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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

OBAMA THE SOCIOLOGIST —

OBAMA'S FUNDAMENTAL POLITICAL STRATEGY IS BASED ON A SOPHISTICATED SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE THAT POLITICAL SCIENTISTS, CAMPAIGN MANAGERS AND EVEN MANY PROGRESSIVES LARGELY IGNORE.

BY *ANDREW LEVISON*

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By Andrew Levison

(Andrew Levison is the author of two books and numerous articles on the social and political attitudes of blue collar workers and other ordinary Americans)

Since taking office, two basic notions about Obama’s political philosophy have become widespread—that he is a “pragmatist” and also an advocate of “bipartisanship.” An extraordinary number of articles and debates have appeared applying these two characterizations to his actions.

Within this broad discussion, Ed Kilgore (http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_SM_Kilgore_live.pdf) has made a convincing argument that in Obama’s specific formulation, neither of these two concepts necessarily implies an abandonment of the liberal-progressive goals Obama expressed during the campaign. Kilgore notes that, while Franklin Roosevelt ultimately achieved very profound progressive reforms, he was actually much more accurately described as a “pragmatist” than an “ideologue.” Equally, Kilgore argues that Obama’s bipartisanship is more accurately understood as a “grassroots” bipartisanship he seeks to generate among ordinary Americans rather than the traditional and elite “behind closed doors” deal-making bipartisanship of the senate cloakroom and corridors of power.

But, at this very broad level, political **strategy** becomes difficult to distinguish from political **philosophy**. There is also a more concrete and specific level of political strategy that also has to be considered—the level where a president’s specific politico-legislative strategy is designed. On this middle level it can be argued that Obama actually has a more coherent and well thought out approach than either his critics or other interpreters recognize.

To see this, it is necessary to identify a particular blind spot in the perspective of most American political commentators. Modern political science (exemplified in the leading American academic journals) and modern political campaign management (exemplified in “professional” political publications like *National Journal*, *Congressional Quarterly* and *Campaigns and Elections* magazine) actually present a very simplified model of the world, one in which politics is discussed as if it were a separate and isolated realm of life with its own unique rules. In this simplified world, most discussions of politics are based on two seemingly self-evident statements:

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1. American elections are won with 50.1 percent of the vote.
 2. All votes, regardless of their origin, are, in political terms, equal.

On the surface, these two ideas appear to be not only true but almost tautological. In a great deal of American political commentary, however, they are subtly inflated into two much broader premises that are most emphatically not tautological—and that are, in fact, arguably wrong.

1. That winning support above 50.1 percent is of relatively small or even negligible marginal benefit or importance. Put differently, it is essentially icing on a cake.
2. That any particular political coalition that can be assembled to provide an electoral majority of 50.1% is of exactly equal value and utility to any alternative political coalition that can also produce an electoral majority of 50.1%. No particular majority coalition is inherently any “better” than any other.

These assumptions are rarely stated explicitly, but they are implicit in much of the progressive concern about Obama’s political strategy—the widely expressed fear that he is essentially *“leaving achievable progressive victories on the table”* because of his commitment to pragmatism and bipartisanship. Having won 53% of the vote and with 59 Democratic senators, it is often argued that he is clearly in a position to seek more progressive, radical or dramatic changes than those which he is actually seeking. To many liberal and progressive commentators, it seems almost self-evident that Obama could demand and get “more” of a progressive agenda enacted if he behaved in a more aggressively hyper-partisan fashion as George Bush did after the 2004 election. Thomas Frank clearly expressed this liberal-progressive view—and frustration—by saying that “Obama should act as if he won.”

But there is good evidence (which we shall see below) that Obama’s political strategy is actually based on an essentially sociological rather than political science perspective. It rests specifically on one key sociological insight—that the political strategy required to enact significant progressive social reforms is substantially more complex and difficult than is the strategy required to simply resist social change.

