



Obstacle Course: Obama and the 2012 Electoral Landscape

BY WILL MARSHALL

As the 2012 election gets underway, President Obama is still waiting to see who his opponent will be. Candidates and campaigns matter hugely, of course, but we should also pay attention to the field on which the match will be played—and at first glance, the lay of the political land doesn't look so favorable to Obama and his party.

The lingering economic slump has demoralized voters and tilted the electorate rightward. With idle workers, underwater homeowners, exploding deficits and debts, growing inequality, and a bitter, broken political system, objective reality isn't exactly working in incumbents' favor. Upon closer inspection, however, the electoral landscape may not be as forbidding for progressives as it first appears.

For one thing, the recovery finally seems to be gaining momentum, complicating Republican attempts to cast Obama as a "failed president" who doesn't have a clue about how the economy works. For another, Republicans are incumbents too, and their intransigence and obstructionism throughout 2011 will make many swing voters reluctant to entrust them with undivided control of the federal government. Finally, the fractious battle for the GOP nomination reveals a party at war with itself, while conservatives' venomous attacks on Obama push Democrats toward unity.

But no matter whom the Republicans pick as their standard bearer, the tricky political terrain confronts Obama with three strategic imperatives: 1) roll up a big majority of moderate voters; 2) win back a good chunk of the independents who deserted his party in 2010; and 3) fashion a stronger economic message that combines jobs and fiscal responsibility.

Moderates Matter More Than Ever

Obama today faces an electorate that's more conservative than the one that elected him in 2008. According to new polls by Gallup, 40 percent of the public identifies as conservative, while just 21 percent fess up to being liberals.¹ That's up three points from 2008, and up significantly from the one-third share of the electorate that conservatives have averaged in polls going back three decades.

The recent uptick is most likely a reaction to an unusually severe economic downturn. The fact remains, however, that whereas there used to be 1.5 conservatives for every liberal in America, in 2012 the ratio is nearly 2-1. The new arithmetic doesn't mean Democrats are doomed; it does mean they have to do exceptionally well among moderates to win.

That in fact is what Obama did in 2008, when he carried 60 percent of the moderate vote.² But he'll probably have to do even better this time to compensate both for the rise in self-identified conservatives and a likely falloff in support among his core 2008 constituencies: minorities, young voters, single women and highly educated professionals. Liberals consider themselves the Democratic "base," but there just aren't enough of them to deliver victory. In 2008, half of Obama's vote came from moderates, while liberals accounted for 37 percent.³ Conversely, Republicans will need fewer moderates to build majorities because more voters now describe themselves as conservatives.

Ideological Makeup of 2008 Obama Voters

2008 voter self-identification	Share of electorate	Obama's performance in 2008	Share of votes received by Obama
Liberal	22%	89%	37%
Moderate	44%	60%	50%
Conservative	34%	20%	13%

Source: CNN Exit Polls

Of course, voters don't define themselves exclusively by their political outlook, and things get more complicated for Republicans when we look at trends in partisan affiliation. Last year, according to Gallup, a record-high 40 percent of Americans described themselves as independents.⁴ In addition, more identified as Democrats (31 percent) than as Republicans (27 percent).⁵

Does the much ballyhooed fact that independents are now the biggest "party" in America bode well for third-party challengers? Not necessarily. There may be more of them, but most independents continue to lean to one party or the other. As a group, they've grown more conservative in the last several years, and Gallup says more leaners incline today toward the Republicans than Democrats, resulting in an even, 45-45 partisan split. Genuinely unaffiliated voters make only about 10–15 percent of the electorate.⁶

Who You Calling Polarized?

Political scientists note that polarization in U.S. party politics is "asymmetrical," which simply means that Republicans are a lot more conservative than Democrats are liberal. A whopping 71 percent of Republicans now say they are either very conservative or conservative, with moderates falling from about a third to 23 percent over the past decade.⁷

Democrats present a more diverse philosophical profile, with moderates and liberals each representing roughly 38 percent of the party's vote.⁸ While liberal Republicans have practically become extinct, fully a fifth of Democrats still identify as conservatives. Such numbers explain why liberals seem destined to perpetual disappointment in Democratic presidents, who cannot lean too far left without alienating the party's moderate-to-conservative majority.

As political analysts Bill Galston and Elaine Kamarck have shown, it is a mistake to think of moderates as watered down liberals.⁹ They have distinctive views on economic issues (they are more pro-market and pro-business) and the role of government (they are more skeptical about its efficacy). The implications for Democratic strategy and tactics are huge. However much liberals may yearn to run against "vulture capitalism" or growing disparities of wealth and income, for example, the need to win big among moderates will likely temper Democrats' appetite for unbridled populism. And base mobilization, while always important, cannot be the centerpiece of Obama's 2012 campaign.

