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Accomplished and Embattled: Understanding Obama's Presidency

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Hope soared as Barack Obama and his beaming family strode onto the stage in Chicago's Grant Park on 5 November 2008. The election night mood was accentuated by tears of affirmation streaming down the face of longtime civil rights leader Jesse Jackson and lifted by graciousness from defeated GOP candidate John McCain, who congratulated the nation's first African American president-elect for having "achieved a great thing for himself and for his country." Only a day after a bruising election, two thirds of Americans described themselves as optimistic and proud after Obama's victory.¹ Most Americans yearned for a reduction in partisan bitterness and for united efforts to cope with a deepening economic crisis and ensure opportunity for all.

How different things are in 2012, as President Obama serves the last year of his 2008 term and the nation heads into what is sure to be a bitterly fought, pivotal election. Hopes for change in Washington, DC and a quick economic recovery have long since disappeared. The 2010 midterm elections swept into office right-wing Republicans determined to counter—indeed reverse—all

¹ USA Today/Gallup Poll, "Now, thinking about the outcome of the 2008 presidential election: Do each of the following describe or not describe your reaction to Barack Obama being elected president? How about [optimistic, proud, pessimistic, and afraid]?" Polling Report, 5 November 2008, accessed at <http://pollingreport.com/>, 21 December 2011.

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steps taken by Obama and the Democrats after 2008. The U.S. electorate is sharply divided along lines of race, class, and generation. Less than a quarter of all Americans believe that Obama fulfilled his 2008 promise to change Washington, DC.²

Waning enthusiasm for a politician after he or she takes office is hardly surprising. What is more striking is the disconnect between assessments of Obama and his actual record—not to mention the tepid reaction of one-time supporters to a President who has, in fact, accomplished significant movement toward progressive goals in the face of fierce political headwinds.

Fiery opposition to Obama from Republicans and conservatives fits a pattern of partisan polarization deepening since the 1970s and recapitulates the all-out resistance faced by President Bill Clinton in the 1990s, when he, like Obama, came to office along with Democratic congressional majorities. Today's Republican conservatives are simply not willing to accept the legitimacy of a Democratic presidency or Democratic governmental initiatives. They engage in hyperbolic attacks and attribute "socialist" or "fascist" proclivities to a President who, in practice, helped Wall Street avert financial catastrophe and furthered measures to support businesses and cater to mainstream public opinion. As we will see, Obama has pursued progressive goals—such as subsidizing health insurance coverage for millions of low-wage workers—yet he has always done so through specific policies that protect and further opportunities for businesses to make profits. Profits have grown under his watch, and private-sector employment has expanded steadily since national economic growth resumed.

Strong critiques of Obama are not confined to his most determined right-wing opponents wielding phantasmagorical falsehoods. Many in the center and on the left treat Obama's presidency as a profound disappointment. Pundits pen OpEds suggesting that Obama has temperamental weaknesses that keep him from effectively challenging Republican opponents.³ A constant drumbeat of policy criticism harries Obama from the left, citing shortfalls in areas ranging from immigration reform and environmental policy to the handling of prisoners in Guantanamo. Leftist commentators such as Paul Krugman, Robert Reich, and Bob Kuttner give Obama especially low grades for being unwilling to break up big banks and unable to further effective jobs programs.⁴ Critics have sold

² AP-GfK Poll, "Barack Obama campaigned on a platform of 'change.' Do you think Barack Obama so far is living up to his promises to change the way things work in Washington, do you think he is breaking those promises, or is it too soon to tell?" Polling Report, 5–10 January 2011, accessed at <http://pollingreport.com/>, 21 December 2011.

³ Drew Westen, "What Happened to Obama?" *The New York Times*, 6 August 2011.

⁴ Paul Krugman, "President Surrenders," *The New York Times*, 31 July 2011; Paul Krugman, "Letting Bankers Walk," *The New York Times*, 17 July 2011; Paul Krugman, "Banking on the Brink," *The New York Times*, 22 February 2009; Robert Kuttner, *A Presidency in Peril: The Inside Story of Obama's Promise, Wall Street's Power, and the Struggle to Control our Economic Future* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2010); Robert Reich, "Obama's Jobs Plan Isn't Enough," *Salon*, 9 September 2011.

the public on the notion that Obama's economic recovery policies failed, even though experts agree that the Obama stimulus and other early measures averted a plunge into a second Great Depression and encouraged the recovery of private-sector job growth amidst big cut-backs in public sector employment in fiscally strained states. As of the end of 2011, only a quarter of Americans believed that President Obama carried through his specific campaign promises.⁵

Obama's actual record in office is at odds with reactions to his presidency. The President has actually fulfilled or addressed most of the promises he made during the 2008 campaign. Not only has he wrapped up the war in Iraq and hunted down Osama bin Laden and other terrorist leaders, his administration has fostered a series of new laws and regulatory shifts on the home front. The Affordable Care and Patient Protection Act of 2010, in itself, ranks among the major expansions of social provision in all of U.S. history, and this comprehensive health care reform enhances social equality because it uses taxes on businesses and the wealthy to pay for health coverage primarily aimed at lower- and lower-middle-income families. Affordable Care also promises important new protections for younger Americans, as do additional Obama initiatives such as expansions of funding for lower-income college students.

Shortfalls in Obama legislative efforts, such as the failure to achieve climate legislation or comprehensive immigration reform, are largely attributable to the crises Obama has faced and the fierceness of political opposition, including through obstruction in Congress. Even sophisticated analysts who ought to know better attribute failings to Obama personally, without acknowledging constraining economic, institutional, and political circumstances. A prime example is Drew Westen, who ignores Obama's major achievements and dwells on shortfalls said to be due to the President's alleged "penchant for passivity and his tendency to deliver an eloquent speech followed by inaction."⁶

Any thorough and realistic assessment of President Obama's achievements and failures must go beyond a focus on Obama's personality and tactical maneuvers by an embattled White House. Big questions must be posed: What happens when a youthful Democratic president, backed initially by substantial but not overwhelming Democratic congressional majorities, takes office amidst a gathering economic storm and tries to turn the titanic U.S. ship of state amidst the choppy seas of partisan clamor and non-stop interest group lobbying? Can ambitious presidential initiatives make headway in an acute, financially induced economic crisis that arouses widespread popular anxieties and shifts calculations for businesses large and small? Why did Republicans turn to all-out opposition in early 2009, and how could they make such huge

⁵ AP-GfK Poll, "How many of his campaign promises do you think Barack Obama has kept so far: all of them, most of them, some of them, or hardly any of them?" Polling Report, 5–10 January 2011, accessed at <http://pollingreport.com/>, 21 December 2011.

⁶ Drew Westen, "What Happened to Obama? An Opinion Piece," *Political Science Quarterly* 126 (Fall 2011): 493–499, at 495.

gains in 2010 despite moving away, not toward, middle-of-the-road public opinion? How much policy change do existing political institutions and pre-existing policy conditions allow—and why more in some areas than in others?

