AMERICAN POLITICS ON THE EVE OF THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS

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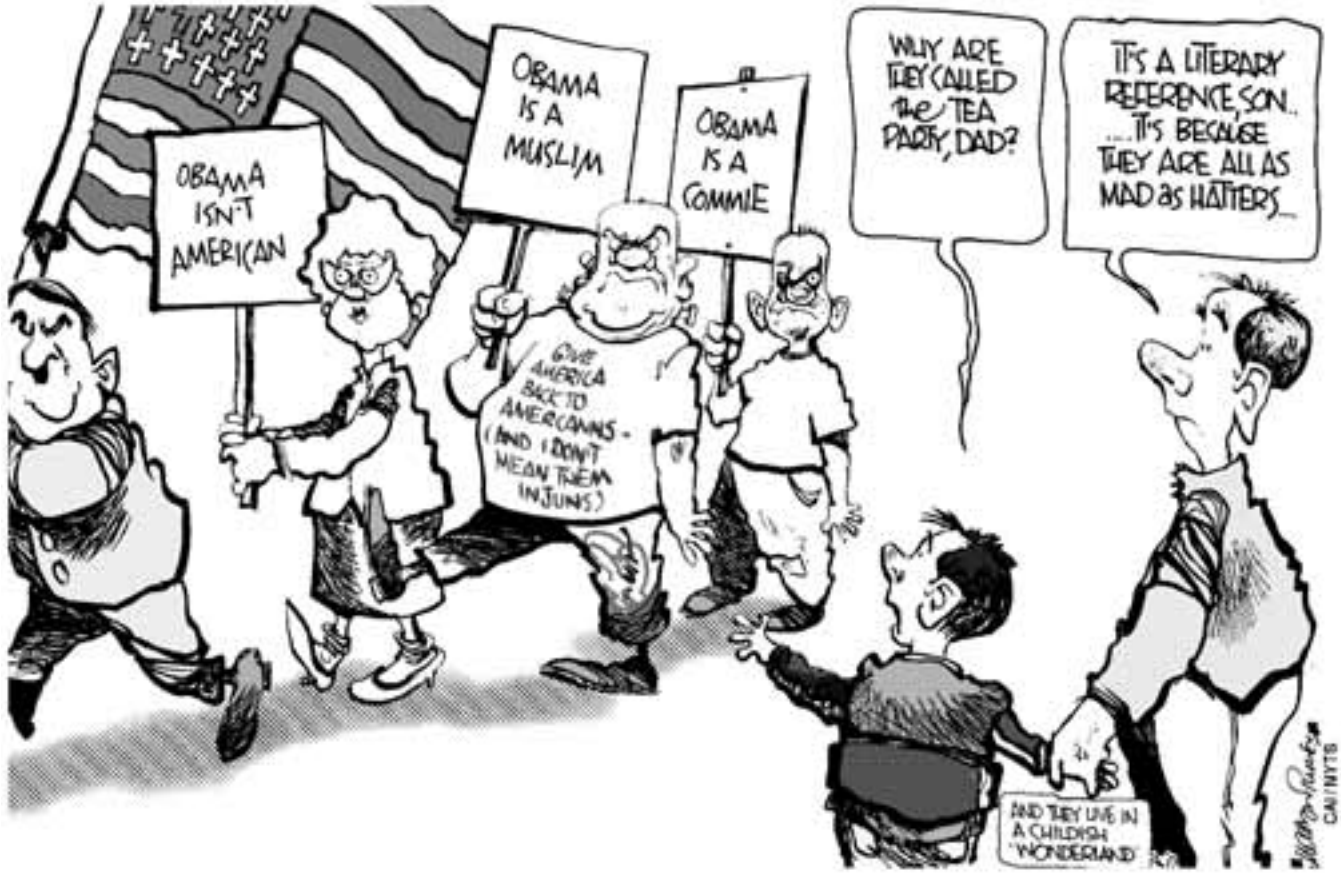


Scared, Sour, Pessimistic

How did Barack Obama, a new United States President of such extraordinary presence and promise, fall so quickly from grace? Why have his considerable achievements - financial stabilisation and economic stimulus, health, education, and financial regulatory reform - not paid political dividends for him and his party? Does the emergence of the tea party movement and its wary embrace by the Republican party signify a sharp ideological turn to the right, an unwillingness to engage seriously and responsibly the staggering challenges confronting the country, and a possible withdrawal of the US from a critical leadership role in global affairs? Do the large Republican gains almost certain in the coming mid-term congressional and state elections signify a truncated Obama presidency and a rapid return to power for the Republicans?

