
Introduction

IN 2008, AMERICA SUFFERED FROM WAR and economic crisis. Partisan polarization was extraordinarily high while faith in government was exceptionally low. In such times, the reflexive call is for new—and better—leadership, especially in the White House. Barack Obama answered the call, presenting himself as a transformational leader who would fundamentally change the policy and the politics of America.

Even though both the public and commentators are frequently disillusioned with the performance of individual presidents and recognize that stalemate is common in the political system, Americans eagerly accept what appears to be the promise of presidential leadership to renew their faith in the potential of the presidency. Many Americans enthusiastically embraced Obama's candidacy and worked tirelessly to put him in the White House. Once there, the new president and his supporters shared an exuberant optimism about the changes he would bring to the country.

There is little question that Obama was sincere in wanting to bring about change. So were his followers. Yet a year into his administration, many were frustrated—and surprised—by the widespread resistance to his major policy proposals. The public was typically unresponsive to the president's calls for support. Partisan polarization and congressional gridlock did not disappear. As a result, the promised transformation in energy, environmental, immigration, and other policies did not occur. When the president succeeded on health care reform, it was the result of old-fashioned party leadership, ramming the bill through Congress on a party line vote. Even worse, from the Democrats' perspective, the 2010 midterm elections were a stunning defeat for the president's party that would undermine the administration's ability to govern in the succeeding years.

How could this bright, articulate, decent, and knowledgeable new president have such a difficult time attaining his goals? Did the president fumble the ball, making tactical errors in his attempts to govern? Although no president is perfect, the Obama White House has not been severely mismanaged, politically insensitive, or prone to making avoidable mistakes. Ineffective implementation of a strategy is not the explanation for the lack of progress in transforming policy and politics.

Instead, the problem was in the strategies themselves—in the belief that they could succeed. A common premise underlying the widespread emphasis on political leadership as the wellspring of change is that some leaders have the capability to transform policy by reshaping the influences on it. As we will see,

the Obama White House believed in the power of the bully pulpit. The president and his advisors felt that he could persuade the public to support his program. They also believed that the president could obtain bipartisan support in Congress through efforts to engage the opposition. As a result of these premises, the White House felt comfortable advancing an extraordinarily large and expensive agenda.

These premises were faulty, however. There is not a single systematic study that demonstrates that presidents can reliably move others to support them. Equally important, we now have a substantial literature showing that presidents typically fail at persuasion.¹

In *à e Strategic President*, I challenged the conventional understanding of presidential leadership, arguing that presidential power is *not* the power to persuade. Presidents cannot reshape the contours of the political landscape to pave the way for change by establishing an agenda and persuading the public, Congress, and others to support their policies.²

The point is not that presidents do not matter. Of course they do. The question is *how* they matter—how do they bring about change? The answer I offer is that successful presidents facilitate change by recognizing opportunities in their environments and fashioning strategies and tactics to exploit them. In other words, presidents who are successful in obtaining support for their agendas have to evaluate the opportunities for change in their environments carefully and orchestrate existing and potential support skillfully.³

Overreach

The stakes of understanding the potential of persuasiveness are especially high for the White House. If the conventional wisdom is wrong and presidents are not able to persuade, much less mobilize, the public or Congress, then presidents may be wasting their time and resources and adopting governing styles that are prone to failure. Presidents—and the country—often endure self-inflicted wounds when they fail to appreciate the limits of their influence.

The concept of overreach refers to presidents proposing policies that lack substantial support in the public or Congress, expecting to create opportunities for change by persuading a majority of the public and the Congress to support their policies. As a result of their risky behavior, they suffer heavy political losses that undermine their ability to govern. The best way to elucidate the concept is to examine some prominent examples of overreach.

FDR's Court-Packing Plan

In February 1937, shortly after his landslide reelection and at the height of his powers, Franklin D. Roosevelt surprised the nation by proposing a plan to in-

crease the size of the Supreme Court. His motivation was transparent: to add members who would support New Deal policies. It is telling that after the election, the president was so confident of his public support and his ability to channel it to sustain his initiatives that he did not consult with major groups of supporters, such as leading liberals or leaders of labor unions and farm organizations, on his proposal and ignored information on the public's fundamental support for the Court.⁴

The story of the battle is a complicated one, and Roosevelt claimed success (a more responsive Court) even though his bill failed to pass. However we interpret the White House's success in achieving its immediate goal, there is little doubt that the entire episode was a costly one for the president. The Court battle became a rallying point around which latent opposition to the New Deal coalesced and helped to weld together a bipartisan coalition of anti-New Deal senators into a conservative bloc composed of the irreconcilable Democrats, Republicans, and, most important, previously loyal moderate Democrats. The battle over the Court also deeply divided the Democratic Party, precipitating factional wars in the states.⁵

Similarly, the dispute produced divisions among reformers of many types, undermining the bipartisan support for the New Deal and confirming for Republican progressives their suspicions that New Dealers were interested in self-aggrandizement and concentrating power in Washington. In addition, the attempt to pack the Court helped to cause the middle-class backing Roosevelt had mobilized in the 1936 campaign to ebb away.

