Obama’s Party? An Examination of Whether a Reluctant Party Leader Transformed the Democratic Party in his Favor

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Abstract: We examine Barack Obama’s influence over the Democratic Party as an ex-president from three vantage points: his popularity among partisans, his control over party nominations, and his rhetorical influence over party platform stances. The findings are somewhat mixed. Compared with other contemporary presidents, Obama is far more popular among co-partisan voters. However, he has had only modest influence in presidential nominations, and, unlike other modern presidents, a waning influence on party platform stances. The findings are suggestive not only about Obama’s own interests but also about institutional constraints of modern presidents.

Keywords: American presidency, party politics, presidential nominations

Barack Obama rarely seemed interested in being a party leader. Indeed, one of his central public justifications for pursuing the presidency was the idea that Americans could transcend partisan differences and work together for the greater good. By far his most famous speech prior to the presidency, and the one that would arguably define his career, was his 2004 Democratic National Convention address in which he rejected the existence of a “red” and “blue” America. Just as his candidacy suggested a post-racial society, so it promised a post-partisan one.

Beyond these rhetorical flourishes, Obama has, throughout his political life, demonstrated indifference to party politics and a willingness to challenge the assumptions of party hierarchy. His very candidacy in 2008 was a rejection of elites’ preferences for Hillary Clinton in that cycle. His earlier career as a community organizer and his rise to national prominence as a cultural figure place him in the tradition of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, John McCain, and Howard Dean – party politicians who sought the presidency by criticizing the Washington establishment.

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This indifference, even hostility, to party politics followed Obama into office. By some measures (e.g.: Galvin 2010), Obama’s relationship with the Democratic Party was predatory, similar to many other postwar Democratic presidencies. Obama, that is, largely used party infrastructure to enhance his own political fortunes and left it in a substantially weaker position than he found it. However, even if Obama was not interested in party politics, it proved interested in him. Not only was his presidency characterized by some of the most bitter partisanship the nation had seen in over a century, but Obama also emerged after his presidency as an influential figure in the Democratic Party. He was highly popular among Democrats after leaving office, and the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination featured dozens of candidates falling over each other to demonstrate their support for Obama and align themselves with his victories (Murray 2020).

This paper examines the degree to which the Democratic Party has become, in effect, Obama’s party. We investigate this from several different angles. First, we compare Obama’s popularity among Democratic voters after his presidency with that of other modern ex-presidents among their co-partisans. This allows us to roughly compare Obama with his contemporaries in terms of his influence over the partisan rank and file. We then look at Obama’s influence over the 2020 Democratic presidential contest, a contest in which he was nominally neutral, in terms of both campaign staffing and donations. We finally turn to a rhetorical analysis of Obama’s State of the Union Addresses and Democratic National Convention platforms, comparing Obama’s influence over the party’s stances. Our findings from these analyses are complex, largely suggesting that while Obama was and remains unusually popular within his party, his influence over that party has been relatively weak. The former president’s efforts to shape the direction of his party, alongside limited institutional investment, proved limited in their effectiveness.

1 A Theoretical Framework for the President-Party Relationship

Obama served as president between two highly partisan Republican presidents. George W. Bush, like Obama, ran initially on a promise to be a “uniter, not a divider.” By the time of his reelection campaign in 2004, the president had become a divisive figure and the electorate had begun to sort more neatly into two distinct camps, with correlated issue positions on cultural, economic, and national security issues (Abramowitz 2011). Bush’s lineage also portended a permanent position as a party leader – his father had also served as president, his brother as governor of Florida, and the Bush name was highly recognizable in Republican politics.
However, the troubled final years of the Bush presidency limited the president’s potential to be an influential figure. Democrats took control of Congress after the 2006 midterm elections. The Iraq War became unpopular, and the housing crisis and subsequent onset of the Great Recession plunged the president’s approval ratings to record lows. Republican candidates in 2008 sought to distance themselves from his legacy. Before Obama, Bush illustrated how it is much easier for presidents to practice partisan politics than party politics, to become a symbolic figure rather than maintain influence within an unwieldy national coalition.

