

# Barack Obama and the Future of Democratic Unity

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The implosion of the Republican Party since Barack Obama's victory last November has provided ample fodder for pundits of all stripes. The bizarre plot turns such as the emergence of Rush Limbaugh as the de facto leader of the party, Michael Steele's bumpy ride as chair of the party and Dick Cheney's stubborn refusal to simply go away are the stuff of political satire. The unraveling of the Republican Party has overshadowed any discussion of developments in the Democratic Party, but these are also important and have substantial bearing on our country's political future.

It was not that long ago, after all, when the Democratic Party seemed about to be torn apart due to a rift pitting affluent liberals and African Americans on one side and Latinos and working class whites on the other. There also was great concern over whether white women would still remain loyal to the party after the harsh treatment they perceived Hillary Clinton as facing during the 2008 primary season. All that, of course, seems very much like ancient history now.

It was not, however, that long ago when many believed Obama's nomination of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State was done to push Clinton out of the senate into a position from which she could make less trouble inside the Democratic Party for the new president. Many argued that after losing such a close primary in 2008, Clinton was considering a primary challenge to the new president in 2012. Clinton's first few months in her new position and the strong relationship between the president and Secretary of State suggest an alternate, and even more fantastic sounding explanation for Obama's decision to appoint his erstwhile rival to the top cabinet post—perhaps Obama appointed Clinton because he thought she was the best candidate for the position. Today the idea of a Clinton challenge to Obama seems absurd, not only due to the relatively good feelings between the two, but also because Obama has done his political work very thoroughly.

The Democratic Party under Obama finds itself in a historic position of being both dominant and unified. The Democratic Party has had periods of dominance before, notably most of the 1930s as well as the mid-1960s. It has also had periods of being more or less unified, most recently during the last six years or so of the Bush administration, as well as, to a lesser extent, during the later Reagan years. However, it has never been both at the same time, until now.

This, of course, will not last. It is the nature of American politics generally, and of the Democratic Party specifically, that these moments are transient. While meaningful rifts within the party are not yet visible, some of the antecedents of these divisions are perceptible if one looks closely. Three issues which should bear close watching in this regard are the winding down of the war on terror, gay marriage and policy towards the banking and finance sector.

In all three of these areas, Obama has sought a centrist approach which has dismayed many of his earliest supporters as well as many others on the left. While Obama himself will likely remain largely immune to any criticism from the left flank, due to his political skill and positioning, broader divisions in the party may emerge around these decisions. The pressure, for example, to withdraw more quickly from Iraq and to engage less in Afghanistan and Pakistan may grow as both of these problems continue to resist quick or easy solutions. The possibility of Democratic members of congress being pulled between supporting their president and following the wishes of their activist bases is real. This would lay the groundwork for divisions within the Democratic Party that may for now be papered over because of Obama's enormous charisma, political skill and popularity, but which will not lie dormant for long.

Obama's failure to take a strong position supporting marriage equality has been disappointing to many, but will only become a divisive issue within the Democratic Party if leaders of the party fail to do the easy, and right, thing. Marriage equality, largely due to the visibility around Proposition Eight and the subsequent court case is not likely to go away as an important issue. However, it is also losing some of its potency as a divisive issue. It is likely that Obama and others will change their positions in the next few years moving ever closer, and eventually, supporting marriage equality. This will be a simple way to diffuse a potentially divisive issue, but if leaders let their political fears get the better of them, and do not support this basic civil right, they will be contributing to unnecessary divisions within the party.

As the recession deepens and continues the potential for the economy to intensify as a divisive issue both between parties and within the Democratic Party is substantial. The Obama administration's support for the finance sector is the single issue with the most potential for undermining this period of unified Democratic dominance. For many ordinary working Democrats, Obama's reliance on Timothy Geithner's advice in this area has been baffling and frustrating. If the Obama administration continues to bailout failing financial institutions, without a corresponding program of accountability, reform and restructuring of the banking and finance sector, prominent leaders of the party will emerge as critics of this approach, and while they may not present a challenge to Obama now, they will represent the future disparate directions in the party.

At the moment, it is unlikely that any of these issues will cause a meaningful dent in the Democratic coalition. On all these issues it is those on the left who are most likely to be upset by the decisions the administration has made. For now, these voters don't have a lot of options and a strong primary challenge to Obama in 2012 seems very unlikely. This, along with the still weakened state of the Republican Party suggests that this period of Democratic dominance is not in immediate peril. However, that dominance is only valuable if it is buoyed by party unity. The prospects there are not as bright as the divisions within the party are substantive and will not be easily ignored or papered over.