

Firestorm: Barack Obama and the Obstacles of the American Political System

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## **Abstract**

The immediate aftermath of the 2008 US Presidential election saw a rush to place the presidency of Barack Obama in historical context before he had even taken office. Pundits and prognosticators suggested that Obama's presidency would break barriers just as his presidential campaign had done. Successfully utilizing the desire for hope and change among the American electorate, Obama was perceived to be a transformational figure, as defined by the parameters set forth by James MacGregor Burns. The notion that Obama would be a transformational figure helped catapult him into office with an impressive victory both in the popular vote as well as the Electoral College. Now in the midst of his re-election campaign, Obama's message of hope and change has been drowned out by an increasingly polarized Congress, a disillusioned electorate, and an anemic economic recovery. His shift towards a more common form of transactional leadership has left many of his supporters questioning whether he is capable of implementing the vision of change he articulated during the 2008 campaign, or if he is simply another politician that makes grandiose promises simply to win an election.

This Master's Research Project applies Burns's theory of leadership to an interpretation of the initial success and subsequent stalling of the Obama presidency. This project illustrates the key elements that established the coalition of support that propelled Barack Obama to victory, and, more importantly, illustrates that the struggle President Obama has faced in maintaining this coalition is not singularly attributed to an overriding factor such as the state of the US economy. Rather, it is attributable to a number of institutional and societal considerations in American politics and governance that have created innumerable obstacles for the president to overcome.

## **Introduction**

At 11:30pm on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008, President-Elect Barack Obama gave a victory speech that represented the culmination of his improbable journey towards the presidency of the United States. In this speech, Obama triumphantly declared that with his election, change had come to America, which had been the main theme of his campaign. Amidst an acknowledgement of the significance of his candidacy and the outpouring of enthusiasm and support for his election, Obama attempted to temper the high hopes that Americans had for his presidency by encouraging a more realistic set of expectations for it. Evidently, Obama wanted to emphasize that his election represented the beginning of a movement for change that could take a significant amount of time. However, the expectations for a transformational Obama presidency that catapulted him into office in 2008 overshadowed his attempt to encourage a realistic set of expectations among the American electorate.

The coalition of widespread support that Barack Obama enjoyed during his 2008 campaign for the presidency has noticeably waned over the course of his administration. Various demographics in the United States that voted for Obama instead of Republican nominee John McCain have wavered in their support for the president, and what was once thought by pundits and prognosticators (Teixeira and Halpin, 1) to be an easy re-election victory in 2012 is now anything but certain. Barack Obama is now perceived simply as another politician who made grandiose promises and outlined lofty goals on the campaign trail that he neglected to fulfill in office. This begs the question, how did Barack Obama achieve such widespread support only to see it diminish over the course of his presidency?

The purpose of this Master's Research Project is to demonstrate the key elements that established the coalition of support that propelled Barack Obama to victory, and more importantly, to illustrate that the struggle President Obama has faced in maintaining this coalition is not singularly attributed to an overriding factor such as the state of the US economy. Rather, it is attributable to a number of institutional and societal considerations in American politics and governance that have created innumerable obstacles for the president to overcome.

Obama's entry into the Oval Office and his attempt to transform his campaign messages into public policies were met with these innumerable obstacles, which have contributed to the partial derailing of his administration over the past three and a half years. This derailment has contributed to the increasing disillusionment of the American electorate, which in turn is putting his bid for re-election into jeopardy.

This argument will unfold by examining the convergence of factors that propelled Obama to victory in 2008. Chief factors include the proficiency of Obama's overall campaign strategy, the negative perception of the Republican Party and the missteps made by its nominee, the onset of the economic crisis of 2008, Obama's rhetoric of hope and change, and the belief that Obama would be a transformational leader if elected

Next, an examination of why the coalition President Obama built in the 2008 campaign is crumbling will illustrate that several key institutional and social considerations within American politics have yielded obstacles for the president. James MacGregor Burns's theory of leadership, which focuses on the transformational vs. the transactional, will be used to illustrate that Obama's transformational campaign message did not translate well

into policy due to the transactional nature of Washington politics. Further, the notion of the powerful 'stakeholders' in the American political system that have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo will affirm the notion that transformational change in Washington politics is extremely difficult to achieve. Additional social considerations will illustrate that throughout his presidency, President Obama has had difficulty maintaining the level of support he established during his 2008 election campaign.

This paper will then illustrate how these obstacles have played out over the course of the Obama presidency, particularly as Obama has attempted to translate the vision of America he articulated in the 2008 campaign into government policy. Focus will be placed on the polarization of politics between Capitol Hill and the White House (particularly with regards to the ongoing health care debate), the perception that Obama has not governed in the manner that was expected of him, and the disillusioned electorate that these factors have contributed to.

Finally, based on the findings in this project, brief commentary will be made regarding what Obama could have done differently to avoid this decline in support by comparing him to other Democratic presidents who ran for re-election. In particular, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton serve as stark examples of a failed re-election bid versus a successful one, which could potentially help illustrate whether Obama is destined for victory or defeat in 2012.

Importantly, this project relies in part on material retrieved from personal interviews to supplement the information provided by primary and secondary sources. Three interviews involving four individuals were conducted during the research phase of this

project with representatives from several District of Columbia Think Tanks. The rationale behind the use of these interviews lies in the fact that these individuals possess significant experience as astute observers of American politics, and represent both sides of the political spectrum. Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin of the left leaning Center for American Progress provided insight into Candidate Obama's victory in 2008, the application of Burns's theory of leadership to President Obama, and the various obstacles that the president has had to deal with over the past three years. Michael Barone and Karlyn Bowman of the right leaning American Enterprise Institute provided statistics and polling data to illustrate political trends over the course of the Obama presidency, as well as significant insight into the conservative interpretation of the Obama phenomenon and his subsequent administration.

## **Chapter One: Elements of an Unlikely Victory**

There are innumerable factors that contributed to Barack Obama's victory, but only the chief factors that led to his election will be examined during this investigation. These include the successful campaign strategy employed by the Obama team, the onset of the economic crisis of 2008, the negative perception of the Republican Party and the missteps made by its nominee, and the belief that Obama inspired, based on his rhetoric of hope and change, that he would fundamentally transform American politics, economy, and society.

Barack Obama's 2008 campaign organization and the strategy it executed remarkably redefined presidential campaign politics. The Obama campaign's use of social media was unprecedented for a presidential campaign. Through campaign e-mail blasts and text messages soliciting donations, the campaign's presence on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and the interactive nature of the campaign website pushed technological campaigning to the forefront of the election. "3 million donors made a total of 6.5 million donations online adding up to more than \$500 million. Of those 6.5 million donations, 6 million were in increments of \$100 or less. The average online donation was \$80, and the average Obama donor gave more than once." (Vargas, 1). The low dollar number in terms of average donations illustrates the true grassroots support that Obama was able to capture in terms of fundraising; it is indicative of donors who perhaps did not have much to give, but were willing to give what they could. The sheer number of donations made, with the average donor making more than one donation, illustrates his exceptional fundraising ability and demonstrates the basis for his nearly unlimited resources in what ended up becoming a three quarters of a billion dollar campaign.



Senator John McCain on the other hand, a champion of campaign finance reform, utilized public funds available to his campaign, putting him at a significant financial disadvantage to the Obama campaign. In total, the McCain campaign raised approximately \$384 million in 2008, \$85 million of that being public funds (Vargas, 1). Clearly, the financial advantage was on Obama's side, providing him opportunities to mobilize more campaign workers and advertise more in crucial battleground states such as Iowa, Ohio, Florida, Virginia, Nevada, and New Mexico - each of which Obama carried in the general election.

Since most donations to the campaign were made online, Obama was able to establish a database of supporters available to campaign communications staff, who they would reach out to instantly through various forms of social media and electronic communication. This was an exceptionally powerful tool that would increase widespread dissemination of information about the candidate and increase the campaign's chances of soliciting donations by providing a hassle-free online option to do so. As well, it enabled the Obama campaign to explore new and innovative avenues when attempting to build the coalition that would solidify the candidate's victory in the fall. Caswell echoes this sentiment, suggesting that Obama's unprecedented financial resources permitted him to also concentrate on identifying additional areas where the demographic and voting patterns were trending Democratic. Caswell also suggests that Obama's immense financial resources enabled his campaign to make extraordinary efforts to register new voters and other categories of voters with less reliable voting histories. (Caswell, 392). This was a complete upheaval in the communication and donation solicitation process that occurs between a national campaign and a potential voter. As mentioned by David Carr in a *New York Times*

article published shortly after the 2008 election, the previous methods exercised by presidential candidates were based on voter lists, phone banks and direct mail – each of which could take up significantly more money, and perhaps more importantly, more time. (Carr, 1).

The half hour prime-time 'commercial' that the Obama campaign was able to produce just six days before Election Day was the result of the campaign's monumental fundraising efforts, and was the first of its kind to air. By using social media and the strategy to drum up support at the grassroots level of the American electorate, Obama was able to raise enough money to outspend his opponent in the general election by a significant margin. The fundraising power of Obama's harnessing of social media and grassroots support therefore proved integral to his campaign strategy of mobilizing support across all fifty states.

An additional noteworthy feature of the 2008 Obama presidential victory was the campaign's ability to mobilize new voters, or eligible voters who were not previously apt to vote. Obama's success in attracting new voters was a visible component of his 2008 victory, particularly when considering the fact that 69 million people voted for him, approximately 10 million more than the amount of votes cast for the 2004 Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry. (Lupia, 239). In total, voter registration numbers were up 7.3 percent from the 2004 presidential election, with a total of 153 million eligible voters casting ballots in 2008. (Lupia, 239). The untapped resource of new voters was central to Obama's campaign strategy of creating and expanding support across the country and party lines. New voters supported Obama by an impressive 66 percent to McCain's 31 percent. (CNN Author Unknown, 1). Undoubtedly, new voters, with their higher rate of turnout and their 2 to 1

support ratio for Obama, enhanced Obama's overall coalition of support and consequently, his margin of victory.

Independents play a crucial role in American presidential elections, particularly so in 2008 when they represented approximately 40 percent of the electorate. (CNN Author Unknown, 1). Evidently, this led to the coveting of independent voters by both the Obama and McCain campaigns, the latter requiring a majority of this voting bloc in order to win the election.

"With Republican partisan identification at 28 percent for 2008, the largest Democratic advantage in the Gallup Poll since 1983, McCain needed many independent and probably some Democratic voters to carry enough of the states won by the 2000 and 2004 Republican presidential candidates to garner a majority of the electoral college." (Caswell, 392)

The low levels of Republican identification combined with a political climate that favoured the Democratic Party created a difficult situation for the McCain campaign that demanded a majority of independent support. Undeniably, if a candidate could capitalize on their party base with a majority of independent support, they would have a much easier time accumulating the electoral votes necessary to win a presidential election.