Nonetheless, Galston notes the *trend* toward ideological sorting is just as strong among Democrats as Republicans.¹⁰ Since 2000, the percentage of Democrats who consider themselves liberal has grown from 29 percent to 39 percent, a 10-point increase, while the percentage of Republicans calling themselves conservative grew by 9 points.¹¹ The bigger picture here is a long-term decline among moderates, who until recently constituted a plurality of both the electorate and the Democratic Party.

The New Radical Republicans

For now, at least, Republicans are by far the more homogenous party. This may be an asset in off-year elections, when low turnout gives outsized influence to impassioned partisans and ideologues, but it's a weakness in presidential contests, where moderates and moderate independents tip the balance. No longer leavened by northeast liberals and western progressives, increasingly concentrated in the South, the GOP coalition has been steadily losing its ideological ballast. Hence the uncompromising, doctrinaire edge that House Republicans have brought to Washington.

To a stunning degree, the GOP's Tea Party cadres seem uninterested in the gritty business of legislative compromise and governing. Debates over concrete and complex problems—immigration, health costs and coverage, public debts, inequality—are abstracted from the actual details of policy and reframed as ideological choices: personal responsibility vs. collectivism, free enterprise vs. regulation, limited government vs. statism. Today's radicalized Republicans want regime change, not reform, in Washington.

Thus House insurgents embroiled the nation in fiscal brinkmanship no less than three times last year. Convinced they'd won a mandate to slash government spending, they adamantly refused to raise tax revenues to reduce the national debt, even if that meant shutting down the government or defaulting on America's debts for the first time ever. The GOP's anti-tax absolutism also scuttled any possibility of a bipartisan resolution of the fiscal crisis. Far from rewarding such truculence, public approval of House Republicans sank like a stone in 2011.¹² According to a recent New York Times/CBS News poll:

“...Americans are also far more apt to blame Republicans than the president for failing to find common ground and passing legislation. An overwhelming number of Americans support compromise over sticking to positions. A majority of people say Mr. Obama is trying to work with Republicans in order to get things done, while two-thirds say Republicans in Congress are not trying to work with Mr. Obama.”¹³

Such attitudes give Obama a chance to win a new hearing from independent voters, who are particularly put off by the partisan deadlock in Washington. Only about a third now express a favorable opinion of the president, a far cry from the 52 percent he carried in 2008.¹⁴ Exit polls showed that independents were powerfully attracted to Obama's promise to narrow America's red-blue divides.

Obama needs to recapture his “post-partisan” mojo, even at the cost of infuriating liberals who believe Republicans have been playing him for a sucker. Having made a calculated decision to withhold cooperation on Obama's big initiatives, such as the stimulus bill and health reform, GOP leaders now have the temerity to call him the most polarizing president ever. As galling as such hypocrisy is, however, Obama's conciliatory instincts are sound. Liberals may yearn for a combative team captain, but the last thing independents want is a president who will make Washington's feral partisanship even worse.

Schism in the GOP

Instead of turning himself into a fiercer partisan, Obama should keep public attention focused on the GOP's new radicalism and the internal rifts it's causing. As nominating contests often do, the GOP primaries have turned into a battle for the party's soul, with conservatives loathe to ratify the party establishment's choice, Mitt Romney.

Tea Party populists don't trust the patrician Romney and, given that he's rarely polled over 28 percent among Republicans in national polls, they don't buy his “electability” argument either. Where Romney is tone deaf, Newt

Gingrich is pitch perfect when it comes to channeling conservative resentment against governing elites. Although a somewhat implausible tribune of the right himself, Gingrich has indelibly stamped Romney both as an ideological poseur (a “Massachusetts moderate” pretending to be more conservative than he really is) and a heartless Wall Street banker. Yet to GOP leaders and donors, these very qualities spell cross-over appeal for Romney in the general election against Obama.

Democrats are salivating over the prospect of facing the erratic Gingrich, even to the point of running ads against Romney. If, as seems more likely, Romney the tortoise outlasts Gingrich the hare, it will be a crushing blow to Tea Party types, who will feel like victims of a political version of a leveraged buy-out. This could spark a third-party challenge, from libertarian Ron Paul or perhaps a social conservative, or lead many disgruntled conservatives to stay home on Election Day.

Even so, conservatives have pushed the pliant Romney farther to the right than he probably wanted to go. Now he’s chained to maximalist positions on abortion, gays, and immigration, which leaves him with a lot of explaining to do with independents—who are more moderate on social issues—and Latino voters. In fact, recent polls show a dramatic erosion of Romney’s standing among independents.¹⁵

To curry favor with conservatives, he’s even been willing to repudiate the biggest achievement of his political career: making Massachusetts the first state with universal health coverage. If he wins the nomination, Romney’s awkward and expedient repositionings will make “authenticity” a key issue in the fall campaign and give Democrats opportunities to exploit the schism between conservative fundamentalists and GOP pragmatists.