Trump’s unexpected nomination and election have inspired a great deal of scholarly inquiry. His nomination was initially conceptualized as evidence of a weak Republican Party susceptible to a hostile takeover by a well-known outsider who was resistant to orthodox party positions (Azari 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). While Trump was clearly not an establishment favorite during the 2016 nomination season, he quickly consolidated elite and electorate support among Republicans (and limited crossover support of the kind we might expect from a truly non-partisan figure). Scholars have also linked Trump’s distinct brand of appeals – nativist, anti-establishment – to prior movements within the Republican coalition, including the Tea Party and Freedom Caucus that emerged during the Obama years (Blum 2020; Gervais and Morris 2018). Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins argue that the Republican Party changed Trump as much, if not more, than he changed it (2018), largely through the mechanism of conservative media.

The arguments the Trump presidency has inspired are useful theoretically for our purposes. Presidential power over party politics seems to come from a few sources: the ability to speak directly to party supporters and shape party positions on key issues (Klinghard 2005); the ability to select campaign personnel (who might later join the administration); and the ability to select a successor.

There are some ways in which we might expect Obama’s party leadership to resemble Trump’s. Despite substantial ideological differences, both were skilled at generating media coverage and establishing themselves as the focal point of party politics. Both inspired significant personal loyalty in the political arena. However, there are also important differences. Obama had a more typical political resume, having served in the Illinois and U.S. senates and having been championed and even recruited by several prominent Democratic leaders for his presidential run. Trump was also more of a factional candidate than Obama, representing a specific set of voters within the party. Sides, Tesler and Vavreck (2018) find that Trump voters were more conservative in their attitudes about cultural issues, especially immigration, but more centrist in their economic attitudes. In other words, Trump exploited issue differences between a faction of the party’s voters and many of the...
other candidates. For Obama, the issue differences separating him from other candidates, including his main rival, Hillary Clinton, were much less defined. Obama differentiated himself from Clinton based on her vote for the Iraq War. But, unlike Trump, Obama was not associated with a distinct faction within the party.

Several distinctions are important for understanding the relationship between presidents and their political parties. First, presidents have ready access to means of party leadership that are powerful but superficial: they do appear to have influence with the “party in the electorate,” but it is unclear how this translates into leverage among elite party actors. Past research has referred to this phenomenon as the ability of presidents to make partisan, but not party, politics (Azari 2019).

Second, the distinction between presidents and former presidents as party leaders may be an important one. How former presidents behave and lead has been the subject of much less theorizing. Conventional wisdom suggests that ex-presidents step into the role of elder statesman, crossing party lines to advocate for charitable or global causes. Nevertheless, they do sometimes remain influential within their own parties as fundraisers, and sometimes as boosters when family members seek office. This question has implications for the nature and sources of presidential leverage over parties: sway with the party’s voters; fundraising; access to the power of the executive branch.

2 Obama’s Party Leadership

The relationship between American political parties and the presidents they nominate has evolved in numerous complex ways since the establishment of mass political parties in the early 19th century. The early nomination system left presidents dependent on their parties. However, changes to the telecommunication, travel, and fundraising environments allowed presidential candidates to cultivate their own bases of political support, lessening their dependence on local parties (Klinghard 2005). In the 21st century, presidential mastery of the communication environment and the fusing of presidential personas with partisan cultural politics has led to a situation in which presidents are important, even dominant, partisan leaders.

The post-WWII period has seen a persistent and important distinction between the two major parties, argues Galvin (2009). Republican presidents during this time have sought to use their elevated prominence to help build their party’s capacity, steering resources toward parts of the country where the party had previously underperformed. Republican presidents from Eisenhower through George W. Bush, that is, were enthusiastic fundraisers and boosters of their parties, and often left the party in a better place financially and politically when they left...
office. Notably, these party building efforts were tied to both strategic and ideological visions; Eisenhower’s party building efforts were connected to his belief that a more moderate, “modern” Republican Party could hope to win national majorities (51–52). By contrast, Galvin argues, Democratic presidents tend to be “predatory” toward their party, using party resources to advance their own political agendas. Of course, much of this study covers the period in which Democrats began with overly large majorities in Congress and in state legislatures in the early New Deal period but steadily lost that advantage as conservative white southerners drifted into the Republican Party – most likely a trend that would have occurred regardless of presidential party building or predation. However, the party differences Galvin examined continued through the presidencies of Clinton and Bush, both of whom exemplified the pattern of Democratic predation and Republican party building.