With the significant financial resources in the Obama campaign's coffers, Obama was able to make a concerted effort to spread his message to undecided independents, moderates, and disaffected Republicans. The vocal endorsement of Obama's candidacy by Susan Eisenhower, granddaughter of GOP President Dwight D. Eisenhower, at the 2008 Democratic National Convention was a symbolic indication of the bipartisanship that

candidate Obama would engage in if elected. Obama was also able to capitalize on having the support of former Secretary of State Colin Powell, a popular African-American Republican who served in the administrations of Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush. Powell's *Meet the Press* interview where he endorsed Obama's candidacy was beneficial to the Obama campaign. It bolstered Obama's bipartisan credentials while at the same time suggested that the McCain campaign was ultimately a losing one since prominent members of his own party were endorsing his opponent. Powell suggested that Obama was a transformational figure, while at the same time calling into question McCain's selection of Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. (Johnson, 1).

By showcasing his credentials as an attractive alternative for disaffected independent and Republican voters who had voted for President Bush in 2004, Obama was able to expand on the coalition he had built during the Democratic primaries to drum up both independent and moderate Republican support. Exit polling suggests that Obama won 9 percent of self-identified Republicans to McCain's 91, 52 percent of independents to McCain's 44, 23 percent of conservatives to McCain's 77, and 63 percent of moderates to McCain's 37. (CNN Author Unknown, 1).

Key to Obama's electoral strategy in 2008 was to prove the contention that he made during his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston – "there are no red states or blue states, there are the United States." (Obama and Olive, 103). The closer elections of 2000 and 2004 indicated a polarization of 'red states' and 'blue states,' the former made up of the south, the Great Plains, and the Rocky Mountain west, and the latter made up of the northeast, the mid-west, and the Pacific northwest, with several key 'swing' states peppered throughout the country that could shift in an election year. The

Obama campaign effectively rejected this premise and, based on the fifty state strategy they employed in pursuit of the Democratic nomination, they employed a similar strategy in 2008 that focused on connecting with voters in states long thought to be entrenched in the Republican fold. Through the extensive revenue brought in by the campaign's fundraising machine, the Obama campaign was able to set up offices and mobilize support workers and volunteers in all fifty states. This advanced ground operation enabled Obama campaign surrogates to reach out to a wide range of voters from states that Democrats had not won in decades (such as Indiana, Virginia, North Carolina, and Nebraska's second district), and made him competitive and ultimately victorious in other swing states such as New Hampshire, Florida, Colorado, Nevada and Iowa. This strategy propelled Obama far past the 270 electoral votes needed to win the presidency and gave Obama the largest Electoral College margin of victory since the 1996 election, with 365 electoral votes for Barack Obama and Joe Biden, and 173 electoral votes for John McCain and Sarah Palin. This Electoral College strategy ensured a strong mandate for Obama and suggested that the country was less polarized in 2000 and 2004, giving credence to Obama's belief that his presidency would represent a wide range of Americans in a more cooperative, bipartisan political climate. The strategy executed by the Obama campaign in 2008 resulted in a significant amount of donations that gave Obama the financial resources to spread his campaign message to a wider range of voters and target new demographics that had previously been difficult for Democrats to make inroads with.

The negative perception of the Republican Party and the blunders made by its presidential and vice-presidential nominees proved to bolster Obama's candidacy and arguably created a political climate that favoured the Democratic Party in 2008. For

example, Obama's 'safe' selection of Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware as his running mate provided a stark contrast between candidate Obama and candidate McCain. Most notably, it emphasized that Obama possessed an even temperament and decision making process that was based on long term rather than short term gain. Biden's experience as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and his ability to connect with working class voters, a demographic that Obama lost heavily to Senator Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries, made for a balanced and strong Democratic ticket. McCain's selection of Palin on the other hand, was seen by some as a blatant attempt to pander to disaffected supporters of Hillary Clinton's that would have preferred to see a woman occupying the Oval Office.

"McCain's selection of Gov. Sarah Palin as his vice presidential running mate appeared to serve two diverse purposes: one, to energize the social conservative coalition that had won for the Republicans in the last two and in five of the last seven presidential election cycles; two, to reinforce his appeal to independent voters and perhaps appeal to some of the disenchanted Democrats who had supported Sen. Hillary Clinton." (Caswell, 392).

The McCain campaign's notion that a woman on the ticket would placate disaffected Hillary supporters clearly had an effect adverse to the intended one. These Clinton supporters consequently gravitated towards Obama (however reluctantly) following Clinton's strong endorsement of Obama following the end of the Democratic primary campaign. The Palin pick illustrated McCain's high-risk manner of strategic thinking, and the subsequent revelations about her that suggested that she had not been properly vetted gave way to murmurs about McCain's decision making ability and whether or not he would be as reckless and un-thorough in his decision making as President. As Palin's initial celebrity

waned, questions began to arise about her ability to assume the presidency if McCain could not discharge his duties properly. These concerns were obviously amplified by the fact that McCain had experienced three bouts of skin cancer and, at 73, would be the oldest president elected to a first term if victorious.

In what was widely regarded by scholars and pundits alike as a move made for obvious political reasons, McCain, in the midst of the increasingly out-of-control economic crisis, suspended his campaign in an attempt to portray himself as focused on governing rather than campaigning. The move would have forced the cancellation of a scheduled presidential debate between the two candidates in Mississippi, which candidate Obama argued should still occur. Eventually, McCain's decision to return to the campaign trail and participate in the debate made him appear erratic, indecisive, and as if he were engaging in a political ploy. As Karlyn Bowman notes, voters saw through McCain's transparent attempt to appear as if he was above campaign politics and more focused on governing. (Bowman, 1). This suspension, having occurred in late September just a short time before the election, helped bolster Obama's credentials as an even-tempered, focused candidate with a genuine concern for discussing the country's problems, where McCain appeared desperate and willing to engage in a political 'gimmick' to win an election. (Bowman, 1).

Republican enthusiasm was diminished in 2008, largely as a result of the sense of disillusionment with Republican policies on the part of the American electorate. This enthusiasm gap was not rectified by the McCain campaign, which conversely proved beneficial for the Obama campaign. Many Bush 2004 voters failed to turn out to vote for McCain in 2008. (Lupia, 239). As well, in the crucial battleground state of Ohio, the McCain

campaign simply could not inspire the same voter turnout that had resulted in a Bush victory in the state four years before.

“A minimum of seven out of every hundred Bush voters in Ohio in 2004 must have done something other than vote for McCain in 2008. These defections from the GOP candidate were sufficiently large enough to allow Obama to win Ohio. Winning Ohio, in turn, was sufficient for Obama to win the Electoral College.” (Lupia, 239).

In the face of the emboldened and enthusiastic Democratic voters, the diminished enthusiasm and fatigue of GOP voters in 2008 cost McCain significant support. The Republican Party’s woes of 2008 contributed greatly to a political climate where a Democratic White House was all but a foregone conclusion.

The favourable political climate for the Democrats in the 2008 election were not by any means singularly attributable to Senator John McCain and his campaign. As William Crotty explains, the man who would become Barack Obama’s predecessor, President George W. Bush, had as much to do with the perceived mistakes of the Republican Party as his GOP heir apparent.

“The policies of the Bush administration established the storyline for the presidential election and determined its outcome. This could be seen in three areas: a failing economy, the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the expansion of executive powers. [...] Not only did it set the agenda for the election, pitting an advocate for change (Barack Obama) against a candidate committed to continuing the Bush policies (John McCain), it also dictated the problems the incoming administration would have to deal with.” (Crotty, 282).



As mentioned previously, the financial meltdown of 2008 and its immediate aftermath was largely blamed on the Bush administration; this illustrates how the state of the economy was used by the Obama campaign to convince voters that Obama's Democratic economic principles would prevail over the Bush/McCain Republican policies and restore financial order to the country's troubled banking and housing systems. This is what made the economy an element of victory for the Obama campaign. That being said, there are several additional factors stemming from the performance of the Bush administration that foretold an uphill battle for the Republican presidential candidate seeking to replace President Bush.

Fatigue with the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that were instigated by the Bush administration was a major issue for voters in the 2006 and 2008 election cycles, both of which saw monumental gains for the Democratic Party. Although exit polling suggests that a larger percentage of voters in 2008 cast their ballot with the economy on their mind (CNN Author Unknown, 1). Obama's candidacy was enhanced by his consistent opposition to the Iraq War since the country was invaded by the United States. Barack Obama, having held the fortuitous position of being against the war from its inception, was able to make the case that he would end the war outright if elected. The country's fatigue with the Iraq war in particular was a clearly important issue, and the support for ending the Iraq war suggested that Obama's position on the subject would resonate well with American voters. (Teixeira and Halpin, 1). Obama had greater credibility on the issue than Senator Hillary Clinton, who voted to support the war but then changed her position on it, and McCain, who supported continued American presence in Iraq until victory was achieved.

By 2008, President Bush's approval ratings were among the lowest in presidential history – 30 percent according to one Gallup Poll taken in the last year of his presidency.

(Caswell, 398). The Bush administration had been plagued with charges of government secrecy and lack of transparency since it was revealed that Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction as the administration led the country to believe and used to rationalize the military incursion into Iraq. Many believed that John McCain would continue implementing the majority of the Bush administration's policies if he were to be elected (Bowman, 1). This information showcases the obstacles that the McCain campaign had to overcome in order to win the 2008 election, and at the same time further illustrates the beneficial conditions of the American political climate at the time that was conducive to the overall message of change emphasized by Barack Obama's candidacy. Needless to say, there was a general disdain for the Bush administration at the end of his presidency, and the country was clearly clamouring for new leadership. Obama, as a Democrat who had disagreed with the American military presence in Iraq from its inception and represented a new type of leadership that he successfully argued was not part of the Washington power structure, was essentially in a position to address American fatigue and argue that he was the candidate best equipped to change Washington for the better.

