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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

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THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

BIPARTISANSHIP AND SUCCESSFUL POLARIZATION

BY ED KILGORE

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The word of the week in the chattering classes seems to be “polarization.” Based largely on a new [Pew Research poll](#)¹ showing the gap between Barack Obama's approval ratings among Rs and Ds being higher than those of six previous presidents at the same point in their tenures, [conservative observers](#)², and [some progressives](#)³, are happily burying “bipartisanship” as a strategy associated with the administration.

Yesterday James Vega [cited and then demolished](#)⁴ a Michael Gerson column making the “most polarizing president” argument. But as someone who [wrote approvingly](#)⁵ of Obama's strategy of “grassroots bipartisanship” back in December, I want to come at the “polarization” claim from a different direction: was all of Obama's bipartisanship talk on the campaign trail and in his first days as president just a shuck or a big mistake?

I don't think so.

Now one could take issue with the Pew analysis of contemporary polarization, pointing out that those previous chief executives at this point in their presidencies were still getting their act together and basking in the fading glow of post-election good feelings, whereas Obama basically had to act as proto-president—without any actual authority—the day after the election, and has been forced to press forward with policies guaranteed to accelerate the usual partisan fissures. No president since FDR has had to take so many immediate steps so certain to arouse partisan opposition.

But even if you take the Pew approval rating comparisons as fair or relevant, the inference that Obama's bipartisan strategy has failed misses the very important point that *successful polarization* was always one option the strategy was designed to produce. Obama's bipartisan rhetoric and outreach was aimed at presenting Republican politicians and activists with a choice that would be beneficial to the administration and the Democratic Party no matter which way the decision went: either enough GOPers would cooperate to make enactment of the Obama agenda much easier—perhaps splitting the GOP in the process—or they'd go to the mattresses and isolate themselves, helping Democrats expand their coalition in both the short- and long-terms. Republicans have decisively chosen the second course, and are harvesting increased support from a shrinking party base.

The reaction to [another new poll](#)⁶, the *New York Times*/CBS survey, has focused on the generally positive reviews of Obama's performance and the future direction of the economy and the country. But the more striking numbers reflect the self-isolation of the

Republican Party. As Christopher Orr [pointed out](#)⁷, the overall favorability rating of the GOP is at the lowest level in the 25 years that the *Times* has been measuring it. At the same time, the percentage of the electorate self-identifying as Republican is down to 23%, the second lowest level (the lowest being two months ago) since 1992, while the gap between D and R self-identification is 16 percentage points, compared with 7 points on the eve of both the 2008 and 2006 elections.

And there's evidence the shrinkage of the GOP could continue. Despite every effort of Republican officials in and out of Washington to present the fight over the Obama budget as a Manichean choice between socialism and Americanism, 27 percent of self-identified Republicans approve of Obama's budget priorities, and about the same percentage explicitly favor Obama's approach to the economy over that of congressional Republicans. Talk all you want about how low rank-and-file Republican support for Obama has sunk: there's still a sizable gap between 27 percent and zero—the percentage of congressional Republicans voting for the administration-backed budget resolution.

Meanwhile, as [Charlie Cook](#)⁸ and others are pointing out, Obama's support among the increasing percentage of the electorate self-identifying as Democrats or independents is sky-high among the former and at a steady three-to-two positive margin among the latter.

This doesn't look like a failed strategy to me. It doesn't, of course, look like "bipartisanship," either, because the Republican Party made a corporate decision that unity and partisan differentiation were more valuable than a bipartisanship that most GOPers didn't want in the first place. And that decision largely explains the tone of hysteria that has infected most conservative interpretations of the Obama agenda, so similar to the tone exhibited by the McCain-Palin campaign when it was on the ropes last October. All the shrieking about "socialism" is intended, consciously or unconsciously, to mask the extent to which the GOP has, amazingly, *moved to the right* as the post-Bush era begins.

I happen to think Republicans were determined to make this shift to the right in any event, but the fear of being contaminated by cooperation with the Obama administration or congressional Democrats probably accelerated it. No one should be fooled by the the ludicrous crocodile tears wept by some conservatives about mean old Barack's unwillingness to play pretty by scrapping everything he campaigned to accomplish.

And this is why I don't agree with those progressives who think Obama really should have been polarizing and hyper-partisan all along, and who are happy to cooperate with conservatives in burying the rhetoric of bipartisanship once and for all. A big chunk of the public does want bipartisanship, but it wants our leaders to get things done even more.

Obama offered to get things done according to a specific agenda that largely reflected the progressive consensus on a wide arrange of issues, and offered to cooperate with congressional Republicans on the details if they would agree to the agenda itself. They emphatically slapped his hand away, and without any doubt are delighted to be united as the “party of no,” hoping that Obama fails so decisively that the opposition will inherit power by default, no matter how far to the right they have to drift to maintain the maximum level of partisan differentiation.

For my money, Obama’s strategy of “grassroots bipartisanship” has helped to fuel a successful polarization of the two parties that a simple right-from-the-start slugfest could not have produced. And it’s helped keep his own personal approval ratings higher than the partisan dynamics can completely explain, giving him political capital he may critically need when the deal goes down on big issues like health care reform.

¹ <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1178/polarized-partisan-gap-in-obama-approval-historic>

² http://www.realclearpolitics.com/horseraceblog/2009/04/should_obama_be_faulted_for_th.html

³ <http://digbysblog.blogspot.com/2009/04/polar-bores-by-digby-all-day-long.html>

⁴ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2009/04/the_most_polarizing_column.php

⁵ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2008/12/post_15.php

⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/07/us/politics/07poll.html?_r=2&hp

⁷ http://blogs.tnr.com/tnr/blogs/the_plank/archive/2009/04/07/americans-more-optimistic-still-hate-gop.aspx

⁸ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2009/04/independents_rule.php