Chapter 8

Changing the People, Not Simply the President: The Limitations and Possibilities of the Obama Presidency, in Tocquevillian Perspective

Thad Williamson

Attempting to elucidate what precisely Alexis de Tocqueville would have made of either Barack Obama the politician or the astonishing political phenomenon that swept the nation's first African-American president into office in 2008 is a fruitless endeavor. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville devotes relatively little attention to the presidency as an institution, and still less to the merits and accomplishments of particular presidents. In his account, what made American democracy unique and functional was neither its federalist institutional arrangements nor the virtues of its national leaders, but its culture of political participation in local democratic institutions. Tocqueville recognized the power of private pursuits, especially the pursuit of material gain, in American culture, and viewed political participation as a central mechanism for broadening the self-interest of Americans, to force them to temper individualistic tendencies with consideration of the good of the whole. The idea that the fate of the American republic could rest in the hands of an individual leader is not prominent in *Democracy*. Indeed, many of Tocqueville's observations about the presidency stress its weakness, especially vis-à-vis the force of public opinion.[1]

Yet if Tocqueville's likely assessment of Obama is necessarily shrouded, the view of many neo-Tocquevillian scholars and public intellectuals with a centrist or progressive bent is clear. Political scientists such as Robert Putnam excitedly praised Obama's candidacy and speculated that his election and the grassroots campaign he mobilized might represent a civic turning point, as well as an extraordinary breakthrough in America's racial history.[2] Political theorist Michael Sandel suggests in the final chapter of his recent treatise *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* that Obama represents exactly the sort of "politics of moral engagement" that has been missing in recent decades.[3] By marrying social concern and a commitment to using public power on behalf of public purposes with talk about civic and personal obligation, Obama is a potent example of what contemporary civic republicanism (in Sandel's view) should look like.

As I show later in this essay, the description of Obama as a latter-day civic republican, not a conventional liberal, is well grounded. The tougher question, however, is whether Obama's civic republicanism has teeth. In contrast to the optimistic interpretation of Obama's election offered by many progressive academics, consider the alternative view of Sheldon Wolin—a perspective that is itself strongly shaped by detailed engagement with Tocqueville's work. In Wolin's view, American democracy has deteriorated beyond recognition from the culture of

participatory local engagement Tocqueville describes. Instead, the American political system can be best described as a corporate-dominated state with policies more befitting an oligarchy than a democracy, combined with a worldwide military empire. The role of citizens in this system is fundamentally passive, and "politics" has become circumscribed to increasingly narrow choices between different factions of the political elite. According to Wolin's diagnosis, it will be no surprise if Obama, despite the fanfare attached to his election, is not able to move the status quo very far—or if he himself transforms from a quasi-oppositional figure into essentially a representative of the institutional status quo.[4]

This essay argues that while Wolin's diagnosis of American democracy is largely accurate, his unrelentingly pessimistic assessment of what Obama might accomplish is overstated (or at least premature). Here I argue that Stephen Elkin's proposals for reconstructing a "post-Madisonian" commercial republic offer a fruitful way for thinking about how a president like Obama might take meaningful steps to re-shape the long-term political culture of the United States—particularly by (following Tocqueville) restoring attention to the importance of local politics and local political participation.[5] In short, insofar as Obama aspires to be a statesman who does not simply deal with immediate crises but who helps redefine the meaning and practice of American democracy, he needs to have an accurate assessment of the institutional and political obstacles to change, and an imaginative response aimed at re-establishing a political culture based on informed, active citizens taking political responsibility for the society in which they live.

We begin by spelling out what neo-Tocquevillians found attractive about Obama's candidacy in 2008. Obama, from the outset, framed his campaign as a social movement, and continuously claimed that his candidacy was not about him personally but about "ordinary Americans" (i.e., his supporters) becoming mobilized on behalf of "change." Empowerment of those who participated in the campaign was stated as an explicit goal. As noted above, Obama's candidacy can be accurately described as an experiment in what I (following Michael Sandel) term "civic republicanism"—a public philosophy that puts primary emphasis on our shared identity, shared responsibilities and shared obligations as citizens involved in a common project of building a just, democratic society.[6]

Civic republicanism, so understood, can be distinguished from approaches to politics that either a) view politics as primarily a vehicle by which one advances or defends one's self-interest, narrowly construed or b) view politics simply as a mechanism for determining how different goods such as income and jobs are to be allocated. Rather, civic republicanism involves a) a deliberate effort to appeal to citizens' wider interests—such as the interest we have in living in a community with certain moral qualities; b) calls for citizens to themselves become directly engaged in addressing matters of shared, public concern; and c) rehabilitating the idea of using public power to undertake bold public action to redress public problems and advance a wider public interest.

Obama's distinctive civic republican themes can be brought out by comparing his campaign themes to those of first Hillary Clinton, and then John McCain. Hillary Clinton ran a primary campaign oriented around her promise to "fight for you"—that is, to be an effective advocate of working class Americans on fundamental economic issues. The basis for this claim was

both Hillary's own policy positions and the record of Bill Clinton's administration on economic growth and job creation. The claim that American politics is fundamentally broken was not a central theme of Hillary's campaign; nor did she attempt to offer big-picture thinking or engage in public philosophizing about controversial issues. Rather, she staked her candidacy on the claims that she could best serve as a "champion" of middle and working class voters' interests, and that she had the experience and tenacity to fight and win against those who would thwart those interests. "I'm in this race to fight for you, to fight for everyone who has ever been counted out, for everyone fighting to pay the grocery bills or the medical bills, the credit card and mortgage payments, and the outrageous price of gas at the pump today," Clinton told a Pennsylvania audience in April 2008. "You know you can count on me to stand up strong for you every single day in the White House."[7]

John McCain's campaign primarily focused on his own narrative as a former prisoner-of-war, as a conservative capable of taking independent stands, and as an expert on national security matters. But his domestic policy, such as it was, consisted of, first, claims that his policies would not raise taxes, and second, critiques of Obama's policy ideas as redistributive and "socialist." McCain in effect appealed to self-interest of middle class voters in keeping what they have.

In contrast, Obama repeatedly portrayed his candidacy as a collective effort to work *with* supporters, first to win the nomination and subsequent general election, and then to convert that grassroots mobilization into an effort to change the status quo in Washington. Obama talked about foreign policy failures and about serious economic problems, but linked these not just to the policies of George W. Bush but to broader problems in the American polity: excessive influence of powerful corporate interests, citizen disengagement, disregard for the public sphere, timid leadership. Frequently he intimated that these problems ran deeper than the rule of any one party. Further, he demonstrated a willingness (and capacity) to model more ambitious, public-minded leadership by directly addressing the role of race and religion in American politics and American life more generally, at considerable risk to his own candidacy.

