Obama: Urban Liberalism's Ascent

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Barack Obama makes strange bedfellows. Indeed, only Obama could unite the kings and queens of bluegrass, merengue, rhythm and blues, jam bands, rock, hip-hop, and alternative rock into a motley rainbow coalition of sonic and electoral support.[1] This eclectic assortment of musicians is more than a political oddity (Kreps 2008). Through it, one can veritably hear the Obama coalition. With an assist from a near economic apocalypse and Sarah Palin's gaffes, this diverse coalition of racial minorities, middle-class liberals, and unmarried women put Obama into the White House (Edsall 2011).

Although the president failed to heal the nation's deep ideological divide, he succeeded in something almost as magical: he kept this unruly coalition together. This task of maintaining a far-flung and diverse collection of supporters united under a single banner is no small feat. Indeed, the primary test of political success for twentieth-century liberals has been just that. Coalescing and then sustaining a heterodox coalition is the most essential hurdle before a Democrat can achieve legislative victories and build a political legacy (see Carter, Jimmy).

Barack Obama's unique political gifts have helped him keep his coalition united. Just as important as the force of his personality is the context. Obama's coalition is a product of a century's worth of demographic tumult and ideological variation. The Obama presidency is proof positive of urban liberalism's ascent. Foreshadowed and foretold by a heterogeneous collection of personalities and movements that range from the Populists and insurgent Progressives to George McGovern and Eugene McCarthy, the Obama coalition is both a reflection of the Democratic Party's past and a harbinger of things to come. Obama both is and is not *sui generis*. A generation before his emergence, self-termed "New Politics liberals" announced a new Democratic coalition. Succeeding where Henry Wallace had failed, New Politics liberals eschewed the Roosevelt coalition's reliance on working-class whites for a new Democratic alliance dominated by "New Class" professionals (Bloodworth 2013, 4–5). According to them, a constituency of New Class professionals, African Americans, the poor, and young activists comprised the natural successors to the Roosevelt coalition.

In 1972, New Politics liberals captured the Democratic nomination for their standard bearer, George McGovern. Moving beyond the New Deal coalition, the South Dakotan pursued his new liberal alliance. Happily, some of it did coalesce. Unhappily (for McGovern), the pieces and parts added up to a paltry 37.5% of the vote (Patterson 1996, 764). A generation hence, the Obama coalition—young people, minorities, unmarried women, and middle-class liberals—bears a remarkable resemblance to the New Politics alliance (Edsall 2011). Unlike 1972, the components now comprise a majority of the electorate.

For the first time since Franklin Roosevelt, a Democrat won consecutive presidential races with more than 50% of the vote (Teixeira and Halpin 2012, 4); Obama's electoral alliance is not his political grandfather's (i.e., FDR) coalition. In 2012, Obama dominated the black (93%), Latino (71%), and Asian American (73%) vote (Teixeira and Halpin 2012, 4). Overlooked, however, is the role of upper-income whites. In 2008, Obama tied McCain with voters making $100,000 but actually won those who made more than $200,000 (Penn 2008). A few slight additions notwithstanding, McGovern's dream of uniting the minorities, youth vote, and highly educated liberals not only exists, it also wins national elections.

The Obama coalition is proof positive of urban liberalism's dominance and ascent and the final demise of the Democratic Party's rural populist wing. Indeed, since Andrew Jackson, the Democratic Party has been a coalition of rural, hinterland "populists" and the urban working class (Wilentz 2005, 357–8). For "Old Hickory" and nineteenth-century Democrats, the former was the dominant part of his electoral alliance. Jackson, like his successors, had to balance the delicate cultural politics that continually threatened to tear asunder the rural populist–urban liberal coalition.

Twentieth-century liberalism was a political coalition of rural populists and urban liberals. Cultural fissures separating urban and rural America consistently threatened this alliance. This balancing act became even more intricate as urban Americans became increasingly demographically dominant. These disparate wings, nevertheless, were brought together into an enduring coalition by the excesses of the Gilded Age and the "monopoly" issue. In this way, monopolies not only helped to establish twentieth-century liberalism—the issue, in a roundabout manner, also made Barack Obama possible.

LIBERALISM: WHAT IS IT?

