During his first two years in office, fulfilling prominent campaign promises, Barack Obama pushed through legislation attacking the recession and its causes, initiated sweeping reforms in the health care system, and shifted U.S. forces from Iraq to Afghanistan. His reward was to see his Democratic Party suffer a crushing defeat in the 2010 elections. I examine the contours of opinion regarding Obama before he was elected and as they subsequently evolved during his early presidency in order to understand where, how, and why the president's legislative and policy successes turned into political failures.

The idea that a president's legislative and political success go hand in hand is starkly contradicted by the first two years of Barack Obama's presidency. With the help of Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, Obama pushed through a huge economic stimulus package targeting the deep recession he had inherited, initiated comprehensive reforms of the nation's health care system, and signed a major redesign of financial regulation.
aimed at preventing a repeat of the financial meltdown that had made the recession so severe. These legislative achievements made the 111th Congress among the most productive in many years, and they were fully consistent with promises Obama made during his successful campaign for the White House. Obama also kept his campaign pledge to wind down the United States' involvement in Iraq and to reallocate American forces to confront the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan.

In short, Obama had done what he might reasonably believe he was elected to do. His reward was to see his Democratic Party suffer a crushing defeat in the 2010 midterm elections, with Republicans gaining 64 House seats to win their largest majority (242-193) since 1946, and six Senate seats, putting them within easy striking distance of a majority in that chamber in 2012.¹ Not only did the president and his party reap no political benefit from their legislative accomplishments, they were evidently punished for them. The congressional Republicans' strategy of all-out opposition, adopted not long after Obama took office, turned out to be remarkably successful, delivering a stunning setback to a majority party that had won a sweeping victory just two years earlier.

Scholars will be debating explanations for this swift turn of events for some time to come. The Obama administration's priorities, legislative strategies, and political acumen are sure to come under critical scrutiny. My purpose here is somewhat different. I focus on the state of public opinion regarding Obama and his party during his successful election campaign and on its evolution during his first two years in office, looking for clues about where, why, and how legislative and even policy successes turned into political failures that ended up devastating Obama's party on election day.

**Background: The 2008 Election**

Public opinion toward Obama during his first two years in office featured wide partisan divisions, unusually intense hostility among his detractors, and extraordinarily strong connections between popular opinions of Obama, his party, his policies, and, ultimately, voting decisions in the 2010 elections. The evidence presented in this article suggests that Obama has become a stronger anchor for political attitudes, positive and negative, than even his predecessor, George W. Bush. Bush had been a highly polarizing figure, inspiring the widest partisan differences in presidential evaluations since the advent of modern polling. By 2008, however, even Republicans had lost some of their enthusiasm for him, and he was receiving exceedingly low marks from Democrats and independents (Jacobson 2011a). Bush's unpopularity, mainly a legacy of the Iraq War, but reinforced by the financial crisis and sharp economic downturn near the end of his term, tarnished his party's image, drove independent voters toward the opposition, and contributed crucially to Obama's victory (Jacobson 2010a).

Obama's election did not signal any narrowing of partisan divisions. According to the 2008 American National Election Study,² party-line voting, at 89.1 %, was second only to 2004's 89.9% in the ANES series going back to 1952.³ Self-identified Republicans accounted for only 4.4% of Obama's voters, the smallest crossover vote for any winning presidential candidate since John F. Kennedy in 1960. Moreover, voters who had supported his opponent, John McCain, tended to accept the McCain campaign's portrayal of Obama as a radical leftist (Conroy 2008; Drogan, and Barabak 2008; Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson 2010). As Figure 1 shows, 41% judged him an “extreme liberal” and another 34% “liberal” on the ANES's 7-point liberal-conservative scale; only 23% put him in the middle three categories (slightly liberal, middle of the road, slightly conservative). Obama's voters, in contrast, saw him as much more moderate; 49% placed him in the middle three categories, 32% classified him as a liberal, and only 7% rated him an extreme liberal.
McCain voters, on average, placed Obama at 2.0 on the 7-point scale, further left than Republican voters had placed any previous Democratic candidate, including George McGovern in 1972. The also placed him further to the left of their own ideological location, by an average of 3.1 points, than Republican voters had placed any previous Democratic candidate (the average distance for candidates from McGovern through John Kerry was 2.1 points). Moreover, the more conservative McCain voters were themselves, the more liberal they perceived Obama to be (Figure 2), whereas the more conservative the Obama voters, the more conservative they considered Obama. Obviously, the psychological processes of contrast (among McCain voters) and assimilation (among Obama voters) were powerfully at work (Sherif and Hovland 1961). On average, Obama's voters placed him slightly left of center (at 3.3, where 4 is dead center) and slightly to their own right, an appropriate location for a leader of the Democratic Party's diverse center-left coalition.