Perhaps one of the greatest assets to Barack Obama's bid for the presidency in 2008 was the state of the American economy. The Bush administration was largely credited for allowing the burst of the housing bubble, the subprime mortgage crisis, and declining value of the American dollar to occur under their watch. The condition of the economy provided a unique opportunity for a member of the opposition to take an offensive line by criticizing the policies of the government as well as the presidential nominee of the governing party. As Bruce Caswell points out, since Barack Obama was not running as an incumbent but as a member of the party that did not have control of the White House, he could easily make

this case. "Without an incumbent president at the head of the ticket, the incumbent party should lose during an economic downturn, and did, by a margin forecast by economic data." (Caswell, 388). Barack Obama, in a very effective way, convinced Americans that his stewardship of the economy would produce better results than continued Republican economic policies if Senator McCain, was elected. The idea that Republican economic policies would continue to be detrimental to the American economy was highlighted by McCain's misguided belief that the crisis was not as bad as it appeared to be. This provided yet another opportunity for Obama to boost his credibility on economic issues. "As the economy worsened, Bush, his Secretary of the Treasury, and the Republican presidential nominee John McCain all assured the public in similar terms that the foundations of the economy were strong. Within days of such reassurances the dimensions of Wall Street's failure began to become clear." (Crotty, 305) The combination of McCain's absurd statement and the pairing of McCain and George W. Bush under the same umbrella of failed Republican economic policies, Obama was able to successfully convince voters that McCain would continue implementing the same economic policies if he were to take office and possibly plunge the country into worse economic turmoil. Obama successfully portrayed a hypothetical McCain presidency as an extension of the failed economic policies that dumped the country into such a deep recession. William Crotty echoes this theory, illustrating that Obama's electoral success was connected to the Dow Jones Industrial Average: "The economy decided the election. More specifically comparing the Dow Jones Industrial average to Obama's support, the process becomes clear. As the Dow fell, Obama gained. [...] The economy was the chief concern in voting for President." (Crotty, 306). Emphasis is added to Crotty's contention that the economy played a significant role in the

election of Barack Obama when considering exit polling commissioned by the *New York Times*, published shortly after the election. Polls indicated that “among those whose economic situation had deteriorated (42 percent of the electorate), Obama had a margin over McCain of 43 points.” (Crotty, 309) These statistics indicate that Barack Obama can easily attribute his victory to the status of the economy. Obama’s status as the nominee of the non-incumbent party and the attribution of the financial crisis to the Bush administration helped create an economic storm that helped propel Obama to victory.

Change represented the core value being articulated by Obama on the campaign trail, and was the cornerstone of the vision he had for his presidency. In addition, with the given political climate in 2008, it was a campaign message that enthused voters: Change you can believe in. Bruce Caswell suggests that particularly in the 2008 presidential election, change resonated with the voting public as it rarely does. (Caswell, 389). Running as the change candidate was natural for Obama; having only served four years in the United States Senate, he could easily make the claim that he had yet to be ‘tainted’ by Washington politics. In his campaign for the Democratic nomination, his chief rival, Senator Hillary Clinton, had been entrenched in Washington politics since her husband’s presidency, and was seen by many as the establishment candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. Obama was successfully able to argue that the United States needed new leadership, and that if Hillary Clinton were elected, it would represent at least twenty-four years of Bush and Clinton control of the White House. This minimized her claim that she would be a change candidate, while bolstering Obama’s claim to that label.

Once he secured the Democratic nomination, Obama continued presenting himself as the change candidate. This was easier for him to accomplish since his Republican

opponent, Senator John McCain, had been serving in the United States Senate since 1985 and was regarded as a Washington insider. (Bowman, 1). Further, as the Republican standard bearer in 2008, John McCain had to contend with the fact that his party currently held the White House, and that he would be saddled with the unpopular economic and foreign policies of then-President George W. Bush. Although he had a reputation as a 'maverick' in the Senate, voting against his party and working across the aisle with Democrats over the course of his career, it was much more difficult for John McCain to make the case that he was a 'change' candidate than it was for Barack Obama.

2008 therefore favoured Obama's candidacy because of his association with the Democratic Party (which had not held the White House in eight years) and because of the lack of time he served as a US Senator. This was the silver lining in the cloud of Obama's relative inexperience as a US Senator; he could easily argue that he was not a Washington insider. Using the powerful message of change, Barack Obama was able to thwart his opponents in the Democratic presidential primary and in the general election by casting them as ultimate Washington insiders who would not work to change the American political system for the better. Obama's rhetoric of change was not simply based on the idea of change; his electoral success also relied heavily upon the way in which he articulated his vision for a changed America to potential voters through his speeches. Perhaps one of the Obama campaign's greatest assets was the ability of the candidate himself to electrify an audience with a simple campaign stump speech. Thomas Cronin provides context on the matter, which helps illustrate the importance of a candidate's communication skills in getting their message across to voters. "Part of being an effective leader is having excellent ideas, or a clear sense of direction, a sense of mission. But such ideas or vision are useless

unless the would-be leader can communicate them and get them accepted by followers.” (Cronin, 24). Obama’s exceptional communication skills allowed him to share his ideas and sense of direction with the electorate. Their resounding support for him at the polls in November 2008 illustrated that they readily accepted his ideas and his mission.

Deborah Atwater advances the notion of the rhetoric of hope, suggesting that Barack Obama chose to employ this rhetoric, which earned him attention and praise from the electorate.

“Senator Barack Obama uses the rhetoric of hope to reach a wide American audience. [...] I am defining a rhetoric of hope as the use of symbols to get Americans to care about this country, to want to believe in this country, to regain hope and faith in this country, and to believe that we are more alike than we are different with a common destiny and a core set of values.” (Atwater, 122-123).

Evidently, Obama made a successful moral and value-based appeal to the American electorate through his rhetoric by suggesting that an Obama presidency would ensure that these morals and values would be rekindled and preserved for the future under his administration. The resonance of his message ultimately manifested itself as support at the polls on Election Day.

Obama’s vision was readily accepted by his followers, as evidenced by his monumental grassroots support and fundraising prowess. Through his charismatic speaking style, Barack Obama was able to convince the American electorate that the country's best times were ahead of them, and he singularly eased concerns about the financial troubles that afflicted the country. Undoubtedly, the promise of transformational leadership and

rhetoric of hope and change was well-received in the 2008 presidential election cycle, and can be considered one of the key elements of Obama's victory.

Concepts of leadership are crucial to the full understanding of any presidency, let alone that of Barack Obama's. However, for the purposes of this paper, James MacGregor Burns' dual concepts of transformational and transactional leadership are the most appropriate concepts of leadership to apply to President Obama. In order to successfully employ these concepts as part of this project's analysis, it is essential to define transformational leadership and governance. Transformational leadership, as posited by Burns, consists of four key factors, that are easily related to Obama's 2008 presidential candidacy. This first factor, idealized influence, describes leaders who act as strong role models for followers; followers identify with these leaders and want very much to emulate them. [...] They are deeply respected by followers, who usually place a great deal of trust in them. They provide followers with a vision and a sense of mission. (Northouse, 134-135). Evidently, transformational leaders captivate their followers with the vision they articulate for the future, creating a bond of trust between themselves and their followers that fosters adulation. Obama's 2008 message of fundamentally changing America can easily be regarded as a mission given to his followers. His meteoric rise to national prominence and his fundraising capabilities illustrate a respect in his message and a trust in his candidacy on the part of his followers.

Second, there is inspirational motivation. This factor is descriptive of leaders who communicate high expectations to followers, inspiring them through motivation to become committed to and a part of the shared vision in the organization. In practice, leaders use symbols and emotional appeals to focus group members' efforts to achieve more than they

would in their own self-interest. (Northouse, 136). The idea that transformational leaders inspire followers and motivate them with lofty goals seems to translate into high expectations for the leader as well. Throughout the 2008 campaign, Obama challenged Americans to join his cause for change. His rhetoric suggests high expectations for Americans, and his use of the symbol of the American dream is easily recognized in his rhetoric, suggesting that he fulfills this aspect of transformational leadership.

Third, there is intellectual stimulation. This type of leadership supports followers as they try new approaches and develop innovative ways of dealing with organizational issues. (Northouse, 136). Transformational leaders clearly attempt to ignore the status quo in favour of new ideas. Obama's change campaign was intent upon redefining the status quo in the American political system, which illustrates his desire to deal with American political economy (an organizational issue to be sure) in a new and innovative way.

Finally, there is individualized consideration. In essence, transformational leadership produces greater effects than transactional leadership. While transactional leadership results in expected outcomes, transformational leadership results in performance that goes well beyond what is expected." (Northouse, 137). This tenet of transformational leadership is satisfied by Obama's 2008 campaign in that he outlined, through his rhetoric of hope and change, that his policies would greatly benefit Americans if he were elected. The high expectations that his campaign promises generated among his coalition of support suggests the belief among the electorate that an Obama presidency would achieve goals and surpass expectations.



Murray Edelman builds on Burns' point by suggesting that "the deprivations and powerlessness that characterize the lives of most citizens furnish the incentive to believe in leaders who signify hope and a talent for coping with complex forces." (Edelman, 38). This suggests that transformational leadership, when executed properly, can successfully establish a followership based on the followers' feelings of helplessness and necessity for leadership that can help them control the uncontrollable. In situations of helplessness and despair, it would seem that followers are more apt to be swayed by charismatic leaders promising transformational (and ultimately, beneficial) change. It is arguable that the 2008 economic crisis fostered senses of helplessness and despair among the electorate, creating a political climate that favoured a candidate who signified hope and proclaimed to have the solutions to the unsolvable problems that faced them. Barack Obama clearly embodied this characteristic in the 2008 campaign, and was able to seize the economic situation for his benefit.

The notion of Barack Obama as a transformational leader is also readily apparent through his political memoir, *The Audacity of Hope*. The significance of *Audacity* is emphasized by Deborah Atwater, who suggests that "The essence of this book might be defined as a blueprint for his political career and, in light of his presidential bid, his belief and stand on major issues." (Atwater, 126). In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama employs rhetoric and articulates a vision for America that becomes the basis for his presidential campaign. "Perhaps more than any other time in our recent history, we need a new kind of politics, one that can excavate and build upon those shared understandings that pull us together as Americans." (Obama, 9). Here, Obama makes the case for a new kind of politics where governance is rooted in the commonalities between Americans instead of the

differences between them. Obama expands upon his vision of America with a proclamation of core American values he is committed to.

“What are the core values that we, as Americans, hold in common? The values of self-reliance and self-improvement and risk-taking. The values of drive, discipline, temperance and hard work. The values of thrift and personal responsibility. The values of equal opportunity and non-discrimination complement rather than impinge on our liberty.” (Obama, 54-55).

One can easily make the connection between Obama’s discussion of American values and transformational leadership in that a transformational leader makes values-based appeals to their followers. Obama’s glorification of these ‘American’ values is meant to instill pride in his audience and foster a bond between he and his followers based on their agreement of the strong values that distinguish America. Ultimately, this tactic worked to portray Obama as a secular saviour, which helped solidify his coalition of support.

The publishing of *The Audacity of Hope* launched Obama’s transformational ideas upon the national scene, and with his declaration of his presidential candidacy, he began making speeches employing the same rhetoric from his book. It was this rhetoric of hope and change that helped portray him as a leader who would be transformational if elected president. The rhetoric Obama used in his numerous speeches while running for president illustrates his firm belief that he could create economic, political and societal change in a transformational way if elected president. “We are the hope of the future; the answer to the cynics who tell us our house must stand divided; that we cannot come together; that we cannot remake this world as it should be.” (Obama and Olive, 251). The obviously

grandiose notion that the movement Obama was spearheading could remake the world as it should be, effectively righting the wrongs in American society and politics, is indicative of his belief that he could fundamentally transform American government, society, and economy.