Crucially, these high-minded words were matched by a potent grassroots mobilization effort that lent substance to the claim that the candidacy represented a movement of citizens acting on their own behalf, using the vehicle of a campaign to advance shared interests. The campaign did not just send professional staffers and recently hired college kids out into communities. Rather, they used the staffers as leverage to bring hundreds of thousands of campaign volunteers aboard, many of whom obtained locally significant roles, such as "precinct block captain" or head of phone banking and data entry. On Election Day, the Obama campaign in swing states implemented an elaborate Get Out the Vote operation—"Project Houdini"—which involved two to three poll watchers in each precinct documenting from six a.m. who had voted, then passing that information to campaign workers at mid-morning and then early afternoon. That information was quickly entered into computer databases to generate a new, targeted phone list for volunteer phone-callers and door-knockers to contact in the waning hours of Election Day. The object was to contact all expected supporters who had yet to vote as efficiently as possible.

Needless to say, such a labor-intensive operation would have been impossible without the

presence of thousands of highly-motivated volunteers. That operation was unquestionably the margin of victory in formerly solid Republican states that Obama won, especially Virginia and North Carolina. In the heavily Democratic city of Richmond, Virginia, turnout spiked to roughly ninety-three thousand voters, nearly a 25 percent increase over 2004. Equally important, the campaign was an unusual example of a multi-racial, multi-generational political effort; in the Richmond area alone, hundreds of volunteers devoted time around the clock to the campaign, particularly in the final three months. For many volunteers, the election felt like a triumph that they had made happen, in a tangible way.[8]

Indeed, the Obama campaign did delegate remarkable responsibility and autonomy to grassroots-level volunteers. The campaign deliberately adopted a community organizing model emphasizing the training of local-level leaders who acquire both responsibility and practical capabilities over the course of the campaign.[9] During the primaries, the Obama campaign was often understood by its supporters to be a challenge to the dominant apparatus of the Democratic Party, an effort to take down the presumed all-powerful Clinton political machine. In the general election, the same rhetorical stance held as the target shifted; the general election campaign was understood by its most active supporters as both an effort to unseat the (much-feared) Republican Party and as a historic effort by the citizenry to re-shape the direction of the nation. Equally significant from a Tocquevillian perspective, grassroots participation in the campaign—nationwide—was dramatically larger and in many ways more sophisticated than previous efforts by either party in the modern era.

Many supporters expected that the energy and high level of engagement characteristic of the campaign would carry over into Obama's presidency. At times during the campaign Obama seemed to promise a new mode of governance, in which the president would directly ally with mobilized citizens to challenge vested special interests and achieve meaningful shifts in policy. In some respects, this was a typical "outsider," anti-Washington message, but the notion that the outburst of civic energy seen during the 2008 campaign could be sustained, even institutionalized, as a potent force in the legislative process was a bold, albeit implicit claim. The route to change, Obama stated in one campaign stop just before the breakthrough Iowa caucuses, would involve "imagining, and then fighting for, and then working for, what did not seem possible before."[10] Obama's frequent statements that the campaign "is not about me, it's about you" fit squarely with James McGregor Burns's conception of "transformational leadership" as involving an ongoing relationship between leaders and followers of mutual responsibility in pursuit of shared, morally relevant goals.[11]

Obama's Inaugural Address carried forward many of these themes. The address consisted not just of a promise to deliver specific material goods and reforms (jobs, health care reform, energy independence) but a call to change what kind of country the United States is. On several occasions the speech challenged Americans to be more engaged in their communities and less preoccupied with material pursuits and entertainment. "[G]reatness is never a given. It must be earned. Our journey has never been one of short-cuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted, for those that prefer leisure over work, or seek only the pleasures of riches and fame." Equally important, Obama critiqued America's civic condition, including "our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age"; Obama

later added "our time of standing pat, of protecting narrow interests and putting off unpleasant decisions—that time has surely passed." Obama made a call for reinvigorated citizenship the punch line of the address: "What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world; duties that we do not grudgingly accept, but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and the promise of citizenship."[12]

The tough question, of course, is what exactly this means in practice. Winning elections with attractive promises to reinvigorate the practice of democracy, and actually translating that promise into a mode of governance that tangibly shifts not just what gets done but how it gets done, are two different things. The latter aim, changing governance, in Obama's first year proved much more difficult—sufficiently difficult to invite cynicism, both on the left and the right, about Obama's campaign promises to deliver "change we can believe in."

At the heart of this difficulty is the ambiguity inherent in the phrase "change we can believe in." What does this actually mean? One conception focuses primarily on policy changes and delivering promised shifts of direction on a wide array of issues, from jobs to energy policy to climate change. Success on major policy initiatives generally requires winning favorable legislation, and that in turn means making the system work: shepherding through Congress acceptable bills that meaningfully shift policy. The track record of Democratic presidents passing large-scale social and economic legislation in the decades since the New Deal generally is not impressive, but (like Hillary Clinton) Obama made it abundantly clear that he intended to deliver a new era of public policy activism, led by government, aimed at addressing concrete, tangible problems. Indeed, some serious analysts believed that with the severity of the financial crisis, a New Deal-type programmatic initiative might have been a viable political possibility at the beginning of 2009. Obama did not declare a new New Deal, but he did seek dramatic action on several policy fronts simultaneously.[13]

Note however that the commitment to an ambitious legislative agenda subtly, and perhaps necessarily, stands in tension with Obama's campaign criticisms of Washington politics-as-usual. By defining "change" as legislative success, the Obama administration essentially committed to a form of this statement: "The American political system is broken, but it is not so broken that my Administration, along with my good friends in Congress, cannot fix it. The system can be made to work, and we are the ones to do just that." Why should anyone have believed that the administration was capable of delivering on such a bold claim? The popularity of the president during his honeymoon phase, his communication skills in speaking directly to the public, the solid majorities in each hall of Congress (including for seven months, a sixty-vote majority in the Senate), the seeming disarray of the Republican opposition, and the severity of the problems themselves all made large-scale domestic legislation seem quite possible to many observers at the start of 2009. Further, Obama would bring to the table something no other president had ever had: an infrastructure to convert his campaign operations into a mobilizing tool for generating grassroots engagement on behalf of his legislative agenda, including a vaunted thirteen million name email list and a new organization, Organizing for America, headed by campaign strategist David Plouffe. Obama thus would not

be left to make generalized bully pulpit appeals calling for citizen pressure on Congress to pass his agenda; instead, he would have a direct mechanism to communicate with those most likely to take such action. In this manner, Obama might be able to introduce a new form of governance marrying presidential charisma and top-down strategic direction with the ability to mobilize—over and over—millions of committed citizens to impact legislative debates. This would provide a solution to both legislative gridlock and the persistent, disproportionate influence of special interests: large-scale citizen pressure demanding change.

This narrative—at least for a moment—persuaded many sober people that Obama's election did not just represent a transformative *event*—an episode of what Wolin would term "fugitive democracy"—but potentially heralded a transformation in American politics itself. Yet while Obama has certainly shifted policy in numerous areas, and tackled a mind-bogglingly large number of complex issues, all at the same time, it would be highly implausible to claim that the Obama era has substantially altered the relationship of ordinary Americans to the legislative process or the federal government more generally. In particular, the attractive notion of highly mobilized citizens placing sufficient pressure on Congress to neutralize the influence of the health care industry and pass a health reform bill that significantly challenged the interests of the insurance industry never came to fruition in 2009.