**Figure 1.**

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**Voters' Placement of Obama on the Liberal-Conservative Scale.**

Source: 2008 ANES.
The campaign by McCain (and especially his running mate, Sarah Palin) to brand Obama as a radical leftist, while insufficiently persuasive to defeat him, certainly resonated with many conservatives. This is no surprise, for Obama's race, background, personality, and political style were guaranteed to antagonize identifiable factions on the political right. An African American carrying a foreign-sounding name with “Hussein” in the middle, Obama also has an Ivy League education, a detached manner, and a nuanced, cerebral approach to politics. He passed a portion of his childhood in predominantly Muslim Indonesia. Entering politics as a community organizer on Chicago's South Side, Obama maintained links with local black activists and leaders, some with fairly radical views, including his long-time minister, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Obama was thus bound to vibrate the racist, xenophobic, anti-intellectual, and antielitist as well as antiliberal strands woven into the fabric of right wing populist thinking. Among people sharing this mindset and others who simply accepted the McCain campaign's depiction of Obama as an unreconstructed 1960s-style radical with a socialist agenda, his election was bound to be alarming, his every action scrutinized for signs of his “true” intentions. The 2008 campaign thus planted the seeds for the intense aversion to Obama and his policies that later blossomed in the Tea Party movement.

The 2008 election also featured the highest levels of party loyalty among House and Senate voters and lowest levels of ticket-splitting between president and House or Senate candidates in more than four decades. As a consequence, the number of split districts was also unusually low, and relatively few congressional Republicans shared a significant portion of their electoral constituents—the people whose votes had elected them—with...
Obama. This is evident from data in the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, which with 32,800 respondents is large enough to provide estimates of partisan voting at the House district level. Figure 3 displays the frequency distribution of House districts across 5-point ranges of Obama’s 2008 vote share according to the percentage of voters in the district who also supported the winning House candidate. Few Republicans in the 111th House represented districts where their own supporter had also given Obama significant backing; in 87% of Republican districts, fewer than 20% of Republican voters also voted for Obama. There were was a slightly larger number of districts where a substantial proportion of voters for the winning Democrat preferred McCain; still, in 82% of Democratic districts, more than 80% of the Democrats’ electoral constituents also supported Obama. The electoral connection thus gave a large majority of congressional Republicans little incentive to support the president’s agenda and little to lose by adoption of a strategy of all-out opposition. It also established conditions for continuing high levels of partisan polarization in Congress.

In sum, the 2008 election laid a foundation for both the elite and mass responses to the Obama and his policy agenda observed during the first two years of his presidency. The next section examines how and why successful action on that agenda failed to deliver political dividends.

**Fixing the Economy**

TARP
On taking office, Obama's first necessity was to address the deep recession that had begun in December 2007 and was to last for the next 18 months. The financial crisis that came to a head in the summer of 2008 in the wake of a collapse in housing prices had accelerated the economic downturn. Large financial institutions with huge positions in mortgage-backed bonds faced bankruptcy, a prospect that threatened to freeze the credit markets essential to the functioning of the American and international economies. The Bush administration responded with the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), a $700 billion rescue package for banks and other financial institutions that passed with bipartisan support in September 2008. As Senator and candidate, Obama had supported the bailout, and his administration adopted TARP as is its own, including its expansion to cover loans designed to keep General Motors (GM) and Chrysler from going out of business.

TARP was unpopular from the start, for its immediate effect was to bail out the banks and insurers whose greed and recklessness had done so much to create the problem. That it actually worked did not make it any more popular. TARP stabilized the financial sector, revived the credit markets, saved Chrysler and GM from bankruptcy, and is projected to cost taxpayers no more than $25 billion of the $700 billion allocated, a modest price indeed if it helped prevent a rerun of the Great Depression (Rooney 2010). The stock market rebounded, and by early December 2010 the S&P 500 was up 79% from its March 2009 low. TARP did not, however, prevent steep increases in unemployment, mortgage foreclosures, and business failures as the recession deepened. Thus, notwithstanding a broad consensus among economists that allowing the big banks and auto companies to fail would make the economic downturn much worse, most Americans were not convinced that TARP helped.

The opinions about the benefits of the TARP loans expressed in the August 2010 NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey are typical (Table 1); more people thought the loans hurt than thought they helped the country, with particular skepticism about the bank bailout. Only regarding the auto company loans and only among Democrats were assessments of TARP more positive than negative. The political problem was that TARP had plainly failed to help the millions of Americans who had lost their jobs, homes, and businesses, while few people who remained employed, housed, or in business because the economic contraction had not been even more severe attributed their good fortune to TARP. And although TARP had been initiated by the Bush administration, by the summer of 2010, more people believed it was Obama's program than remembered it had been Bush's idea.  

### Table 1.
**Opinions on the Effects of Obama's Policies on the Country**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Independents</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helped</td>
<td>Hurt</td>
<td>Helped</td>
<td>Hurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank loans</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto company loans</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic stimulus</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial regulation</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Obama’s own initiative for addressing the recession was the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, a $787 billion package (later grown to $814 billion) combining tax cuts and incentives, expanded unemployment and other social welfare benefits, and spending on infrastructure, energy development, education, and health care. The bill passed in February, 2009, with no Republican votes in the House and only three in the Senate. As with the bank bailout, the benefits of the stimulus package for ordinary Americans were at best ambiguous. It may have increased economic growth by as much as 4.5% and saved as many as 3.3 million jobs, as the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) concluded, but the unemployment rate was higher in December 2010 (9.8%) than it had been when the bill was passed (8.2%). Partisan divisions on the efficacy of the stimulus bill mirror its partisan origins (Table 1), but only half the Democrats thought it had helped and majorities of independents joined Republicans in deeming it more hurtful than helpful.