“What began as a whisper in Springfield soon carried across the cornfields of Iowa, where farmers and factory workers, students and seniors stood up in numbers we’ve never seen. They stood up to say that maybe this year, we don’t have to settle for a politics where scoring points is more important than solving problems. This time we can finally do something about health care we can’t afford or mortgages we can’t pay. This time can be different. Their voices echoed from the hills of New Hampshire to the deserts of Nevada, where teachers and cooks and kitchen workers stood up to say that maybe Washington doesn’t have to be run by lobbyists anymore. They reached the coast of South Carolina when people said that maybe we don’t have to be divided by race and region and gender; that crumbling schools are stealing the future of black children and white children; that we can come together and build an America that gives every child, everywhere, the opportunity to live their dreams. This time can be different.” (Obama and Olive, 247).

In this passage, Obama uses various tools to express the significance of the change movement spearheaded by his presidential candidacy. Obama emphasizes the wide-ranging support he received from multiple geographic regions in the country (Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Carolina), as well as individuals from a variety of different professions to suggest to listeners that his message transcends class and geographic boundaries. Clearly, this is an attempt to unite the country; an attempt that is enhanced

when he pairs his desire to upend the status quo in Washington politics such as his idea that Washington should no more be 'run by lobbyists'. Perhaps the greatest indication of Obama's belief that he would be a transformational president came from his election night speech in Chicago's Grant Park. Speaking before a jubilant crowd as President-Elect, Obama essentially laid out a roadmap for his administration based on the transformation of the American economy, government, and society.

"It's the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day. It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America." (Obama and Olive, 319).

By reiterating the idea that Americans could achieve anything they set their minds to, referring to his election as a defining moment, and that with his election, change had come to America, Obama is motivating his listeners and blatantly suggesting that his presidency would fundamentally transform American government, economy, and society in a beneficial way. It is correctly suggested that Obama was perceived to be a transformational leader during the 2008 campaign, and as Caswell notes, Obama even used the term transformational in describing how his presidency would unfold. (Caswell, 389).

Hopkins points out that to the *New York Times*, Obama's victory 'amounted to a national catharsis,' while the *Boston Globe* characterized it as 'precipitating an era of profound political and social realignment in America.'(Hopkins, 368-369). Since the American public, pundits, and activists mentioned by Caswell to believe in the days

following Barack Obama's victory that America was going to fundamentally transform as a result of his election, it is arguable, based on these reactions, that expectations were extremely high for Obama as he began his presidential transition. The belief that Obama would create significant change as a transformational leader was inspiring and as mentioned, helped him win the election; however, this rhetoric came with a heavy price – Obama would have to fulfill the expectations of the public that placed their trust in him because of his rhetoric of change.

For all intents and purposes, Barack Obama campaigned on the notion that if elected, he would be a transformational leader. Perhaps more importantly, the American electorate perceived him to be transformational, which gave rise to the monumental expectations placed upon him as he assumed the presidency in the worst financial crisis to afflict the United States since the Great Depression. Barack Obama truly expected to create transformational change once elected, an expectation he conveyed to the American electorate through his rhetoric of hope and change, and an expectation that was readily accepted by a country desperate to be extracted from economic turmoil.

Any explanation of the general belief that Obama would be a transformational leader has to acknowledge the issue of race. As the first serious African-American candidate for a major party presidential nomination, Obama's candidacy was framed largely around the question of whether America was ready for a black president. (McIlwain, 64). Race had been a barrier to previous African-American candidate who had attempted to win their party's nomination for President of the United States, and many questioned whether a black presidential candidate could win the necessary delegates to win the Democratic nomination.

It has been suggested that white voters, which in 2008 still made up the majority of the American electorate, not only questioned the prospects of an African-American president, but were also wary of voting for an African-American presidential candidate, for fear that they were only seeking office to serve the interests of their African-American constituency. (McIlwain, 64). This explanation has been used in the past to illustrate why African-American candidates have had little success in senatorial, gubernatorial, and presidential elections. (McIlwain, 65).

Perhaps the most important early victory for Barack Obama's presidential aspirations came in his victory in the first-in-the-nation Iowa Caucuses on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008. On first glance, one may wonder where the issue of Obama's race fits in when discussing his Iowa victory. The fact that Iowa's demographics were (and remain, for that matter) overwhelmingly homogenized – 93% white (CNN Author Unknown, 1) - illustrates the appeal of Obama's campaign message across racial lines. This provided Obama with the necessary momentum to make the case that his message resonated with Americans from a diverse range of backgrounds, and helped emphasize that he was a candidate for all Americans, not simply African-Americans. Although Hillary Clinton would win the subsequent New Hampshire primary, many analysts attribute Obama's win in Iowa as the event that propelled him towards the Democratic nomination and ultimately, to the presidency. "Exit polls estimated white voters' support for Obama was slightly greater than for John Kerry in 2004 or Al Gore in 2000." (Donovan, 865). The support from white voters that Obama received in Iowa translated into a fifty state strategy aimed at shoring up support from whites across the country. The fact that Obama, an African-American candidate, was able to increase the share of the white vote from the levels achieved by Al

Gore and John Kerry, both white men, suggests a stronger message on Obama's part that consequently made him the only victorious candidate of the three.

Experts have suggested that the American electorate ultimately embraced the idea of the first African-American President of the United States and flocked to the polls to vote for Barack Obama. People wanted to be part of a movement that would effectively be a part of history (Teixeira and Halpin, 1) by voting for the man who would become the first black President. Further, the notion of the country's first black president clearly excited the African-American demographic in the United States in 2008. The enthusiasm among blacks translated into high African-American turnout in states such as Virginia, North Carolina and Florida, three crucial swing states that Obama ended up carrying. It can be argued, particularly with regards to North Carolina, that if Obama had not excited his African-American constituents in that state, it is likely (when considering that he only won the state by a 0.33% margin) that he would not have received Virginia and North Carolina's electoral votes, which would have decreased his overall margin of victory in the Electoral College. Silva echoes this notion by stating that "[The election returns in North Carolina] show that the Democrats of [2008] profited enormously from an increase in the white suburban vote along with a greatly increased black turnout." (Silva, 10). By exciting the country at the prospect of being a part of history, and by increasing African-American voter turnout, the enthusiasm that Obama's candidacy as the first African-American with a serious chance of becoming President of the United States generated among his African-American constituents as well as among Americans from a diverse range of backgrounds wanting to be a part of a historical movement can clearly be considered an important element of his victory. The issue of race, although at times during the campaign was a controversial topic,

ended up assisting Obama in the end with the increased symbolism and meaning it lent to his campaign for the presidency.

The 2008 election thus featured a perfect storm of factors that each contributed, some on a greater scale than others, to the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States of America. The combination of the successful strategy employed by the Obama campaign, the negative perception of the Republican Party and its leaders, the increasing economic turmoil brought on by the Great Recession of 2008, the rhetoric of hope and change that Obama employed, and the perception that Obama would be a transformational leader if elected converged to create a political climate conducive for the election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States. Undoubtedly, the coalition of support that Obama was able to construct during his lengthy primary campaign and then build upon during his general election campaign was a force to be reckoned with. Following Obama's inauguration he had an approval rating of approximately 60 percent for several months. At that point in time, with a Democratic-controlled Senate and House of Representatives, it seemed as though transformational change was coming to America, and a mandate was given to Barack Obama to ensure that the vision he articulated on the 2008 campaign trail would come to fruition. Very quickly however, the new Obama administration encountered a series of considerations within the American political system, both institutional and social, that would place him at odds with the coalition of support that he had constructed over the course of his presidency.



## **Chapter Two: Institutional and Social Considerations Within American Politics**

After three years in office and now fully engaged in his 2012 re-election campaign, President Obama finds himself in a vastly different political climate than he did in 2008. The economic recovery has been slow, with unemployment hovering around the 8 percent mark. Although there have been twenty-seven straight months of job creation as of July 2012, the amount of jobs added is far less than to be desired. Hyper-partisanship is rampant in Washington, with many Republicans working vehemently towards the goal of limiting the Obama presidency to a single term. The disillusionment of the electorate remains palpable, and the idea of a second term for Obama is far from a sure thing. Compared to his all-time high approval rating in February of 2009 – 66% (Jacobs and King, 793) – Obama is now mired in the low to mid 40's; an almost equal amount of Americans disapprove of the job he is doing as president as those who approve of his work.

As one examines the state of the Obama presidency over time, the question is ultimately asked, how could the widespread support that catapulted Obama towards a strong mandate in the 2008 election evaporate during his presidency? The answer lies in a series of entrenched institutional and social considerations within American politics and governance that have made it difficult for President Obama to fully implement the vision for America that he articulated during the 2008 campaign. This has led to the perception that he has been unable to fulfill significant campaign promises, which has contributed to the decline in support Obama enjoyed in 2008 and in the first months of his administration. Prior to discussing how these considerations have produced obstacles to the Obama presidency, it is important to define them.

In discussing the elements of Obama's 2008 victory, this project referred to the concept of transformational leadership as posited by James MacGregor Burns. This concept is actually part of a dualistic leadership model that also encompasses a concept known as transactional leadership. This forms the basis for the first institutional consideration within the American political system that has been an obstacle for President Obama over the course of his presidency; the fact that Washington politics are transactional by nature and resistant to transformational change. According to Burns, transactional leadership refers to most leadership and governance models, focusing on exchanges that occur between leaders and their followers.

"Politicians who win votes by promising no new taxes are demonstrating transactional leadership. [...] In the classroom, teachers are being transactional when they give students a grade for work completed. The exchange dimension of transactional leadership is very common and can be observed at many levels throughout all types of organizations." (Northouse, 131).

Exchange is the operative word when referring to transactional leadership; the concept appears to be rooted in the exchange of favour between the leader and the follower. "The transactional leader engages in an exchange, usually for self-interest and with short term interests in mind. It is, in essence, a bargain situation: 'I'll vote for your bill if you vote for mine,' or 'You do me a favour and I will shortly return it.'" (Cronin, 27). This analogy validates the contention that Washington politics are grounded in this type of leadership, which is based on exchanges between leaders and followers (or subordinates), and ignores the individualized needs of the subordinates and ignores their personal development.

Bowman provides further proof that Washington politics are rooted in transactional governance, and that transformational change is difficult to achieve.

“It is difficult to govern in a transformational way with the political structure in Washington the way it is. What is needed is a major event like the Great Depression or an incredibly strong mandate for a first term president like Reagan was given in 1980. The way the system is set up, it is extremely difficult to achieve significant transformational change.” (Bowman, 1).

Bowman’s emphasis on the difficulty with which transformational change is enacted within the Washington power structure illustrates an obstacle to any president, let alone one that promised significant transformational change. Importantly, since transactional change represents either a failure to meet expectations or simply the meeting of expectations, it is arguable that if a leader promises transformational change and has to resort to transactional governance instead, their followers would be disappointed that the promise of fundamental change was not met.

Jacobs and King posit the concept of the stakeholder in American politics, an additional institutional consideration that, as will be shown, has served as an obstacle to President Obama’s efforts to fundamentally change the American political system.