Instead, Obama was faulted by many allies and supporters for not taking an aggressive enough role in the health care debate, allowing Congress to write the bill(s), waiting months before addressing the public with his views on the topic, and refusing to commit to clear guidelines as to the minimum content of an acceptable bill. The result was a bill widely regarded as an agreement to subsidize private health insurers to allow them to cover more people, with insufficient mechanisms in place to contain costs or provide consumers an alternative to the large insurance companies. At the same time, the bill inspired much more visible grassroots opposition than support; public opinion regarding the plan sank as the debate carried on, less because of the details of the plan (which few citizens seemed to understand) than because of the sheer fact that the horse trading and prolonged debate gave the opposition time to mount a variety of attacks, ranging from legitimate questions to blatant fear-mongering. The upset election of Scott Brown of Massachusetts to the Senate as the chamber's forty-first Republican in a January 2010 special election forced Obama to change tactics to get the bill passed. Eschewing any pretense of bipartisanship, Obama focused energy on getting House Democrats to approve the Senate's version of health reform in March 2010, with further amendments added through the budget reconciliation process. On its own terms, the leadership the president displayed in getting his own party on board and rescuing the health care bill was impressive, but the entire episode raises the question of whether Obama might have been able to deliver a better bill (including a "public option") had he pursued a less compromise-minded strategy from the start. Further, while the passage of the health bill indeed represented (to paraphrase Joe Biden) a big deal, the impact of the bill on Obama's political prospects remain at this writing highly uncertain.[14]

Meanwhile, unemployment continued to remain very high by historic standards with no obvious prospects for improvement in the near term, and no serious, large-scale plan forthcoming from the White House or the Democratic leadership as to how to attack that problem prior to the midterm elections. The February 2009 stimulus bill, Obama's first

legislative triumph, proved to be large enough to invite criticism from the right but not large enough to make a visible dent in the fundamental economic trends; Obama advisers were reduced to the claim that the economy would have been much worse without the bill, a claim accurate enough on its own terms but not likely convincing to voters inclined to hold the president directly responsible for the state of the economy. Perhaps most disturbing of all, Obama's economic team showed little inclination in its first year to challenge the prerogatives of powerful Wall Street firms, instead continuing the outgoing Bush administration's problematic strategy of bailing out favored financial firms on sweetheart terms.[15]

In short, feeling was widespread at the end of Obama's first year that his "moment" had passed and with it the opportunity to transform the tone and substance of American politics—if there ever was such an opportunity. In particular, the efforts of David Plouffe's Organizing for America (OFA) to influence legislative debate, by almost all accounts, had a marginal impact on Congressional behavior. Initial analyses of OFA by both political scientists and journalists point to several reasons why. First, the number of OFA email members who remained highly engaged was small; even if 130,000 members sent emails to their representative of Congress, this would represent just 1 percent of members (allowing Republicans to say—as they did—that even 99 percent of the president's base supporters were not all that fired up). Second, attempts to target House Republicans from districts carried by Obama in 2008 were ineffective both because of Republican party discipline and because such efforts invited a counter-response from conservative activists. Third, increased contacts with members of Congress via emails and phone calls generally has, whatever the quantity, only limited impact on positions taken by members. Fourth, OFA did not develop effective mechanisms by which members could not just contact Congress but attempt to shape local public opinion. Fifth, as the president made high-profile compromises on health care, the enthusiasm of some supporters waned, especially in the long summer months when visible presidential leadership seemed to be absent. Sixth, the OFA did not encourage members to target Democratic members of Congress (even those who put roadblocks in the way of health care reform) or to lobby for any particular version of health care reform; members were asked to simply lobby for passing a "health reform" bill they had no real role in shaping, and to target only Republicans.

In short, having direct email contact with supporters has to date proven far less valuable an asset in the work of governance than it was during the campaign. From a civic republican point of view, the OFA effort as presently constituted is inherently flawed as a mechanism for facilitating robust political engagement. First, the organization itself is not controlled by its members, but rather via top-down directives, with strategy controlled by close allies of the White House. Many OFA members likely would have favored campaigns targeting Blue Dog Democrats wavering in their support for Obama's legislative agenda, but (for understandable political reasons) Obama could not be seen as endorsing attacks on fellow Democrats. There is a place for being a loyal foot-soldier in an army controlled by someone else, faithfully donating money and signing petitions and calling Congress when an email arrives from David Plouffe, but such activity does not develop the independence of judgment a healthy civic republican political culture requires. Second, as argued by Peter Dreier and Marshall Ganz (Ganz was a key figure in shaping Obama's community organizing approach to the campaign), the OFA approach simply sets aside key elements of the social movement advocacy model that

worked so well in the campaign: state a clear goal (i.e., what we want in a health care bill), name a clear opponent (the health care industry), and call not just for "polite" emails to legislators but for direct action and the full array of activist tactics to push Congress in the intended direction. OFA allowed itself to be tangled in the contradiction of *being* the power and at the same time trying to fight it; this contradiction in turn mirrored the tension between on one hand Obama's pledges to fight for needed changes (implicitly using an organizing model) and on the other hand his calls for bipartisan cooperation and more deliberative public debate as well as his (sincere) desire to be a unifying, not polarizing figure.[16] This critique of Obama's 2009 strategy argues that the community organizing model failed because it was not sufficiently tried, or tried only in a half-hearted way that failed to energize citizens and squandered the momentum generated during the election.[17]

But even if the effort had been more successful there is good reason to suspect that national politics is simply the wrong scale to expect sustained political activism to make a major difference on a regular basis, or to develop the distinctive civic virtues that come with experience in both dealing with those with whom one disagrees and in learning to make complex judgments about the public interest. It is a truncated civic republicanism indeed that reduces desirable political engagement to electronic communication and periodic face-to-face pressure on members of Congress. Put another way, at no point to date has the Obama administration attempted to connect the dots between what it means to support the president's broad goals and concrete steps that can be taken in support of those goals at the local level. Being a good citizen cannot simply mean communicating frequently with members of Congress and then hoping bills pass. Such a conception of citizenship leaves citizens without any *power* to directly affect or achieve social change. Rather than affect change directly, citizens are to *hope* (based on very uncertain evidence) that Washington will somehow respond to all the pressure, and if it does not, then try harder or hope the next charismatic president who comes along will do better. Obama has not been shy about telling students they must study, parents that they must put away the video games and read to kids, and young people in general that they should exercise personal responsibility. But how can or should residents act *within* their local communities—as *political* actors, not just as do-gooders—to support the broad vision of America Obama endorses? The answer to that question has remained very unclear, in large measure because there is no evidence it has been asked by either the White House or the Democratic Party leadership, including Organizing for America.[18]

There is some irony in the fact that Barack Obama, the former community organizer, has not called on the young or citizens more broadly to follow his example and make a serious commitment to bringing about social change at the local level, or make a serious effort to engage in local issues more generally. Perhaps this omission is because his own difficult Chicago experience persuaded Obama that there really is not all the much that can be done at the local level in the absence of larger-order changes. Perhaps it is because inviting large-scale civic activism at the local level might unleash movements that the White House could not control or shape, with unpredictable consequences.[19] Or perhaps it is because Obama has not yet considered revising the implicit claim that *his* presidency and *his* administration can make Washington work, even though others could not.

