

ECOSYSTEM PERSPECTIVE AND BARACK OBAMA'S CAMPAIGN FOR THE PRESIDENCY

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Abstract

The presidential campaign of Barack Obama was remarkable for the millions of volunteers and donors it inspired. In this article, we argue that the Obama campaign was inspirational because it communicated an ecosystem perspective—a perspective in which people care about something larger than the self. We describe the characteristics of ecosystem perspectives revealed in a program of social psychological research and how these characteristics translate to ecosystem leadership. We then consider Obama's speeches and actions at critical moments in the campaign that suggest to us an ecosystem perspective.

Keywords: Obama, Leadership, Goals, Ecosystem, Self-Image

INTRODUCTION

On November 4, 2008, Senator Barack Obama was elected president of the United States by receiving approximately 63 million votes; winning by more than 9 million votes, the largest victory margin ever by a nonincumbent; and capturing 365 electoral votes, to 173 for Senator John McCain.

The campaign generated enthusiasm and commitment in a reported 1.5 million active volunteers and thousands of campaign staffers, who typically worked eighteen-hour days (Helman 2008). Over 3 million donors made approximately 6.5 million donations online, adding up to more than \$500 million. Of those 6.5 million donations, 6 million were in increments of \$100 or less. The average online donation was \$80, and the average Obama donor gave more than once (Vargas 2008). The

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campaign energized previously unengaged segments of the electorate, especially young voters.

We propose that the Obama campaign generated such enthusiasm because it communicated an ecosystem vision that inspired people to contribute to a larger goal that transcended the self. Of course we cannot know the inner workings of Obama's mind, but his speeches and actions suggest that at critical moments of the campaign, he viewed situations with an ecosystem perspective. We describe the qualities of an ecosystem perspective and the characteristics of leaders who have this perspective. We point to speeches and moments in the campaign that, in our view, communicated an ecosystem perspective.

ECOSYSTEM PERSPECTIVE

In biology, an ecosystem is a community of species together with its physical environment, considered as a unit. In a healthy ecosystem, the species fulfill each other's biological needs for nutrients, oxygen, carbon dioxide, light, and shade, etc., creating an often delicate balance of mutually interdependent life. Harm to one element of the ecosystem can negatively affect all species in the ecosystem.

We draw on the biological notion of an ecosystem as a metaphor for a perspective on human relationships in which the self is seen as part of a larger whole, as part of a system of separate but interconnected individuals whose actions have consequences for others, with repercussions for the entire system, and ultimately affect the ability of everyone to satisfy their fundamental needs (Crocker et al., in press). People with an ecosystem perspective see themselves as embedded within a larger context in which the relationship between the self and others is nonzero-sum. The well-being of the system depends on the well-being of each of its parts, and harm to one part ripples through the system, ultimately affecting the self. In contrast to altruism, an ecosystem perspective is not selfless, self-sacrificing, or self-disparaging; the self is part of the larger picture, and the needs of the self have as much importance as the needs of others—but not more.

Research conducted at the University of Michigan supports the idea that people can have this ecosystem perspective (Crocker and Canevello, 2008; Crocker et al., 2008). People with this perspective believe that (and *behave* as if) people and all living things are interconnected, both in the present and across time and generations. They tend not to view the world as zero-sum, with others' success coming at their own expense. Just as crucial, they view their failings as part of the human condition, not as diminishing their intrinsic worth or threatening their reputation, and they are "mindful," maintaining perspective and balanced emotions. They believe it is important that people take care of each other and do not believe that people should take care of themselves at the expense of others.

This ecosystem perspective has far-reaching effects on goals, decision-making capacity, and behavior. Mindfulness of others' needs, for example, can influence how people communicate and interact with other people or groups and how earnestly they search for "win-win" solutions to conflicts. The work of Learning as Leadership suggests that this holds true for families, for the highest levels of public and private organizations, and plausibly for heads of state. Research shows that over time, this perspective generates far more collaborative, trusting, and effective relationships (Crocker and Canevello, 2008). The zero-sum mindset found in an ecosystem perspective inevitably leads to more competitiveness, mistrust, and conflict.

Looking back at the presidential campaign, we find that Obama had the ability to shift to an ecosystem perspective. His speeches repeatedly suggested he had the capacity to take an ecosystem perspective on events, even under adverse circumstances. From his speech on race in Philadelphia, March 18, 2008:

But I have asserted a firm conviction—a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people—that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union (Obama 2008b).

From his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention on August 28, 2008:

But what the people [at the March on Washington] heard instead—people of every creed and color, from every walk of life—is that in America, our destiny is inextricably linked, that together our dreams can be one. . . . That's the promise of America, the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation, the fundamental belief that I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper (Obama 2008a).