“America’s administrative structure is also prone – as generations of research have demonstrated – to penetration and influence by pressure groups and parochial interests. If the lobbyists fail to shape agency behaviour, they turn to the White House or, if that turns out to be unrewarding, to responsive members of Congress. What seems from afar like inexplicable lapses in administrative competence can

often be traced to successful industry interventions into a porous administrative structure. [...] The comparative weakness of America's administrative state is compounded by a legislative process that is individualized and diffuse, and therefore nearly immune to efforts by presidents to form supportive coalitions." (Jacobs and King, 798)

Stakeholders can be defined as those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in Washington. To do this means that the stakeholders must resist any attempt to transform the system in such a way that could yield less benefits for them in the long run. It is important to clarify that members of the United States House of Representatives are not bound to toe the party line as members of political parties in parliamentary governments are; they are not threatened with removal from their party's caucus if they do not vote the way the party leader wants them to. Simply because a Representative is of the same political persuasion as the sitting president does not mean that they will vote in agreement with every measure the president puts forth. The individualized nature of congressional office-holding makes it far easier for a stakeholder to lobby individual members of Congress in an attempt to sway their opinion for their benefit.

The weakness of the US administrative structure and the lack of a party line to tow in Congress means that it is easier for stakeholders to seek out supporters for their causes within the ranks of America's elected officials. The ease with which stakeholders intervene in the legislative process illustrates the level of clout they possess, and it is logical to conclude that these stakeholders would not be inclined to give up this extraordinary power within the American political system. Thus, if faced with a threat to the way in which Washington politics operated, it is conclusive that stakeholders, interested in protecting

themselves, would go to any lengths to preserve the status quo and prevent significant transformational change from occurring.

Institutional considerations within the American political system are not the only obstacles that President Obama has had to face throughout his administration. Rather, there are two important social considerations within American politics that have dogged President Obama in a detrimental way that has helped contribute to the decline in support for the president over the past three and a half years.

The first societal consideration within American politics that has presented an obstacle for President Obama is the notion that the American public perceives government spending, for all intents and purposes, guilty until proven innocent. Teixeira and Halpin suggest that the American public is predisposed to be cynical about government intervention and spending. (Teixeira and Halpin, 1). This provides a beneficial talking point for the Republican Party, which champions less government intervention and spending. A negative perception exists within American politics that Democratic presidents support unreasonable government spending and intervention. The notion that Americans are naturally predisposed to government spending and intervention makes it difficult for elected officials to legitimize the policies they attempt to implement, often resulting in the intensification of a hostile opposition towards them. Elected officials, particularly Democrats, must convince the public that government spending is beneficial instead of wasteful. This illustrates a significant obstacle for any Democratic president to overcome, as they are saddled with the need to validate government spending to the American public. Further, since the topic of government spending is seen as an area of traditional Republican

strength, it becomes easy for Republicans in opposition to label a Democratic administration as engaging in out of control spending.

The concept of a president from a minority background is still new, since Barack Obama is the first to hold that distinction. This presents an additional social consideration based on race within American politics that President Obama has had to deal with as the country's first African-American president. This consideration is based on a suspicion held by white voters in the United States that minority candidates will only serve the interests of their particular racial demographic instead of advocating on behalf of all Americans.

McIlwain suggests that many minority candidates of the past – for example, Shirley Chisholm and Jesse Jackson – have failed in their pursuits for their party's presidential nomination because their campaigns were perceived by white voters to be predicated on the basis of advancing the interests of their racial group instead of advancing the interests of all Americans. (McIlwain, 64). Barack Obama's success, as outlined in the previous chapter, is rooted in the fact that his message of hope and change resonated across racial lines, and he came across as a candidate seeking to benefit all Americans.

A minority candidate must engage in a balancing act where they are perceived to be advancing the interests of all Americans, but also perceived to be advancing the interests of their own racial constituency in order to maintain the same level of support from their base. This is extremely difficult to achieve; if the candidate does not appease their racial base, they may be regarded as 'selling out', and if they do not appear to be acting in the interests of all Americans, they appear to only be concerned with their own racial group. Either way, this presents a significant obstacle for a minority president to overcome.

As the United States minority population continues to grow, it is logical to suggest that this obstacle for a minority candidate will be diminished going forward. However, at this point in time, since the concept of a minority president has only become a reality in the past three and a half years, the country's social issues that pertain to race will continue to dog minority candidates and force them to engage in an extremely delicate balancing act.

As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, these four institutional and societal considerations in American politics have largely obstructed President Obama's attempts to fulfill his campaign promise of fundamentally transforming American politics, economy, and society. Consequently, these difficulties that continue to plague the Obama administration have contributed to a noticeable decline in support over the course of his presidency, which continues to jeopardize his 2012 re-election campaign.

### **Chapter Three: Obama's Obstacles**

The first institutional consideration of American politics that has presented an obstacle for President Obama since he took office focuses on the transactional nature of Washington politics. As previously mentioned, the Obama administration began with exceptionally high expectations for the new president's performance. Following his election victory in November 2008, the palpable excitement among the electorate and political pundits alike lauded his election as the beginning of a fundamental realignment in the United States. "The 2008 presidential election can be said to suffer from an audacity of analysis, a rush to place the Barack Obama presidency in historical perspective before the Obama presidency actually makes history." (Caswell, 388). This illustrates the expectations that Obama was attempting to temper in his Grant Park victory speech. The excitement over Barack Obama's election as president generated, according to Caswell, a desire to place his presidency in historical context based on the symbolism of the first African-American president and his rhetoric of change. This speculative nature of pundits and prognosticators effectively set the bar exceedingly high for Obama as he took office. Caswell provides further insight into this contention; "The historical symbolism of the first African-American president [...] gave rise to some audacious claims about the significance of the Obama presidency before he had assumed office, much less before he had a track record." (Caswell, 406).

Clearly, expectations for the Obama presidency were abnormally high, given the rhetoric he employed on the campaign trail, the transformational presidency he outlined if he were elected, and the extreme dissatisfaction with President Bush and the Republican



Party. These 'audacious claims' raised expectations among a disillusioned electorate that was clamouring for the type of leadership Obama professed. Based on this information, it is abundantly clear that Barack Obama could not let his campaign rhetoric go unfulfilled if he wanted to maintain the high level of support he experienced as a candidate once he took office. As Teixeira and Halpin suggest, Obama did imply that he would be a transformational leader, but the promises he made turned out to be difficult to fulfill especially within the transactional nature of Washington politics. (Teixeira and Halpin, 1). Obama quickly discovered that in order to simply get things done, he had to resort to a more transactional, conciliatory form of a leadership that was rooted in compromise. (Teixeira and Halpin, 1). Consequently, as Michael Barone points out, the fact that Obama's policies to date have yet to produce results that a majority of the nation considers wholly desirable illustrates a failure on Obama's part to fulfill his promise of fundamental change that would benefit a majority of Americans. (Barone, 1).

The issue of Obamacare, the colloquial term used by Republicans and opponents of the law to brand the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, illuminates the dichotomy of Obama's determination to govern in a transformational fashion with the underlying reality of the transactional nature of American politics.

"The proposal in Obama's first year legislative program that had the greatest potential for placing him on the short list of chief executives who have presided over major policy breakthroughs relates to health care. [...] Obama sought a major expansion in the ranks of the insured, an end to the practice of denying health insurance to people with pre-existing medical conditions, and a ban on lifetime limits on health insurance." (Greenstein, 9).

Undoubtedly, Obama was attempting to make good on one of the most transformational promises of his campaign by seeking total health care reform in the United States.

However, the controversial nature of the bill and the alleged lack of input requested by congressional Republicans enhanced partisan divisions in Congress; a side-effect that hurt Obama in that it reflected his inability to follow through on his promise to enhance bipartisanship in government.

“Democrats, emboldened by a new president and big gains in Congress, pushed sweeping legislation to expand coverage for uninsured Americans, clashing with Republicans who branded the bill ‘Obamacare’ and warned it would trigger an unprecedented intrusion by Washington into people’s medical decisions. [...]” “When Democrats muscled the final version of the bill through the House of Representatives in a late-night vote, not one Republican voted for it.” (Walsh, 1).

The fact that not a single Republican voted for passage of the health care law in the House of Representatives signifies a failure on Obama’s part to unite Democrats and Republicans in agreement on issues and initiatives that would be transformational, as he promised he would during the 2008 campaign. “I’ll be the President who finally brings Democrats and Republicans together to make health care affordable and available for every single American.” (Obama and Olive, 249). Clearly, Obama did not bring Democrats and Republicans together on health care as he had promised. The President’s inability to do so reflected poorly on him with the American public and can be considered an attribute of the electorate’s shift towards the Republican party in the 2010 midterm elections.

Returning to the transformational vs. transactional leadership debate, Jacobs and King suggest that Obama should accept the fact that realistically, a transactional leader is more conducive to the institutional and societal considerations of American politics and governance.

“The initial expectation that Obama would transform America – which he himself encouraged – needs to be refocused on the opportunities and constraints within the existing US political economy. This shifts attention from Obama as a kind of secular messiah to the strategic challenge of seizing opportunities within existing institutional and economic structures and instituting changes that instigate future developmental paths in desired directions.” (Jacobs and King, 795).

Jacobs and King emphasize the ever-important fact that the existing political economy in the United States is resistant to transformational change. The notion of Obama as a secular messiah is also noteworthy here; the idea that the realities of governance shift the focus on Obama from a positive light (as a transformational saviour) to a less positive light (as a transactional leader who has to seize as many opportunities as possible to achieve as much as he can within the confines of the American political structure) is, on first glance, detrimental to the transformational mystique that Obama encouraged the creation of with his use of the rhetoric of hope and change. Jacobs and King also point out that Obama has been criticized not only by his political opponents, but also by his supporters, for not acknowledging the confining realities of the American political system.

“Liberal *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman criticized Obama for “not enough audacity’ owing to his insufficient tenacity or naive belief in the possibilities for post-

partisan common ground where none exists.' The persistent result, Krugman suggests, has been 'policies that are far too weak' and 'cautious,' due to Obama's failure 'to exploit his early opportunities' and his 'strong mandate to take bold action' after his election." (Jacobs and King, 794).

Clearly, Krugman had great expectations for Obama, whom he believed would be a champion for liberal ideals in the White House and, along with a Democratic House and Senate, would utilize his mandate to usher in transformational change based on these ideals. Krugman demonstrates the contention that Obama had little idea how difficult it would be to achieve transformational change within the labyrinthine Washington power structure, and is significant in that it represents diminished support for Obama because of his perceived inability to meet the expectations of the followers that elected him. The difficulty Obama faced in achieving the transformational change he sought made him appear weak and ineffectual. Jacobs and King outline the successes of the Obama administration's efforts to affect transformational change, but counter these successes with his failures to do so.