More mood than strict ideology, liberalism has long defied easy definitional categorization. A political homonym in America, liberalism simultaneously refers to the eighteenth-century doctrine and the twentieth-century dogma that fosters state activism in pursuit of economic opportunity and social equality (Hamby 1973, vii). Early liberalism was synonymous with the Enlightenment—and Enlightenment thinkers popularized their ideas just as the early modern world gave way to transformative changes.

By the mid-nineteenth century, centralized states, religious pluralism, industrial capitalism, and a plethora of technological and productive innovations had altered the Western world (Fawcett 2014, 30–1). Thinkers slowly developed a set of coherent ideas that came to be called "liberalism."

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A protean impulse, liberals encountered a late-nineteenth-century world beset by the creative destructive forces of liberal capitalism.

Similar to the economic landscape that Obama confronts, rampant economic growth and industrialization spurred social dislocation and tumult (Fawcett 2014, 114). In the chaotic age of economic vitality, a concomitant decay of outmoded sectors, and boom-and-bust cycles, disarray was the order of the day. Wealth, not surprisingly, spread inequitably. The Gilded Age was an era of great economic expansion. From the vantage point of a lived experience, the age was akin to a roller coaster, which created significant tumult.

Economic expansion and rising tides of wealth were tangible and incontrovertible. Growth and development did not lead inexorably to material improvements for all Americans. The so-called upper ten enjoyed unrivaled prosperity. Meanwhile, half of the populace lived on 25% of the nation's GDP (McGerr 2005, 7). Despite this inequality, so much wealth was created during a four-decade span (i.e., 1869–1913) that average incomes nearly doubled. This expansion, however, was constantly interrupted by depressions and downturns (Fawcett 2014, 140–1). The boom-and-bust economy created significant amounts of wealth, novel social issues, and extraordinary economic anxieties.

For the first time in American history, unemployment became a mass problem. In past economic downturns, a farmer, shop owner, or craftsman dealt with stagnant or declining wages, but most were never "unemployed." In a wage-earning economy, depressions and periodic downturns now meant mass joblessness. In any given year, the average laborer worked, but steady, year-round jobs remained relatively scarce. In this way, the Gilded Age's erratic economy imbued wage laborers with profound economic angst (White 2013).

In the nineteenth century, urban America and industrial wage earners were ascendant, but rural America remained demographically and symbolically dominant. Thus, the initial organized movement to redress the accumulated grievances of the Gilded Age—wealth inequality, economic anxiety, and demographic transformation—emanated from the Heartland: the Populists (White 2011, 110). This movement came to define the rough, inchoate "liberalism" of rural America.

Seeing themselves as a "regenerative periphery" set to battle against a corrupt urban, industrial world, the Populists were a mix of rational and irrational concerns. In terms of the former, they sought parity for rural Americans in living standards and battled for more local control over the large economic stakes that increasingly governed their lives. Pitched at regional concerns, the Populist's appeal stopped at the Corn Belt's eastern edge. However, the People's Party did identify an issue that pointed to the political future: monopolies.

MONOPOLIES: THE RURAL POPULIST AND URBAN LIBERAL GLUE

Obama is not the only urban liberal to struggle with rural populists (Urofsky 2000, 436). The particular issue of monopolies, however, enabled rural populists to join with urban liberals to build a majority governing coalition. Before the Gilded Age, private enterprise had entailed Jeffersonian fantasies of yeoman farmers and artisan laborers diligently plying their craft (McCraw 1984, 64). The advent of the modern corporation resulted in an avalanche of mergers and combinations that witnessed 5,300 companies consolidated into 318 trusts (McCraw 1984, 64). Thus, during the Gilded Age, "private enterprise" took on negative connotations, as corporations, trusts, and holding companies became the same centralized power that Americans feared in their very bones.

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Long before the Great Depression, antimonopolism emerged as a glue connecting nascent urban liberals with the rural populists. A novel issue for a fresh political epoch, antimonopoly was both newfangled and old. Equipped with wariness of privilege and concentrated power, rural populists came into the Gilded Age prepared to diagnose the nation's problems. To them, economic elites had created a new aristocracy and upended the old egalitarian order. Their analysis transformed a liberal doctrine that had ceased to respond to the exigencies of its age. Indeed, industrial capitalism had turned traditional liberal shibboleths onto their head. Instead of promoting egalitarian ends, powerful trusts and corporations used laissez-faire doctrines to justify an industrial, capitalist system that had quashed liberty and individual dignity.