Consider, now, an alternative formulation of what the slogan "change we can believe in" means. This formulation is delivered in the form of a short presidential speech, delivered some time in 2011.

Speaking from the Oval Office, President Barack Obama: Good evening. Washington, DC, is broken, and it is so broken that is beyond the capacity of my President or my Administration to fix all that is wrong with it. I knew this job was tough when I took it, but I didn't realize how tough. I may have overestimated my ability to get the things done that need to get done. I had and continue to have a responsibility to do the best I can given the powers invested in the President to address our urgent problems. I do not plan to waver in those efforts in the future. But I now recognize that those efforts alone are not enough to bring about the changes we need.

I can already hear what some of the pundits will say. They will compare tonight's speech to Jimmy Carter's "national malaise" speech of 1979. They will say that I am trying to mask my failure to deliver what I promised to deliver in my election campaign and in my Inaugural Address. I will admit that there have been leadership failures and things I could have done differently. But we will never have a president who does not make mistakes. More importantly, many of the failures have as their root cause not the actions or inactions of any particular person or leader, but institutions that no longer function in a way that allows us to act on the majority's shared interests—the promise of democracy—or to solve our urgent common problems—our imperative as a society.

Consider some of the institutional and political obstacles the pursuit of "change we can believe in" has encountered during my term of office to date.

First, the American political system is deliberately structured so as to frustrate significant legislative change. Unlike in a parliamentary system, it's no simple matter for the majority party, even if it controls the executive branch and Congress at the same time, to pass major legislation. Further, by Senate rules, a super-majority is needed to pass legislation, and because Senate elections are spaced out, it's unlikely that either party will ever have a sufficient majority to ram its own favored legislation through without being held hostage to the demands of individual senators. Even for that brief period in which my party's caucus had a super-majority in the Senate, the result was to allow individual Senators to hold up reform with their own demands, demands we could not easily ignore since we needed each and every vote.

Second, the Democratic Party, even when we enjoyed a comfortable majority in the House and Senate, is internally diverse, and far more ideologically diverse than the Republican Party. It includes many liberals, but also moderates and substantial number of moderate conservatives. My sometime friends the "Blue Dogs" have the capacity to torpedo social legislation, or to get it watered down in order to win approval for it. We Democrats have never been very big about practicing strong party discipline, or gung-ho about congressional leaders forcing recalcitrant members to vote for legislation.

Party discipline—that's what Republicans do, and that's why the Republicans are the third severe obstacle I have faced. The GOP is ideologically relatively homogenous with only a handful of members willing to support any legislation I sponsor or that might benefit me politically. I've got to hand it to them—no one does obstruction any better. I have had to learn the hard way that "bipartisanship" is not a realistic aim in this environment.

Fourth, political influence in the United States remains highly skewed towards powerful interest groups. Large-scale civic mobilization of voters on domestic legislation is not a regular feature of American politics, but corporate influence over both Republican and Democratic Administrations is assumed as a fact of life. When possible, I've tried to make an end run around that fact by making tactical alliances with particular corporate interests to help get bills passed, as when I met with Big Pharma to get their industry support for our health proposals. Those alliances, I understand, may have made some of my supporters less enthusiastic about fighting for my agenda. One thing I've learned though, is that while the passion and enthusiasm of voters for engagement waxes and wanes, the largest corporations and industries never take a day off from trying to advance their interests. I have to admit, I haven't quite figured out how to cope with this, but I'm just letting you know that this is a fact of life I have to deal with.

Of course, and this is my fifth point, it would be a whole lot easier to deal with if we have what my friends in Europe have, namely a strong and active labor movement. The labor movement has shown some resurgence in its ability to influence elections—they helped get me elected—but does not have a major influence on domestic legislation, even on its top priorities. So to all you union members out there, thanks for voting for me and for working for me, and for using your dues to try to get health care reform passed. I'm sure I will hit you up again next year. I'm sorry I couldn't help get labor law reform passed either—it would be great for me if I could help create more union members—but the votes just aren't there to do something real.

Sixth, I inherited a triple economic crisis. The first economic crisis is the current economic downturn of 2008 and the very high unemployment rate that has persisted throughout my term. The second is the decades-long trend in the United States towards growing inequality that has undermined long-term purchasing power of working Americans and made growth contingent on various financial bubbles. The third is the almost-as-long trend towards deregulation of financial markets in the United States, creating the possibility and then the reality of a major financial crisis. Since we finished with all the bailouts, there hasn't been a lot of money slushing around for new initiatives, even for job creation. And while I wish we could do more for the unemployed, the votes in Congress for a really big jobs program just aren't there, because so many of our fellow Americans are

convinced that a bigger short-term deficit is worse than keeping unemployment around 10 percent for another year. My advisors and I decided it would be better to be hammered over high unemployment than to be hammered over not caring about "fiscal discipline."

Seventh, believe it or not, all my domestic initiatives are just a part-time job. I've got a worldwide military empire to run too, you know. I have gotten us almost all the way out of Iraq, and want to do the same with Afghanistan before long. But I can't just pack up all the army's equipment and tell them to go home. Well, technically I could but it would be political suicide—I cannot have the generals on my case or the elite newspaper columnists saying I "lack seriousness" or having Joe the Plumber saying I'm soft on terrorism. You voters don't have any real say over my war policy, and there's not much point in challenging the huge military budget—it is what it is. I ran for President claiming I had better judgment than McCain or Bush about the wisdom of Iraq, not that I shared the views of American peace activists. As I told my Scandinavian friends in Oslo back in 2009, while I want to be an enlightened realist in foreign affairs, I am a realist, and I'm not going to be dismantling our military-industrial complex.

Now I can hear what some of you may be saying. Some of you might be thinking that it's a good thing that our system is designed to frustrate change and that major reforms have to pass a high bar. Fair enough, but the specific nature of our system adds an additional bias against progressive reforms: residents of rural states are dramatically over-represented in the Senate, while residents of our biggest cities are under-represented. Others of you, especially my friends on the left, might think that however tough a hand I have had to play, I haven't played it as well as I might have. That's fair enough, too. But I'm here to tell you that those of you who expected me to be a miracle worker and succeed in delivering an adequate economic recovery plan, serious financial reform, a health care plan that provided a real alternative to the private insurers, and a serious energy and carbon reduction plan in this political climate just aren't being realistic. I'm doing the best I can to achieve these goals given some pretty significant constraints. I'm proud of what we've tried to do, but fully aware how far short we've fallen compared to what we set out to do and what needs to be done.

As we all know, the time cycle of American politics is quite short, with significant elections every two years. Sometimes it is possible to win political points for long-term diagnoses of the nation's civic condition, and I have done so in the past. But I have also learned that attempting to do anything substantial about it rarely does. What will drive my fate the most is the condition of the American economy, not the quality of our civic life. You know that, I know that and I will act accordingly between now and the election next year. As Tocqueville put it long ago, "It is impossible to observe the normal course of affairs in the United States without realizing that the wish to be re-elected dominates the President's thoughts and that all the policies of his administration are geared to this objective."[20] Tocqueville was right about that.