"The high hopes surrounding Obama's election boosted his approval to stratospheric levels of 60 percent or higher during his first months in office and were – after a tortuous year – realized in the passage of historic reforms of health care and higher education. [...] But these accomplishments coincided with his failure (to date) to deliver on a new, post-partisan politics; to enact far-reaching legislation on labour, immigration, and energy; and to recast foreign policy toward the Middle East and global climate change. The striking contrasts between historic accomplishment and abject failure are also accompanied by more ambiguous cases. None stands out

more than the strained effort to enact reform of America's financial system to prevent a repeat of Wall Street's crisis and its disastrous consequences for the economy. Reform has been substantially watered down and falls far short of the restructuring that the administration proposed and that many experts recommend to prevent future system breakdowns." (Jacobs and King, 793).

Jacobs and King illustrate that Obama has failed at achieving the far-reaching, transformational legislation that he promised during the 2008 campaign and was expected of him by those who formed his coalition of support. This also suggests that Obama has had to be more transactional in his approach to governance, shunting aside potentially transformational policies in an effort to compromise and, effectively, get things done. Barack Obama has learned that Washington politics demands a transactional style of leadership, and that he cannot achieve everything he sets out to do within the current institutional obstacles that the American political system presents.

As Teixeira and Halpin suggest, the electorate tends to focus on the failures of a presidency rather than the successes, particularly in times of economic uncertainty. (Teixeira and Halpin, 1). Obama's inability to accept the underlying transactional nature of Washington politics has hindered him in this respect, considering the slow pace of the economic recovery and his various failures to implement transformational policy. Consequently, this can easily be considered a causal factor in the widespread evaporation of support over the course of his presidency that he enjoyed during the 2008 campaign.

Additionally, President Obama has had to deal with the obstructive presence of stakeholders in the American political system; a presence that he rallied against throughout

his 2008 campaign and which he promised to reduce during his time in office. Stakeholders have become an institutional norm within the prevailing power structure in American government.

“The institutional hurdles of lawmaking do not shape organized interests equally. Rather they interact with America’s market-deferring political economy to the advantage of stakeholders and their allies who ably work their allies to capitalize on multiple veto points to protect the status quo by blocking new government action.” (Jacobs and King, 799).

Stakeholders have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo with regards to their ability to intervene in the legislative process in the United States. Jacobs and King also suggest that stakeholders have coalesced against Obama’s efforts to challenge the status quo and reduce their presence in Washington.

“Stalemate on candidate Obama’s agenda for reform of labour and climate change, for example, has often been chalked up to Obama’s leadership failings. Yet neglected in these accounts are the organizational advantages of stakeholders and institutional rules (such as the Senate filibuster) that favor defenders of the existing political/economic status quo and disadvantage reformers and the less well-established.” (Jacobs and King, 795).

The lack of time that Barack Obama served as a US Senator within the Washington political structure cements his status as a less well-established member of the American political arena. Further, his credentials as a reformer – or attempted reformer – are solidified by the vision for transformational change he articulated during the 2008 campaign. Based on these

two factors, it is plausible to suggest that President Obama is at a disadvantage to the more entrenched and well-established stakeholders. With respect to the president's attempts to herald transformational legislation regarding labour and climate change, the stakeholders possessed organizational advantages that allowed them to prevent Obama from succeeding in his mission to change. This in turn portrays President Obama as incapable of constructing the political organization necessary to achieve the transformational change he pledged in the 2008 campaign. Certainly, if Obama has been unable to diminish the role of lobbyists and stakeholders in the Washington power structure, he has not been able to fundamentally redefine the status quo in the American political system, which constitutes failure to live up to one of his core campaign promises. This ineffectiveness is echoed through Jacobs and King's notion that part of the blame lies with the president's inability to maintain an organization strong enough to thwart stakeholders with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

"President Obama has lacked an encompassing organization to build support and legislative votes for his initiatives, and this has created an imbalance between the unorganized and diffuse support of beneficiaries and the intense, well organized opposition of stakeholders. In truth, administration reform efforts were delayed or defeated in large part because their opponents were far better organized, funded, and programmatically coherent." (Jacobs and King, 796).

Those who seek to implement Obama's policies do not have an organized, collective voice as strong and well organized as the stakeholders in Washington politics. Clearly, the opposition to Obama's policies have been more proficient at generating funds in support of disseminating information about their causes and portraying Obama administration policies

in a negative light. Obama's difficulties organizing support for several pieces of signature legislation suggests that he has struggled to acknowledge the stakeholder consideration in the American political system. This successful negative spin placed on the government diminished the government's credibility while at the same time bolstering the arguments made by the stakeholders.

Stakeholders played a significant role in the health care debate – seen as the most obvious attempt by the Obama administration to engage in fundamental change. “Proposals to create a national health insurance exchange and a public option were defeated by well-organized interests and their advocates within Congress in an arena where provision and financing among the non-elderly were privately controlled.” (Jacobs and King, 798). Clearly, Obama's health care law and the transformational reforms it proposed to the insurance system was detrimental to the interests of insurance companies. Based on the financial resources at their disposal and their advocacy of members of Congress, these companies can easily be considered stakeholders as they possessed a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Certainly, it is plausible to suggest that insurance companies were threatened by a government mandate that would prevent them from denying coverage to individuals with pre-existing conditions, for example. These individuals, being more of an insurance liability, would ultimately cost the insurance companies a significant amount of money in health care costs. It is credible to suggest that these insurance companies would therefore have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo with regards to health care.

By November of 2010, the combination of high unemployment rates, the stalled economy, and the strong backlash to President Obama's health care reform law that was intensified by the strong opposition to Obama's transformational policies by the



stakeholders interested in maintaining the status quo created a political climate that was detrimental to Democrats, but beneficial for Republicans. "Democrats were tossed out of the majority in the House after voters elected a new class of 87 Republicans who campaigned on repealing 'Obamacare'." (Walsh, 1). Throughout the 2010 midterm election campaign, the Republican Party effectively seized the disillusionment of an electorate dissatisfied with Obama's inability to reduce gridlock in Washington as he had promised he would during the 2008 campaign. The stakeholders were clearly adept at organizing an anti-Obamacare message and convincing the American voting public that the health care law was detrimental to their personal liberties. "With polls indicating the public still sharply divided on the issue [of health care], GOP aides said that showing the overall costs and impact on the nation's deficit ties into their message that Obama isn't focused on the economy." (Walsh, 1). The election produced a Republican controlled House of Representatives, as well as a reduced Democratic majority in the Senate. "When the results were in, a chagrined Obama acknowledged that he and the Democratic Party had received a 'shellacking.' His critics and many of his defenders were quick to describe the election as a rejection by the electorate of Obama's policies and perhaps Obama himself." (Greenstein, 10). This victory represented the intensification of a hostile opposition to President Obama's policies, which also gave a stronger voice to one of the most intensely anti-Obama groups in the United States: the Tea Party. The intensification of a hostile opposition towards Obama as sparked by the Tea Party is illustrative of one of the significant social considerations within American politics that Obama has had to deal with – the general aversion that the American public has towards government spending, and the difficulty Democrats have in justifying it.

As Teixeira and Halpin suggest, government spending is guilty until proven innocent. (Teixeira and Halpin, 1). It is difficult to justify government spending in that the American electorate has a predisposed skepticism towards it; a skepticism that is long entrenched and is perpetually fueled by the current Republican Party, which champions smaller government and less intervention in the free market. The rise of the Tea Party represents the beginning of a hostile opposition towards President Obama's policies, based on the perception that he was engaging in out of control spending in his efforts to extract the country from an economic quagmire. "On February 17, 2009, Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, a \$787 billion measure designed to stimulate the economy." (Greenstein, 9). The 'bailout' of financial institutions was a move seen by many who opposed Obama to be government intervention in America's free market economy, a difficult move to justify in a nation skeptical about government spending and intervention.

"Obama's bailout of financial institutions and his proposed changes in the health care contract quite literally affected Americans' most intimate sense of secure belonging – jobs, health, and home. The leaders of the Tea Party movement characterized these measures as the continuation by economic means of the terrorist attack on the homeland on 9/11/2001." (Pease, 93)

The notion that Obama administration policies would, as Pease suggests, 'affect Americans' most intimate sense of secure belonging' illustrates the catalyst that sparked the Tea Party movement. The fact that the leaders of the Tea Party characterized Obama's Wall Street bailout and his moves towards health care reform as akin to an economic terrorist attack illustrates the obstructive nature of this social consideration of American politics

The Tea Party movement emerged approximately one month after Obama's inauguration, "bankrolled by powerful Republican lobbies and promoted by Fox News, the Tea Party movement included members who had suffered real economic and emotional losses in the wake of the financial meltdown." (Pease, 90). Evidently, the Tea Party represents the manifestation of American unease about government intervention, as well as those who were experiencing distress in their everyday lives because of the economic meltdown. There are also clear stakeholders who continue to stand to benefit from the hostile and vocal opposition towards President Obama by the Tea Party – Republican lobbies stand to gain clout within the American political structure if the Tea Party opposition helps elect Republican office-holders.

The basic tenets of the Tea Party illustrate that this social consideration has indeed been an obstacle for Obama throughout his presidency.

"The Tea Party believes in a reduced role for the federal government, more fiscal responsibilities, lower taxes, a free market, and a commitment to states' rights. [...] Specifically, Tea Party sympathizers appear united in their fervent disdain for President Barack Obama, and seem to be squarely opposed to any policies that might benefit minority groups." (Barreto et al, 106)

Not only do Tea Party sympathizers possess a 'fervent' disdain for President Obama, but according to a recent study issued by Democracy Corps, 90 percent of Tea Party supporters believe that President Obama is a socialist, and they view him as "the defining and motivating threat to the country and its well being." (Barreto et al, 107). Statistically, "according to data from a 2010 University of Washington study, 27% of the adult

population, or 63 million Americans, strongly approve of the Tea Party.” (Barreto et al, 106). These numbers illustrate a strong backlash towards the Obama administration’s attempt at achieving transformational policies.

Although the bailout of financial institutions through Obama’s stimulus package angered Tea Party supporters, it was the health care debate that led to the intensified presence of the Tea Party at rallies focused on opposition to the law and the alleged impingement it had on the privacy and liberty of Americans. “Although the Tea Party operated on the fringes of US politics for much of 2009, they became a nationally recognizable movement following President Obama’s signing of the Affordable Care Act on March 30, 2010. The so-called ‘Tea Party Patriots’ led protests across the country.” (Barreto et al, 109). This can easily be labelled as the intensification of opposition against President Obama’s attempt to usher complete transformational change through the American political system, and it also serves as a reminder of the underlying reality of American politics that President Obama apparently misunderstood; that not only is Washington resistant to transformational change, but Americans are generally averse to increases in government spending, requiring a president who engages in such to justify their actions.

