

Rockman, Bert A. and Andrew Rudalevige, eds. 2019. *The Obama Legacy*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019. 384 pp. (\$34.95 paper, \$34.95 ebook)

There is a vast and growing literature on “Obama effects.” Readers should not confuse this literature with the research on “Bradley” effects—which, when applied to Obama, explores whether (or how much) the former president’s biracial heritage cost him the support of White voters who might have endorsed him publicly but picked against him in the privacy of the ballot booth. The Obama effects I mention here focus instead on the influence of Barack Obama’s unique standing as the first President of the United States (POTUS) of color on a host of socio-political outcomes. Parker (2016) talks extensively about the implications of Obama’s triumphs and challenges on the campaign trail and in elected office, and some of my own work examines Obama-effects more broadly (see Block & Lewis 2020; Haynes & Block 2019). Much of what we know about Obama effects pertains to the former POTUS’ ability to shape the attitudes and actions of rank-and-file citizens. One major contribution of *The Obama Legacy* is that it tackles the topic from an elite- (rather than mass-) level perspective. By showcasing the Obama era as an important case study in its “Presidential Appraisals and Legacies” series, the edited volume invites its readers to appreciate more fully the link between the executive branch of the federal government and legislative priorities, judicial decision-making, and agenda-setting.

Bert A. Rockman and Andrew Rudalevige assemble an all-star team of scholars to discuss Obama effects. In the preface/acknowledgements and first chapter, the editors organize author’s contributions thematically, acknowledging that political polarization is a central feature of Obama’s historic candidacy and two-term presidency. Trump won the office, in part, by mobilizing his supporters based in this polarization, and his administration made reversing Obama effects a pillar of what can otherwise be characterized as a “scattershot” policy and governing agenda.

The next two chapters examine Obama’s effect on party dynamics. In chapter 2, Brandon Rottinghaus points out that party polarization is on the rise and that this trend does not appear to be changing. Presidential politics has followed suit, with candidates and office-holders tailoring their rhetoric and/or policy agendas to match the preferences of their core constituents – often at the expense of the desires of opposing partisans. Obama’s presidency was no different, and the strategy of favoring his base inspired a level of polarization that was both the reason for him winning the presidency and the reason why it was so difficult for him to govern. Julia Azari builds upon this argument by discussing Obama’s legacy in terms of the disconnect between Obama’s unique brand of democratic politics (a brand that often deviated from his party’s platform) and the former presidents’ relative inattention to strengthening the infrastructure of the Democratic Party as an organization. According to Azari, this is how Obama engaged in “partisan” but not necessarily “party” politics.

Two chapters explore the effect of Obama on minority-group relations in the United States. On this front, the former president was caught in a vice between the expectations of

White and non-White voters. Obama's demographic background gave him both first-hand insights into the problems of Black America and a unique opportunity to work towards fixing those problems. Working within the constraints of the political office – navigating outright racism on one hand and expectations rooted in the “politics of respectability” on the other – Obama failed to satisfy the demands made of him by those on the far Left, while those on the far Right worked doggedly to paint the once-president as an unwelcomed outsider. Given the identity-polarizing environment his administration worked within, Alvin Tillery reminds us in Chapter 4 that it is unfair to accuse the former POTUS of doing nothing to foster racial uplift. Although racial tensions flared on his watch and many of the consequences of his policy agenda had a negative and disproportionate impact on persons of color, it is also true that Obama's nominations and appointments, policy platforms, and rhetorical choices dealt more directly than any other post-civil-rights president with the country's troubled race relations. In chapter 5, Angela Gutierrez, Angela X. Ocampo, and Matt A. Barreto tell an equally complicated story as they chronicle Barack Obama's non-linear journey from being a “political unknown” among Latinos to enjoying solid support from this important and growing voting bloc. As the authors note, a combination of *push* (e.g., the GOP's increasingly hardline and anti-immigrant stances) and *pull* (e.g., Obama's outreach to Cuba, his DACA and DAPA initiatives, etc.) factors helped Obama to earn the support of Latinos – despite the fact that many of these voters hoped Obama's presidency would be more pro-Latino than it ultimately was. These two chapters offer much-needed perspective: assessing Obama's legacy on race and ethnic group relations requires that we weigh the promises his administration kept against those the 44th POTUS made explicitly and the ones he didn't state but that constituents of color assumed he would fulfill.