But let me make one more promise that hopefully you can believe in. Like the prison convict who wins his release from the parole board the day he stops claiming he's reformed, I have come to believe that leaders like myself can make the most valuable contribution to improving our political system when we stop pretending that we can fix it or that if you put me in office—even the highest one—I will become immune to its logic and limitations. If you re-elect me, the system will still be broken. I'll do what I can to get the urgent things that need to be done through the system, but I can't fix it. Let me turn to my old friend Tocqueville again to explain why. He wrote that "In America, the President"—that would be me—"exercises quite an influence upon state affairs but he does not direct them; the preponderant power resides in the representatives of the nation as a whole. You have, therefore, to change the people en masse, not simply the President, if you wish to alter the guiding political principles."[21] To me, what that is saying is that we have to pay attention to all the capillaries of power, not just the big heart muscles. Changing Presidents doesn't make that much difference if we don't also change the nature of our political culture, from bottom to top. I've been reading up on Tocqueville, and that's my conclusion. It really isn't all about me—it's about you and our shared civic culture.

What does it mean to say there's something wrong with our political culture? Let's go back to 2009 and let me try to explain once again why our health care efforts ran into such difficulty. It wasn't only because Martha Coakley blew the Massachusetts election, or because of Joe Lieberman, Rahm Emanuel, or anyone else you care to blame. Here's the deeper reason: the generally weak state of political mobilization in the United States, combined with the generally low level of political awareness and sophistication of the American public. All throughout 2007 and 2008 as I traveled the country campaigning for this job, voters told me how much they needed health care reform, how terrible the status quo is, how many people they knew whose lives had been disrupted by illnesses and injuries they weren't covered for. At the start of 2009, Americans in the abstract strongly supported fundamental changes in the health care system, including measures to expand coverage to the uninsured and to rein in rapidly spiraling costs.[22] All of us running for President in 2008 as Democrats supported one version or another of comprehensive reform, as did the general public. But we knew all along that health care reform would attract major ideological opposition from conservatives as well as many business interests.

As the legislative process dragged on throughout 2009, public support for my party's plan fell, in part due to sustained attacks on the plan launched by the Republicans and the substantial right-wing media machine that attracts many millions of listeners and viewers, day in and day out. (I wish I had a nickel for every time those radio guys had called me a Kenya-born socialist over the last three years.) Patently false claims about "death panels" and "subsidizing illegal aliens" came to be accepted by many people as factual accounts of what my "Obamacare" intended to do. They made it seem like my goal was to

bankrupt as many small businesses as possible, force everyone to change their doctors, and have a government panel decide whether grandma really needs treatment anymore. The Tea Party movement launched a grassroots campaign intended to target Congressional representatives who favored the bill. Protests of town hall events sponsored by Congressmen in their constituencies had the precise aim of disrupting the ability of legislators to communicate the goals and fundamental mechanisms of the health care plan to voters.

To be sure, there was and is plenty of room for both principled and pragmatic disagreement with our health care reform plans. I went back and forth on some of the details myself a few times. The key point is not that the plan attracted some opposition—I don't expect everyone to agree with me—but the nature of the debate itself. Only rarely did it resemble well-structured deliberation between parties committed both to respecting one another as fellow citizens and seeking to judge the plan not in terms of its political ramifications but in terms of its capacity to further the public interest. Few Americans possessed sufficient knowledge of the plan and its details to have informed debate about its pros and cons. That's partly my fault—I should have explained it better—but it's partly your fault. You should be sophisticated enough to understand why every story about an affluent Canadian getting elective surgery in the United States does not mean their system is a disaster and ours is great. You should know the difference between arguing from systematic evidence and arguing by anecdote. You should also be capable of thinking about other citizens, not just your own narrow interests, when we have a debate like this. Because not enough of you have those basic civic habits, the conservative activists made hay by framing the bill as a fundamental threat to the American way of life and an attempt by socialist bureaucrats to micro-manage the details of individuals' lives and decide who lives and dies. Now I don't expect the entire country to become big government liberals, and I never expected the health plan to garner 100 percent or even 80 percent approval from the public. But is it too much to ask that citizens not be taken in by obvious distortions, and that citizens punish rather than reward leaders who engage in over-the-top exaggeration designed to inflame rather than educate? Those criticisms and distortions did not kill the bill, but they helped make it weaker—and less popular—than it should have been. Again, this is partly my fault, but it's partly yours. We've got to be better informed and less easily manipulated, or nothing will ever get done, be it further improvements to health care down the line or addressing other critical issues.

Now it turns out that Tocqueville also had some pretty interesting observations about how a truly democratic political culture emerges and what sustains it. Some of those ideas, we can update, draw on, even try to implement. I've got some ideas on how to help do just that, or at least start the ball rolling. For instance, Tocqueville said that "Town institutions are to freedom what primary schools are to knowledge: they bring it within people's reach and give men the enjoyment and habit of using it for peaceful ends." Put another way, real freedom isn't just about consumer choice and people not telling you what to do—it also must involve skill in self-governance. That skill requires practice, and I fear that too many of us have not graduated from the primary schools of freedom Tocqueville is talking about. So we need to find some ways to again make local politics relevant, and breathe back into our everyday experiences what Tocqueville called the "spirit of freedom."[23] Tocqueville worried that one day we might lose that spirit of freedom, by trading it for a cheap consumerism. I'm optimistic enough to believe that we are not too far gone yet—in 2008 we saw that Americans' "concern for their future and that of their descendants" has not vanished, and that Americans are still capable of making a "sudden and capable effort to set things right when the need arises."[24] But I've come to understand that just mobilizing people to win an election isn't enough to heal our civic culture and begin solving our urgent problems.

Now I realize that most of you don't care about that right now and just want me to fix the economy. I'm trying, and I hope my efforts pay off in time so that I can get that second term. In the meantime, if you want to see the country change, don't depend on me to do it. Go out and organize the communities you live in, remembering that organizing isn't just about talking to people who are like you or who think like you, but about pulling people together across differences and learning to deal with people who disagree with you. I can't teach you how to do those things. You have to go learn it for yourself. When more of you start doing that, we'll have a better country and I—or whoever you elect to replace me—will have a little easier job.

Good night, thank you, and God bless the United States of America.

The speech cited above is fictional, but the political and institutional constraints it describes are not. Those constraints must be kept foremost in mind in trying to evaluate Obama's presidency. His presidency may in time come to be seen as a case study of the difficulty of achieving substantial social changes within the American political system, even in relatively favorable political circumstances and with a competent, far-sighted president who enjoys widespread popularity, and even when there is fairly widespread majority support for significant change.

For some observers, this outcome would be no surprise. Sheldon Wolin argues in *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* as well as *Democracy, Inc*. that contemporary American

politics is best characterized not as democracy but as a form of permanent corporate rule, with citizens limited to a plebiscitary role in which they are asked to choose between (generally) two candidates who may have significant differences on certain philosophical and social issues but are each fundamentally committed to perpetuating a regime in which a) corporations are the predominant economic institution and have disproportionate political power and b) the United States maintains a permanent, quasi-imperial military presence around the world. Republicans and Democrats may have substantial differences in identifying, prioritizing, and crafting responses to particular problems, but they are each committed to the presumption that these problems are to be addressed within the framework of regime features a) and b). Exhibit A in contemporary politics for these propositions is the gargantuan federal bailout of the financial industry, in which there was bipartisan support for committing huge amounts of public resources to benefit private actors, without at the same time establishing meaningful control over the bailed-out firms or challenging investor prerogatives. Many of the specific institutional features of American politics noted above reinforce this corporate-dominated regime and contribute to rendering political majorities in America almost toothless.