In some ways, it is premature to try to answer such big questions and draw any bottom line. Obama may end up having two terms in which to firm up his record in the White House, and whether he is ousted in 2012 or not, only the fullness of time and the longer perspective of history will allow final answers. Even in loss, Obama might prove to have set in motion policy shifts and political realignments that will end up shaping twenty-first-century America. But in another sense, grappling with big questions is a much better way in which to probe Obama's ambitious presidency than by trucking in psychological speculations or posing simple-minded oppositions of "success" versus "failure" or "more" versus "less" government. Grappling with the big picture in real time encourages a focus on *what government actually does*—and forces exploration of what battling political actors are trying to get government to do, or stop doing.

In this assessment, we draw from a collective project that we led with the support of the Russell Sage Foundation. Eight institutionally oriented political scientists and political sociologists used interviews, public records, and public opinion data to investigate a range of domestic policy areas where Obama and his allies attempted major redirections in health care, education, labor regulation, taxes, environmental and energy policy, immigration, and financial regulation.⁷ We draw on the empirical results, and also assess Obama's presidency overall through comparisons to the New Deal of the 1930s. Comparisons across historical periods highlight major shifts in societal institutions and the overall U.S. political system, as well as flashpoints of conflict and sequences of change.

WAS 2008 AN OPENING FOR MAJOR CHANGES?

In the aftermath of the 2008 elections, many pundits proclaimed the Republican Party virtually dead and opined that Barack Obama and the new Democratic Congress would soon launch what *Time* magazine dubbed a "new New Deal."⁸ Hyperbole aside, there were reasons to suppose that Democrats had a major opening to realign policies and politics.

Most presidential elections since 1988 had ended up as plurality victories (such as Bill Clinton by 43 percent in the three-way 1992 contest) or very close outcomes, virtually tied between the Democratic and Republican contestants (such as Clinton with 49.2 percent of the vote in 1996 and George W. Bush with 47.9 percent in 2000 and 50.7 percent in 2004). But Barack Obama

⁷ Theda Skocpol and Lawrence Jacobs, *Reaching for a New Deal: Ambitious Governance, Economic Meltdown, and Polarized Politics in Obama's First Two Years* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

⁸ Peter Beinart, "The New Liberal Order," *Time*, 24 November 2008.

won quite decisively, especially for a Democrat, in recent memory, and amazingly decisively for an African American with one foreign parent. Obama's margin over John McCain was 53 percent to 46 percent in the total popular vote, and 365 to 173 in the Electoral College. At the same time, congressional Democrats strengthened their majorities in both the House and the Senate, carrying forward a partisan shift that started in 2006. Barack Obama also won election at a juncture when most Americans of all political persuasions were disillusioned with his predecessor, George W. Bush, and had soured on the economic and foreign policy directions the country had taken while the Republican Party controlled both Congress and the presidency from 2000 through 2006. To reach the White House backed by congressional party majorities after the country has "repudiated" the predecessors is an excellent situation for an ambitious president determined to change policy direction.⁹

The U.S. elections of 2006 and 2008 were also marked by the mobilization of new blocs of voters into greater participation, as well as enhanced support for the Democratic Party.¹⁰ Younger voters raised their level of engagement; African Americans turned out in droves to vote for the first African American presidential candidate; and Latino voters increased their level of participation and shifted toward a greater margin of support for Democrats. Obama and his party seemed to be riding the future.¹¹

Beyond electoral trends, President Obama took office after being unusually straightforward with the voting public that he would seek to change the direction of federal social and fiscal policies. Obama promised to ask the wealthy to pay a higher share of taxes and he called for promoting growth and economic renewal "from the bottom up" rather than the top down, in order to reinvigorate the American middle class and broaden its ranks.¹² This amounted to more than empty talk following years of federal policies that had actually redistributed wealth upward in the United States.¹³ And the new president had allies ready to back his efforts. Democrats had started

⁹ Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Chuck Todd and Sheldon Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won: A State-by State Guide to the Historic 2008 Presidential Election* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

¹¹ Rob Runyan, "Vote Might Widen Divide Between Children, Parents," *USA Today*, 1 November 2008.

¹² Barack Obama, "The American Promise," online transcript of acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, 28 August 2008, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/28/us/politics/28text-obama.html>, 20 September 2010.

¹³ Lawrence R. Jacobs and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Inequality and American Democracy: What We Know and What We Need to Learn* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005); Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press and New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), chaps. 1–2; Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), chap. 1.

making preparations in 2006 and earlier to take control of lawmaking when the party next elected a president. The Center for American Progress and other Washington think tanks developed detailed policies for an incoming administration to consider. Well-networked activists and funders were poised to lobby for reform in Washington.

A decisive election, a public responsive to a new President's calls for change, strong congressional majorities, and experts and movement allies ready to go—it all looked like a promising opening for big shifts in policy and politics. Yet even amidst the hoopla following November 2008, some analysts sounded notes of caution. It is a well-known regularity that electoral outcomes tend to swing back and forth, especially in midterm congressional elections held when one party has control of the presidency and both chambers of Congress. FDR's 1936 landslide was followed by mid-term losses of 71 seats in the House and half a dozen in Senate; Lyndon Johnson's Democratic Party lost 47 House seats two years after their landslide win in 1964. Typically, the party in power has lost 22 seats in the House since the Second World War, and the losses have been higher when presidential approval ratings slipped below 50 percent (as was the case for Obama during 2010). Older, richer, and whiter voters, are the ones most likely to turn out in mid-term elections, and according to exit polling for the 2008 election, these were the demographics least enamored of Barack Obama.¹⁴ Analysts and White House political advisers alike knew from the start that the President and his congressional co-partisans would probably face electoral setbacks in 2010.

Sustained public support was not certain, either. From the very beginning of mass surveys and continuing until the present, researchers have noted that if you ask Americans abstract questions—such as “Do you agree that people in government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes?”—they favor the free market and oppose government intervention. But if you ask them about specifics—such as “Do you support Social Security?” or “Would you be willing to pay more taxes for early childhood education?”—they tend to support liberal positions about active government.¹⁵ Because Americans are, at once, philosophical conservatives and operational liberals, conservatives can evoke worries about bold government initiatives—all the more readily in a period of economic anxiety. As a young, black, change-oriented president, Obama would have faced such worries under any circumstances. But the spreading economic distress of 2009 and 2010 generated genuine fear that was readily exploited by political foes who equated even mild government activism with “radicalism.”

¹⁴ Todd and Gawiser, *How Barack Obama Won*, 30–31.

¹⁵ Lloyd A. Free and Hadley Cantril, *The Political Beliefs of Americans: A Study of Public Opinion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968); Benjamin I. Page and Lawrence R. Jacobs, *Class War? What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Finally, Congress was sure to create delays and complications, even with Obama's co-partisans in the majority during his first two years. Partisan polarization has created the impression that America's two major parties are similarly unified teams, that Democrats should be expected to support Obama's full agenda, much as a British parliamentary party would back the prime minister. But congressional Democrats have long been fractured by ideology and regional and economic concerns. Many of them harbor deep suspicion and opposition about tightening government regulations or raising taxes even for the very wealthy, and there are regional divisions on key issues such as energy. Republicans aside, even Democrats in Congress would not necessarily support Obama initiatives, especially if the President should begin to lose popularity with voters.