The Obama administration not only failed to convince most Americans that the stimulus had helped but also failed to get across the point that it had given 94% of working Americans a tax cut and that federal taxes had thus gone down—by about $240 billion—rather than up, during Obama’s tenure (Przybyla and McCormick 2010). A September 2010 CBS News/New York Times survey found that one-third of public held the mistaken belief that taxes had increased, while only 8% recognized taxes had in fact decreased, with the remainder saying they had stayed the same.

### Financial Regulation

The Obama administration’s other principal response to the economic crisis was embodied in the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which become law July 21, 2010. This broad revision of the rules regulating the financial sector was designed to prevent a recurrence of banking crisis, avoid future bailouts, and protect consumers from predatory banking and credit practices. The action was supported by a solid majority of Americans, including a substantial share (although still a minority) of Republicans. However, most Americans remain undecided on its efficacy (Table 1), a reasonable position because most of the rulemaking needed to realize the new regulatory regime has yet to be completed. Moreover, despite its popularity, the bill may have actually hurt Democratic candidates in 2010, for it fed perceptions in the financial sector and elsewhere in the corporate world that Obama and the Democratic congressional leaders were unsympathetic to business interests, a perception helped finance lavish independent campaigns aimed at ending Democratic control of Congress (Jacobson 2011c).

Taken together, the data in Table 1 underline political ineffectiveness of the Obama administration’s response to the economic crisis. Most Americans did not hold Obama responsible for the recession; every survey taken during Obama’s first two years in office found more people blaming Bush for the current state of the economy than Obama, typically by ratios of more than two to one, and when “Wall Street” and “Congress” are added to the list of possible culprits, the percentage of respondents assigning Obama primary responsibility has been in single digits. But most Americans also believed that his administration had failed to address the problem effectively, for the economic recovery that began in the summer of 2009 produced too few jobs to cut the unemployment rate. Although Obama’s popular standing with the public was certainly affected by issues besides unemployment, it is worth observing that his approval ratings fell in lock step with the rise in unemployment during his first year in office and subsequently remained flat as unemployment also held more or less steady (between 9.5 and 10.1%) for the next 15 months (Figure 4).
Unemployment and Approval of Obama's Job Performance (Monthly Averages).

Health Care

Important as they were, Obama's policies for addressing the recession were not nearly as politically consequential as his efforts to restructure the health care system. The passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, signed into law on March 22, 2010, fulfilled a central promise of Obama's 2008 campaign, but both the process and the product proved controversial and divisive. Implementation of the complex legislation is not scheduled to be completed until 2014, and its effects on the cost and quality of health care will not be known for many years. Its political effects, however, were immediate and profound.

The Tea Party Movement

First, people susceptible to the McCain-Palin campaign's depiction of Obama as a radical leftist took his health care reform initiative as confirmation, fueling the emergence of the Tea Party movement, which became the locus and loudest transmitter of fervently anti-Obama sentiments. Egged on by conservative voices on talk radio, Fox News, and the Internet, some Tea Partiers came to see Obama as not merely an objectionable liberal Democrat, but as a tyrant (of the Nazi, Fascist, Communist, Socialist, Monarchist, or racist variety, depending on the critic\textsuperscript{14}) intent on subjecting Americans to, variously, socialism, communism, fascism, concentration camps, or control by United Nations, Interpol, international bankers, the Council on Foreign Relations or the Trilateral Commission (\textit{Barstow 2010}). Not all Tea Party adherents (12 to 18\% of the public) or sympathizers (about a third of the public\textsuperscript{15}) entertain such fancies, but they are nearly unanimous in their antipathy toward Obama and belief that his policies are moving the country toward socialism.\textsuperscript{16} They are also overwhelmingly white, conservative, and
Republican or independent leaning Republican (83 to 88%, depending on the survey); few—on the order of 10%—had voted for Obama in 2008. Although some Tea Partiers express disdain for the Republican establishment, the movement's sympathizers fit seamlessly into the party's conservative core, expressing opinions typical of ordinary Republicans, only with more thorough conservative orthodoxy (Jacobson 2011b). They also tend to hold attitudes locating them toward the high end of the racial resentment scale (Parker and Barreto 2010).

Tea Party sympathizers and other Republicans manifest their disdain for Obama by, among other things, denying his American birth (and thus eligibility to be president) and Christian religion. An April, 2010 CBS News/ New York Times poll found 32% of Republicans and 30% of Tea Party activists saying that Obama was foreign born, with only 41% saying he was born in the United States; other polls report similar results. About the same proportion of Republicans—31% in an August, 2010, Pew survey—also said that Obama is a Muslim, more than thought him a Christian (27%). A Time survey taken the same month found an even more remarkable 46% of Republicans expressing this misconception; among the 60% of Republicans calling themselves conservatives, 57% said Obama was a Muslim, with only 14% saying he was a Christian. This was not meant as a compliment; 95% of Republicans who thought Obama was a Muslim disapproved of his job performance.