Consider again the health care debate of 2009-2010, in which Obama sought to pass reform that would be comprehensive, yet not directly attack the core idea of profit-driven provision of medical care and health insurance. One might reasonably criticize Obama's performance in swaying and attempting to educate public opinion on health care during 2009—he took a back seat in drawing up legislation, and arguably waited much too long to frame the debate. But the underlying issue is not whether Obama got the tactics right, but the difficulty of passing complicated, comprehensive reform given a climate characterized by a) determined opposition from some corporate interests, b) determined ideological opposition from a substantial minority, and c) inability to appeal to a middle, "even-handed" center of American politics consisting of independent-minded, highly informed voters who make calls based on a reasonably informed judgment of the merits of particular cases. Political communication in this climate resembles not even a crude form of public deliberation, but sheer political warfare, couched in highly ideological terms and driven by the quest for tactical political advantage.

Could American democracy become anything more promising than this? Wolin's conclusion is largely negative: he contrasts Tocqueville's effusive praise of the New England township in volume 1 of *Democracy in America* with the stark warnings in volume 2 of popular rule decaying into a form of soft tyranny—"democratic despotism"—as citizens become consumed with private affairs and lose their civic habits. At one point, the American political system had institutional elements that both permitted and moderated a form of rule by an informed majority capable of recognizing and acting on the public interest; now it consists of elite manipulation of (and contempt for) a largely uninformed majority, a "society of stunted individuals who have embraced lives empty of political responsibility."[25]

Yet if Tocqueville's description of the New England township seems quaint, it remains the most plausible account of the *kind* of political experience and education citizens must acquire if they are to become skilled in making judgments about the common good, either on a small-scale basis or writ large. Consider the nature of local political participation, as described by Tocqueville and re-described as a normative aspiration by Stephen Elkin. First, involvement in local politics is most often motivated by a practical concern touching one's self-interest: the

condition of the schools, the quality of the local infrastructure, proposed changes in land use, the provision of public space and recreational facilities, local tax rates, local economic development plans—down to such mundane questions as how to fund the removal of chewing gum from city sidewalks. The content of local politics is thus more pragmatic than ideological (though ideologies may be invoked). Second, the effects of local politics are generally immediately visible and concrete. Third, the scale of local politics means that active citizens are likely to be placed into fairly direct contact with parties or interests they oppose, and will be compelled to hear what the other side has to say. Fourth, the scale of local politics ought to make it easier to directly judge the competence and skill of leaders.

When local politics have these qualities, we might expect the following civic virtues to emerge: citizens learn to move from narrow consideration of their own interest to consideration of the public interest, and learn to frame their arguments in terms of the public interest; citizens become aware of the tradeoffs of alternative courses of action, and come to recognize the legitimacy of perspectives other than their own; and citizens learn to distinguish better from worse arguments and proposals. In Elkin's view, local politics of this kind can produce better citizens as well as better leaders (persons skilled in taking account of multiple perspectives to shape a public interest). Leaders who are judged to be successful stewards of the public interest in the immediate setting of local politics in turn become strong candidates to practice statesmanship at a higher level of government—i.e., to become a candidate for governor or for Congress. Similarly, virtuous civic habits learned through the experience of active engagement in local politics might carry over to engagement in national-level politics.

This last point is crucial for Elkin: Elkin is concerned not just with local politics, but with the institutional design of a "reconstructed commercial republic"—that is a Madisonian constitutional theory updated for modern conditions. A continental-scale republic simply cannot work if citizens do not have some skill and experience in judging public matters, and if leaders do not have the proper kind of education in judging and acting on the public interest. While in Elkin's view reviving local politics is not a sufficient condition for achieving a significantly improved commercial republic—he also cites strengthening the middle class and broadening the ownership of property as key goals for a healthy republic—it is certainly a necessary condition.

But local politics in the United States do not always—or even usually—have all the desirable qualities stipulated by Tocqueville and Elkin. The fragmentation of the American metropolis into relatively homogenous, independent municipalities has damaged interest in and participation in local politics.[26] Evidence also suggests that the automobile-oriented design of most contemporary suburban communities, and the associated loss of public space, inhibits several types of nonelectoral political participation.[27] Thus many residents of suburbia (the spatial setting of the majority of Americans) inhabit neighborhoods and municipalities where interest in local political participation is weak, precisely because of both the homogeneity and the spatial design of the communities. Where there are no fundamental conflicts between residents that must be adjudicated by politics, participation is likely to recede, and such participation as remains is less likely to teach citizens how to interact with and learn from people different from and with different interests than themselves.

Turning from suburbs to central cities, in cities we are likely to find higher levels of nonelectoral political engagement, and higher levels of local political conflict among competing groups and interests.[28] Yet urban "regime theorists" have long stressed that central city politics tend to be dominated by coalitions between elected officials and local business interests, and oriented primarily around the pursuit of new economic development. The economic dependence of cities on mobile corporate investment means that attracting new development, or retaining existing jobs, becomes the top priority of urban political leaders. In this context, citizens' political activism often becomes reactive and defensive, and city officials are likely to view civic groups that question elite priorities as impediments to progress and action rather than partners and collaborators. Further, cities are typically under tight fiscal constraints, with few additional resources available to advance the public interest. When such resources do become available, privileged political actors (particularly business interests) have the largest role in shaping how they are used. Urban politics in this mode rarely resembles a deliberative conversation between a variety of actors about how best to advance the public interest. Instead, it more likely takes the form of public officials allying with private business interests to advance initiatives intended to stimulate economic development; civic mobilization becomes oriented around attempting to block or modify elite-sponsored initiatives, or becomes reduced to symbolic or identity politics. Meaningful public action in the direct interests of the majority becomes unlikely, in the dominant sort of urban regime; instead, public action and resources are steered towards and guided by the most powerful economic actors, with any benefits to the broader public coming in trickle-down form.[29]

Elkin's vision of a commercial republic accepts this critical description of contemporary urban politics (indeed Elkin himself has played a prominent role in development of urban regime theory), but unlike many other regime theorists he suggests it is possible to imagine a reformed form of city politics not dominated by the economic imperative to attract and keep jobs. The basic idea is simple: for local politics not to be dominated by economic concerns and the need to retain investment, localities must in fact have a stable economic base that is not likely to move or evaporate. Obvious examples in the United States include moderate-sized college towns (Chapel Hill, Ann Arbor; Madison) where state universities provide a permanent source of employment and income. Such communities are not devoid of conflict, but they need not be nearly as preoccupied with maintaining and retaining investment as other urban areas. In the absence of a major state university or other form of public investment, alternative urban regimes could instead be anchored around locally owned firms, including small businesses, worker-owned firms, cooperatives, city-owned firms, and public-private partnerships. If such locally controlled capital achieves sufficient mass, it might serve as the basis for a politics oriented around the interests of the majority and responsive to meaningful public deliberation about the public interest.[30] Such a politics in turn might reasonably aspire to produce at least some of the positive civic effects Tocqueville attributed to local political engagement.