At the very start of Obama's tenure in the White House, the commentators who saw openings for major changes seemed correct. Obama started out with sky-high public approval ratings, and quickly persuaded Congress to pass the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the so-called "Stimulus"). That measure was not as large as progressives wanted to see, but nevertheless injected nearly a trillion dollars into the economy and included initial resources for new policy initiatives in education, clean energy production, and health care.¹⁶ The fledgling Obama administration quickly signed legislation about fair pay and children's health insurance that had been vetoed under President Bush. And the first Obama budget called for regulatory shifts and new directions in taxing and spending—for movement away from providing subsidies to favored private industries and tax cuts for the very wealthy and toward broadening access to higher education, stimulating K–12 school reform, paying for health insurance for all Americans, and encouraging new environmentally friendly programs. In contrast to the Republican legislative strategy of relentlessly cutting taxes and talking about spending cuts without delivering them, Obama candidly proposed a fiscal policy that would expand social benefits for middle- and lower-income Americans and pay for them with specific spending cuts and tax increases on the privileged.

But the honeymoon, if any, was very brief, and the fledgling Obama administration soon found itself grappling with multiple, intractable national crises in the face of gathering opposition. Economic misfortunes and political pushbacks arrived more quickly and fiercely than garden-variety, normal swings in U.S. politics would have led us to expect. As we lay bare the major factors limiting change—factors that led, very quickly, to an extraordinarily embattled Obama presidency—it helps to start with a telling comparison between the New Deal response to the Great Depression and the Obama administration's early efforts to limit and cope with the financial meltdowns of 2008 and 2009.

¹⁶ Jonathan Alter, *The Promise: Obama, Year One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 135–137.

REFORMIST DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTS AND ECONOMIC CRISES

Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Barack Obama both came into office as change-oriented Democrats, but the timing, nature, and severity of economic crises explain crucial differences between Obama's debut in 2009–10 and FDR's launch of the New Deal during 1933–34. Roosevelt took office several years into the Great Depression, when the U.S. economy was at a nadir; with some 25 percent of Americans unemployed, the nation was begging for strong federal action. Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike were ready to vote for the bills FDR sent them, and citizens battered by the Great Depression were open to the direct federal creation of jobs. By contrast, Obama took office amidst a sudden financial seizure that was just beginning to push the national economy into a downturn of as-yet-undetermined proportions.

Because FDR took charge at a moment of despair following a Republican president who had been unable to counter several years of deepening economic disaster, Roosevelt and his advisers knew that they had to create jobs by virtually any means, and the President's emergency proposals were voted through by legislators of both parties before they even saw the written texts.¹⁷ In contrast, Obama's steps to spur recovery met from the start with a nearly universal wall of partisan opposition, because Republicans knew, as all experts did, that the country would plunge into deeper recession with unemployment ballooning for many months. Obama would end up being associated with steep economic decline and severe job losses, as Hoover once was. In addition, since the American people had yet to experience much of what was to come in the Great Recession, they could not know what to demand or expect from initial federal recovery efforts.

Fixing the Economy from the Top Down

It is worth tarrying a bit on this last point. Because Obama took office without the full effects of the financial crisis hitting the supply of jobs and the operation of the main street economy, he arguably lacked FDR's clear-cut opening to dramatize a full-blown national economic emergency and pursue a full range of policies, including direct federal creation of large numbers of jobs. From the start, the new President, a cautious lawyer by training, heard key options taken off the table not just by Republicans and conservative Democrats in Congress and the Beltway media, but by his own economic advisers, who were leery of disrupting existing business practices and hesitant to embrace policies outside conventional boundaries.¹⁸

¹⁷ James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933–1939* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), chap. 1.

¹⁸ Jonathan Alter, *The Promise*, 11–12; Michael Hirsh, "Obama's Old Deal: Why the 44th President is No FDR — and the Economy is Still in the Doldrums," *Newsweek*, 29 August 2010.

The nature as well as phasing of the crisis affected Obama's economic leadership, real and perceived. His strong election victory over McCain was spurred by the Wall Street crisis that broke in September 2008, as conventional wisdom has long recognized. But looking deeper, we can see that candidate Obama was drawn into cooperation with the outgoing Bush administration starting well before the November election, as well as during the presidential transition. Decades earlier, FDR had deliberately avoided Hoover's invitations to work together, but with the economic meltdown of late 2008 and 2009 just getting started, Obama could not avoid transitional efforts to prevent the initial Wall Street crisis from spiraling out of control, a catastrophe which would have taken down the world financial system and plunged the United States into a massive and prolonged depression. In short, FDR came in when the patient was near death, while Obama wanted to keep the patient's raging fever from turning into pneumonia.

Cooperation to deal with Wall Street woes started in earnest during the campaign in mid-September, when GOP candidate McCain tried to call off the first presidential debate and hold a summit at the Bush White House. As Jonathan Alter reminds us in *The Promise: President Obama, Year One*, this campaign stunt backfired on McCain because Obama was the one who looked cool, calm, wise, and in charge.¹⁹ What also mattered about this episode was that soon-to-be President-elect Obama became engaged with Bush administration efforts to mitigate the financial crisis through the politically unpopular decision to build congressional support for a massive financial rescue plan, the Troubled Asset Relief Program. Starting at that misguided September 2008 session at the White House, Obama gained confidence that he could master complex issues and work with financial experts. Yet, as we can now see, he was also drawn into a save-Wall-Street-first approach to economic recovery that was highly unpopular and fabulously expensive.

This was inevitable in a sense, but also ironic. The insurgent Democratic candidate who campaigned by promising a bottom-up approach to economic growth and renewal in America started his "presidential" economic efforts amidst a bipartisan scramble to help Wall Street first. A couple of months later, President-elect Obama would also urge President Bush, as his term wound down, to support legislation to rescue collapsing U.S. auto companies. To millions of Americans beginning to face the realities of declining family fortunes, underwater mortgages, and looming pink slips, all this looked like helping the big guys float free while ordinary Americans were left to drown.

Assembling a Team and Planning for Recovery

Obama's initial economic efforts also limited his purview going forward. After his election, the President-elect quickly decided that two Wall Street-connected

¹⁹ Alter, *The Promise*, 9–14.

experts, Timothy Geithner and Lawrence Summers, would lead his White House economic advisory team.²⁰ In a financially-induced crisis, Obama believed they were uniquely qualified to figure out where reforms were needed—and perhaps persuade bankers to help the larger economy going forward. But building this kind of economic team—especially given the well-known proclivity of Summers for taking control of the process of generating policy alternatives—also meant that Obama was not going to hear day to day from other kinds of economic experts who thought of jobs first, or who saw U.S. economic recovery over the longer term as requiring commitments to structural transformation and seeding innovative new industries. Paul Volcker joined the administration, but was sidelined for much of the first year.²¹ Nor would prominent non-economists be involved in economic policy design, as social worker Harry Hopkins was in FDR’s brain trust.