The Obama presidency marked an interesting development. Obama transitioned his 2008 campaigning organization (Obama For America) into a governing organization (Organizing For America) with the same initials designed to advance and promote his policy agenda. In its final stage, OFA changed to “Organizing for Action” and became a 501(c) (4) issue advocacy group, “joined to a long-term plan to restructure the policymaking process so that it was better suited to achieve success in a highly fragmented partisan environment” (Milkis and York 2017, 6). Thus did Obama generate a parallel organization to the DNC, duplicating some party functions but with an organization more directly loyal to him (Galvin 2010). The achievements of his 2008 campaign should not be understated. Obama built on the innovative internet-based fundraising strategies of Howard Dean and George W. Bush in 2004, and was such a successful fundraiser that he became the first major party presidential candidate to refuse general election matching funds from the FEC (Milkis and Rhodes 2009). His approach was a substantial departure from the past:

> Eschewing the Democrats’ traditional reliance on organized labor and other constituency organizations to mobilize the party faithful, Obama promised to strengthen the national party apparatus. He vowed to wage a 50-state campaign, build grassroots organizations in every state, help elect Democrats down the ballot, and register millions of new voters who would support the party’s commitment to depart from the domestic and foreign policies of the previous eight years (Milkis and Rhodes 2009).

Conventional scholarly wisdom suggests that presidents who do not invest in party organizations detract from the enterprise of collective action, contributing instead to their own personal political fortunes at the expense of institution-building. Obama followed the pattern of neglecting the formal party organization, allowing its legitimacy and reputation to deteriorate under the troubled leadership of Rep.
Debbie Wasserman Schulz (Azari 2019). With the help of OFA, Obama scored legitimate policy gains, especially with the Affordable Care Act, but these achievements often came at the expense of party strength (Galvin 2016). That is, while the organization helped produce two presidential election victories and a major policy victory in the ACA, these successes were paired with significant down-ballot losses for the party (Milkis and York 2017, 4). As a “shadow party,” OFA was not solely a vehicle for Obama, but also an effort to consolidate a coalition within the Democratic Party of supporters demanding a more progressive agenda than the “New Democrat”-style politics of Bill Clinton’s administration (10–11).

The evolution of OFA from Obama for America to Organizing for America to its final form as Organizing for Action illustrates efforts to unify different groups in the so-called Obama coalition for both elections and progressive legislative priorities like environmental regulation, the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, and immigration reform. Importantly for our purposes, the final form of the organization was intended to extend Obama’s influence over the Democratic agenda even after his presidency had ended.

Post-presidential political involvement can be bumpy terrain. Ex-presidents continue to balance competing imperatives to serve as statesmen and party leaders. Our analysis adds an additional category, contemplating whether the being a party leader and a partisan leader might have divergent implications.

The party record by the end of the Obama presidency was a bleak one for Democrats. The DNC was deeply in debt (Brazile 2017). The party controlled 60 Senate seats his first year in office; that was down to 46 during his last. The number of House Democrats shrunk from 257 to 188 (Liasson 2016). The party lost nine governorships and 14 state legislatures. To be sure, the back-to-back Democratic victories in 2006 and 2008, created in part by public backlash to the Iraq War and the Great Recession, generated something of an unsustainable high-water mark for Democrats, but it was nonetheless a record-setting set of losses for the party during Obama’s presidency.

3 Obama as Post-presidential Partisan Figure

While in office, presidents have access to media attention and serve as the most prominent symbolic face of their parties. But how should we expect this to translate into partisan and party leadership after an administration has ended? Our initial premise in this paper is that Obama has seemed, on the surface, to have had an unusual amount of public participation in partisan politics, and that he remains both a central public figure in the Democratic Party and an influential actor within party politics. Obama’s party involvement more closely resembles the partisan...
model of nineteenth century presidents (Kaufman 2012), rather than the focus on non-partisan philanthropic activities expected of modern ex-presidents.