This perspective was not invented as a strategy for the presidential campaign; it could also be heard in Obama's speech to the Democratic National Convention on July 22, 2004:

Now even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters and negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there's not a liberal America and a conservative America; there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America. The pundits, the pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue States: red states for Republicans, blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states. We coach little league in the blue states and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq, and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America (Obama 2004).

ECOSYSTEM LEADERSHIP

Leaders can have a significant impact on their sphere of influence, through the decisions and policies they implement, as well as through the direction and the behavior they offer their followers. Leaders with an ecosystem perspective tend to share several interconnected characteristics: (1) self-transcendent goals, (2) nondefensive responses to threat, (3) global/systemic vision, and (4) transparency and willingness to listen.

We believe that President Obama's statements and behaviors revealed all of these characteristics at crucial points during the campaign, increasing his appeal (as a different kind of leader) in the eyes of tens of millions. This devotion by his supporters was a central factor leading him to victory on November 4, 2008.

Self-Transcendent Goals

At a very basic level, what is most important for leaders in a moment of crisis? Their self-image, self-worth, and concerns about how they will be viewed by others? Or the overall set of issues they face and what is at stake for the larger whole? Ecosystem leaders have goals that transcend concerns about self-image or self-worth. They do what is needed for the larger whole, even if it might not enhance their self-image. Self-transcendent goals may take a variety of forms. In research on ecosystem perspectives, these goals are expressed as the desire to be constructive, do no harm, and support others. Strongly associated with these goals is the desire to grow and expand one's capacities as a person (Crocker 2008).

The financial crisis that rocked the United States and the presidential campaign in September 2008 seems to provide an interesting example. When it occurred, Obama's actions suggested to his supporters that he realized that (a) it was far more important to fix the problem effectively than it was to spin the events to his advantage, and (b) there were other capable leaders in Washington who were better positioned to address the issue than he was. Obama seemed willing to play a secondary role, did not appear to exploit the situation to his benefit, and seemed willing for other members of Congress to play central leadership roles in the solution; he did not give the appearance of trying to be the "star" of the \$700 billion bailout negotiations. Instead, he seemed to engage based on what Congress and the country needed: to ask questions that he thought useful and to stay out of the way when that was most helpful. In a time of great fear and uncertainty in the United States, he did not inject partisan politics or distracting campaign rhetoric; doing so would have surely destabilized the process at a critical juncture in a way the country could least afford.

In retrospect, Obama has been credited with making the steady choice at this juncture. It is easy to forget, however, that at the time it was far from clear how events would play themselves out or how the media and the U.S. public would judge the behaviors displayed and actions taken. John McCain's call to suspend the campaign and to return to Washington was criticized during and after these events as self-serving. We cannot know his true motivations, but it was a strategy that could have potentially reinforced his image as experienced and ready to lead in a crisis. If it had, Obama's calmer approach might then have been negatively contrasted as that of an aloof intellectual who speaks well but lacks the ability to deal with real world crises. If Obama had been guided by his self-image goals, and specifically fears about appearing aloof or unconcerned, he might have attempted to "out-McCain" McCain: look strong, talk tough, give direction to Congress, fly to Washington, and take up air space with the press, all in hopes of appearing as the hero in charge. This course could have been destructive to the negotiations, yet not taking it carried significant risk for how the U.S. public viewed him. Obama was willing to take that risk because his priority was, or appeared to be, the larger whole: supporting and trusting Congress to do their job, stabilizing the country's financial markets, and preventing a collapse that would ruin millions of families' lives.

Goals that transcend a leader's self-interest do not end with the ingroup's interests but include the needs of a larger constituency. Such leaders try to lead for the whole, including those who may disagree, have conflicting priorities, or do not support their efforts. A nonzero-sum perspective in both interpersonal and intergroup relations searches for solutions that are good for me and others, good for us and them. From the race speech in Philadelphia:

This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign—to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous United States. I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren. . . .

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world's great religions demand—that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well (Obama 2008b).

This rhetoric found more tangible expression at the Democratic National Convention in August 2008:

America, our work will not be easy. The challenges we face require tough choices. And Democrats, as well as Republicans, will need to cast off the worn-out ideas and politics of the past, for part of what has been lost . . . is our sense of common purpose, and that's what we have to restore. We may not agree on abortion, but surely we can agree on reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies in this country.

The reality of gun ownership may be different for hunters in rural Ohio than they are for those plagued by gang violence in Cleveland, but don't tell me we can't uphold the Second Amendment while keeping AK-47s out of the hands of criminals.

I know there are differences on same-sex marriage, but surely we can agree that our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters deserve to visit the person they love in a hospital and to live lives free of discrimination. You know, passions may fly on immigration, but I don't know anyone who benefits when a mother is separated from her infant child or an employer undercuts U.S. wages by hiring illegal workers. But this, too, is part of America's promise, the promise of a democracy where we can find the strength and grace to bridge divides and unite in common effort (Obama 2008a).