Drawing on established macroeconomic wisdom and the “common sense” of the financial community with which they were connected, Summers and Geithner advised Obama to counter the Wall Street crisis with bank bailouts that imposed minimal penalties, hoping to cajole and sooth bankers into resuming lending. They urged Obama to avoid nationalizing banks and other aggressive steps out of fear that such undertakings could cause “a disastrous run on those banks.”²² Beyond that, Obama’s team, joined by other orthodox economic advisers, urged spending a lot of federal money as quickly as possible, which necessarily meant spending on established programs that could be expanded without new planning or protracted negotiations. Tax cuts would also be added into the Recovery Act, accounting for a third of the overall stimulus package, even though most economists knew they would deliver less bang for the buck than would direct spending. Calm the bankers, cut taxes, and quickly spend as much as Congress would enact for projects that could be implemented without a lot of corruption, and then be patient as the economy slowly recovered over the course of 2010 and 2011—that was the prescription.

An energetic push to boost employment through massive infrastructure construction or industrial innovation—let alone any New Deal-style public employment programs—was not earnestly recommended to Obama. There were certainly outside economic mavericks like Paul Krugman who said from the start that Obama was proposing to spend too little and do too much to accommodate banks and businesses. Members of Congress like Jim Oberstar pressed for large investments in transportation infrastructure. But for the most part, Obama seemed to cleave to orthodox experts. “When he brought in Summers and Geithner he just thought he was getting the best of the best.”²³ Obama hoped to use the stimulus to seed significant green energy projects, a

²⁰ Ibid., 49–53.

²¹ Hirsh, “Obama’s Old Deal.”

²² Alter, *The Promise*, 206.

²³ Michael Greenberger quoted in Hirsh, “Obama’s Old Deal.”

move that would have injected more-innovative industrial policy into the emergency recovery effort. But according to Alter,²⁴ Obama backed off when it was pointed out that legal wrangling over environmental regulations could slow spending; and he also retreated when Summers pushed back against the idea of featuring large infrastructure projects as part of the recovery effort.

Endorsing the bold yet orthodox recovery steps his advisers urged upon him, Obama's White House tried to hit the middle on the overall price tag. Some economists, like Krugman, argued from the get-go that he needed to get Congress to spend more than a trillion (to make up for the drop in consumer demand) and keep the proportion devoted to tax cuts to a minimum. But such advice did not seem realistic to the Obama White House, which felt it had to stay under a trillion to get Congress to pass any stimulus.²⁵ Furthermore, perhaps naively, the newly installed Obama hoped to woo congressional Republicans with substantial up-front tax cuts of the sorts they had claimed to support in the past. Because Obama offered Republicans policy concessions and got less than a handful of votes for his outreach, most postmortems on "what went wrong" with the stimulus focus on his unnecessary concessions about taxes (instead of more-stimulative direct spending) as well as on the insufficient size of the stimulus package, given the collapse of consumer demand. But his choices were understandable for a brand-new President who had promised the 2008 electorate that he would change the political tone in Washington. Moreover, as we discuss further below, it is not at all clear that Congress would have passed a bigger, more spending-heavy Recovery Act, no matter what Obama had proposed. In addition, the tendency of analysts to discuss Obama's economic recovery efforts only with reference to the stimulus understates the difficulties the administration faced in finding remedies for the sub-prime mortgage mess. Addressing this could have done much to revive jobs more quickly, yet the administration was constrained by Congress, bureaucratic politics, and other forces beyond Obama personal direction.²⁶

No Real Jobs Program

In retrospect, the fact that Obama's economic recovery strategy was not truly a jobs program turns out to matter more.²⁷ The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is better understood as a Hail Mary pass to goose aggregate economic growth by 2010, hoping that jobs would come back in tandem with the revival of overall gross domestic product growth (or following soon after growth resumed). The absence of a "jobs program" stemmed, in part, from the

²⁴ Alter, *The Promise*, 85–86.

²⁵ Paul Krugman, "The Pundit Delusion," *The New York Times*, 19 July 2010.

²⁶ Joseph Stiglitz, "Fixing America's Broken Housing Market," Project Syndicate, 8 September 2010, accessed at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/stiglitz129/English>; Alter, *The Promise*, 317–320.

²⁷ Alter, *The Promise*, 85–86; Hirsh, "Obama's Old Deal."

decision of Democratic leaders to push the large stimulus package through Congress very soon after Obama's inauguration, both to stave off the looming financial and economic disaster as best they could and to conserve time within the President's honeymoon period for the pursuit of long-planned efforts such as comprehensive health care reform. The idea was to get some of those reforms through in ample time to take effect before the next elections. Yet this approach meant that the White House largely deferred to congressional appropriators, letting them push money into their longstanding wish lists. A bold plan for creating new jobs would have taken much longer to formulate, and would have run into many congressional buzz saws.

President Obama's quickly devised economic recovery strategy also confused American citizens, many of whom did not see how heightened federal spending, funded through a growing deficit, could work. Most citizens wanted jobs saved or available, which Obama's spending and tax cuts would, at best, bring about only indirectly and gradually. By the summer of 2010, even aggregate growth was slowing, and unemployment remained near 10 percent. Citizens looked back and believed that Obama—supported by his Democratic Congress—had first “saved” Wall Street and other corporate giants, and had left much of Main Street foundering. During the run-in to the November 2010 election, and afterward into 2011, Obama and his party were hampered by too little job growth and the sense among many Americans that “federal spending does not work” to create economic recovery²⁸—or, worse, that the usual insiders are the real beneficiaries of recovery efforts. In one of several piercing ironies, the winds of populism and change that swept Obama into office in 2008 turned against him two years later, and threatened to block further government actions to promote economic recovery and broaden social opportunity.

REPUBLICAN OBSTRUCTION

At the start of the first New Deal, President Franklin Roosevelt enjoyed bipartisan support for recovery efforts launched at an economic nadir. But even though candidate Obama had partnered with Republican officials to handle the 2008 financial crisis during the closing days of the Bush presidency, his own initial recovery proposal got virtually no votes from congressional Republicans. Obama repeatedly reached out to Republicans, hoping for a modicum of cooperation amidst a true national crisis, but even though previous presidents facing national crisis have enjoyed some bipartisan support, Obama was almost totally rebuffed by the GOP. As the months went by, Republican opposition hardened—and grassroots populist movements arrayed under the banner of the Tea Party took to the streets to excoriate the President and any and all new federal initiatives being debated in the 111th Congress. Both GOP strategic calculations and the birth of a media-facilitated grassroots

²⁸ Alan Silverleib, “Recession Not Over, Public Says,” accessed at www.cnn.com, 26 September 2010.

movement on the far right figured into the crystallization of intense opposition to Obama's presidency.