At first glance, this line of reasoning might seem utterly irrelevant to an assessment of the Obama presidency. We expect presidents to tackle national and global problems, not worry about the nature of local politics. But federal policies set in Washington have important effects

on metropolitan areas, and an administration seriously committed to the project of revitalizing local democracy could take at least three kinds of policy initiatives (two of which could be launched at minimal or modest cost). First, the federal government could take aggressive steps to promote regional cooperation at the metropolitan level, and to compel municipalities within the same region to cooperate with one another, by making award of federal funds contingent on the presence of regional cooperation. Existing metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) could be reorganized as democratically elected bodies and given real power in shaping local priorities. Other scholars have gone further, and envisioned the establishment of regional legislatures consisting of elected representatives from a region's cities.[31] Second, the government could direct community development funds toward a deliberate strategy to build up place-based, community-anchoring economic enterprises, building on past community development precedents as well as exciting new initiatives such as the "Cleveland Model" of cooperative development.[32] Third, the federal government could undertake major public infrastructure investments designed to upgrade transportation networks, particularly public transit, in and around central cities, with the aim of strengthening urban economies. The guiding principle behind these reforms is the observation that meaningful democratic governance at the city, metropolitan and state (or regional) level will always be hamstrung so long as localities remain economically insecure and in competition with one another for capital. The goal of larger-order policy units at the state and federal level should be to relieve that insecurity through place-based investments and the nurturance of forms of capital that stabilize local community economies over the long term.

We thus confront a paradox: the climate of national politics is distorted in part because an insufficient number of citizens possess the substantive knowledge, skill in judging the public interest, and disposition to listen to and take seriously the viewpoints of others that a healthy deliberative political culture requires. This is in part because one key mechanism generating such a political culture—training and experience in judging the public interest at the local level—has been allowed to atrophy in most places in the United States, for a variety of reasons. Yet it is difficult to see how meaningful local-level democracy could be revitalized in this country without substantial alterations in the way local politics are organized. The most plausible way by which such an alteration could be achieved involves substantial interventions by the federal government to promote the formation of more effective local and metropolitan-scaled democratic institutions, in the ways described above.

Any move in this direction by the Obama administration—or any other president in the near to mid-term—would represent, of course, an admission that the current mode of governance is unworkable, for reasons that are deeper than can be solved by any president. Many Americans, across the ideological spectrum, in fact already share that judgment. Nonetheless, it would take some courage (in terms of the conventional political wisdom) for Obama to openly state that he cannot cure what ails American democracy, and that he has very little hope of realizing his largest policy ambitions because of the obstacles, both institutional and cultural. Indeed, the political risks of doing so—"Obama admits failure"—are probably too steep for a first-term president to take on. (Here Tocqueville's critique of the way political concerns and bending to the views of the majority militate against presidents seeking re-election *leading* the citizenry is right on point.) Such a message would both invite stinging attacks from the opposition and

undercut the enthusiasm of the president's progressive and liberal supporters, most of whom respond more instinctively to positive themes about "hope" than sober assessments of the severe difficulties of achieving meaningful change.

So the course recommended here could probably only be taken by a president who had already achieved re-election. Ironically, however, the honest admission that the American political system is in need of fundamental reconfiguration, and that no elected official can magically "fix Washington," would likely achieve wide resonance among the citizenry. It also would open the door to a serious conversation not just about policies and problem-solving, but about the advantages and disadvantages of our current political institutions, and about plausible ways they might be improved—a conversation that is now confined largely to academic political scientists (and is relatively rare even there). Elkin's critique of the American constitutional system, as it is practiced, both illustrates the kind of discussion that needs to take place and offers a fairly well-developed argument for the proposition that there is no way to heal or improve the larger-order constitutional regime without providing a regular outlet in which citizens can learn to exercise judgment and to wield the responsibility of authority—an outlet which, now as in Tocqueville's era, must generally be in local politics. But not all local politics are equally efficacious in producing the sorts of civic habits valued by Tocqueville and Elkin, and alterations in federal policy vis-à-vis urban areas with the aim of producing urban regimes that are more responsive to the public interest are imperative if local politics are to once again become formative schools of democratic virtues.

Without a programmatic agenda of this kind, Obama's civic republicanism runs the risk of being reduced to occasional bully pulpit advocacy of greater "civic engagement," with no real effort to encourage and nourish a healthier, more knowledgeable and more vigilant political culture. Obama secured tactical advantage in the 2008 campaign from mobilizing partisans, encouraging them to network with one another, providing opportunities for meaningful participation, and encouraging them to give money (early and often). No one would deny that there is an important place for partisan political participation of this kind, but the Obama campaign model does *not* in itself cultivate the full range of political virtues associated with Tocquevillian local political participation—in particular, the imperative to deal with and listen to those with whom one disagrees (rather than just check them off one's prospective voter list). More generally, Obama, as president, needs to be concerned not just with maximizing the participation and engagement of liberal activists, but with promoting stronger civic virtues among the citizenry as a whole. Reasoned pitches to the putative political center cannot work if there is not an informed, highly engaged political center to appeal to. The less partisan, more pragmatic terrain of local politics, despite its imperfections, remains the most promising terrain for developing those virtues across a broad cross-section of the population.

To be sure, national politics will always be contentious and potentially ugly, and the job Obama signed up for demands trying the best he can to advance his agenda within the cross-currents of the existing political culture. The argument of this essay is that Obama could make a lasting impact on American civic culture beyond the parameters of what he is or is not able to accomplish legislatively by seeking ways to address the root causes of America's highly polarized and near-dysfunctional political culture. This is not an easy task: to make the argument for the value of political engagement in an era when politics strikes many people as

ugly, and perhaps fruitless. But as president, Obama should not settle for bemoaning the civic status quo or for bully pulpit exhortations to be better citizens. Rather, he should take concrete steps to support institutional arrangements at the local level designed to maximize opportunities for genuine civic participation, with the aim of turning America's localities back into genuine schools for democracy, not simply comfortable places where Americans can escape politics. Meaningful steps in that direction are well within the scope of presidential power, and need not require extremely expensive fiscal commitments. Obama himself would be long out of office before the benefits of a reengaged citizenry with stronger civic habits made any tangible effect on the tone and parameters of national political culture. The agenda suggested here thus should be understood as a long-term—but indispensable—investment in improving America's civic condition. A society based on the force of majority opinion cannot work if the majority are not engaged, informed, and experienced in exercising political responsibility. Likewise, as Tocqueville observed and the Obama presidency is helping to prove, electing a talented, occasionally brilliant leader with legitimate statesmanlike qualities as president cannot in itself cure the dysfunctions of a political system unable to address society's most urgent problems, so long as the bulk of citizens remain both unskilled in exercising independent judgment about what the public interest requires and inclined to believe that taking responsibility for the nation's pressing problems is someone else's job.

Notes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (London: Penguin Books, 2003), volume 1, chapter 8. Quotations and specific page references from *Democracy* in this chapter refer to this edition.