In this section, we answer a simple question: how does Obama’s post-presidential popularity among Democrats compare to other recent ex-presidents and their parties? Using ANES feeling thermometer questions, we look at how partisans rate former presidents in the election cycle after they have left office. We compare these ratings to feeling thermometer scores among partisans toward the party’s presidential and vice-presidential candidates that year, and to scores among all respondents for the three figures in question.

This section compares Obama’s post-presidency warmth scores from Democrats with those three post-presidents who left office after completing two terms: Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The purpose of these comparisons is to assess, if crudely, Obama’s influence over Democratic partisans as an ex-president.

Figure 1 shows how recent former presidents compared in popularity to current nominees in their own party. It is not particularly striking that Reagan, long

![Figure 1: Feeling thermometers for current presidential and vice-presidential nominees and most recent ex-president among partisans.](image-url)
heralded as a party icon, received warm ratings from Republicans in 1992, four years after he had left office. What is notable, however, is that his mean thermometer ratings were marginally lower than those of the incumbent president, George Bush \((p = 0.022, \text{two-tailed})\). The difference between the ex-president and the presidential candidate was statistically significant at the 0.05 level in each instance, with Reagan and George W. Bush receiving lower scores than their party’s presidential candidate four years after they left office, and Clinton and Obama both receiving higher ones. Obama is nevertheless the outlier of the group, receiving far warmer average ratings than Biden in the 2020 ANES.

We further examine these ex-presidential approval ratings in Table 1, predicting feeling thermometer scores with respondent race, gender, age, education level, party identification, and ideological self-placement. The coefficients themselves tell a number of interesting stories. Unsurprisingly, ideology and partisanship have become stronger components of presidential approval over time. It is perhaps also unsurprising that race was such a prominent contributor to Obama’s ex-presidential approval, with Black respondents approving of him by eight additional points and white respondents moving away from him by three points, even controlling for partisanship and ideology. (Less well explained is the role of race in previous years.)

In sum, the Democratic base clearly held Obama in high regard in 2020. But did these ratings translate Table 1 into more structural and systemic influence?

**Table 1**: Feeling thermometer support for former presidents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>44.18 (5.9)</td>
<td>112.68 (4.19)</td>
<td>−7.19 (1.7)</td>
<td>119.43 (1.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>−15.5 (4.9)</td>
<td>7.7 (3.3)</td>
<td>−2.12 (1.3)</td>
<td>8.28 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>−9.99 (3.8)</td>
<td>−12.2 (2.6)</td>
<td>−0.15 (0.93)</td>
<td>−3.3 (0.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−1.16 (0.54)</td>
<td>0.63 (0.52)</td>
<td>1.6 (0.2)</td>
<td>−0.08 (0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>4.04 (0.8)</td>
<td>−4.5 (0.77)</td>
<td>4.72 (0.33)</td>
<td>−6.06 (0.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
<td>6.72 (0.47)</td>
<td>−7.3 (0.55)</td>
<td>7.05 (0.23)</td>
<td>−8.9 (0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>−3.8 (0.76)</td>
<td>−1.17 (0.75)</td>
<td>−0.64 (0.3)</td>
<td>0.71 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R squared</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>815</td>
<td>4935</td>
<td>6417</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cell coefficients are OLS ordinary least squares coefficients, with standard errors appearing in parentheses. Dependent variable is feeling thermometer rating for former president. Asterisks indicate statistical significance: \(^* p \leq 0.05, ^{**} p \leq 0.01, ^{***} p \leq 0.001\). Age is measured seven categories: 17–29; 30–39; 40–49; 50–59; 60–69; 70–79, and 80 and over. Education is measured in five categories: no high school diploma; high school diploma; some college but no bachelor’s degree; bachelor’s degree; advanced degree. The racial composition of the sample varied somewhat across years: 122 respondents identified as Black in 1992; 88 in 2004; 737 in 2012; 447 in 2020.
3.1 Nomination Influence: Staff

Another measure of Obama’s influence over the Democratic Party is the influence of people affiliated with Obama over major party decisions, such as the choice of a presidential nominee. There’s no one obvious way to measure Obama’s influence over, say, the 2020 presidential nomination contest. We know from considerable qualitative evidence that Obama was highly reticent to take a public stance on that contest or be seen as influencing it in any direction, only officially endorsing his former vice president after all other candidates had withdrawn (Astor and Glueck 2020). Yet influential party insiders have numerous ways of steering a nomination contest in more subtle ways. For example, the Obama-aligned Priorities USA Action super PAC began supporting Hillary Clinton in 2014, conferring a number of fundraising advantages on her but also signaling tacit Obama support for her candidacy (Confessore 2014). Former President Jimmy Carter reportedly nudged Pete Buttigieg to withdraw from the 2020 presidential contest (Allen and Parnes 2021).