GOP Leaders Decide to Oppose Everything

At the elite level, Republican congressional leaders attuned to a dispirited, heavily white-southern voter base—and goosed on by flamboyant right-wing media commentators—decided from the start of Obama's presidency on all-out opposition. This was a cold-blooded political bet by Republican leaders, made possible because the Great Recession was just starting on the heels of the Wall Street bailout undertaken by the outgoing Bush administration. Two thirds of House Republicans voted against the unpopular bailout when it first came up under Bush, and only half voted for the final bailout legislation, despite pleas from Bush officials and business leaders after the stock market plunged following the abortive first congressional vote. As the Democrats took charge, congressional Republicans aimed to pin the bailout on Obama and, indeed, succeeded in convincing many voters that the bailout and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the “stimulus”) were one and the same. It was all a bunch of expensive federal handouts, congressional Republicans told the public—and that message gained traction, even if particular GOP representatives and senators regularly went home for ribbon-cutting ceremonies celebrating job-creating stimulus projects they had voted against in Washington. Republicans knew that Americans like the specific fruits of government spending, even when they doubt its value overall.

Obama also inherited Bush's huge federal budget deficit—bills run up by off-budget wars, tax cuts for the very wealthy, and a new Medicare drug benefit not paid for with future revenue streams. Add the inherited unpaid bills and declining taxes due to the recession to the unavoidable cost of bailouts and the stimulus, and it was easy to see that President Obama started out with deficit problems that would only grow—quite apart from funding for any of the new long-term reform measures Obama had promised the electorate during 2008. Republicans knew they could take political advantage of the new President's terrible luck, and they decided to do so.

Tea Partiers Erupt and Shift the National Conversation

Any chance that some Republicans in Washington, DC might have drifted toward cooperation with the Obama administration—the nation faced an emergency, after all, so it might have seemed logical—dwindled after Tea Party networks sprang to life starting early in 2009.²⁹ Conservative activists in and around the Republican Party were understandably demoralized in

²⁹ Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

the aftermath of the 2008 elections that left pundits projecting a permanent shift toward the Democrats. But when CNBC commentator Rick Santelli went on a rant against “losers” supposedly taking advantage of federal mortgage-reduction programs and called for a new American “Tea Party” to protest an overweening federal government, conservative activists across the country recognized a great opportunity to regroup and re-brand themselves. Activists in many states warmed up Internet lists and began to convene local meetings and protests, and Fox reporters and commentators helped national organizers and financial backers advertise colorful national protests days—always touting the efforts for weeks and days—*prior to* any actual happening.³⁰ When the protests happened, the rest of the media flocked to cover them—magnifying the Tea Party message.

For the crucial first year of the Obama presidency, and especially at peak moments like the 2009 summertime town meeting outbursts over health care reform, mainstream media outlets found it irresistible to cover outlandish protest actions with older white demonstrators dressed up like Revolutionary war patriots and carrying extremist signs. It made for great television, and constant online buzz, even if most Americans were not involved and had no idea who these folks were. For many months, analysts debated whether this was a grassroots protest of non-party-affiliated “independents” disillusioned with Obama.

National surveys and ethnographic work show that Tea Partiers are mostly previously active conservative Republicans, older, whiter, and more well-to-do on average than other Americans.³¹ They espouse more-stereotypical suspicions of nonwhites than do other Republicans, let alone Americans overall, and are deeply angered by the suspicion that unworthy, “freeloading” people—including immigrants, the young, and lower-income people of color—might get benefits from the federal government. They fear that such expenditures, even in a recession, could end up costing people like them higher taxes or could squeeze programs, such as Medicare, to which they feel entitled. Tea Party anger reached a boil among people who turned out disproportionately for the 2010 mid-term elections, and remained primed to turn out again for the next presidential contest in 2012.

Grassroots Tea Partiers, moreover, are not the only forces at work. Funders operating through political action committees channel millions of dollars to very right-wing candidates in the Republican Party. And professionally run, billionaire-backed advocacy groups such as Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks push right-wing policy prescriptions—including calls to repeal Obama’s health care reform and financial regulations—and proposals to slash business regulation, further cut taxes for millionaires and billionaires,

³⁰ Ibid., chap. 4.

³¹ Ibid., chaps. 1–2.

and privatize Medicare and Social Security for future generations, turning these popular programs into a series of subsidies for private business interests. Such elite Tea Party forces have taken advantage of grassroots conservative opposition to Obama and the Democrats, and they aim to sweep national offices in 2012 and set the stage for radical redirections of U.S. public policies in 2013 and beyond.

In the meantime, Tea Party funders and advocates push congressional Republicans to obstruct Obama's initiatives and refuse to compromise on tax and spending issues with Democratic representatives. Congressional Republicans during 2011 were willing to take the federal government to the brink of crisis again and again. Indeed, whatever their long-term electoral effects end up being, Republicans in Congress prodded by the Tea Party, have followed scorched-earth plans to block anything Obama does—from routine appointments to efforts to promote jobs and economic recovery. Tea Party-backed Republicans believe that middle-of-the-road voters will turn to them if Obama fails and falls short. As GOP Senate Leader Mitch McConnell unapologetically explained, "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president."³²

THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF CONGRESSIONAL REALITIES

An activist president can move forward on various fronts—from attempting to shape public opinion to making court appointments, from action through regulatory bodies and executive agencies, to asking Congress to pass legislation. Obama has, of course, pushed initiatives across the board; yet many of his choices about when and how to proceed, as well as the issues he has prioritized, have depended on what legislators thinking of their own interests were willing to do amidst ongoing struggles involving lobbyists and social movements. During the first two years, when Obama could work with Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, some major legislative breakthroughs were possible—just barely. Yet even during this period, Democrats had a hard time avoiding defections, and in the Senate, GOP legislators also used every delaying and obstructionist tactic possible. So difficult was it to "move" legislation even with Democrats in nominal control during the 111th Congress of 2009 and 2010 that many presidential initiatives proceeded through regulatory steps instead.

Herding Democratic Congressional Cats

After 2008, the Democrats had substantial margins in both the House and Senate, but only in the former were they truly "in control" —when they could get their intra-party act together. The Speaker of the House can control through

³² Major Garrett, "After the Wave," *National Journal*, 23 October 2010.

simple majority votes which legislation is voted upon, when the vote occurs, and the handling of amendments. Senate rules, by contrast, slow things down.³³ A single Senator can object by placing a “hold” on nominations and bills (often secretly), and by custom, the minority can request many delays in committees and on the floor. What is more, the potential exists for the minority to demand a super-majority vote, 60 rather than 51, on virtually all matters—from procedures and presidential nominees to the enactment of legislation. The filibuster, which takes 60 votes to break, used to be reserved for major, controversial issues, but has been invoked more frequently in recent decades.³⁴ The filibuster has been invoked especially frequently, indeed unremittingly, when Republicans face Democratic leadership. Under Barack Obama, Republican obstructionists have decided to invoke the super-majority rule on almost every issue small and large; hence they have prevented the President from assembling his administration within a normal time period, kept much-needed judicial appointments from filling court vacancies, and blocked most reform initiatives. In general, Senate action by filibuster ensures that Americans see a dysfunctional government, with everything slowed to a crawl. The filibuster was invoked more often in 2009, for example, than in the entire decade of the 1950s.³⁵ As leaders of a party and angry conservative movement that wants to undercut and hobble government when Democrats have any say, GOP leaders have made the calculation that such behavior will help rather than hurt their cause with the general public. Under Obama, GOP leaders in the House and Senate have successfully pressured even the less-extreme conservatives in their caucuses—such as Senators Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins from Maine—to back filibusters against any and all legislation proposed by Obama.