As a result, the Court struggle helped to blunt the most important drive for social reform in American history and squandered the advantage of Roosevelt's triumph in 1936. As William Leuchtenburg put it, "Never again would FDR be as predominant, either on Capitol Hill or at the polling places, as he was when 1937 began."⁶ Years later, Henry Wallace reflected: "The whole New Deal really went up in smoke as a result of the Supreme Court fight." At the end of the 1937 session of Congress, one reporter inquired, "How did the President slide so far—so fast?"⁷

Bill Clinton's Health Care Reform

Bill Clinton declared health care reform as the cornerstone of his new presidency. In November 1993, he sent a 1,342-page proposal to Congress. The administration based its massive health care reform plan on the underlying, and unquestioned, assumption within the White House that the president could sell his plan to the public and thus solidify congressional support. Because the administration believed it could persuade the public, Clinton and his aides felt they could focus on developing their preferred option in health care policy in 1993. In the process, they discounted centrist opinion and underestimated how opponents could criticize their plan as big government. The

president was not able to sustain the support of the public for health care reform, however.⁸

Moreover, even as the bill's fortunes soured, the White House refused to compromise. As Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro put it, "The White House's unquestioned faith that the president could rally Americans produced a rigid insistence on comprehensive reforms." In the end, Clinton's proposal did not pass—or even come to a vote in either house of Congress. The president and his aides had greatly overestimated their ability to persuade the public to support their proposal.⁹

This is not the lesson that Clinton learned, however. Indeed, the premise of the power of the presidential pulpit was so strong that each downturn in the bill's progress prompted new schemes for going public rather than a reconsideration of the fundamental framework of the bill or the basic strategy for obtaining its passage.¹⁰ Ultimately, the president concluded that health care reform failed because "I totally neglected how to get the public informed. . . . I have to get more involved in crafting my message—in getting across my core concerns."¹¹ In other words, it was not his strategy that was inappropriate, only his implementation of it. The premise of the potential of presidential persuasion seems to be nonfalsifiable.

In the 1994 midterm elections, the Democrats lost majorities in both the House and the Senate for the first time in four decades, undermining the president's ability to move his agenda. The administration's health care proposal was the prime example of the Republicans' charge that the Democrats were ideological extremists who had lost touch with the wishes of Americans. Summing up the health care reform debacle, Jacobs and Shapiro concluded that the "fundamental political mistake committed by Bill Clinton and his aides was in grossly overestimating the capacity of a president to 'win' public opinion and to use public support as leverage to overcome known political obstacles—from an ideologically divided Congress to hostile interest groups."¹²

George W. Bush's Social Security Reform

On November 4, 2004, two days after the presidential election, George W. Bush painted his second-term vision in bold, aggressive strokes during a press conference at the White House. A central thrust of his second term would be to spend the political capital he felt he had earned in the election to reform Social Security. Rather than winding down its 2004 campaign effort, the administration launched an extensive public relations effort to convince the public, and thus Congress, to support the president's reform proposal.

Even before the inauguration, the White House announced plans to reactivate Bush's reelection campaign's network of donors and activists to build pressure on lawmakers to allow workers to invest part of their Social Security taxes

in the stock market. As Treasury Secretary John W. Snow put it, the “scope and scale goes way beyond anything we have done.”¹³ The same architects of Bush’s political victories, principally political strategists Karl Rove at the White House and Ken Mehlman, who was the Bush-Cheney campaign manager, at the Republican National Committee (RNC), would be masterminding the new campaign. As Mehlman put it, the “whole effort will be focused on the legislative agenda.”¹⁴

At the end of President Bush’s “60 Stops in 60 Days” campaign to promote his Social Security proposals, the Treasury Department reported on its Web site that 31 administration officials had made 166 stops outside the beltway, visiting 40 states and 127 cities, and had given more than 500 radio interviews in 50 states. Administration officials also placed opinion columns in newspapers with circulation totaling 7.94 million during this period, and they participated in 61 town hall meetings with 30 members of Congress in their constituencies.¹⁵

All this effort did not succeed in convincing the public to support the president or his Social Security proposal. What was probably the largest and best-organized public relations effort to sell a policy in the history of the Republic ended with a whimper—and in failure. Neither the public nor Congress supported the president’s plan.¹⁶ Instead, the president’s efforts contributed to the unraveling of Republican cohesiveness in Congress and reinforced the growing perception among the public that he was not up to the job of president.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush overestimated the prospects for change on Supreme Court appointments, health care policy, and Social Security, respectively, overreached, and failed to achieve their goals. (In his memoirs, Clinton admits that he overestimated the pace and amount of change Americans could digest.)¹⁷ In each case, the president’s assumption that he could achieve his goals through persuasion led to much greater problems than the failure to achieve his immediate policy goals. Their strategic choices also weakened their administrations in the long term.¹⁸

The dangers of overreach and debilitating political losses alert us that it is critically important for presidents to assess accurately the potential for obtaining support. Moreover, the success of a strategy for governing depends on the opportunities for it to succeed. Adopting strategies for governing that are prone to failure waste rather than create opportunities.¹⁹

Strategic Assessments

Before a president can fashion a strategy for accomplishing his goals and avoid the consequences of overreach, he must understand the environment in which he is operating. Because presidents are not in strong positions to *create* opportunities for legislative success by persuading others to support their policies, recognizing the opportunities that already exist is particularly significant. In-

deed, it may be the most important skill of all. Ideally, such appraisals will influence how much and what types of change presidents seek and the strategies they choose for achieving it.