When significant social reforms threaten to directly affect major social institutions, enacting such reforms requires two things beyond simply winning an electoral victory:

1. The opposition of the key social institution or institutions affected—which in most cases include either the armed forces, big business or the church—must be neutralized or at least very significantly muted.
2. A certain baseline level of sociological support (or at least relative neutrality) must be obtained among a series of pivotal social groups. Sociologically and

demographically speaking these groups—religious voters, military voters or business voters—are often predominantly working class, red state voters.

As a result, the coalition necessary to achieve major social reforms will require more than a knife-edge 50.1% majority. Translated into national levels of public support or approval, a commanding majority of as much as 60% is more likely to be necessary.

The idea that opposition from major social institutions must be overcome and that the support or neutrality of specific social groups must be obtained is an unfamiliar notion in conventional American politics, but it is a fundamental axiom of successful movements for social change. Martin Luther King's strategy in overcoming Southern segregation (which Obama studied in the 1980's) included both successful negotiations with the municipal power brokers in cities like Montgomery and Birmingham in order to moderate their opposition to integration and also extensive but less successful efforts to build economic alliances with lower income whites and other non-elite groups. King considered that social reforms supported by only a knife-edged majority coalition of the educated and the non-white poor were substantially more likely to produce polarization and backlash rather than steady social advance.

The notion that achieving significant social reforms requires more than 50.1% majorities was also seriously discussed in Western Europe during the 1970's when the possibility of left-of-center coalitions obtaining power arose as a serious possibility. The military coup that overthrew the elected, but minority, left-wing government of Chile in 1974 was cited by some European politicians as proof that achieving significant social change by parliamentary means was impossible. The "establishment" would simply not allow such change to occur. The alternative view argued that significant social change was not impossible, even in the face of establishment opposition, but that it would require a level of popular political support so powerful that it would inhibit any attempt to derail it.

It is extremely unlikely that Obama ever encountered this European debate during his education. Only a handful of articles on the subject were ever published in the United States, and by the time the left coalition led by Françoise Mitterrand took power in France in 1980, the European and U.S. political climate had shifted so substantially that the new left-of-center French government had to devote its efforts to simply defending the existing French welfare state from the winds of Thatcherism and Reaganism rather than taking any radical steps to extend it.

Obama, however, independently arrived at a similar perspective as a result of his work as a community organizer in Chicago during the 1980's. As John Judis has carefully

reconstructed (<http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=2e0a7836-b897-4155-864c-25e791ff0f50>), Obama gained a social reformer's perspective of both the power of major social institutions and the difficulty in overcoming their intransigence in his attempts to negotiate with the steel industry on behalf of laid-off steelworkers in Chicago. Obama also directly observed the political paralysis that was induced by the failure to overcome the backlash of white working class community groups in the ethnic communities within the city.

The most explicit and direct description of how deeply this sociological insight affected Obama's political strategy appeared in a long article by Matt Bai (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20tulsa.html?_r=1&hp) in the Oct 15th edition of the *New York Times Magazine*:

First, the article reveals how emphatically Obama expressed his rejection of the 50.1 percent approach.

[Obama seeks to] get beyond what he dismissively refers to as the "50-plus-1" governing model, the idea that a president need only represent 50 percent of the country (plus 1 additional vote) to command the office. From the start, Obama has aspired not simply to win but also to stand as a kind of generational break from the polarized era of the boomers...To a large extent, this reflects Obama's personal conviction about modern politics, which he first laid out in his 2004 convention speech when he talked about worshipping "an awesome God in the blue states" and having "gay friends in the red states."

He told me, when we talked, that Washington's us-versus-them divisions had made it impossible for any president to find solutions to a series of generational challenges, from Iraq to global climate change. "If voters are polarized and if they're seeing two different realities, a Sean Hannity reality and a Keith Olbermann reality, then we're not going to be able to get done the work we need to get done," Obama said.