Examination of a pair of Pew surveys suggests that causality runs more strongly from opinions of Obama to beliefs about his religion than in the opposite direction, for as Obama's approval ratings fell, the proportion calling him a Muslim grew. Between Pew's March 2009 and August 2010 polls, Obama's approval rating dropped from 59% to 47%, and the proportion saying he is a Muslim rose from 11% to 18%, while the proportion of disapprovers saying he is a Muslim held about steady (21% in the first survey, 23% in the second). These beliefs help to explain why 52% of the Republican respondents to the August 2010 Newsweek poll said it was definitely (14%) or probably (38%) true that “Barack Obama sympathizes with the goals of Islamic fundamentalists who want to impose Islamic law around the world.” That so many of Obama's detractors voice such bizarre notions is testimony to how thoroughly alienated from the president they have become.

The Republican Strategy

A second major effect of the health care debate was to convince Republican congressional leaders that a strategy of all-out opposition to Obama was their ticket back to majority status. The anger and energy manifested by the Tea Party movement, and, more important, the election of Republican Scott Brown in January 2010 to the late Edward Kennedy's Senate seat in Massachusetts on a platform opposing Obama's health care plan, inspired united Republican opposition to changes in the health care system that, as its Democratic defenders were fond of pointing out, look very much like those Republican presidential aspirant Mitt Romney had pushed through when he was governor of Massachusetts and that Republicans had proposed as alternatives to Bill Clinton's plan in 1993. Republican leaders even adopted the Tea Party's apocalyptic rhetoric in denouncing the legislation: House minority leader John Boehner called the struggle over the final vote “Armageddon” because the bill would “ruin our country.” His Republican colleague, Devin Nunes of California, declared that with this “Soviet”-inspired bill, Democrats “will finally lay the cornerstone of their socialist utopia on the backs of the American people.”

Public Opinion on Health Care Reform and Obama

The public was and remains fairly evenly divided over the extraordinarily complicated health care reform package; more people offer unfavorable than offer favorable reviews (by about 5 percentage points on average), but some do so because it promises too little rather too much government involvement. Some of the legislation's elements are quite popular, some not; predictably, majorities tend to like the benefits and to dislike paying the costs required to produce them. But reflecting and reinforcing the partisan battles in Washington, opinions on the overall package were sharply divided along party lines, contributing to the even wider divisions in...
assessments of Obama's job performance (Figure 5). Although this partisan divide has yet to reach the record levels inspired by Bush during his second term, it is wider than under any president before Bush.

Figure 5.
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Partisan Opinion on Health Care Reform and Obama’s Job Performance.
Source: See footnote 24.

The extent to which health care became a touchstone issue for assessments of Obama's presidency is evident in the extraordinarily strong cross-sectional relationship between opinions of Obama's job performance and his health care reforms. On average during 2010, 89% of respondents offered consistent opinions of Obama and the legislation, approving of both or disapproving of both. To put these numbers in perspective, opinions of Obama and his health care proposals were even more tightly linked than were opinions of Bush and the Iraq War (an average consistency rate of 83%; see Jacobson 2008, 80). Opinions on Obama's handling of the issue were also more closely related to his overall job performance rating than were his ratings on the handling of any other issue.

The pivotal role of the health care issue in comparison with other major sources of assessments of Obama is confirmed by the equations in Table 2. The May, 2010, an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll asked respondents to rate their feelings toward various public figures and institutions, including Barack Obama and the Tea Party movement, as very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, or very negative. It also asked opinions on the health care bill and the efficacy of the stimulus bill, how the respondent voted in the 2008 presidential election, and the standard party identification, ideology, and demographic questions. Opinion on the health care bill is the strongest predictor of feelings about Obama of any of these variables (Equation 1). This is
not surprising, for the simple correlation between feelings about Obama and health care reform, .79, is noticeably higher than for any other pairing, including party identification (.65) and the two 2008 vote variables (.66 each). The same result appears when approval of Obama's job performance is the (now dichotomous) dependent variable and the model is estimated using logistic regression (Equation 2); views on the health care bill have by far the largest estimated effect on the respondent's probability of approving. The equations show that opinions of Obama in 2010 were also strongly related to the reported 2008 presidential vote,27 opinions of the Tea Party movement, and assessments of the efficacy of Obama's stimulus bill.

Table 2.

Source of Opinions of Barack Obama
The causal arrows here clearly run in both directions, so these equations are intended to assess the relative strength of relationships rather than to provide structural estimates of a causal process. They do, however, demonstrate that attitudes toward Obama reflect far more than mere partisanship and ideology, and they point to some of the underlying sources of the highly polarized responses to the Obama presidency. For example, among the approximately one-quarter of respondents who viewed the health care legislation positively and the Tea Party movement negatively, 98% approved of Obama’s job performance and 96% viewed him positively. Among the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party identification (7-point scale)</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.06** (.02)</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.21*** (.08)</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
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</table>
| **Note:** The dependent variable in the OLS equation is a 5-point scale ranging from 2 (very positive view of Obama) to -2 (very negative view of Obama); in the logit equation it takes a value of 1 respondent approved of Obama’s job performance, 0 if disapproved; party identification scored in the Democratic direction; ideology is scored in the liberal direction; the presidential vote variables and “white” are 1 if yes, 0 otherwise; opinion on the Tea Party movement is a 5-point scale ranging from 2 (very positive) to -2 (very negative); opinion on health care reform is a 5-point scale (2 = good idea, strongly; 1 = good idea, not so strongly, 0 = unsure or no opinion; -1 = bad idea, not strongly; -2 = bad idea, strongly); efficacy of the stimulus is a 4-point scale, (2 = has helped the economy, 1 = will eventually help the economy, 0 = unsure, -1 = will not help the economy). Robust standard errors are in parentheses.
| **For the OLS equation, effect is the estimated difference in the dependent variable between the highest and lowest values of the independent variables; for the logit equation, it is the difference in the probability of approving Obama’s performance between the highest and lowest values of the dependent variable with the other variables set at their mean values.**
| **Source:** NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll, May 6-10, 2010, courtesy of the Roper Center, University of Connecticut.