2. See, i.e., Tom Clark, Robert Putnam, and Ed Fieldhouse, *The Age of Obama* (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, 2010), and Robert Putnam, "The Rebirth of American Civic Life," *Boston Globe*, March 2, 2008.

3. Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do?* (New York: Farrar Strauss, 2009).

4. See Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Wolin, *Democracy, Inc*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). In February 2009, Wolin was quoted as follows by journalist Chris Hedges, when asked to describe the likely direction of the Obama administration:

> The basic systems are going to stay in place; they are too powerful to be challenged. . . . This is shown by the financial bailout. It does not bother with the structure at all. I don't think Obama can take on the kind of military establishment we have developed. This is not to say that I do not admire him. He is probably the most intelligent president we have had in decades. I think he is well meaning, but he inherits a system of constraints that make it very difficult to take on these major power configurations. I do not think he has the appetite for it in any ideological sense. The corporate structure is not going to be challenged. There has not been a word from him that would suggest an attempt to rethink the American imperium.

Chris Hedges, "It's Not Going to be Okay." Interview with Sheldon Wolin. *TruthDig*, February 2, 2009. Available at www.truthdig.com/report/item/20090202_its_not_going_to_be_ok/

5. Stephen L. Elkin, *Reconstructing the Commercial Republic: Constitutional Design after Madison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

6. For accounts of contemporary civic republicanism, see among others, Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America's Search for a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Cecile Laborde and John Maynor, eds. *Republicanism and Political Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

7. Hillary Clinton. Speech to supporters, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 23, 2008. Available at http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2008/04/clinton_pennsylvania_victory_s.html

8. Thad Williamson, "Obama's Vote Machine." *Style Weekly* (Richmond, VA) online, November 6, 2008. The dramatic

increase in voter turnout seen in Richmond was not typical of the national pattern: the presence of a large African-American community, many Democratic voters, college age voters (and volunteers), and heightened interest in the election in Virginia due to the close race in the state made Richmond ripe—and strategically important—terrain for Obama's ground operation. In some parts of the country, voter turnout in 2008 actually declined compared to 2004. For analysis, see Thom File and Sarah Crissey, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008," United States Census Bureau, May 2010, available at www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p20562.pdf, as well as Curtis Gans, "African-Americans, Anger, Fear and Youth Propel Turnout to Highest Level since 1960," Center for the Study of the American Electorate (American University), December 17, 2008, available at www1.american.edu/ia/cdem/csae/pdfs/2008pdfoffinaledited.pdf.

9. For detailed description, see, David Plouffe, *The Audacity to Win: The Inside Story and Lessons of Barack Obama's Historic Victory* (New York: Viking, 2009).

10. Quoted in Peter Dreier and Marshall Ganz, "We Have Hope. Now Where's the Audacity?" *Washington Post*, August 30, 2009.

11. James McGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

12. Barack Obama, "Inaugural Address." January 20, 2009.

13. For a helpful overview of the policy agenda Obama took up in 2009, See Thomas Dye, George Edwards, Morris Fiorina, Edward Greenberg, Paul Light, David Magleby, and Martin Wattenberg, *Obama: Year One* (New York: Longman, 2009). For a detailed, informative critique of Obama's first year in office from a progressive perspective with special attention to the handling of the financial crisis by Obama's economic team, see Robert Kuttner, *A Presidency in Peril* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2010).

14. First, it is possible that if Republicans return to power across the board in 2012, the reform bill will be scrapped before most of it is implemented. Second, the bill's mandate that the uninsured buy private health insurance may prove sufficiently unpopular to drive a powerful backlash against the reform.

15. For detailed assessment of Obama's handling of the financial crisis in 2009, see Kuttner, *A Presidency in Peril*. Partly in response to the election of Scott Brown, Obama in 2010 began taking a tougher line on financial reform; at this writing Congress is considering a reform bill intended to at least reduce the risk of future financial meltdowns and bailouts.

16. For discussions of Organizing for America's efforts in 2009, see Ari Melber, "Year One of Organizing for America: The Permanent Field Campaign in a Digital Age," *techPresident Special Report* (Jan. 2010). Available at www.techpresident.com/ofayear1; Dreier and Ganz, "We Have the Hope"; and George Edwards, "*Creating* Opportunities for Policy Change?" in Dye et al., *Obama: Year One*.

17. Some observers did credit OFA with having a notable role in the final days of the health care reform debate in March 2010; volunteers affiliated with the organization were responsible for over 500,000 phone calls and 324,000 letters to Congress in a ten-day period in mid-March. See Micah Sifry, "Organizing for America's Role in Health Care Battle," March 21, 2010, at http://techpresident.com/blog-entry/organizing-americas-role-health-care-battle.

18. OFA frequently sponsors neighborhood events aimed at local social capital-building, and in 2009 encouraged volunteers to do community service work in their local communities. Both these activities are different from mobilizing people to engage in local issues.

19. For instance, mobilized citizens might begin directly challenging the policies of Democratic officeholders at the local level—creating a political headache for the president who endorsed such mobilization. For discussion of the tension between local public officials and the federal government generated by federal Community Action Programs in the 1960s, see Noel Cazenave, *Impossible Democracy: The Unlikely Success of the War on Poverty Community Action Programs* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

20. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 160.

21. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 151-52.

22. In April 2009, polls showed that 53 percent of Americans approved of Obama's handling of health reform, compared to 28 percent opposed. By April 2010—after the bill had passed—only 44 percent approved, while 52 percent opposed. A July 2009 Gallup Poll found that 56 percent of Americans at that time supported passage of a reform bill, with an identical number agreeing that all Americans should be required to have insurance. Polls taken in April 2010 generally show that roughly 40 percent of the public approve the bill as passed, although solid majorities believed it would have beneficial effects for the uninsured and the poor. Notably, over half of respondents in one poll reported that they needed more information to be able to adequately gauge how the reform would impact their personal situation. See Jeffrey M. Jones, "Majority in U.S. Favors Health Care Reform This Year," Gallup Report, July 14, 2009, available at www.gallup.com/poll/121664/majority-favors-healthcare-reform-this-year.aspx. See also Kaiser Family Foundation and AP-Gfk polls on health care from 2010, as well as other polling data on health care assembled at www.pollingreport.com/health.htm.

23. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 73.

24. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 750.

25. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 570.

26. J. Eric Oliver, *Democracy in Suburbia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

27. Thad Williamson, *Sprawl, Justice and Citizenship: The Civic Costs of the American Way of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

28. Williamson, *Sprawl, Justice and Citizenship*.

29. On these points, see among many others, Stephen Elkin, *City and Regime in the American Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989); and David Imbroscio, *Reconstructing City Politics: Alternative Economic Development and Urban Regimes* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1997).

30. See Thad Williamson, David Imbroscio, and Gar Alperovitz, *Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era* (New York: Routledge, 2002). See also Imbroscio, *Reconstructing City Politics*, and Imbroscio, *Urban America Reconsidered: Alternatives for Governance and Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

31. Gerald Frug, "Beyond Regional Government," *Harvard Law Review* 115 (2002): 1763-1836.

32. See Gar Alperovitz, Ted Howard, and Thad Williamson, "The Cleveland Model." *The Nation*, March 1, 2010; and Williamson et al., *Making a Place for Community*.