

A practical post-mortem



BY: TONY ROMM

Barack Obama's win on Tuesday night was historic, but this post-mortem is no hagiography. The president-elect's unrivaled ability to engage an electorate, if not an entire generation, is worthy of admiration, but this column offers no such thing. The former Illinois senator's story is inspiring and his words and ideas are grandiose yet empathetic, but this space does not memorialize his intentions, however great they are. Frankly, it does not have to; [better writers than I have already praised Obama's accomplishment](#).

Unfortunately (and at the risk of harsh reaction), this analysis is a reality check; a reminder that once ideologically imbibed journalists finish showering Obama with affection, the ever-symbolic sun rising from behind his logo won't burn through voters' most painful troubles – at least, not until voters recognize how unrealistic their demands are.

For better or for worse, voters' expectations are unattainably high, a byproduct of a two-year-long, 50-state strategy that included the introduction of "change" as a public relations tool. Of course, Obama believes his words as much as his supporters do, and voters believe (for good reason) that he will stay true to those pledges. But many of the reforms Obama touted on the trail as essential – those policies, including his health care plan, on which the president-elect refused to relent – must first face the test of a Congress previously in the throes of apathy.

A Democratic majority in both houses should ease Obama's legislative concerns, but it is hard to believe Congress will always acquiesce to his will. The rubber-stamp majority [still risks provoking a Senate filibuster](#), and worse, appearing partisan and irrelevant – the very two problems Obama's campaign challenged. If this November clarified anything, therefore, it is that the political atmosphere Obama campaigned against for nearly two years is the political atmosphere he is in fact about to enter, and it is going to take more than a few words of wisdom to escape accusations of hypocrisy and fulfill voters' expectations.

He has to fill bank accounts, prescriptions and college aspirations too; he has to reform a broken banking industry and salvage America's sagging international stature, provide more credit to low-income households and revive failing public schools. Obama enters the White House at a time when [a series of once neglected institutions demands immediate reform](#); an ironic moment, at that, when voters are still a little reluctant to care about the issues. Sure, this election's turnout rate [makes a mockery of some generations past](#), especially insofar [as the youth vote is concerned](#). But what is still unclear is [whether Americans voted for Obama the Symbol](#) (and the notion of change and reform it embodies) or Obama the Politician (the man who never disputed the [Tax Policy Center's prediction](#) that his platform would add nearly \$3 trillion to the federal debt).

No matter what the answer, Obama was still the strongest of all the presidential candidates, McCain especially. His platform (and his way of presenting it) offered voters a more realistic opportunity for self-improvement. However, the fact that voters (much less, the debate moderators) never pressed Obama on his inconsistencies, no matter how few or arguably insignificant, suggests that the country's long-overdue political enthusiasm blinded voters, maybe myself included. And, as we all know, excitement to the detriment of substantive political discourse serves no one.

Again, do not misinterpret the point: President-elect Obama will foster reforms of some variety, either during this term or (presumably) the next. But those changes will deliver far less change than what voters desire, purely because Americans' expectations are, to some degree, grounded in wishful thinking. Their metrics for success and progress are still nested in the notion that presidential elections matter more than school board choices, off-year Congressional contests, periodic gubernatorial races and [ill-explained state ballot propositions](#).

Obama [may have acknowledged this limitation](#) during his memorable acceptance speech in Grant Park, Ill. on Tuesday night, but it is unclear how much of it voters heard. If previous presidential contests are any indication, however, the answer is nil; otherwise, we would not have started celebrating Obama's accomplishments long before he entered the White House.

This entry was posted on Thursday, November 6th, 2008 at 12:19 pm and is filed under [analysis](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0 feed](#). You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

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Politics@theEAGLE is a presidential election blog owned by The Eagle, American University's student newspaper, and Tony Romm, the newspaper's special projects editor and a student in the COMM-490 Capstone class. [Click to read more](#)

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