similarly sized faction who expressed negative opinions of health care reform and positive opinions of the Tea Party, 96% disapprove of Obama's job performance and 90% viewed him negatively.

Losing the Independents

A third crucial aspect of health care reform politics is that a solid majority of independents rather consistently sided with Republican identifiers in opposing the bill as too intrusive and too expensive. In surveys taken in 2010, an average of 37% of independents favored the legislation, 52% opposed. In aggregate, independents' views of health care reform and Obama converged (Figure 5) and not at a level that was helpful to Obama and his party. Obama's decline in support was particularly noticeable among conservative independents, many of whom adopted the Tea Party's view of him as an extreme liberal. As Figure 6 shows, just before his inauguration, and regardless of their own ideological locations, independents surveyed by the NBC News/ Wall Street Journal Poll placed him on average between 2 and 3 on a 5-point liberal-conservative scale (on which 1 is very liberal, 2, somewhat liberal, 3, moderate, 4, somewhat conservative and 5, very conservative). A year later, conservative independents were placing him on the far left end of the scale. As a consequence, their feelings toward him (measured on a scale where 5 is very positive, 4, somewhat positive, 3, neutral, 2, somewhat negative, and 1, very negative), became much more negative. Obama's loss of support among independents is the most politically consequential change in public opinion during his first two years in office, a point I return to in discussing the 2010 elections.

Figure 6.
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Obama's Wars

Obama inherited two ongoing wars and so never had the option of attending exclusively to the economy and other domestic policy issues. Popular disaffection with the Iraq War had contributed crucially to Barack Obama's nomination and election in 2008 (Jacobson 2009a; 2010a). On assuming office, Obama proceeded to fulfill his campaign promise to wind down that war and redirect forces to fighting the resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan. Both moves enjoyed broad public backing. Partisan divisions on Obama's conduct of the wars have been much smaller than on domestic policy (Figure 7), no doubt because his policies toward both have pleased Republicans as much (Iraq) or more (Afghanistan) than Democrats. The draw-down of U.S. forces in Iraq follows a timetable negotiated by the Bush administration and is consistent with Republicans' assessment of Bush's "surge" of 2007-2008 as a great success, so their opposition has been muted. Although Democrats tend to prefer a hastier exit (explaining their tepid approval ratings of Obama's performance in this domain), they can at least see a trajectory that should finally extract the United States from what most of them now judge a disastrously misconceived venture (Jacobson 2010b).

![Figure 7.](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2011.03852.x/full)

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Partisanship and Approval of Barack Obama's Performance in 2010, by Domain.
Note: the number of surveys averaged is in parentheses.
Obama's Afghan policies have divided partisans internally. For example, Republicans’ support for his December 2009, decision to commit another 30,000 U.S. troops to the fight averaged 70% in polls taken in the months after it was announced, 33 points higher than their approval of his handling of the Afghan war, while Democrats’ approval of the escalation averaged 49%, 14 points lower than their approval of his handling of the war (Jacobson 2010b). Thus, many Republicans approved of the president’s decisions but not his handling of the war, whereas many Democrats approved of his handling of the war but not his decisions. In neither case, however, did opinions on Obama's performance in this domain (or regarding Iraq) have an appreciable effect on his overall approval ratings. As the data in Figure 7 show, Republican approval of Obama's general job performance averaged 20 points lower than their approval of his handling of the wars, while Obama's overall approval among Democrats averaged 18 and 11 points higher than his respective ratings on Afghanistan and Iraq. In sharp contrast to evaluations of his predecessor, then, overall assessments of Obama's performance have so far reflected reactions to his domestic far more than his foreign policies, a natural consequence of both his legislative agenda and the recession's severity. Thus, the domain provoking the least partisan contention has not been sufficiently salient to dampen partisan differences in overall evaluations of his presidency.