Obama was not well positioned to handle the intensity of the opposition that arose based on the perception that he was going to spend uncontrollably. This has hurt him significantly, as Teixeira and Halpin suggest. “He had too much faith in his ability to strike deals with Republicans in Congress. When he couldn’t strike these deals, it made him appear weak, and when he ended up implementing his policies anyway, he faced a backlash from those concerned about government spending and intervention.” (Teixeira and Halpin, 1). Obama’s misguided attempts to strike deals with Republicans interfered with

his ability to concentrate on the issues of greater importance that he said he would during his 2008 presidential campaign – chief among them, the well-being and day to day lives of the American people.

Race played a key role in contributing to Barack Obama's victory in 2008; the enthusiasm that Obama generated among African-Americans increased black turnout by 7 percent, and his ability to bridge the racial divide and attract a larger share of the white vote than the two previous Democratic presidential nominees provided a strong popular vote victory to complement his large Electoral College margin. As the first president from a minority racial demographic, Barack Obama has faced an additional obstacle rooted in a social consideration of American politics and governance. This obstacle is unique to his presidency and again returns the issue of race to this narrative regarding the Obama administration.

President Obama has been forced to engage in a balancing act between advancing the interests of the country as a whole and advancing the interests of his core racial demographic of African-Americans. As defined in the previous chapter, this social consideration is an obstacle for Obama in that on the one hand, he must not appear to be more focused on advancing African-Americans for fear of losing support of the rest of the country, but he also has a special role as the first African-American president to the black community in the United States. Having to bridge this ever-present divide has created difficulties for Obama, particularly in maintaining the strong connection he developed with his African-American constituency during the 2008 campaign. Importantly, as pointed out by Teixeira and Halpin, expectations for Obama were significantly higher as the first African-American to occupy the White House. (Teixeira and Halpin, 1).

Several African-Americans prominent in the media illustrate the difficulty that Obama has faced during his presidency with regards to his race. These prominent blacks have vocally expressed their disappointment with Obama's alleged lack of proper representation and advocacy of his African-American constituents. Silva provides insight into this argument by discussing opinions made by civil rights activist Harry Belafonte, who lamented that "there is no force, no energy, of popular voice, popular rebellion, popular upheaval, no champion for radical thought at the table for discourse. And as a consequence, Barack Obama has nothing to listen to, except his detractors and those who help pave the way to his own personal comfort with power – power contained, power misdirected, power not fully engaged." (Silva, 7). Further, Silva outlines that academic Cornel West believes that Americans have "become so maladjusted to the prevailing injustice that the Democratic Party, more and more, is not just milquetoast and spineless, as it was before, but thoroughly complicit with some of the worst things in the American empire." (Silva, 8). Furthermore, segments of the Hip Hop community, a community that was vital for Obama's election, have also criticized Obama, and some artists have done so quite bluntly. [...] Sean Combs, AKA P. Diddy said in an interview early in 2011 that although he still supports the president, he is disappointed with how little Obama has done for blacks. P. Diddy also said, 'he [the president] owes us. I'd rather have a black president that was man enough to say that he was doing something for black people have one term than a president who played the politics game have two terms.' (Silva, 8).

For Belafonte, West, and Combs to express their disappointment in Obama, it brings into question whether Obama has been able to maintain the level of support he enjoyed among African-Americans that has been shown to have contributed to his victory in 2008.

Belafonte's questioning of Obama's ability to affect transformational change in terms of radical upheaval of American societal problems, West's belief that the Democratic party under Obama's leadership has become weak and spineless, and Combs' belief that Obama has not 'done enough' for black people illustrates the difficulty Obama has faced within his role as the first black president; he has had to set a precedent for future minority presidents through his efforts to appear to be advocating on behalf of all Americans and by not overtly attempting to serve the interests of his racial constituency.

A concern with the testimonials of Belafonte, West, and Combs lies in the fact that these individuals represent the elite of African-American society due to their prominence in the media. Do they speak for themselves or can they accurately gauge the sentiments of African-American society at large? Silva illustrates that, based on President Obama's policy track record with issues pertaining to lower and middle class African-Americans, the opinions of these individuals of the upper echelon of black society may ring true.

"Obama's actual track record over the past three years has not been good for poor and working-class blacks [...] his 2010 budget included cuts to [Housing and Urban Development] and heating assistance that will hurt poor blacks more than any other community, the rising black unemployment, and the disproportionately high rates of foreclosure among poor and working-class blacks who were targeted by unscrupulous bankers and mortgage specialists in the past 10 years." (Silva, 6).

Although Harry Belafonte, Cornel West, and Sean Combs can be considered elite members of the African-American community, President Obama's actual record sheds light on several issues that continue to afflict middle and lower-income African-Americans in the United

States. This adds legitimacy to the idea that the opinions of Belafonte, West, and Combs run parallel with the opinions of a wider contingent of the African-American community. In 2008, enthusiasm among black voters was at extremely high levels since they were voting for an African-American candidate for the first time. In 2012, this could come to work against President Obama, notably since if the black community doesn't believe he has done enough for them, enthusiasm will not be as high and could affect voter turnout in crucial swing states such as Virginia, Florida, and North Carolina, the latter two which the president won by considerably small margins in 2008. Further, Silva provides an important point regarding the Obama administration's efforts to discuss race. "To ensure Obama's success, the unspoken but clear strategy that Obama and his handlers have used is to avoid any talk about race and racism, even when racial issues emerge." (Silva, 5). There is legitimacy to this claim, seen through the Obama administration's reaction to the Shirley Sherrod resignation.

"After the Obama administration forced Shirley Sherrod to resign following the circulation of a faked video purportedly showing her 'racism,' President Obama 'called for a national discussion of race issues around kitchen tables and water coolers and in schools and church basements' (Montopoli, 2010). Besides the fact that race is already discussed around kitchen tables, water coolers, and church basements (Myers, 2003) albeit often in disguised terms (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), 'calls' for discussions, dialogues, or conversations about race from liberal politicians are actually ways to deflect dealing with race issues at all." (Silva, 6).

Obama's blatant aversion to the discussion of racial issues serves as a point of contention for African-Americans who were hoping to inject racial issues into the national discourse



with the election of President Obama. The fact that he has studiously avoided the use of race in his attempt to portray himself as a representative of all Americans instead of just African-Americans has contributed to the decline of African-American enthusiasm towards him that could result in lower African-American turnout at the polls; an element of his 2008 victory that he would need to replicate to win re-election in 2012.

“While liberal commentators and activists yearn for Obama to channel Lyndon Johnson’s notorious skill in lobbying Congress and to unleash sharp denunciation of his predecessors as had Ronald Reagan, the reality is that Obama is haunted by lingering stereotypes and bias. His advisors have steered him away from actions and rhetoric that could trigger the ‘angry black man’ stereotype, which is already bubbling up in protests. He has resisted pleas from African American leaders to target resources into their communities and into reducing unemployment among blacks.” (Jacobs and King, 800).

One can see the delicate balancing act that Obama has had to engage in as president; because of his race, he has not been able to live up to the high expectations that not only African-Americans had for him, but that his progressive followers had for him as well. Jacobs and King’s suggestion that Obama must avoid the ‘angry black man’ stereotype, which ultimately makes it seem to blacks in America that Obama is not advocating for them on their behalf, illustrates a societal consideration within American politics. Obama’s decision to ignore pleas from African-American leaders to increase resources into poor black communities indicates that Obama is fearful of being portrayed as biased towards people of his own racial background. It is without question that as a Democrat and the first African-American president, Obama will win over 90 percent of the African-American vote in

the 2012 election. However, his difficulty overcoming this particular hurdle as the nation's first minority president posits a concern for the Obama campaign – will African-Americans show up at the polls in 2012 as enthusiastically as they did in 2008?

Obama was under enormous pressure coming to Washington and having to deal with the ever-shifting currents of public opinion, the House, Senate, and the media. In this milieu, simply pushing legislation through becomes difficult and pressing, and changing the American political structure becomes something that fades into the background. In terms of how the Obama administration has gone about implementing policy, it certainly does not appear transformational, which in turn made him look like he wasn't transformational. As Teixeira and Halpin point out, people now believe he can be president and achieve some accomplishments, but they are skeptical at whether he's the transformational figure that many people hoped he would be. (Teixeira and Halpin, 1).

Throughout this chapter, conclusive evidence has suggested that the weakening of the coalition of support that Barack Obama constructed in 2008 is not attributable to a single overriding factor such as the state of the American economy. Rather, Obama's woes are tied to a series of institutional and social considerations within American politics that have presented obstacles for the president, forcing him to abandon his message of transformational change in an effort to minimize the negative effects that these obstacles have presented. Obama's 2012 re-election victory is far from certainty, and he is already being compared to the most recent one-term Democratic president, Jimmy Carter. Are these comparisons founded? Compared to a successful two-term Democratic president such as Bill Clinton, is there anything that Obama could do or have done differently to increase his prospects for re-election?

#### **Chapter Four: Obama's Historical Precedent: Presidents Carter and Clinton**

Obama is only the third Democrat to occupy the White House since 1976, and his two Democratic predecessors illustrate the stark contrast between a failing re-election campaign and a successful one. Comparisons between Obama and these Democratic predecessors, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, are inevitable, but based on the findings of this investigation, are these comparisons valid? Do these comparisons provide a template suggesting whether Obama will be limited to one term like Carter was, or be elected to a second term like Clinton? Following this string of thought towards its logical conclusion would suggest that Carter had difficulty navigating the institutional obstacles of the American political system as evidenced by his defeat in 1980, whereas Clinton was more adept at this, shown by his relatively easy victory in 1996.

Political observers and pundits throughout the first half of the 2012 presidential campaign have been likening the Obama administration to that of Jimmy Carter's. Upon first glance, there are significant similarities to the way in which both men ascended to the White House, as well as the issues they faced in office. Consider the political climate during the 1976 election. The Watergate scandal, the Nixon resignation, and the war in Vietnam were still mentioned in popular discourse. These events occurred under two terms of Republican leadership in the White House. President Gerald R. Ford was regarded by many as an illegitimate president (Bowman, 1), as he was appointed to the vice-presidency upon Spiro Agnew's resignation, and ascended to the presidency upon Nixon's resignation. The fact that Ford was not elected by the people to the office of vice-president or president contributed to the notion that he had an illegitimate claim to the presidency, souring public opinion of him. Even though President Ford was not connected to the Watergate scandal,

he was seen as the remaining representative of the corrupt Nixon administration. (Bowman, 1). This 'illegitimacy' as well as Ford's immediate pardoning of Nixon of all crimes committed with regards to the Watergate scandal served to further taint the presidency in the minds of the American public.