The 2020 Democratic contest famously involved a very large field of candidates, and the leader looked different depending on what measure an observer used. Biden dominated the field in terms of public opinion polls as well as endorsements, although Kamala Harris trailed him closely by the second measure before her late 2019 withdrawal. Bernie Sanders and Pete Buttigieg appeared to be the most successful fundraisers at various points in the contest, yet billionaire candidates Michael Bloomberg and Tom Steyer had more spending money and larger staffs. Elizabeth Warren seemed to be the strongest debater and public speaker.

One way of examining Obama’s less direct influence over this contest is to measure the number of staffers each campaign had with ties to the former president. To do so, we rely upon the Democracy in Action collection of campaign staff information (Appleman 2021). This independent data resource is perhaps the most complete accounting of all the personnel hired by modern presidential campaigns. We tallied the total number of paid campaign staff for each Democratic presidential campaign, omitting (to the best of our ability) volunteers, endorsers, and honorary local advisors. The database helpfully includes brief biographies of each of these staffers. We examined these and tallied the number of staffers with experience either in the Obama White House or the 2008 or 2012 Obama presidential campaigns. While the entry for the Biden campaign includes all those staffers his team hired throughout the general election, we excluded those hired after April 2020, when Biden clinched the Democratic nomination.
Table 2 below shows the total number of staffers and the percentage of staffers with Obama ties for each campaign with at least 25 staffers. As this demonstrates, while Biden hardly had the largest campaign team, he had the highest percentage of Obama-affiliated staff at 21.5%. That is, more than one Biden staffer in five had some experience with the Obama administration. Some of the larger campaigns (notably Warren’s and Bloomberg’s) had extensive staffing at the state level, often well beyond the early contest states of Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Nevada. Biden’s presence in those states was minimal during the nomination contest, but he still enjoyed the apparent blessing of team Obama at this early stage.

To be sure, this was not an overwhelming advantage for Biden. Notably, Julián Castro and Beto O’Rourke, with considerably smaller staffs than Biden’s, still had substantial Obama ties (at 19 and 17%, respectively), and the relatively large campaign teams of Kamala Harris and Pete Buttigieg also had around 15% Obama teammates. It is also notable that the substantial staffs of more outsider candidates like Andrew Yang and Bernie Sanders had very low Obama percentages. But Biden’s ties to this community were nonetheless important, and in this sense, Obama got the outcome he sought.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Number of staffers</th>
<th>Staffers with Obama ties</th>
<th>Percentage of staff with Obama ties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biden</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castro</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Rourke</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buttigieg</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hickenlooper</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booker</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloomberg</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inslee</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gillibrand</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steyer</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klobuchar</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanders</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaney</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullock</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennet</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Democracy in Action.
3.2 Nomination Influence: Campaign Finance

In another approach to this same question, we examined campaign donation patterns across the 2008, 2016, and 2020 Democratic presidential nomination contests. The 2008 contest was a particularly contentious one, with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton functionally contesting all state and territorial primaries and caucuses; the campaigns accusing each other of dirty-dealing, race-baiting, and more; and Clinton not conceding until early June.

In theory, the patterns of donation among supporters of Obama and Clinton during that fraught 2008 should tell us something about factional patterns within the Democratic Party, and those factional lines may be instructive about future contests. If Obama is particularly influential over Democratic contests, we should see him steering his supporters (as identified in the 2008 contest) toward the party’s eventual nominee in later contests. This should be particularly true among high-dollar donors, who tend to be more strategic in their allocations of funds (La Raja and Schaffner 2015).

