

A Note on Presidential Leadership

Sathyan Sundaram

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The president of whom Obama most reminds me is FDR neither due to the economy, nor the coattails but in leadership traits demonstrated. These are:

(1) Pragmatism - Much to the chagrin of the people who made Obama president, he has not chosen a single progressive for his cabinet but rather DLC centrists (Clinton, Richardson, Emanuel) and technocrats (Geithner). Even Joe Lieberman - targeted for revenge by the Left - has been shielded and is now indebted to Obama. On policy, Obama has shown flexibility in much they way of FDR: bold, persistent experimentation, constantly evaluating outcomes and modifying or abandoning suboptimal initiatives. Non-ideological leaders must be all the more charismatic and able to explain policy shifts to the public.

(2) The embrace of new technologies - The social networking capabilities of internet 2.0 gave Obama a decisive edge in the campaign and one which likely will continue to generate non-institutional support for his presidency in much the way FDR's fireside chats reached into member's districts to bring pressure on Congress.

(3) Co-opting rivals by inviting them in. Jack Garner had he not been FDR's VP would have resisted the New Deal in a full-throated manner. Sun tzu's maxim "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer" explains Clinton's nomination and Obama's rescue of Lieberman.

and, (4) Personalization of politics- As the dominant political figure of his day FDR undermined political parties for a generation (seen in weakening partisanship). An individual utilized technology to directly speak with the constituents. If Obama's calls for post-partisanship are more than rhetoric he may have an exacerbating effect on the decline of political parties. In my opinion, this is not good. Political parties were created to channel popular sovereignty. Congress eventually stood up to FDR in the Constitution-shredding court-packing scheme. After 70 years of executive aggrandizement, Congress' ability to prevent a similar usurpation is somewhat in doubt. Without the backstop of strong political in the legislature the risk of a benevolent or malevolent dictator becomes a serious risk.

Unfortunately Nelson Polsby (author of "The Modern Presidency" and analyst of presidential leadership) is no longer with us to provide comment.