MANY CRITICS PUT THE blame squarely on President Barack Obama. Inflated campaign promises and rhetoric, misguided priorities, ideological overreach, tactical failures in dealing with Congress, and a communications breakdown are offered as serious flaws in presidential leadership. Each contains some fragment of truth; none capture the difficult tradeoffs he confronted or the logic of the path he chose.

The lofty poetry of every inspiring presidential campaign inevitably gives way to the more grounded prose of governing. Obama's rhetorical invocation of a post-partisan future was wildly unrealistic in this era of deep partisan polarisation but it was also his signature brand.

He catapulted to national prominence with his electrifying keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic national party convention in which he evoked a vision of a country 'not of blue states and red states but of the United States of America.' It was so much a part of the fabric of his presidential campaign that he had to make extended efforts to bring Republicans in Congress into serious negotiations on major policy, however futile they proved.

Those who argue that Obama should have focused exclusively on the economy and jobs during his first two years, pushing health reform, climate change and other centerpieces of his campaign agenda into the future, are blind to the realities of governing. Multiple problems and issues crowd a presidential agenda. They cannot simply be set aside. The window for health reform, which he considered an essential element in dealing with the long-term revenue imbalance, would be open early and briefly at best. Obama wisely concluded it was 'now or never' and won a seemingly impossible legislative victory.

Critics use health reform as the prime example of an ideological lurch to the left. Yet the legislation borrowed heavily from the Republican tool kit, including competitive private insurance markets, individual mandates, and reducing the tax deductibility of health insurance premiums. It was also crafted to be at worst revenue neutral in its first decade and then slow the rate of health care inflation in subsequent decades.

To be sure, the multiple government interventions in the economy designed to avoid another Great Depression and reduce the extent and duration of the economic downturn were aggressive and intrusive. But similar and coordinated steps were taken by G20 developed and emerging market governments of all ideological stripes.

Financial and economic crises of this magnitude demand immediate and extraordinary steps by government; in the US, Washington is already withdrawing from its temporary investments in finance companies and car makers and the stimulus programmes were by design temporary. In the case of climate change induced by greenhouse gas emissions, putting a price on carbon through direct taxes or cap-and-trade markets is fully consistent with mainstream and conservative economic thinking.

LACKING A NARRATIVE

Obama's dealings with Congress and his efforts to explain clearly and understandably to citizens what he was doing and why – to 'craft a narrative' – have been far from perfect. These shortcomings, however, and more broadly his inability to maintain his popularity – currently 46 percent – and garner public approval of his major legislative and administrative successes,, are more a consequence of structural economic and political obstacles than failures of leadership.

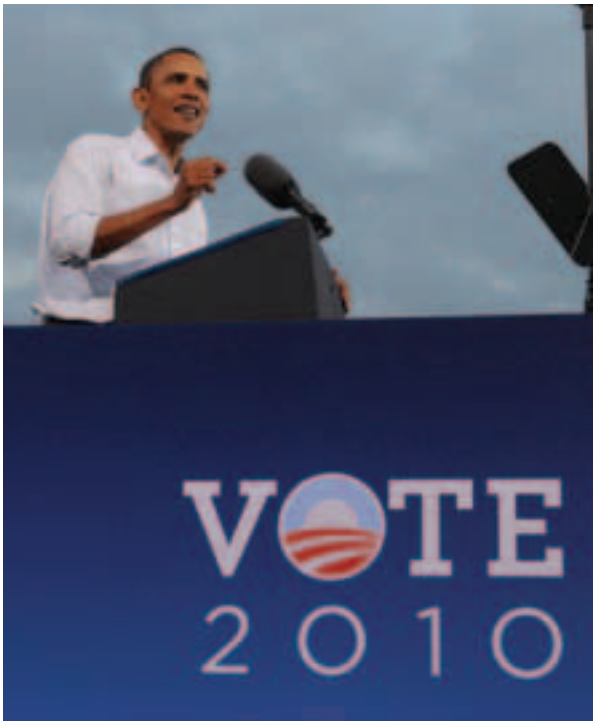
The simple fact is that no leader or governing party thrives politically in difficult economic times. President Ronald Reagan's approval rating dropped to 38 percent in the depths of the 1982 recession before he rode an economic recovery to a landslide reelection. President George Bush Senior saw his sky high approval ratings associated with the brief and successful Gulf war crash in the midst of the 1990-91 recession.

