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2013: The Democrats

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Distinctly Catholic

In 1932, after his election to the presidency, Franklin Delano Roosevelt asked Frances Perkins to come to Washington and join his Cabinet as Secretary of Labor. The two knew each other well, having worked together in Albany during Roosevelt's tenure as Governor of New York, which was then the largest state in the country. Perkins said that she would only take the post if the President would commit to a range of issues, such as Social Security. Roosevelt explained that, in his estimation (and this was before the days of polling), public opinion was not ready to adopt the measure, but that it would be Perkins' job to shape public opinion and create a groundswell of popular support for it, and that he would support her in that effort. She took the job, hit the road, and Social Security became the centerpiece of the "Second New Deal" enacted in the summer of 1935.

President Barack Obama is no Franklin Roosevelt - indeed, it is ironic that in our own time when we have sophisticated polling, our political leaders seem to lack Roosevelt's ability to measure and shape public opinion. But President Obama was rightly chosen *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year" and if he were a Catholic, I suspect he would have been NCR's choice also. The President overcame a sluggish economy, a Congress determined to frustrate any and all of his initiatives, a deeply divided country, and won a significant re-election victory. His margin in the electoral college, 332 to 206, was much larger than George W. Bush's 286 electoral votes in his successful re-election bid in 2004, and Obama's margin in the popular vote, 50.96% to 47.28% for Mr. Romney, was also larger than Bush's margin in 2004. And, Mr. Bush did not face unemployment hovering near 8 percent. Already, the President seems to have understood how his victory has strengthened his hand: In the negotiations over the fiscal cliff he got most of what he wanted and did not have to support much that he disliked.

Democrats have secured a popular vote victory in five of the last six elections, so there is something going on within the electorate that transcends Mr. Obama's personal political skills, but that does not take away from Mr. Obama's mastery of the political landscape in his time. Already, he has achieved something Democrats have sought unsuccessfully for decades, near universal health insurance, he has ended U.S. involvement in one war and is on schedule to end our involvement in a second, and his much maligned stimulus bill kept the economy from tanking in early 2009.

Mr. Obama, however, made one enormous mistake in his first term and that one mistake may continue to frustrate his ambitions in his second term: He did not ramp up his get-out-the-vote machine in 2010, and the GOP took control of the U.S. House of Representatives and swept to power in dozens of statehouses. To have punted in an off-year election when re-districting was about to begin was a very big mistake. How big? More voters cast ballots for Democratic candidates for Congress two months ago than they did for Republicans, but because of GOP control of the re-districting process, and because the President's campaign emphasized certain hot-button cultural issues that do not play well in key swing districts, the Democrats could not regain control of the lower chamber of Congress.

In short, the next four years are not going to be easy for President Obama and the Democrats. The fact that the government remains divided is part of the problem. The other part has to do with Obama's style, what David Brooks touched on when he said last Sunday, "Sometimes he governs like a visitor from a morally superior civilization." It is not clear that the President has a knack for channeling public opinion, nor for rousing it, and in the coming years, he will need to improve. He does not need to be Roosevelt, but he needs to make his case repeatedly on issues he wants Congress to address and he must choose his issues with Rooseveltian care. Like most NCR readers and writers, I am appalled that our gun laws are so lax and believe, on strict originalist principles, that the Second Amendment guarantees only the right to bear a musket. But it is not at all clear to me that the President will be able to achieve a favorable political result on that issue. On the other hand, given the drubbing the GOP took in the last election among Latinos, I think the President has a chance to move the ball on immigration reform, but he will need to explain why creating a pathway to citizenship is different from amnesty, that setting the penalties for crimes is what legislatures do, and if the Congress decides that paying a fine for entering the country illegally is sufficient, rather than deportation, that does not amount to an amnesty.

The immigration debate will give President Obama the opportunity to do something he did not do with the Affordable Care Act, put a human face on the issue. In this age of reality TV shows, when people like the Kardashians and Paris Hilton are essentially famous for being famous, the American people relate better to the human side of an issue than to any abstract argumentation of which the President is so keen. He needs not to be the professor-in-chief, he needs to introduce the American people to one person, not two or three, but one person, who epitomizes the reasons we should adopt comprehensive immigration reform. The issue needs its Ryan White.

The fiscal cliff negotiations exposed deep ideological divisions between the two parties. Once again, the President and the Democrats will need to place the issues of reforming entitlements, cutting spending, and tax reform, against the backdrop of growing income inequality in the nation. No one begrudges people success in business or in the stock market. But, throughout the economy, incomes for the very wealthy have gone up exponentially while middle class and working class wages have stagnated or fallen. Raising the minimum wage, helping workers organize and bargain collectively, expanding the social safety net so that no matter a person's income, they have the basic necessities of life, such programs will not eliminate income inequality, but they can help keep it in check. A country with gross income inequality, and little upward social mobility, is a country that is destined for severe internal political upheaval. If the GOP is right to warn that our government's fiscal commitments are unsustainable, then the Democrats must point

out that increasing income inequality is the dominant economic and social fact of the past thirty years and that balancing the budget on the backs of the working poor is a bad way to assure the long-term health of our society. This is an argument that must be cast in terms familiar to those of us raised in the Catholic social justice tradition: the common good, justice, the universal destination of goods.

The danger for Obama and the Democrats is that they will look at the election results and conclude that the party should once again become a congeries of special interests, and govern accordingly. Such a view precludes the possibility of articulating a governing philosophy of the kind that could chart the Democrats' future for a generation and it is far from clear the coalition of minorities, affluent suburban women, and non-religious voters will stick together in a post-Obama political landscape. The Democrats need to focus on issues of economic and political justice, and focus by articulating a moral vision for the nation. That, and that alone, will guarantee them continued success at the polls. Additionally, at a time when the Republican Party is an ideological mess, the center of the electorate is there for the taking, but they will not respond to special interest pleading.

Most second term presidencies show a greater emphasis on foreign affairs, but I wonder if that will be the case with President Obama. Of course, events can force a president's hand. If Iran were to move ever closer to acquiring a nuclear weapon, or if China were to start saber rattling in Asia, or any one of a dozen trouble spots get more explosive, the reaction of the United States will be critical. But, Obama seems to me to be more interested in taming the debt than herding cats on the world stage and the luster he once had abroad has largely worn off.

When I inaugurated this blog several years ago, I began with a quote from Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s "The Age of Jackson" that, to my mind, best captures the historic vocation of the Democratic Party. "American democracy has come to accept the struggle among competing groups for the control of the state as a positive virtue — indeed, as the only foundation for liberty," Schlesinger wrote. "The business community has been ordinarily the most powerful of these groups, and liberalism in America has been ordinarily the movement on the part of the other sections of society to restrain the power of the business community." That mission, to define and defend those important social goals that the business community does not care to pursue, that is still a mission that garners the Democrats a majority of the electorate. As the President prepares for more difficult negotiations with Republicans in Congress, he should keep that in mind and not waste political capital on issues that do not fit that primary narrative. Even the issue of immigration reform should be framed in terms of justice, not in terms of satisfying a constituency that backed him in the election. Any tinkering with entitlements must be framed in terms of justice. And, any further revisions to the tax code should be similarly framed. This is not class warfare, it is pursuing the common good. It is the path to winning seats in the 2014 midterms and forging a governing coalition for a generation. It is the path Obama should follow.

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