The antimonopoly movement was hardly the reserve of erstwhile rural populists. From New York City to Los Angeles, urbanites also joined the cause. Whereas urban laborers had rushed to the Jacksonian standard, a half-century of seismic events—the Civil War high among them—had eased the bonds connecting them to the Democratic Party. The rise of corporate titans and one "bread-and-butter" issue—the railroads—recemented the rural–urban coalition.

Antimonopoly connected a disparate collection of middle-class reformers, rural populists, and big-city ward politicians. Indeed, urban, immigrant America could not have come to national power without coalescing with rural populists. The Gilded Age's economic anxieties rendered cultural differences less important. The emergent industrial order coupled with a saturated commodity market eroded the laissez-faire liberal consensus and launched the proper name: Populist Movement. Centered in rural America and largely composed of erstwhile

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Jacksonians, the Populist Movement maintained Jefferson's "common man" mantle but rejected limited government as its sentry. The Populist's "new" liberalism retained the old ideals of liberty and equal opportunity. Instead of laissez-faire means to an egalitarian end, the Populists looked to the state (Gerring 2001, 193–4).

Led by William Jennings Bryan, the Populists declared that the "common people" required state action to redress elite rule. For generations, liberals had claimed they spoke on behalf of "the people." Populists also used that language—but with a class twist. No longer advocating for a vague undifferentiated mass that was "the people," they regarded their fight as one for the "struggling masses." Embedded in this critique was a new claim that separated the Populists from their predecessors: class resentment.

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The class rhetoric did not end with Bryan and the Gilded Age. From Bryan through Truman, Democratic platforms and presidential candidates consistently emphasized what had become political shorthand for "economic elites": antimonopoly. A trope that brought rural Populists and Progressives into the New Deal tent, "monopolies" supposedly rendered the free market into a "privileged enterprise" (Gerring 2001, 199).

Although the monopoly issue remained a consistent political glue, it was left to FDR to translate the concern for a new political era. Nevertheless, as newfangled as the New Deal coalition was, it owed debts to the past. Indeed, few appreciate the rhetorical and political debt that Roosevelt owed to the Populists. The Great Depression may have ushered in a new political order, but the New Deal's progenitor, FDR, used class-based, Populist appeals to pass one-time Progressive legislation, which served as the foundation for New Deal liberalism (Farber 2010, 1).

FROM POPULIST AND PROGRESSIVE ANTIMONOPOLISM TO NEW DEAL LIBERALISM

As Barack Obama has discovered, Americans' suspicion of state power runs deep. The original party system had emerged from that same issue: state power. As Jefferson's ideological "children," rural Populists and Progressives had to square their calls for federal activism with liberalism's historic antipathy toward it. Franklin Roosevelt understood that the political viability of his program and coalition required that he root federal activism in the American liberal tradition.

During the 1932 election, FDR never committed himself to a program of federal activism. His "New Deal" served as a political Rorschach test for voters; that is, they saw what they wanted to see. Once in office, Roosevelt opted for massive state intervention. Thus, the 1936 election became a plebiscite for liberal statism. Ever the canny politician, the president used the pageantry and drama of Philadelphia's 1936 Democratic Convention to frame his governing philosophy.

In his "Rendezvous with Destiny" address, FDR not only rendered liberalism synonymous with federal activism, he also Americanized statism. Borrowing a page from the rural populists, the president depicted his era as one in which, "privileged princes of these new economic dynasties…reached for control over Government itself" (Davis 1995, 637). In the face of a laissez-faire philosophy, which enabled the "new despotism" to "wrap it[self] in the robes of legal sanction," Roosevelt claimed the people "could appeal only to the organized power of Government" (Davis 1995, 637).

In addition to populist rhetoric, Roosevelt used the convention site, Philadelphia, to its full advantage. With a national audience listening to the radio broadcast, FDR compared his New Deal to the American Revolution. Proclaiming that "Philadelphia is a good city in which to write American history," he lauded the revolutionary generation for battling "political autocracy." In a similar spirit, New Deal liberals, according to Roosevelt, fought "against economic tyranny" through "the organized power of government" (Farber 2010, 2).

The 1936 landslide signaled the emergence of the New Deal coalition. At the center of this alliance were rural populists and urban liberals. Symbolizing the urban liberal–rural populist coalition was the "Austin–Boston" alliance. For almost five decades, the Democratic House leadership team consisted of a Texan and a Bostonian (Champagne, Harris, Riddlesperger, and Nelson 2009, 1–2). The Austin–Boston alliance was an expression of the New Deal coalition and more. Indeed, FDR's motley coalition of seemingly disparate groups had been slowly gestating for decades. The Depression and Roosevelt's magnetic personality were the final ingredients necessary for an enduring political coalition to coalesce.