A Stronger Economic Argument

Romney’s strategy is to juxtapose his success in business to Obama’s alleged record of economic mismanagement. There’s no doubt that public worries about the economy pose the chief obstacle to a second term for Obama. No recent President has gone into his reelection campaign with unemployment as high as it is now (8.5 percent). But that number has fallen for four consecutive months, and if it continues on a downward slope, the pall of economic pessimism hanging over the country could start to lift.

The more important number is GDP growth. Unfortunately for Obama, it averaged only 1.7 percent over four quarters in 2011. Contrast that with the situation Ronald Reagan faced in January 1984, when unemployment stood almost as high at 8 percent.¹⁶ GDP figures, however, showed the economy expanded by an average of nearly 7 percent over the previous four quarters. No wonder voters were receptive to Reagan’s “morning in America again” theme.¹⁷

Since a surge like that isn’t in the cards for President Obama, he needs something else to mitigate voters’ economic pessimism: A long-term vision for restoring America’s productive might and rebuilding the middle class.

In his State of the Union speech, Obama began to sketch such a vision. But it will take more than a basketful of new tax credits and modest regulatory changes to reverse profound structural changes in the U.S. economy that have been unfolding for decades. What’s needed is a new model for growth that emphasizes domestic investment, innovation, and production rather than encouraging more debt-fueled consumption.

The production economy model demands big policy changes and institutional innovations. For example, we need an independent bank to leverage private investments in modern infrastructure, and to choose projects based on the economic rather than political benefits they generate. As PPI has proposed, it requires a systematic effort to

prune the accumulation of regulations that impede economic innovation and growth.¹⁸ It means sweeping tax reform and a big push to reduce the number of U.S. homeowners who are underwater. It means getting much more serious about closing the achievement gaps in our K-12 school systems. And it means cracking down on China and other countries that violate free trade rules through subsidies, currency manipulation, technology expropriation, and intellectual property theft.

In short, Obama needs bigger, bolder ideas for building new foundations for middle class prosperity in America. Fairness and shared sacrifice are important elements of such a message, but progressives should shy from overheated populist rhetoric. Middle class Americans are more concerned about increasing jobs and growth than reducing inequality, and they are more interested in creating a climate conducive to entrepreneurship and business success than a hostile environment for corporations.

At the same time, Obama also must show more urgency about long-term deficit reduction. Getting America's debts under control is the public's second priority, after jobs, and is especially important to swing voters. This is a tricky issue for the president. Polls show that the public doesn't relish paying higher taxes, and that it opposes cuts in entitlement programs, which are driving long-term spending growth. But experience suggests that Americans will support a balanced package of revenue increases and spending cuts that spreads the political pain more or less equally to both sides.

For reasons that still puzzle many, Obama failed to endorse just such a "grand bargain" when his own Fiscal Commission proposed it over a year ago. In the coming campaign, he should rectify that error and spell out clearly the specific fiscal goals he believes America must achieve in his second term, as well as the sacrifices both parties must make to get our debts under control. There's no better way for Obama to demonstrate to independents his resolve to rise above party and steer both parties to a compromise that puts the nation's interests first.

President Obama obviously must traverse a rockier, less welcoming political landscape in 2012 than four years ago. But with a little help from a brisker recovery, bigger ideas to expand middle class opportunity, a radicalized and divided opposition and the courage to rise above a destructive partisanship, he can find his way across.

Endnotes

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⁴ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Record-High 40% of Americans Identify as Independents in '11" *Gallup*, January 9, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/151943/record-high-americans-identify-independents.aspx>.

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⁹ William Galston and Elaine Kamarck, "The Still-Vital Center": Moderates, Democrats, and the Renewal of American Politics," *Third Way*, Pg. 3.

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¹⁵ Greg Sargent, “Romney’s negative ratings soaring among independents,” *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/post/romneys-negative-ratings-soaring-among-independents/2012/01/27/gIQAeVB1VQ_blog.html.

¹⁶ Lydia Saad, “Obama Faces Challenging Re-Election Climate,” *Gallup*, Pg. 4, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/152051/obama-faces-challenging-election-climate.aspx>.

¹⁷ Saad, *Ibid*, Pg. 3.

¹⁸ Michael Mendel, “Reviving Jobs and Innovation: A Progressive Approach to Improving Regulation,” Progressive Policy Institute, February 3, 2011, <http://progressivepolicy.org/reviving-jobs-and-innovation-a-progressive-approach-to-improving-regulation>.

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