might the first nine months of the Obama presidency be characterized? Does “partisanship” continue to be “the pre-eminent structuring principle of our politics?” (Mellman) Or are we witnessing the post-partisan solution? The record for major issues at this writing features pure, not post-partisanship. However President Obama may have wished to govern, circumstances channeled him into that partisan form, with all of the attendant risks. Here are some of those guiding passages:

1. Democrats were already in charge of Congress and were fresh from having engaged in partisan politics with President George W. Bush.
2. Congressional Democratic leaders had reason to believe that they had as much popular support as President Obama, having had net gains in the House (21) and Senate (8) with House Democratic popular vote equaling Obama’s 53 percent. Senate Democratic popular vote was 52 percent.
3. Congress was in a contentious and highly partisan lame-duck session

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during November and December when George W. Bush was still president and President-elect Obama was preoccupied with his transition at the time.

4. By law, Congress was in session over two weeks before the president was inaugurated. Work continued on shaping a stimulus package during this time. Whatever Obama's urges, Democratic party leaders on Capitol Hill were not in a post-partisan mood.
5. Upon being inaugurated, President Obama, as expected, issued several executive orders reversing George W. Bush's policies, the most controversial of which set a deadline for closing Guantanamo prison as promised in the campaign.
6. The \$787 billion stimulus package was passed by Congress on February 13, 2009 with no House Republican votes and three Senate Republican votes (one of which was cast by Arlen Specter who subsequently switched to the Democratic Party).
7. The president's pre-recession agenda contained a raft of contentiously partisan issues: health care, climate change, energy, tax reform, education, treatment of detainees, gays in the military, and immigration.

President Obama sought to temper this partisan climate by appointing three Republicans to his cabinet, one of whom withdrew even before Senate hearings on his nomination. But the main message from the new administration and Capitol Hill was "we won, you lost." And the initial decisions, whether by executive order or congressional action, were not conciliatory. Very much like the early days and weeks of the Clinton presidency in 1993, Congressional Republicans unified as a hardly loyal, if mostly impotent, opposition.

In conclusion, the first nine months of the Obama presidency confirm Mellman's characterization of our politics. Partisanship is definitely the preeminent structuring principle, bipartisanship is unlikely under prevailing political conditions, and circumstances favor a pure partisan approach to enact the president's legislative priorities.

As observed earlier, pure partisanship is a risky approach, especially with respectable but not overwhelming numbers in the House, Senate, and with the general public. Maintaining party discipline can be exhausting in working through an ambitious agenda. As it is, however, once pure partisanship is set, it is difficult to reverse, especially in a system with two-year election cycles. The minority watches the clock, as do those in the majority occupying seats ordinarily held by the minority. Just as critical is the likelihood of needing minority votes down the line on a crisis or a divisive issue for the majority.

Additionally, pure partisanship's companion is pure accountability.

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Sensitive to this possible burden in making large change, President Obama's preference has been for Congress to provide legislative details. Trouble is, holding Congress accountable as an institution, weighed separately from the president, is difficult under any circumstances and quite impossible when the same party is in charge at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. Consult any ex-president on how well that works. As it happens, the public does not vote for Congress (which presently has a 25 percent approval score), but for an individual representative or senator.

So Barack Obama's days as a post-partisan president ended before they began. Like it or not, he is a partisan president in a polarized political culture, executing a straight-line Democratic strategy. And as with all presidents before him, he will be held accountable for what is produced by the chosen strategy.

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