**Obama and the Democratic Party**

The failure of Obama's legislative and other policy achievements to deliver any tangible political dividends and continuing economic discontent affected not only his own popular standing, but also that of the Democratic Party. Presidents have a powerful effect on popular attitudes toward their parties (Jacobson 2009b); one of Bush's signal contributions to Democratic victories in 2006 and 2008 had been the damage done to the Republican Party's popular standing during his second term. By the time Obama took over, his Democrats enjoyed a wide lead in party favorability (Figure 8). Since then, Republican favorability has undergone a modest rebound from its low point in early 2009, while views of the Democratic Party have become substantially less favorable. The average 23-point advantage Democrats held on this dimension during the first quarter of 2009 had by the final quarter of 2010 fallen to 2 points.
As with Bush, the data show a strong linear relationship between aggregate views of Obama and his party. Figure 9 plots party favorability against presidential approval during the two administrations and displays equations estimating the linear relationship between the two variables, also plotted in the figure. Note that the slope has been steeper during the Obama administration; the difference is statistically significant (p < .001), another sign of Obama's unusual centrality to the organization of public opinion during his presidency. Also as with Bush (Jacobson 2009b), Obama's popularity had a much smaller effect on favorability ratings of the opposing party. Regressing Republican favorability on Obama's approval rating produces a coefficient of −.24 (standard deviation, .12) and the fit is quite poor (adjusted $R^2 = .05$). Presidents who lose popularity hurt their own party's standing, but they do not help the opposition party's standing to nearly the same degree.
Trends in macropartisanship (the aggregate share of partisans identifying with the parties) have also been found to track aggregate presidential approval (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 1998; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 1998; Jacobson 2009b; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989), and this remains true for the Obama administration. Both the CBS News/ New York Times and Gallup party identification series show that Bush’s declining approval ratings during his second term were reflected in an increasingly Democratic mass electorate (Figure 10). That trend was reversed early in Obama’s presidency and by the end of his second year in office, all of the Democrats’ gains in the Gallup series, and most of the gains in the CBS/ New York Times series, had been erased. Treating independents who say they lean toward a party as partisans does not alter the picture, although their inclusion tends to exaggerate the degree of change. As with party favorability, macropartisanship is directly related to presidential approval during both the Obama and Bush administrations (Figure 11). Again, the slope is steeper for Obama, although in this instance the difference is not statistically significant.

![Figure 9.](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2011.03852.x/full)

**Figure 9.**
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**Presidential Approval and Party Favorability, G.W. Bush and Obama Administrations.**

![Figure 10.](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2011.03852.x/full)

**Figure 10.**
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**Macropartisanship, 2001-2010.**
The 2010 Midterm Elections

The accumulated consequences of lingering high unemployment and the failure of Obama's legislative and policy accomplishments to generate political benefits inflicted severe damage on the Democratic Party in the 2010 midterm elections. The referendum component common to all midterm elections was strengthened in 2010 by Obama's emergence as an unusually powerful anchor for political opinions. The proportion of respondents saying their congressional vote would be cast to support or oppose the president, 56%, was the highest for any of the nine midterms for which data are available (Jacobson 2011c). The balance of supporting (27%) and opposing (29%) voters was nearly even, but Obama's opponents were much more eager to participate in the election: on average, 63% of Republicans said they were more enthusiastic about voting than usual (the highest proportion of such voters recorded in midterm data going back to 1994), compared with 44% of Democrats (Jacobson 2011c). And Obama's Tea Party antagonists were the most enthusiastic participants of all.

Analysis of aggregate election data confirms that the 2010 election was nationalized to an extraordinary degree and that the president was the primary focus. For example, the relationship between the midterm House vote and the president's district-level vote in the previous election was the closest on record. This relationship has been growing stronger for decades (Figure 12), but 2010 produced, by a considerable margin, the highest correlation in the series, .92, compared to .85 and .84 for the two next-highest midterms (1954 and 2006).
same statistic for 2010 Senate elections calculated from state-level data, .84, was also highest among midterms going back to Dwight E. Eisenhower's first term. To an extraordinary degree, then, how well Democratic candidates did in 2010 depended on how well Obama had done among their constituents in 2008. The interelection swing in the House vote between 2008 and 2010 was also more uniform across districts than usual, and estimates of the incumbency advantage were the smallest since the 1960s (Jacobson 2011c). All evidence, then, identifies 2010 as the most nationalized midterm election in at least six decades.


**Figure 12.**

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Correlation Between the Prior Presidential Vote and the Midterm Election Vote Across House Districts, 1954-2010.

Source: Compiled by author.

With high unemployment and widespread popular discontent about the direction of the country, a highly nationalized election obviously favored the Republicans. Shifts in the structure of electorate between 2008 and 2010 also worked to the Republicans' advantage. Obama had attracted unusually high turnout among younger and minority voters in 2008, demographic categories that include a disproportionate share of marginally involved citizens with a lower propensity to vote in midterm elections, setting up a classic “surge and decline” scenario (Campbell 1966). As noted earlier, the balance of party identifiers had also shifted in the Republicans’ favor since Obama's inauguration (Figure 10), and independent voters, essential to Democratic victories in 2006 and 2008, had turned against the president (Figures 5 and 7). Both changes clearly hurt the Democrats. According to the exit polls, party-line voting was very high (at 94% for Republicans, 92% for Democrats) in 2010, underlining the significance of the shift in mass partisanship. More crucially, independent House voters, who had split 57-39 for the Democrats 2006 and 51-43 in 2008, voted for Republican, 56-37 in 2010 (Jacobson 2011c). A comparable shift occurred in Senate elections. According to the 2008 exit polls, seven of the eight Democrats
who took Senate seats from Republicans that year had outpolled their opponents among independents; in 2010, all of the Republicans who took seats from Democrats were supported by majorities of independents. The failure of Obama and his party to maintain their appeal to independent voters was the single most important source of the Democrats' losses in 2010.