To examine this, we obtained complete records of donations to the Democratic presidential candidates in 2008, 2016, and 2020 from Open Secrets. For each contest, we limited our analysis to donations of $1000 or more, and donations made from the beginning of the year prior to the election to the date that the nominee functionally clinched the contest. We used Open Secrets’ contributor identification numbers to match donors across election cycles. Thus our analysis is limited to those who donated both in 2008 and 2016, as well as those who donated both in 2008 and 2020.\(^1\)

Even with these stringent limitations, the data are plentiful. 127,230 such people contributed to the Democratic presidential candidates from the beginning of 2007 to June of 2008. 190,518 did so from the beginning of 2015 to June 2016, and 157,729 did so from early 2019 to April 2020. 15,369 people donated either Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama in 2007–2008 and to a Democratic candidate in 2015–2016, and 13,455 people donated to either Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama in 2007–2008 and to a Democratic candidate in 2019–2020.

Figure 2 below shows the donation patterns in the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination contest broken down by the donors’ prior support for a candidate in 2008. The left chart shows the total number of funds raised among these $1000+ multi-cycle donors during the 2015–16 cycle. Unsurprisingly, Hillary Clinton, who was the party’s consensus choice from very early in the cycle given patterns in endorsements and other key indicators, received the overwhelming share of support from these donors. Roughly 90% of the funds donated by this set

\(1\) We are grateful to Jennifer Victor for assistance in procuring these data.
of donors went her way. What is somewhat interesting is how these donors break down when we examine their choices in 2008. Those who had supported Clinton back in 2008 stuck with her in 2016; 97% of those who had backed her previously backed her during her second run. Obama’s supporters from 2008 were still supportive of Clinton’s later run, but somewhat less so; only 85% of them backed Clinton in 2016. We see nearly the identical pattern in the graph on the right, which charts the percentage of the total number of donors who supported each candidate.

This shouldn’t be terribly surprising, given that personal loyalty may count for quite a bit in campaign donations, although it is notable that Obama’s backers were not quite unanimous in support of his chosen successor. Indeed, the donors in this sample who backed Clinton’s 2016 rival, Sen. Bernie Sanders, came almost exclusively from Obama’s supporters in 2008. (Sanders was of course a highly successful fundraiser, but mainly among relatively new and low-dollar contributors. His backers are largely invisible in this particular dataset, which focuses on people who contribute $1000 or more across multiple cycles.)

The graphs below in Figure 3 show the same relationships, but among supporters of the large Democratic presidential nomination field in 2020. Importantly, among all these multi-cycle $1000+ donors, Joe Biden received the plurality of support, both in terms of the total number of donors and the total amount that they

Figure 2: Financial support for 2016 democratic candidates by 2008 candidate support.
contributed. In this sense, this aspect of the party was ultimately supportive of its eventual nominee.

But again, the distinctions among supporters of Clinton and Obama from 2008 are striking. Clinton’s prior backers were far more supportive of Biden than Obama’s former backers were. Of all the funds raised by these multi-cycle donors, Biden received 30% of that given by prior Clinton supporters, but only 20% of that given by former Obama supporters. 33% of Clinton’s former donors were on board with Biden, but only 26% of Obama’s former backers were. This is particularly notable because since neither Obama nor Clinton were running in 2020, personal loyalty was largely removed from the equation. To the extent it was still relevant, one might think that loyalty to Obama would yield dividends for his vice president. Yet Obama’s earlier backers were more divided among the 2020 field than Clinton’s earlier backers were.

Figure 3: Financial support for 2020 democratic candidates by 2008 candidate support.
4 Rhetoric and Platforms

In this section, we seek to understand Obama’s influence over the Democratic Party by examining the similarity of rhetoric in his major addresses with the contents of the party’s platform during and following his presidency. Specifically, we examined the texts of his eight State of the Union Addresses, and compared

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**Figure 4:** Cosine similarities of presidential state of the union addresses and party platforms.

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2 https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/app-categories/written-messages/presidential/state-the-union-messages. Presidents traditionally do not deliver a State of the Union address in their first year; in each of these cases, we have used their first speech to a joint session of Congress, delivered within two months of their inauguration.
them with the Democratic National Committee’s platforms from 2008 through 2020. We compared the documents with a cosine similarity matrix, available through the Topic Modeling package in R. To get some sense of how Obama compared with other modern presidents, we ran the same analysis on Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump. The cosine similarities are plotted below in Figure 4.