The press emphasized that Obama and the Democrats held a supposedly “filibuster-proof” 60-vote majority for many months during the 111th Congress—from the time that Senator Al Franken was seated in July 2009 following Minnesota’s contested election, until mid-January 2010, when Republican Scott Brown surprisingly won a special election to fill the seat of deceased Senator Ted Kennedy. But in truth, there never was a reliable 60-vote margin. Independent Senator Joseph Lieberman could never be counted upon to stick with anyone’s team (or even stick with his own previous positions); and various conservative Democrats, such as Ben Nelson of Nebraska and Mary

³³ Sarah A. Binder and Steven S. Smith, *Politics or Principle: Filibustering in the United States Senate* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1996).

³⁴ Barbara Sinclair, “The New World of U.S. Senators” in Lawrence Dodd and Bruce Oppenheimer, eds., *Congress Reconsidered* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2009); Ezra Klein, “The Rise of the Filibuster: An Interview with Barbara Sinclair,” *The Washington Post*, 26 September 2009.

³⁵ Ben Frumin and Jason Reif, “The Rise of Cloture: How GOP Filibuster Threats Have Changed the Senate,” Talking Points Memo blog post, 27 January 2010, accessed at <http://tpmdc.talkingpointsmemo.com/2010/01/the-rise-of-cloture-how-gop-filibuster-threats-have-changed-the-senate.php>, 20 September 2010.

Landrieu of Louisiana, regularly defected. Even when everyone bearing his party's label could be kept on board, Obama's Democratic margins in Congress never reached the level enjoyed by previous Democratic presidents.³⁶ Throughout his presidential term, Jimmy Carter had a stronger Senate majority than Obama. And FDR, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson had larger majorities to work with when they pushed far-reaching social programs (although back then, of course, many Democrats were Southern conservatives).

Because Republicans in the 111th Congress remained throughout 2009 and 2010 almost entirely opposed to Obama's initiatives, the drama in one policy area after another focused on what sorts of Democratic coalitions could be formed. Obviously, legislative action was always precarious in the Senate, where any one or two Democrats could kill all possibility of forward movement (unless an equal number plus one Republican votes could be found, which almost never happened). But even in the House, where the Democrats had a 75-vote margin in a majoritarian chamber, various kinds of issues could peel off dozens of Democrats. Many who criticize Obama from the left cite his "failure" to close Guantanamo, or his inability to push through comprehensive immigration reform or comprehensive climate legislation (for example, getting Senate assent for the cap and trade legislation passed by the Democratic House in 2010). But the simple truth is that these were all policy areas in which Democrats were divided—just as they were on issues of taxing the wealthy. Obama would have needed some Republican congressional support to pass his preferred policies in such areas—yet no Republican support was forthcoming. Even Republican Senators who had previously supported immigration reform and environmental legislation stopped doing so when Obama and the Democratic House in the 111th Congress wanted to move forward.

The areas in which the early Obama administration did shepherd significant legislative breakthroughs to the President's desk were areas in which congressional Democrats, with difficulty, could bridge intra-party divides enough to muster bare majorities. Health care reform married cost controls and deficit reduction appealing to moderate Democrats with the subsidized insurance coverage for lower-income workers and small businesses long sought by Democratic Party liberals. With much fine-tuning, Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi got most Democrats to go along; and in the end, Leader Harry Reid cajoled Senate Democrats into acting, though only by ensuring states a major role in implementing health care reform and dropping the "public option" that would have put pressure on private insurance company profits. Republicans remained in vociferous opposition throughout, even when their own policy ideas were incorporated.

³⁶ Nate Silver, "Freshman Republicans Push House Toward Right," *The New York Times*, 12 July 2011, accessed at <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/12/freshmen-republicans-push-house-toward-right/>.

Stimulus legislation, reforms in higher-education loans, some new funding for energy efficiency and school reforms, and limited new regulations of Wall Street practices plus a new Consumer Financial Protection Agency—all of these turned out to be areas in which bare Democratic coalitions could be cobbled together in the 111th Congress. In each complicated negotiation, Obama paid a high price—he looked “indecisive” while congressional committees and interest groups haggled. Republican-induced delays and messy horse-trading among Democrats left the public in dismay about Congress each time. But the fact is that Obama and his allies got major reforms enacted—including comprehensive health care reform that Democrats had sought without success for more than half a century.

By Regulation if Not Legislation

During the Democratic-led 111th Congress, some Obama priorities could be addressed through legislation—particularly when Blue Dog measures meant to propitiate business or address long-term deficits could be married to regulations and benefits designed to help lower- and middle-income Americans. But in other major issue areas, such as immigration and energy, there were bound to be many Democratic defectors. White House perceptions of possibilities for building Democratic coalitions in the 111th Congress drove its choice of what issues to pursue when, and whether to call for legislation or proceed through administrative and regulatory efforts. In the labor law area, for instance, a number of conservative Democrats in the Senate were never willing to accept any version of the Employee Free Choice Act favored by the labor unions (and Republicans have long been adamantly opposed). Obama could have given “forceful” speeches until the cows came home, and it would have mattered not at all. Instead, Obama circumvented Republican obstruction in the Senate and put a lawyer favored by the labor unions onto the National Labor Relations Board. And Obama’s Labor Secretary, Hilda Solis, engaged in energetic enforcement of existing workplace regulations that Bush administration officials had left loosely enforced. Similarly, the Obama administration has taken regulatory steps to help the environment—by requiring greater fuel efficiency for automobiles, for example—even though major legislation has stalled in Congress.

When Republicans assumed the majority in the House of Representatives in 2011 and tried to cut funds specifically for regulatory agencies following the White House agenda, Obama’s budget negotiators had to get down and dirty about what funding bill riders they would accept. Working with the Senate still in Democratic hands, the White House has been able to keep Republicans in the 112th Congress from totally de-funding and undercutting administrative agencies pursuing reforms in education, labor regulation, and environmental regulation. Obama has also stymied GOP efforts to cut off most sources of ongoing funding for the implementation of the Affordable Care Act of 2010.

In the area of financial reform, GOP obstruction went to new extremes, however. The law passed in 2010 included an important liberal priority, a new consumer protection agency. But the Senate was supposed to approve the director before the agency could fully function, and after their victories in 2010, the GOP minority in the Senate demanded fundamental revisions in the original legislation to weaken the Consumer agency as a condition for allowing a majority vote on a new director. Senate Republicans feel that their Party has a good chance to take the majority after 2012; and big-check writers on Wall Street who oppose the new agency are supporting Republican candidates. From the GOP perspective, blocking Obama's efforts to establish this new area of financial regulation was promising. They stuck with it, until President Obama finally circumvented their obstruction by making a recess appointment of Richard Cordray to head the Consumer Financial Protection Agency. Court challenges from conservatives are now in the offing, but in the meantime, the agency is able to function—until the 2012 election decides its long-term fate.