Conclusion

During his first two years in office, in fulfillment of prominent campaign promises, Barack Obama pushed through landmark legislation attacking the recession and its causes, initiated sweeping reforms in the health care system, and shifted U.S. forces from Iraq to Afghanistan. The public's response was to hand his party a decisive defeat in the 2010 midterm election, leaving him to face a hostile Republican majority in the House and sharply diminished Democratic majority in the Senate for the final two year of his term. The political failure of Obama's legislative and policy successes had multiple sources. The most important was that the economy did not rebound strongly enough to make a significant dent in the unemployment rate. The main benefits of TARP and the stimulus legislation lay in keeping the economy from getting much worse, but the counterfactual (how much more severe the recession would have been without these actions) did not carry much force against the reality of a painfully slow recovery, and most Americans came to see these policies as ineffective or even harmful. The survey respondents identifying the beneficiaries of “the government's economic policies since the recession began in 2002” who placed large banks and financial institutions (74%) and large corporations (70%) far ahead of poor people (31%), middle-class people (27%), and small businesses (23%) could hardly be faulted; stock prices and corporate profits rebounded (arguably, a necessary step toward more general prosperity), but the benefits have been slow to trickle down to middle- and working-class Americans. Similarly, health care reform may someday be celebrated like other major New Deal-type programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, but its immediate political effect was to polarize the public and inspire the upsurge of populist conservatism and intense hostility to Obama manifest in the Tea Party movement. His foreign policy decisions were less controversial and divisive, but they were not central to the public's evaluation of this president.

Could Obama and his allies have done anything to produce a more positive response from the public to his initiatives? Perhaps at the margins, but realities beyond his control place severe constraints on any president's ability to move the public (Edwards 2009), and Obama is no exception. It was not for want of his “going public” that his health care reforms were not more popular. Aside from the straitened times that curb generosity, there was also the problem that, even if they care about the uninsured and worry about rising costs, most Americans are satisfied with their own medical arrangements and skeptical that changes will improve them. Obama could hardly have avoided addressing the issue, given its prominence in his campaign; and had he tried to do so, his own partisans would have felt betrayed. The administration might have managed congressional action on the legislation more effectively, but there would have been no tidy way to get around the implacable Tea Party-infused Republican opposition in the Senate.

The recession Obama inherited was probably more severe than he and his advisors anticipated, and a larger and better-focused stimulus bill might have been more effective. But it is doubtful he could have got one through the Congress, and public fears about the mounting deficit limited subsequent options for boosting consumer demand and job formation. In any case, it is difficult to imagine any feasible government action that would have significantly accelerated the recovery during Obama's first two years, if only because the devastated housing market admitted to no quick fix, and the international economy was also plagued by the legacy of the banking and housing crises.

Opinions of Obama were sharply divided along partisan and ideological lines even before he took office, reinforcing congressional Republicans' reflexive instincts to oppose and obstruct. The Tea Party view of the
president also preceded his election, so almost any domestic action consistent with his position as a moderately liberal Democratic president was likely to provoke the wrath of the McCain voters and other populist conservatives who considered him a radical leftist. And Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, and company were in business to make sure that it did.

In short, even if Obama had been a more astute politician and effective advocate for his policies, conditions prevailing during his early presidency suggest that he would still have faced a jobless recovery and intractable opponents and that he and, by extension, his party would still have suffered a serious erosion of public support. Conditions may or may not improve for Obama during the remainder of his term (even if the economy picks up steam, the problem of Afghanistan looms), but his ability to recover popular support and revive his party’s fortunes will continue to be constrained by circumstances he cannot control.

Footnotes

1. Democrats will have to defend 23 seats, Republicans only 10, in 2012.


3. Party line voting was also second highest to 2004 in the equally lengthy Gallup Poll series; see http://www.gallup.com/poll/139880/Election-Polls-Presidential-Vote-Groups.aspx (accessed December 6, 2010).

4. “Contrast” occurs when people perceive someone they dislike as having opinions more distant from their own than is actually the case; “assimilation” occurs when people perceive someone they like as having opinions closer to their own than is actually the case.

5. According to ANES data, loyalty in the 2008 House elections was the highest since 1962; in Senate elections, it was the highest since 1958; the rate of president-House ticket splitting was second lowest since 1964 (it was slightly lower in 2004); president-Senate ticket splitting was lowest since 1952.

6. The analysis here is confined to districts in which there were at least 10 voters for the winning candidate; this includes 158 Republican districts and 199 Democratic districts. The mean number of Republican voters in the Republican districts in the data set is 27.7, with a standard deviation of 7.9; the mean number of Democratic voters in the Democratic districts in the data set is 25.6, with a standard deviation of 8.8. For a description of the 2008 CCES, see Ansolabehere (2009a; 2009b).

7. Questioned in a July 1-5, 2010, Pew survey, 47% of respondents said it had been Bush’s program, 47%, Obama’s. Responses did not differ significantly across partisan categories; http://pewresearch.org/databank/dailynumber/?NumberID=1057 (accessed December 7, 2010).


9. The breakdown on the question (increase vs. decrease in taxes) was 55-3 for Republicans, 31-7 for independents, and 19-13 for Democrats; thus even Democrats were more likely to get it wrong than right. See the CBS News/ New York Times Poll, September 10-24, 2010, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20016602-503544.html?tag=contentMain;contentBody.