A generation hence, FDR's rural populist political disciple, Lyndon Johnson, ruled over the alliance. By the late 1960s, urban liberals had become demographically dominant and sought to replace a rural populist with one of their own. Johnson never saw the urban-liberal revolt coming. With party regulars, senate barons, and big-city mayors in his back pocket, the president believed his renomination was secure. Of course, Gene McCarthy was challenging him, but the Minnesotan lacked credibility. Long perceived as a liberal up-and-comer, by 1967, McCarthy had so soured on Senate life that colleagues had so mocked his commitment and few took seriously his presidential bid (Sandbrook 2004, 84–5).

Although political lore credits New Leftists, who got "clean for Gene," McCarthy attracted a traditional and clean-cut demographic: educated, middle-class whites. From Al Gore, Jr., and his professor Martin Peretz to student activist David

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Mixner and businessman Donald Peterson, McCarthy supporters, young and old, shared similar straight-laced traits (Bloodworth 2013, 16). Although their siren lost the nomination fight, these New Politics liberals moved from the McCarthy campaign to control the Democratic Party during the 1970s.

Barack Obama is scarcely George McGovern 2.0. Hawkish in foreign policy, a Clintonite in terms of trade and economic policy, and cautious on social issues, he ingested the bitter lessons from the Democrat's wilderness years.

Whereas New Politics adherents are easily definable by their income group (i.e., middle class) and racial homogeneity (i.e., white), a definition is more slippery. Part of a long tradition of upright, middle-class reformers, they rejected much of the liberal postwar domestic and foreign policy (Sandbrook 2004, 218–19). Seeking a new coalition, the New Politics Movement sought to expel working-class whites—of which rural populists comprised a significant number—from the Democratic Party.

Indeed, from John Kenneth Galbraith to Alvin Toffler, in the early 1970s, opinion leaders routinely pronounced the working class to be a relic of the past (Harrington 1972). These intellectuals not only convinced themselves that white-collar workers outnumbered blue-collar laborers, they also routinely pronounced the entire white working class as "racist." Following this meme to its logical extreme, many liberals equated working-class issues, such as law and order, with pure and simple bigotry. New Politics activist Adam Walinsky stated bluntly, "[t]here are now only two identifiable ethnic groups—blacks and those who hate them" (Martinson 1972, 559). In the early 1970s, New Politics liberals made it clear in which category they placed rural populists.

THE OBAMA COALITION

Barack Obama is scarcely George McGovern 2.0. Hawkish in foreign policy, a Clintonite in terms of trade and economic policy, and cautious on social issues, he ingested the bitter lessons from the Democrat's wilderness years. A post-Boomer liberal in both birth date and political milieu, Obama was able to trumpet American greatness in a manner that liberals had not for generations. Telling the 2004 Democratic Convention his life story, he called his country "a magical place" and "in no other country on Earth is my story even possible" (Obama 2004). For the first time in a generation, Obama made it cool—even hip—for liberals to love their nation.

Despite his sophisticated patriotism and Clintonian liberalism, the president failed to woo rural populists. Certainly, Obama's 2008 campaign ventured into North Dakota, Montana, and Southwest Virginia, which helped stanch the flow of rural whites from the Democrats in those areas. Nevertheless, his presidency has witnessed a veritable flight of rural whites from the Democratic column. The demographic realities of twenty-first-century America mean that Obama's coalition comprises an electoral majority. The realities of the Obama coalition's voting behavior means that divided government will be a semipermanent feature of American political life.

In this way, Obama is the fruition of what New Politics activists had once dreamed. Urbane, sophisticated, and suspicious of interest-group wrangling, the president is an urban liberal to his core. Although the New Politics coalition can now elect a president, it lacks the demographic heft to build a durable governing majority. It will be left to the inheritors of Obama's coalition to bring enough rural populists back to the fold to build a durable majority that is capable of winning and maintaining a numerical advantage sufficient to pass an agenda. ■

NOTE

1. Ralph Stanley, Juan Luis Guerra, Steve Wonder, The Grateful Dead, Bruce Springsteen, Jay Z, and Beyoncé endorsed Barack Obama in 2008.

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