In short, a commanding majority is not optional "icing on the cake". It is indispensable for achieving significant change. In the same fashion, winning significant support from working class and small town religious and culturally conservative voters is also not optional. It is a prerequisite for maintaining social stability while seeking progressive reform. Speaking of his misstep in referring to rural voters "clinging to guns and religion" Obama said:

"part of what I was trying to say to that group in San Francisco was, 'You guys need to stop thinking that issues like religion or guns are somehow wrong,' "he continued. "Because, in fact, if you've grown up and your dad went out and took you hunting, and that is part of your self-identity and provides you

a sense of continuity and stability that is unavailable in your economic life, then that's going to be pretty important, and rightfully so. And if you're watching your community lose population and collapse but your church is still strong and the life of the community is centered around that, well then, you know, we'd better be paying attention to that...

"To act like hunting, like somebody who wants firearms just doesn't get it — that kind of condescension has to be purged from our vocabulary. And that's why that whole 'bittergate' episode was so bitter for me. It was like: Oh, this is exactly what I wanted to avoid. This is what for the last five or six years I've been trying to push away from."

During the election Obama's efforts in these two areas were often viewed as part of his campaign rhetoric rather than as an actual strategy for achieving significant reforms once in office. But, even in September, Obama was quite clear that this impression was incorrect. As Bai says:

"If I'm able to change this," he [Obama] told me on his plane, meaning the cultural breach in our politics, "then it's probably going to be most powerful after I'm elected, when you're no longer in the context of day-to-day battle, and I can prove it by what I do."

Obama later restated the same idea.

"I guess the point I'm making," he went on, "is that there is an entire industry now, an entire apparatus, designed to perpetuate this cultural schism, and it's powerful. People want to know that you're fighting for them, that you get them. And I actually think I do. But you know, if people are just seeing me in sound bites, they're not going to discover that. That's why I say that some of that may have to happen after the election, when they get to know you."

Bai comments:

Hearing him say this a second time, it seemed to me a remarkable admission—if not a retreat from his driving vision, then at least a deferral. Normally, in political campaigns, you hope people get to know you and then decide to vote for you; Obama now believed that perhaps only the inverse was possible. ...If he won, Obama would likely start out as a 50-plus-1 president [rather than holding a commanding majority]... And then the campaign would begin again.

Soon after Obama's election it became clear that he was, in fact, quite systematically pursuing both of his key objectives—reducing the potential opposition of key social institutions and seeking to broaden his coalition into a commanding majority.

The first objective was not immediately recognized as a long-term political strategy because the urgency of the problems Obama inherited made very dramatic overtures to the military and the business community seem inevitable. Liberals and progressives may have disliked a number of Obama's key military and economic policy cabinet choices, but they understood the quite urgent political imperatives that lay behind the selections. What was not necessarily apparent was that those choices were also consistent with a coherent long-term political strategy.

The second objective, on the other hand, seeking to extend his political coalition into a commanding majority, provoked substantial progressive annoyance—particularly in the case of the selection of Rick Warren to participate in the inauguration and Obama's unreciprocated attempts to win Republican support for his stimulus package. In both these cases many liberal and progressive observers criticized Obama's efforts as seeming to reflect an excessively naïve and timid attitude toward the exercise of power.

Mark Schmitt is one of the few observers who (like Ed Kilgore) has consistently emphasized the role political strategy plays in Obama's "bipartisanship" and "pragmatism," even well before the election. In an article about Obama's "theory of change" (http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_theory_of_change_primary) written during the Democratic primaries, Schmidt noted:

Perhaps we are being too literal in believing that "hope" and bipartisanship are things that Obama naïvely believes are present and possible, when in fact they are a tactic, a method of subverting and breaking the unified conservative power structure.... [Obama's approach is] not a tactic of bipartisan Washington idealists,—it's a hard-nosed tactic of community organizers, who are acutely aware of power and conflict.

There are two main lines of argument that can be raised against Obama's political strategy (1) that the groups Obama is trying to reach—religious voters, military voters and working class and red state voters—will simply not respond to his outreach and (2) that it is much more important for Democrats to try to gain the maximum number of victories immediately, while the political climate favors them, rather than moderate their current demands in order to seek what might hopefully, but not certainly, be larger benefits in the long-run.