These factors suggest that the 1976 election, occurring after two previous White House terms for the Republicans, was a unique opportunity for a Democratic candidate to seize in order to win the presidential election that year. The 1976 Democratic presidential primary contest saw an unusually high number of aspirants for their party's nomination, including better known candidates. However, a dark horse candidate emerged from this group, surprisingly winning the Democratic nomination: Jimmy Carter. As Governor of Georgia, he easily claimed executive experience while at the same time being untouched by scandalous Washington politics. This easily enabled Carter to run as a reform candidate, and allowed him to circumvent the more well known candidates by painting them as Washington insiders. 2008 by comparison also yielded a favourable political climate for a Democratic candidate running as a reformer, in the midst of an unpopular Republican administration tainted by scandal and perceived mismanagement of the government. Barack Obama's rise to power as a change candidate in the political climate of 2008 can easily be compared to Jimmy Carter's rise as a reformer in the political climate of 1976.

Upon closer examination however, one can easily identify key differences between the Carter and Obama presidencies. Barack Obama was able to build a vastly stronger coalition of support when he ran for his first term in 2008, winning the popular vote against John McCain by over ten million votes and winning an impressive Electoral College victory of 365-173. Jimmy Carter's run for a first term yielded a victory in the popular vote, but

only by 1.7 million votes; only a fifth of the margin that Obama received in 2008. Further, Carter's Electoral College victory over incumbent President Gerald R. Ford was significantly smaller than Obama's over McCain: 297-240. Carter could not claim the sea-to-sea support that Obama achieved in 2008; the Carter-Mondale ticket did not carry any states west of Texas. Clearly, Barack Obama, in a more successful way than Jimmy Carter, was able to convince voters that he had the capacity to change Washington politics for the better, which resulted in a more decisive mandate for change in 2008.

In 1980, Carter's support had eroded within his own party, prompting a primary challenge on his left by Senator Ted Kennedy. Although Carter survived the challenge it portrayed a weak and ineffectual party leader incapable of garnering support among his base, let alone a wider coalition of voters in the general election. President Obama, as of June of 2012, far surpassed the amount of required delegates necessary to obtain his party's nomination for the 2012 election. This suggests that for the most part, the Democratic Party is united behind President Obama's candidacy. This is a particularly noteworthy asset for the president, considering the long primary campaign that he won by a small margin against Senator Hillary Clinton in 2008. In terms of party base, President Obama is currently in a much more solid position than President Carter was in 1980.

As well, President Obama possesses the strong asset of personal popularity, an asset that Carter did not have leading up to his 1980 re-election campaign. In June of 2012, an NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll suggested that Obama himself was more popular than his policies and his stewardship of the economy; 46 percent of respondents suggested they approved of President Obama personally (Shepard, 1) whereas at the same point in Carter's re-election campaign (June of 1980) only 32 percent of respondents

approved of him personally. (Roper Center, 1). This 14 point disparity illustrates that President Obama remains in a better position for re-election than President Carter was in the 1980 campaign cycle.

As Teixeira and Halpin illustrate, compared to Obama, Carter was not a particularly great or adept president.

“The errors that he made combined with the stagflation of the late 1970s largely doomed his re-election campaign. Carter did not know how to deal with this stagflation – he seemed as though he had no control and was incompetent. The key difference between Carter and Obama is to remember that Obama inherited the current economic mess. The economic turmoil that doomed Carter occurred largely under his watch. Obama is currently in a much better position for re-election than Carter was at this point in 1980.” (Teixeira and Halpin, 1).

The idea that Obama is in a better position for re-election is emphasized by Teixeira and Halpin’s assertion that Obama’s ratings are either ticking up or staying the same at this point, whereas Jimmy Carter’s ratings at this point in the 1980 campaign cycle were steadily moving down. (Bowman, 1). The fact that President Obama has maintained steady approval ratings, however mediocre, offers a glimmer of hope for his re-election prospects that President Carter simply did not have at this point in 1980.

Further, as Bowman points out, Carter was largely seen as responsible for the economic woes of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which hindered his re-election bid and enhanced the idea that he was an incompetent leader. (Bowman, 1). President Obama, on the other hand, is not blamed for the continued poor state of the US economy; according to

opinion polling, that blame continues to lie overwhelmingly with former President George W. Bush. (Bowman, 1). Voters in 2012 are more concerned about the slow pace of the economic recovery, which Bowman suggests creates a slightly friendlier political climate for President Obama's re-election campaign.

An additional difference between the two Democratic presidents stems from the Iranian hostage crisis that lasted for 444 days from November 1979 until January 1981. The extreme difficulty that Carter experienced in attempting to solve the crisis, according to political analysts such as Michael Barone, contributed to his loss to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election. (Barone, 1). The Iranian hostage crisis represented a foreign affairs emergency for President Carter, which made him appear weak and incompetent in that niche. Conversely, President Obama is highly regarded for his administration's approach to foreign policy, which is an impressive feat given the fact that foreign policy is traditionally an area of Republican strength. (Teixeira and Halpin, 1). Obama has not faced a foreign affairs emergency of the same scale as the Iranian hostage crisis, and he has overseen the overall improvement of international sentiment towards the United States. The perceived incompetence of the Carter administration with regards to foreign policy was simply another nail in the coffin of Carter's presidency, which contributed to his defeat in the 1980 election. President Obama's foreign policy prowess is seen as an asset to his re-election bid, which establishes an additional key difference between Carter and Obama.

These differences between Carter and Obama illustrate that recent comparisons of the two presidents among political commentators and pundits should be taken with a grain of salt. Clearly, there is a strong possibility that the 2012 presidential election will be an historical aberration should President Obama win, given the high unemployment rate and

the stagnant economic recovery that is taking place under his stewardship. Although strong connections can be made with the way in which Carter and Obama came to power, Obama has proven himself to be a vastly different president than Carter in ways that could benefit his bid for re-election. Therefore, the comparisons between Presidents Carter and Obama are inevitable, but unfounded.

The case of Bill Clinton, who also campaigned on a theme of change in 1992 after twelve years of Republican control of the presidency is noteworthy, particularly when considering his successful 1996 re-election bid. What did Clinton have success with that Carter did not, and is it too late for President Obama to replicate this success in his own re-election campaign? Obama faced a similar situation in 2010 that Clinton faced in 1994. The midterm elections proved disastrous for both presidents, ushering in large Republican majorities in a previously Democratic-controlled Congress. Clinton's Democratic Party lost both the House and the Senate to the Republicans, whereas Obama's Democratic party lost the House and the supermajority in the Senate.

As Teixeira and Halpin illustrate, Clinton was widely disliked during the first years of his presidency and his approval ratings were terrible mid-term. However, he was a great politician, shown through his gravitation towards the political centre following the 1994 midterm elections, and was able to reinvent himself and his legislative strategy in a manner that was perceived in a more positive light by the American electorate and was ultimately beneficial to him and his re-election bid. It also helped that the economy in 1995-96 was improving rapidly. (Teixeira and Halpin, 1). Clinton's decision to gravitate towards the political centre with regards to his legislative style helped him redefine the parameters of his administration on his own terms instead of allowing the Republican opposition to define



him. This is something that, given the hostile 111<sup>th</sup> Congress and the rise of the Tea Party, President Obama has had difficulty achieving; the various stakeholders in maintaining the Washington status quo have, as shown in the previous chapter, have organized more successfully than the Obama administration and campaign have.

President Clinton also benefitted from the state of the US economy, a factor that President Obama will have difficulty reaping benefit from in his re-election bid. It is arguable, based on Teixeira and Halpin's discussion about President Clinton, that President Obama can still increase his prospects for a second term by emulating President Clinton's 1996 campaign strategy. President Clinton effectively bounced back by transmitting his message more effectively following the 1994 midterm elections, and he was able to successfully pair the gridlock of the Republican Congress he faced to his Republican opponent, Senator Bob Dole. President Obama still has a chance to emulate Clinton, but given the short amount of time until the 2012 election, he will have to act quickly to pair his Republican opponent, former Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, to the gridlocked 111<sup>th</sup> Congress which is under Republican rule.

Essentially, the comparisons between President Obama and President Carter are unavoidable given the economic woes that the United States is facing in a presidential re-election campaign, but upon closer scrutiny of the presidencies of these two men, it is apparent that the differences between them suggest that President Obama should not yet be counted out. These comparisons between Carter and Obama are inevitable, but unfounded. Further, comparisons between President Obama and President Clinton yield greater potential for an Obama victory in 2012, should he emulate President Clinton's adept leadership style that helped win him re-election.

## **Conclusion**

The coalition of support that Barack Obama was able to generate during his 2008 presidential campaign stemmed from his well-executed campaign strategy, the negative perception of the Republican Party, the onset of an economic crisis, Obama's rhetoric of hope and change, and the belief that Obama would be a transformational leader if elected. Over the course of the Obama presidency, this coalition has dwindled, and not simply due to one overriding concern such as the stagnant economic recovery. Rather, a series of institutional and social realities within American politics and governance have become obstacles for Obama in his quest to fundamentally change America's politics, economy, and society. These factors, among them the transactional nature of Washington politics, the presence of stakeholders with a vested interest in maintaining the Washington status quo, the electorate's aversion to government spending, and the racial divide that Obama has had to bridge as the nation's first African-American president have derailed the Obama administration and have now jeopardized the president's chances of winning re-election. With Obama's re-election in jeopardy, observers have begun to compare Obama to the most recent one-term president, Jimmy Carter. These comparisons, along with comparisons between Obama and former two-term Democratic President Bill Clinton, are inevitable but unfounded, as the differences between Obama and his recent Democratic predecessors overshadow any similarities and therefore make it impossible to predict whether Obama will be limited to a single term or not. Further, if Obama is to salvage his prospects for a second term, he would be shrewd to attempt a more aggressive campaign to pair his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney, with the gridlock of the current Republican Congress; a strategy that helped solidify a second term for President Clinton in 1996.

While this project has provided a narrative of the Obama phenomenon – his meteoric rise and his unexpected fall – the overall narrative has yet to be completed. The information shared in this Master’s Research Project is significant in that it provides a more complete rendering of the inner workings of modern political economy in America. The various considerations – both institutional and social – that have contributed to the partial derailing of the Obama administration serve as a reminder to historians and political scientists alike that the American political system – not necessarily the individual occupying the Oval Office – is responsible for many of the political problems the country faces.

The 2012 presidential election will likely come down to a small amount of battleground states, which suggests that the country is still exceptionally polarized. Should Obama emerge victorious, he will likely not have achieved the same margin of victory that he did in 2008. President Obama retains several strong assets heading into his re-election campaign; his foreign policy record remains strong, and as a traditional source of Republican strength, the president can effectively utilize this during his campaign. Further, Obama remains popular personally; his popularity outshines that of his policies. However, the stagnant economic recovery combined with a firestorm of institutional and social considerations within the American political system have made what was once thought would be an easy re-election victory anything but certain.

Presently, the United States is attempting to establish equilibrium between Congress and the presidency, all within a porous administrative structure prone to penetration by stakeholders. The various checks and balances placed on these branches of the federal government by the Framers of the US Constitution, along with social considerations such as those mentioned in this project, create a political climate that is detrimental to

transformational ideas. This calls into question why the idea of transformational change can resonate so noticeably during an election campaign, but cannot be implemented within the confines of the American political structure.

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