Although accurately assessing the possibilities for change in the president's environment is a key to success, the context of any presidency is complex, making such assessments difficult. Public support is a critical political resource. Indicators of the potential for public support for a president seeking to expand the scope of government include a mandate from the voters favoring specific policies, a broad public predisposition for government activism, and opposition party identifiers open to supporting the president's initiatives.

All politicians claim to know what the public wants, but the facts that it is rare to test such claims and that there are typically contradictory claims on the same issue ought to give one pause about their accuracy. In truth, it is not easy to decipher public opinion or to predict public response to specific proposals. Moreover, it is possible that presidential success at altering public policy will create a backlash against further change. Future currents of public opinion, which are inherently difficult to gauge, will influence the support the president receives from members of Congress, especially those in vulnerable seats.

Supportive majorities in Congress and an opposition party open to compromise are also critical factors in presidential success. Equally useful to the White House is a weakened, or even reeling, opposition party attempting to find its footing after electoral setbacks. Moreover, the size and nature of the president's legislative agenda will strongly influence how representatives and senators respond to his proposals and affect the resources available to fund and implement them. The nature of the opposition to the president is also critical—and difficult to assess. It is one thing to count the number of opposition party members in Congress. It is something else to predict the party's resiliency in response to defeat, the effectiveness of its leaders, and the issues on which it may find its voice.

A range of political and financial resources can be useful for engendering widespread, non-incremental change. Slack budgetary resources or minimal resistance to expanding budgets can be crucial for many programs. The availability of public funds, and the tolerance for spending them, can change quickly, however.

It will be rare for a presidency to enjoy all the most useful resources simultaneously, and effecting change does not require such an unusual confluence of favorable forces. Every president requires some of these resources to succeed, however. Equally important, no chief executive can properly assess the opportunity structure of his administration without rigorously analyzing the most significant features of his environment. As I show in chapters 1 and 4, it was possible to assess the president's strategic position accurately and make predictions about what strategies would and would not work. These predictions, of course, are premised on asking the right questions about the likely success of presidential leadership efforts.

Two weeks into the Obama presidency, I gave a presentation covered by C-SPAN in which I predicted that the administration would not be able to rally the public behind its initiatives and would not obtain significant bipartisan support in Congress. If the president succeeded on his major initiatives, it would be a result of mobilizing his party in Congress.²⁰ The next month, I answered five questions about the new administration for *CQ Weekly*, making similar arguments.²¹

I savored no *schadenfreude* in predicting that the Obama administration would be less transformative than either the president or his supporters hoped. However, the accuracy of the predictions shows the value of thinking rigorously about the strategic level of power. According to Richard Neustadt:

There are two ways to study “presidential power.” One way is to focus on the tactics . . . of influencing certain men in given situations. . . . The other way is to step back from tactics . . . and to deal with influence in more strategic terms: what is its nature and what are its sources? . . . Strategically, [for example] the question is not how he masters Congress in a peculiar instance, but what he does to boost his chance for mastery in any instance.²²

To think strategically about power, we must search for generalizations. Influence is a concept that involves relationships between people. To understand relationships, we must understand why people respond to the president as they do. We cannot assume that they will respond positively to the president’s requests for support. Nor can we evaluate the promise of a presidency simply by examining its aspirations. Instead, we have to adopt a skeptical posture and carefully analyze the patterns of public and congressional behavior. Once we can explain relationships, we are in a better position to evaluate both the opportunities for a president and the utility of potential strategies for governing.

Plan of the Book

In this volume, I apply the lessons of *à e Strategic President*—that the essential presidential leadership skills are recognizing and exploiting opportunities, not creating them—to the first years of the Obama presidency. I want to explain why the president found it so difficult to engender change. I proceed by asking two core questions about his administration. The first deals with the opportunities for public and congressional support. What were these opportunities and how did the administration understand them? And what does our analysis lead us to expect about the likely success of the strategies it pursued? Chapter 1 focuses on assessing the potential for public support, while chapter 4 examines the potential for support in Congress.

Like most presidents, Obama was not content to exploit existing opportunities for change. As we will see, the White House thought it could create new opportunities. Thus, the second fundamental question deals with the ability of

the White House to create such opportunities. Could the president move the public in the direction of support for his policies? Could he obtain bipartisan support in Congress? Chapter 2 analyzes Obama's efforts to lead the public, while chapter 3 evaluates his success in doing so. Similarly, chapter 5 examines the president's efforts to lead Congress, and chapter 6 presents his success in gaining congressional support, especially from the opposition.

In chapter 7, I examine lessons for both presidents and students of politics that we can learn from studying the Obama presidency. I particularly stress the importance of strategic assessments in presidential leadership and the leverage they give us to evaluate the likely success of strategies for governing.