In regard to the first argument, there is already significant evidence that Obama's strategy is actually working. As a *New York Times* article (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20tulsa.html?_r=1&hp) about changing attitudes toward Obama in Oklahoma since the election noted:

In interviews in the week leading up to Mr. Obama's inauguration, many people here said a tolerant spirit toward his presidency has been hastened, paradoxically, by some of the same groups that voted mostly Republican in the election. Those include active or former military personnel, and people who identify themselves as evangelical Christians....

Some people have, in fact, changed their minds. Leonard Nelson, 63, a 23-year military veteran of both the Army and the Navy, said he had voted for Mr. McCain mainly through military fealty—believing that Mr. McCain's own military record would make him a better commander in chief.

"But I've come to think the better man won," said Mr. Nelson, owner of the Humidor Cigar Shop.... Mr. Nelson said that Mr. Obama, through his cabinet nominations, sent a signal of centrist government intention that feels O.K. to him.

At one of the city's biggest evangelical megachurches, Victory Christian Center, with 17,000 members, there were also mixed messages of enthusiasm. The center's pastor and founder, Billy Joe Daugherty, said that the selection of the Rev. Rick Warren, a prominent evangelical pastor from California, to give the inaugural invocation went a long way to easing fears in Mr. Daugherty's mostly conservative congregation about a liberal social agenda.... "What I'm sensing from Obama in making the choice he did—he's saying to all groups, 'Why don't we come together?'" Mr. Daugherty said in an interview.

More generally, Obama's positive ratings since the election continue to hold at well above his 53% electoral margin. Many opinion polls show levels of support or approval above 60%.

As the most recent *Democracy Corp* poll results reveal:

While Obama's outreach to Republicans may not have generated any Republican votes on his economic plan in the House, it is clearly cementing his reputation as a bipartisan problem solver; an astounding 80 percent of voters, including 56 percent of Republicans, say Obama is willing to work with both parties.

Obama's standing is nearly as strong in the conservative-leaning, but Democratic-held Congressional districts that are likely to make up the 2010 battleground. In the 40-most vulnerable Democratic-held seats, a battleground George Bush carried by 13 points in 2004, Obama's personal standing is nearly as strong as it is nationally, with 59 percent rating him favorably against just 20 percent unfavorably. And 70 percent of battleground voters say they support Obama's policies and goals for the country, virtually the same level of support he receives nationally.

With about a third of Republicans backing Obama's policies and goals, it is not surprising that Obama is doing as well in these Republican-leaning areas—his poll results here parallel his high national numbers.

In short, at the present moment, Obama is successfully achieving the objectives set by his political strategy.

The second argument against Obama's strategy—that it essentially "*leaves too much on the table*" right now in return for uncertain benefits in the future is by no means necessarily true, but ultimately its validity can only be determined after several years of an Obama administration have passed.

On the other hand, two other conclusions can certainly be drawn even at the present, early stage of Obama's presidency.

First, Obama's "pragmatism" and "bipartisanship" are actually part of a logical and coherent politico-legislative strategy and are not simply a reflection of Obama's personality or style.

Second, Obama's political strategy takes serious account of social institutions and social classes in a way that standard American political commentary does not. In the academic journals political analysis is based on the image of isolated individuals rationally choosing their most preferred options. For most campaign managers and other political professionals, politics begins and ends with winning 50.1% on Election Day.

But the challenge of achieving major social reforms that Obama has chosen as his goal is profoundly more complex and multifaceted. It requires recognition of the power of social institutions and the influence of pivotal social groups. It requires coherent political strategies to deal with these realities rather than simply leaving them out of the analysis. In this regard, it can be compellingly argued that Obama's sociologically sophisticated political strategy is—to put it simply—powerfully and inherently superior to the existing alternatives.