CREATING VERSUS RESHAPING FEDERAL PROGRAMS

Finally, we come to the biggest difference between the 1930s and now. Decades ago, New Dealers in Congress and in the FDR administration were advocating *new kinds* of federal government interventions—new financial regulations, unprecedented national policies like minimum-wage and maximum-hour rules, Social Security, unemployment insurance, and new rights for labor unions to organize. Previously, apart from setting tariffs and seeding infrastructure and western expansion, the U.S. federal government had intervened actively in economic and social affairs only temporarily during major wars. The New Dealers, amidst a massive Great Depression, were selling new ideas in a huge economic emergency. Today, by contrast, Obama and his Democratic allies offer revised frameworks for already-pervasive federal regulations, benefits, and taxes—rather than first-time interventions.

Obama arrived in Washington, DC following a half century of previous accretions of pervasive regulatory and fiscal interventions—and set out to reverse some of those and redirect others. The new President and his allies came to office dogged by federal deficits already run up to high levels; finding new resources for redistributive social benefits—such as more-generous college loans for low-income families, or subsidies to help poor and lower-middle-income people afford health insurance—required that they raise new revenues and/or recapture revenues previously devoted to other federal programs.

Pundits declare nearly every day that Americans in the early twenty-first century are fighting about “government” versus “the market.” This is nonsense. Over the past six decades, Washington, DC Democrats *and* Republicans alike have presided over more or less steady increases in taxes and tax subsidies, regulatory interventions, and social spending, not to mention rising deficits. Both parties have participated in building up a massive, ramified, expensive, and

pervasive subsidy and regulatory state.³⁷ This steady accretion of government activism precipitated the conservative backlash against President George W. Bush as an “imposter,” as one book title put it.³⁸ On the margin, Democrats tilt the tax advantages and subsidies toward working families and the middle class, while Republicans since 1980 have pushed subsidies and advantages toward favored industries and very wealthy taxpayers.³⁹ Neither party has cut back in any important respect. Consequently, every region of the United States, and every industry and social stratum, has a stake in existing federal interventions into the economy and the society.

In our day and age, when a change-oriented president like Obama attempts to transform the forms and redistributive impact of federal government interventions, he is not starting from scratch like FDR. He is redirecting resources—and at the same time, necessarily asking some citizens and interests already enjoying regulatory advantages, governmental subsidies or benefits, and tax breaks to accept less.

The knotty dilemma of how to shift policies in ways that cut against current political inequalities has bedeviled the Obama project from the very beginning. Health insurance coverage for lower and middle-income uninsured Americans could be financed only through hard-fought steps to place new charges and regulations on businesses and the well-to-do. Enhanced Pell grants for lower-income college students and better loan terms for middle-class college students required a battle with private bankers accustomed to receiving guaranteed profits for administering federally backed loans without risk. Proposals for new energy policies aroused resistance from the coal and oil and gas industries, some of which are located in regions represented by congressional Democrats—illustrating but one source of Obama’s difficulty in assembling durable legislative coalitions.

What is more, as we saw in ongoing tax and budget battles fought at fever pitch, Obama’s 2008 campaign promise to allow the expiration of George W. Bush’s tax breaks for the very highest income earners faced fierce pushback and was undermined by Democratic skittishness, even when the President’s Party enjoyed congressional majorities in 2009 and 2010. After Republicans took over the House in the 112th Congress, they put in place rules that favor additional tax cuts and set out to slash public spending on programs that benefit ordinary Americans. This tees up confrontations through 2012 between congressional Republicans and President Obama, who must begin to sustain

³⁷ Paul Pierson, “The Rise and Reconfiguration of Activist Government” in Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol, eds., *The Transformation of American Politics: Activist Government and the Rise of Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

³⁸ Bruce Bartlett, *Impostor: How George W. Bush Bankrupted America and Betrayed the Reagan Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

³⁹ Jacobs and Skocpol, eds., *Inequality and American Democracy*; Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*; Hacker and Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics*.

and raise revenues to reduce looming long-term deficits and support existing and newly promised benefits for the majority of Americans. In early 2012, President Obama managed to win some high-stakes face-offs with Congressional Republicans, yet his victories came when he was the one championing tax cuts—through the continuation of reductions in payroll taxes designed to stimulate further economic recovery. Obama has yet to force Republicans to give way on what clearly is their very top priority: protecting and increasing tax reductions for millionaires and billionaires. Until Obama and allied Democrats win that battle—perhaps after taxes on the rich are front and center in November 2012—they cannot hope to sustain Medicare and Social Security for the long run, while also increasing benefits for the young and seeding economic innovation. For Democrats to achieve their social policy goals while gradually reducing the federal deficit, upward adjustments in taxes (and probably not only on the rich) will have to occur, starting in Obama's second term, if he manages to win one.

Fighting for a second New Deal in the current U.S. policy and political landscape is also bound to be a more-confusing and opaque undertaking than the original fight in the 1930s, because accretions of previous federal spending, regulations, and tax breaks crowd every major policy area—and large bureaucracies, multiple congressional committees, and hundreds of interest groups have a hand in ongoing policymaking in every realm. Back in the 1930s, American citizens could see that big, new things were being proposed and debated in Washington, DC. Social Security at its inception was hard to miss: it enjoyed support from two thirds or more beginning in the mid-1930s. As Social Security was implemented and expanded from the 1930s to the 1970s, its supporters could offer simple metaphors to try to make it popularly understandable.

In contrast, America's contemporary public policies include many complex regulations and publicly invisible tax credits and tax breaks.⁴⁰ What is more, as exemplified by the Affordable Care and Patient Protection Act of 2010, major reforms impacting already-mind-boggling complex sets of institutional arrangements necessarily turn into massive compilations of regulatory, tax, and spending provisions running to thousands of pages. Such complex measures are difficult for members of Congress to master and virtually impossible to explain to citizens who know that something big is being endlessly and bitterly argued about—but what is it? How can it be good, or workable? In the case of Affordable Care, citizens remain divided and puzzled long after the President signed the reform into law.

In short, already-huge, pervasive, and complex government undertakings are a challenge to rework—and the politics involved is even more challenging for citizen majorities to appreciate. Obama's agendas for policy change progressed quite remarkably during 2009 and 2010—in health care reform, education loans,

⁴⁰ Suzanne Mettler, "The Transformed Welfare State and the Redistribution of Political Voice" in Pierson and Skocpol, eds., *The Transformation of American Politics*; Joe Soss, Jacob S. Hacker, and Suzanne Mettler, eds., *Remaking America: Democracy and Public Policy in an Age of Inequality* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007).

financial regulation, and many other realms of law and regulation. But much of what happened was either invisible or ominously incomprehensible to most citizens. Big, worrisome, and easily caricatured—especially at a time of economic stress when Americans know one thing for sure: the national economy is not getting stronger fast enough to ensure that a rising tide lifts all boats.

RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

During his first years especially, Obama's record of accomplishments was impressive, both in absolute terms and in relation to the economic and political circumstances he inherited. He was inaugurated into an office encumbered by constitutional checks and old and new institutional trapdoors that routinely thwarted the presidential domestic agenda. Facing what may arguably constitute the fiercest political opposition and the most daunting constraints of the modern era, President Obama and the Democrats of the 111th Congress nevertheless fashioned landmark pieces of legislation—for comprehensive health care reform, the revamping of higher-education loans, and the regulation of Wall Street financial practices vital to the health of the U.S. and world economy. Morale and degrees of effectiveness were restored or established in many parts of federal administration that had languished or abandoned key missions; and the Obama administration has made assiduous use of cabinet powers to spur school reforms, improve health and safety enforcement, enforce immigration laws, and tackle environmental threats. Economists of various persuasions and the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office agree that the fledgling Obama administration and congressional majorities took the basic steps necessary in 2009 to cut short a financial crisis, prevent the sudden disappearance of the U.S. auto industry, and forestall overall economic collapse into a second Great Depression. After a few months, America's beleaguered economy turned from nearly unprecedented contraction to slow growth.⁴¹

More strongly opposed by enemies than understood by friends, Obama's policy accomplishments in 2009 and 2010 have been endangered by the huge electoral setbacks his party suffered in November 2010. That election's political tsunami resulted, in part, from deep divisions among Americans about the realities and prospects of the economy, with many voters questioning the effectiveness of federal government efforts to cope with economic stagnation, immigration dilemmas, and environmental threats.⁴² Voters experiencing the bad could not readily grasp that things could have been far worse. Because Democrats were the incumbent party, they bore the brunt of public doubts. Whether or not most Americans had confidence that Republicans would make things better—and polls suggested that they *did not* have any such confidence—the voters expressed their dismay about government's ineffectiveness by voting

⁴¹ Timothy F. Geithner, "Welcome to the Recovery," *The New York Times*, 2 August 2010.

⁴² Silverleib, "Recession Not Over."

against the majority incumbent party. The 2010 electorate was also skewed in directions that hurt Democrats, because only about 40 percent of those eligible actually voted, and they were disproportionately older, richer, whiter, and more-conservative than the 60 percent who turned out back in 2008.

After 2010, Obama reaped the political whirlwind. House Republicans immediately voted to repeal the 2010 health care reform (though the Senate would not go along), and the President has not only been unable to further many of his proposals to stimulate economic growth and job creation in a still-sluggish economy, he has had to parry countless congressional attempts to eviscerate post-2008 policies and tend to the implementation of his initiatives in a highly contentious environment. Dozens of his administrative and judicial appointees were simply blocked from confirmation votes in the Senate, an unprecedented exercise of partisan obstruction to prevent a president from functioning.

The political fireworks of the 112th Congress peaked during brinkmanship episodes in April and December 2011, when Republicans came close to forcing government shutdowns by refusing to compromise in budget negotiations, as well as in the near-default on U.S. government debt that the GOP forced in August 2011 by demanding huge cuts in public spending in return for a debt-ceiling adjustment of the sort that used to be routine under presidents of both parties. GOP brinkmanship in 2011 had little precedent. Although a 1995 clash between President Clinton and newly elected House Republicans had forced the government to suspend activities briefly, no previous Congress ever precipitated three fiscal crises of the enormity forced by the 112th House. Obama was badly boxed in, especially by the GOP's extreme default brinkmanship. At the time, it looked as if Obama had weakly "given in" to the Republicans and struck a bad bargain, but after default was averted in August 2011 through a deal that probably forestalls another debt-ceiling crisis before November 2012, Obama freed himself to take stronger stands with House GOP radicals thereafter. In recent months, Obama has challenged the GOP rhetorically at every turn.

Votes on legislation registered by the 85 House Republicans swept into office by the 2010 elections were considerably more conservative than those taken by their predecessors and by many of their GOP colleagues in the House and Senate.⁴³ For each of the three fiscal crises in 2011, the new GOP House members behaved as conservative insurgents who throttled efforts by Obama and by their own Republican leaders and colleagues to reach any sort of compromise on spending and taxes, even one heavily tilted toward their own preferences. "My Way or the Highway" was their byword. GOP House extremists mounted nearly unprecedented displays of defiance, rejecting potential deals negotiated by House Speaker John Boehner with Obama and Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell.⁴⁴ Although critics on the left

⁴³ Silver, "Freshman Republicans Push House Toward Right."

⁴⁴ Carrie Budoff Brown and Jonathan Allen, "The Humbling of the House GOP," *Politico*, 23 December 2011.

and the right attributed messy last-minute deals and episodes of near fiscal meltdown to Obama's personal weaknesses, the reality is that no amount of presidential arm twisting or prime-time speech-making could have overcome the right-wing results of the 2010 House elections. Obama did well to manage GOP extremism and maneuver toward better terrain on which to do battle in 2012. As Americans have gotten a clear bead on the post-2010 GOP in office, the popularity of the Republican Party has steadily dwindled.

Even in the direst moments, Obama and his Cabinet officers have found ways to move forward with the implementation of significant reforms amidst hearings and budgetary roadblocks. In the key areas in which breakthrough legislation occurred during 2009 and 2010, as well as in areas in which action has been primarily by administrative means all along, change in federal regulations and subsidies has proceeded. President Obama has continued to push redirections of federal efforts through administrative action, backing off only in realms, such as certain areas of environmental regulation, where he sensed undue political blowback for Democrats in 2012.

What is more, as it became clear—not just to Obama but to the general public—that Republicans were determined never to compromise on policies in the national interest, Barack Obama stopped dickered and regained his voice as a national political leader—articulating clear contrasts between his proposals and those of Republicans in areas such as taxes on the rich, the preservation of Social Security and Medicare, and programs to promote job creation. As the presidential contest heats up during 2012, Barack Obama and other Democrats are finding it easy to draw contrasts with Republican candidates who have pandered endlessly to Tea Party extremists. In his State of the Union Address delivered on 24 January 2012, President Obama did a brilliant job of setting forth themes of fairness, active job creation, and support for middle class opportunity on which he will campaign for reelection. The President's newfound populist voice, coupled with fresh signs of revival for the national economy, have boosted his popularity with the public and put Obama in position to make a strong run for reelection.

The national euphoria that accompanied Barack Obama's original election and inauguration is long gone, as is the sense that most Americans had in early 2009 that Obama knew how to save the national economy quickly. Nothing can gainsay the fact that Obama's White House has fallen short of facing the full challenge of leading the nation to a rapid and confident economic recovery—and presidents are measured not just against each other in some timeless statistical space, but in relation to the national challenges they are called to address. But as the season of parrying Republican counter-thrusts comes to an end, no one should underestimate Barack Obama as he undertakes to fight for his reformist presidency. He understands the high stakes in 2012 and will not bring a knife to a gun battle. Obama, by every indication, will fight with eloquence and mettle to preserve the accomplishments of his presidency, as he asks American voters to renew its promise for four more years.