Even Franklin D. Roosevelt maintained a popular public profile during the 1930s only as long as the economy showed clear signs of improvement; when the early years of progress on economic growth and the unemployment rate were reversed in 1938, he and his party suffered accordingly.

Citizens today are understandably scared, sour, and deeply pessimistic about our economic future. Persistently high and extended unemployment and underemployment, stagnant wages, and diminished personal assets together with huge public deficits and debt, have contributed to a loss of confidence in the value of governmental interventions.

The well-documented successes of the financial stabilisation and stimulus initiatives are invisible to a public reacting to the here and now, not to the counterfactual of how much worse it might have been. The painfully slow recovery from the global financial crisis and Great Recession have led most Americans to believe these programmes have failed and as a consequence they judge the President and Congress harshly.

HIGHLY POLARISED



That perception of failure has been magnified by the highly contentious process by which Obama's initiatives have been adopted in Congress. America has in recent years developed a highly polarised party system, with striking ideological differences between the parties and unusual unity within each. But these parliamentary-like parties operate in a governmental system in which majorities are unable readily to put their programmes in place.

Republicans adopted a strategy of consistent, unified, and aggressive opposition to every major component of the President's agenda, eschewing negotiation, bargaining and compromise, even on matters of great national import. The Senate filibuster has been the indispensable weapon in killing, weakening, slowing, or discrediting all major legislation proposed by the Democratic majority.

Tough economic times and militant opposition make the wider problem of very low levels of trust in government worse. The public is deeply skeptical of the capacity of government and the willingness of its elected leaders to deal responsibly with pressing problems confronting the country. The contemporary media – including ideologically tinged cable news, talk radio, and internet blogs – contribute to public cynicism and distrust, all of which weakens the capacity of leaders to fashion and sustain policies responsive to the problems they confront.

TEA PARTY TIME

The tea party movement is one manifestation of these powerful forces. While its activists are a very small slice of the citizenry, it attracts the support of a fifth of the electorate. Tea partiers are overwhelmingly white, middle class, older, very conservative, and Republican or Republican-leaning independents.

They share a belief that elected officials in Washington have defiled the Constitution by creating a bloated government and they are determined to take back their government and end its abuses, including the provision of subsidies and benefits to the undeserving poor.

Many are religious conservatives and strongly against immigration; others have a purer libertarian philosophy that embraces limited government in social as well as economic areas. Many share a paranoid, conspiratorial view of the world that has been present in pockets throughout American history. Most have very strong views and very little knowledge about the shape of public policies and the composition of the federal budget.

By intervening in Republican Senate and House of Representatives primaries, some elements of the inchoate movement have succeeded in nominating candidates far from the mainstream of American politics, at least one of whom, Christine O'Donnell of Deleware, is unelectable.

Their energy is likely to help the Republicans make major gains in Congress, but their reputation for extremism and quirkiness could well impair Republican chances of mounting a serious challenge to the President's reelection campaign. The Republican party is embracing the tea party out of both fear and opportunity. That embrace could well prove fatal after the midterm election is over and the new Congress seated.

The traditional loss of seats at midterm by the president's party, the large number of Democratic seats at risk following their victories in 2006 and 2008, and the abysmal state of the economy, guarantee major Republican gains in Congress. The only question is whether they will pick up the 39 seats in the House and ten in the Senate needed to claim majority status. They are likely – but not guaranteed – to succeed in the House but fall short in the Senate.

What follows is almost certain to be a period of intensified polarisation and partisanship, with little of consequence enacted into law and the focus of government activity shifting to the executive, through foreign policy leadership and the administrative process. And then on to the 2012 presidential election, with Obama favoured to repeat the success of his predecessors Reagan and Bill Clinton.

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