10. In the August 27-30 Gallup Poll, for example, 61% of Americans approved of the legislation, including 76% of Democrats, 62% of independents, and 42% of Republicans (from my secondary analysis of the
In the survey reported in Table 1, 20% said they did not know if the legislation hurt or helped the country, and another 37% said it was too soon to tell.

In the 11 surveys taken between March 2009 and August 2010, asking if Obama or Bush were more to blame for the economy, an average of 25% blamed Obama, 54%, Bush. In the six surveys including Wall Street and Congress as potential culprits, an average of 5% blamed Obama, 33%, Bush, 24%, Wall Street, and 13%, Congress. Only in the first series was there a modest increase in blaming Obama over time. The first series is from polls conducted by ABC News/Washington Post, NBC News/Wall Street Journal, Fox News, Quinnipiac, Newsweek, Democracy Corps, National Public Radio, and Time; the second series is from CBS News/New York Times and Fox; data are reported at http://www.pollingreport.com and the sponsors' Web sites.

Monthly unemployment and Obama's average approval rating correlate at -.92 over his first 12 months in office.

Google “Obama” in conjunction with any of these labels to see how routinely they are used—and defended—on the Internet.

In 19 surveys taken between January and October 2010, between 18 and 41% said they had a favorable view of the Tea Party movement (average, 32%), and from 12 to 50% had an unfavorable view of it (average, also 32%); the rest were uncertain or did not know enough about it to have an opinion; from NBC News/Wall Street Journal, CBS News/New York Times, Quinnipiac, Fox News, AP-GfK, and ABC News/Washington Post polls available at http://www.pollingreport.com/politics.htm (accessed November 7, 2010).

Only 7% of Tea Party supporters in the April 5-12 CBS News/New York Times Poll approved of Obama's performance; 88% disapproved, and 92% said his policies were leading the country toward socialism; see “Tea Party Movement: What they Think,” http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/poll_tea_party_041410.pdf (accessed April 15, 2010).

“Polls: ‘Birther’ Myth Persists Among Tea Partiers, All Americans.” http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20002539-503544.html?tag=contentMain;contentBody (accessed April 15, 2010); the February ABC News/Washington Post Poll found 31% of Republicans and a like proportion of Tea Party sympathizers believing Obama was not U.S. born; see http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/poll-half-birthers-call-suspicion-approve-obama/story?id=10576748&page=2; asked in a July, 2010 survey if Obama was born in the United States, only 23% of CNN's Republican Respondents said “definitely,” 34% said “probably,” 2% said “probably not,” and 14% said “definitely not.” The respective percentages for Democrats were 64, 21, 7, and 8; results at http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2010/images/08/04/rel10k1a.pdf (accessed August 4, 2010).


Eleven percent of Democrats and 17% of independents also thought he was a Muslim; Time Magazine/Abt SRBI Poll: Religion, August 16-17, 2010, available from the Roper Center, University of Connecticut; secondary analysis by the author.


Typically, most people favor requiring insurance companies to cover preexisting conditions and to continue to cover people who become sick, providing subsidies so that poor families can buy insurance, and requiring employers to provide health insurance to workers. The idea of universal coverage also generally wins majority support. But majorities also tended to oppose the components necessary to pay for these features: taxing the most generous health care policies, limiting some Medicare reimbursements, and requiring everyone to buy health insurance (so that the risk pool is large enough) and enforcing this requirement through fines; see the extensive compilation of survey questions and responses at http://www.pollingreport.com/health.htm (accessed November 10, 2010).


An average of 90% of Republicans, 88% of Democrats, and 82% of independents offered consistent evaluations; analysis is based on 10 surveys by Gallup, NBC News/ Wall Street Journal, and CNN taken between February and August and available for secondary analysis from the Roper Center, University of Connecticut.

In the June 2010 Pew survey, 88% of respondents gave consistent evaluations of Obama's performance on health care and his overall job performance; on eight other issues, including the economy, the deficit and the Iraq and Afghan wars, consistency ranged from 69% to 85%.

The relationship could be inflated by faulty memories, but the distribution of the reported two-party vote (54.9% for Obama, 45.1% for McCain) is very close to actual vote in 2008 (53.7% to 46.9%).


Party favorability is measured by the proportion of respondents who reply “yes” when asked, “Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of the Republican [Democratic] Party?”

The slope from analysis of comparable data from the Clinton administration was .49 (standard error, .12, adjusted R^2 = .35, N = 29), so this cannot be attributed to the difference between Republican and Democratic presidents.

Second highest was George W. Bush in 2006, at 54%; for other presidents going back to Ronald Reagan in 1982, it has ranged from 34% to 47%.

During 2010, the proportion of Americans believing the country was on the wrong track exceeded the proportion believing it was moving in the right direction by a ration of more than 2 to 1. See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/01/07/issue-rdwt_n_725763.html (accessed December 4, 2010).

The 2008 results are at http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls.main (accessed November 26, 2010; the 2010 results are at http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2010/results/polls.main (accessed November 26, 2010). There was no exit poll covering one of the Republican pickups (North Dakota), but John Hoeven won 76% of the vote overall so it is safe to assume he also took a majority of independents.

References

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