By focusing on the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, respectively, the next three chapters examine Obama effects with respect to interbranch relations. Most of the time, these interbranch relations were more conflictual than they were collaborative. Molly E. Reynolds (Chapter 6) puts the widely-documented and highly visible clashes between Obama and Congress into sharper relief. The Republican Party committed to the strategy of oppositionalism and brinksmanship, thwarting the president's policy agenda (the passage of the Affordable Care Act is noteworthy considering the controversy it caused) and making the 2012 midterm election a referendum on Obama's shortcomings. This combined with the Democratic Party's loss of congressional seats in 2012 motivated an initially-consensus-seeking Obama to employ unilateral tactics to achieve his political ends. Sharece Thrower (Chapter 7) elaborates on the former POTUS' use of executive power (e.g., by reforming the process by which presidents fill cabinet vacancies, issuing executive orders and memoranda, etc.) to battle with, and sometimes circumvent, Republican members of Congress. As Obama himself acknowledged, such strategies are a double-edged sword: because they are solutions he achieved without the majority consent of congress, these tactics are, by definition, less-enduring and more easily undone. In Chapter 8, David A. Yalof discusses Obama's use of the judicial branch as an alternative (read: non-legislative) and arguably last-resort pathway to furthering his political goals. Specifically, Yalof

talks about how the 44th POTUS prioritized gender and racial/ethnic diversity in his appointments of federal judges and how he enlisted (even if reluctantly) the help of the Supreme Court in his quest to advocate for civil-rights, health care, marriage-equality, and immigration policies.

The next three chapters continue the conversation about Obama's legacy with respect to policy. While thinking about the former president's second-term domestic policy agenda, Alysia Julian and John D. Graham (Chapter 9) ask: "how could Obama have handled things differently?" Perhaps different decisions and approaches in first term – particularly before the party composition in Congress vis-à-vis the President shifted from "unified" to "divided" government – could have mitigated not only the need for unilateral action but also some of the extreme polarization that Obama faced in his second term. Following up on these and related topics, Andrew Rudalevige (Chapter 10) discusses the fragility of executive action, particularly in hyper partisan circumstances that "demand, but can rarely induce, consensus and coalition building to achieve permanent reform" (Chapter 12, page 241). David Patrick Houghton (Chapter 11) explores Obama's legacy on foreign policy, one that the 44th President himself described as his desire to avoid doing "stupid shit." On the one hand, Obama had considerably more room to maneuver when it came to foreign policy (in the sense that his opponents in Congress were less inclined to block or contradict his strategies). On the other hand, Obama's non-extremist foreign policy stance made him the subject of heavy scrutiny (if not outright scorn): voters and politicians who subscribed to a more hands-off philosophy questioned both the wisdom and the sincerity of the motives underlying any of Obama's commitments abroad. Those who favored intervention criticized the former POTUS for his minimalist foreign policy agenda.

In the twelfth and final chapter, Bert A. Rockman puts Obama's legacy into larger context by comparing his leadership style to those of John F. Kennedy and George H. W. Bush. As many others have noted, the success of a president (or any leader for that matter) depends not only on things unique to a person (like, to borrow Neustadt's (1960) phrasing, character, temperament, intellect, etc.) but also on the circumstances surrounding that person's political milieu. Based on this panoramic view, Rockman concludes that Obama's leadership style is one characterized by "progressive ambition through conservative means."

Overall, *The Obama Legacy* makes good on its goal, stated in the Preface and Acknowledgements chapter, to let "some of [political science's] finest scholars assess the consequential years of the Obama presidency" (page IX). I enjoyed reading this edited volume, I learned a lot from it, and I will assign it to the students in my American presidency courses. As I mentioned above, *The Obama Legacy* offers one of the few, if not the first, comprehensive studies of Obama effects at the elite (rather than mass) level, and I like how the book divides its treatment of elite-level Obama effects into topic areas (legislative, executive, and judicial politics, social identity politics, public policy, etc.). For a person like me who wants to stay current with this fast-moving literature, these chapters, along with their lists of references, are vital.

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