To first discuss the patterns seen in Obama’s figure (at bottom left), it appears that Obama’s addresses were most similar to Democratic Party platforms early in his presidency and became steadily less so with time. His 2009 address had nearly a 0.8 similarity score with the 2008 Democratic platform (with 1.0 being the highest possible). Generally, his addresses were more similar with the party’s 2008 platform than they were with the platforms of 2016 and 2020; unsurprising, since it was the 2008 DNC that first nominated him and over which he theoretically had the most influence.

Beyond those specific year-to-year patterns, however, Obama’s graph stands apart from those of other modern presidents, whose speeches’ similarities with their party platforms do not seem to wane with time. Clinton may have even gained some influence over the party with time; the similarity between Clinton’s speeches and the 2000 platform increased over the course of his presidency. Bush’s influence seemed consistent over time. While Trump’s second address was somewhat less similar to the GOP’s 2016 platform than his first one was, that similarity rebounded with time. Only Obama seems to have lost influence during the course of his presidency.

Now, it’s fair to question whether this measure really captures influence. It could work just the opposite way, with presidents drawing from party ideas rather than the party drawing from the presidents’. Similarly, other actors (interest groups, campaign consultants, social movements, etc.) could be influencing both the presidents and their parties. But regardless, Obama stands apart from his contemporaries in that his rhetoric appeared steadily less in sync with that of his party.

5 Conclusion

Obama’s relationship with the Democratic Party stands out in several contradictory ways. His popularity among partisans is high even compared with other recent, term-limited presidents. Yet the warm feelings of Democrats in the electorate do not seem to have manifested in lasting influence, or the transformation of the party into an Obama-style party. Obama’s staffers, donors, and rhetoric have played a limited role in the post-Obama party.

What accounts for this disconnect? The linkage, or lack thereof, might be structural: Obama, as an ex-president in a highly partisan environment, could command the support from the party’s supporters, but the fragmented nature of the party system means that this public support did not provide any sort of real leverage. Alternately, it is possible that the divergence between partisan and party fortunes was strategic: party leaders may not have embraced being the “party of Obama” because of the deeply polarized nature of his appeal.

In light of research about Trump’s effective hold on both Republican partisans and the elite party apparatus (Galvin 2020), it is worth considering the party asymmetry implications. We know that Democratic presidents are typically less invested in party organizations (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). But might it also be the case that the structural barriers that prevent presidents from wielding real intra-party leverage are more pronounced in the Democratic Party, in which leaders representing core groups (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016) pursue their own agendas rather than coalescing under the ideological umbrella of an influential president?

Our findings might also indicate that Obama served as a kind of transitional figure in the Democratic Party, representing neither a “third way” approach to politics like Bill Clinton in the 1990s, nor the full-throated progressiveness of Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and the Justice Democrats who emerged during and after his presidency. Such an outcome might be an even more perverse result from Obama’s detached approach to parties and partisan conflict: a party both embroiled in partisan conflict and divided within its own ranks.

Appendix A

Table A1 shows the predicted values for feeling thermometer scores for recent presidents. Unsurprisingly, presidents typically inspire warmer feelings among their co-partisans than among members of the opposite party. Again, we see larger differences between strong and weak partisans for Bush and Obama, and Obama’s ratings were much more polarized.

Table A1: Predicted values of feeling thermometer scores for past presidents, by partisan identification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reagan</th>
<th>Clinton</th>
<th>W. Bush</th>
<th>Obama</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong Democrat</td>
<td>35.01</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>20.17</td>
<td>96.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weak Democrat</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>77.03</td>
<td>29.14</td>
<td>84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ind.-Lean Dem.</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>68.99</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>75.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>59.13</td>
<td>61.08</td>
<td>45.79</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ind.-Lean Rep.</td>
<td>64.4</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>44.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weak Republican</td>
<td>71.72</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>35.39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong Republican</td>
<td>78.02</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>20.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model controlled for race, gender, age, education and ideological self-placement.
References


Bionotes

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