Nondefensive Responses to Self-Image Threat

Connecting to a goal that is good for the larger whole promotes the view that not everything is “about me,” which allows people to deal with setbacks or criticism less defensively. In moments of threat, research shows that people respond by narrowing their focus to defend against that threat, ignoring the larger context (Sapolsky 1998). This response to threat helps people survive when facing life-threatening situations by mobilizing resources for flight or fight responses (Dickerson and Kemeny, 2004). In modern society, however, very few people face hungry saber-toothed tigers, so these threats are more often relational and self-image related in nature (Leary 2004). In moments of social rejection or in moments that threaten self-image, people lose their higher-level intellectual capacities (Baumeister et al., 2002; Steele 1997) and view others who could potentially provide support as competitors rather than collaborators (Crocker et al., 2008).

Overcoming this tendency is crucial, because leaders most need their full intellectual capacity and the support of others at moments of crisis, failure, or criticism. Too often, crisis leads to finger pointing and defensiveness, instead of root-cause analysis and learning. The value of responding nondefensively and learning in cases of failure is easy to espouse but difficult to practice when all appears lost and stress and fear are intense.

An ecosystem perspective fosters the desire to grow and learn, even in the face of self-threat—this is one of the strongest associations in research on ecosystem perspectives (Crocker 2008). In this sense, we can best evaluate a leader's ability to maintain this ecosystem perspective and true leadership capacity by their actions and responses during a crisis.

On Thursday, March 13, 2008, ABC News aired video clips of Reverend Jeremiah Wright saying in a sermon, "God damn America . . . that's in the Bible! For killing innocent people! God damn America!" The controversial videos of Reverend Wright's sermons could have led Obama to abandon his idealistic rhetoric and institute frantic damage control. Instead, he decided to give a speech on race, which became a teachable moment for the American people (*Washington Post* 2008).

Obama did not respond to the crisis with a vigorous defense of his patriotism. Instead, he sought to help the U.S. public understand and discuss the anger on both sides of the racial divide. He articulated why the videos were at once threatening and misunderstood; why African Americans might justifiably feel angry; and why White resentment was perhaps not a sign of racism, but rather of pain and anxiety. He took the risk of challenging the American people to rise above their usual interpretations and acknowledge the pains and needs felt on all sides of the racial divide. From the race speech in Philadelphia:

But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it—those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations—those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or beauty shop or around the kitchen table. At times, that anger is exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines, or to make up for a politician's own failings.

In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience—as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero-sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good

college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time (Obama 2008b).

Obama described the racial polarization in the United States without taking sides, without judging either side as illegitimate, *and* without accepting or condoning either's position (which leads to the righteousness indignation of victimhood). To the contrary, just as he revealed a deep understanding of not only the proximate causes but also the ultimate causes of each side's difficulties, he communicated a vision of each side's responsibility for transforming their situation:

For the African American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man whose been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds—by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper (Obama 2008b).

Whites and Blacks alike responded to Obama's call for greater action against racism because they believed he was not defending just one group's interests and views. By communicating both points of view, he could legitimately demand change and exert accountability from both Blacks and Whites. This ability to empathize with divergent points of view has important benefits for leaders, especially for the development of a global, or systemic, vision.

Global/Systemic Vision

Leaders who possess global vision, or systemic thinking skills, can see the dynamics of the larger context, instead of falling into reactive responses to others, circumstances, or the environment. As noted, when people feel threatened, they tend to react to defend their self-image and reputation. When ecosystem leaders find themselves acting or feeling compelled to act in ways that contradict their intentional goals or values, their commitment to protecting the larger whole, even at the expense of their self-image, can provide the self-control to stop and reflect. Observing and

articulating the overall dynamic coherently and acting constructively for all parties requires both highly developed self-awareness and self-control and the intellectual skill of systemic understanding.

Obama's capacity for self-awareness was described in-depth by a reporter for *Newsweek* who was embedded in the campaign:

Obama was something unusual in a politician: genuinely self-aware. In late May 2007, he had stumbled through a couple of early debates and was feeling uncertain about what he called his "uneven" performance. "Part of it is psychological," he told his aides. "I'm still wrapping my head around *doing this* in a way that I think the other candidates just aren't. There's a certain ambivalence in my character that I like about myself. It's part of what makes me a good writer, you know? It's not necessarily useful in a presidential campaign" (Thomas 2008).

Obama appears to have an unusual ability to combine self-awareness with systemic understanding at crucial moments. When criticized by other candidates, he consistently eschewed nasty counterattacks that would have escalated the negativity. Instead, he frequently pointed out the typical harmful cycle the exchange was headed toward, and then realigned his actions with his larger contribution goals. From the Philadelphia race speech:

For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. We can tackle race only as spectacle—as we did in the OJ trial—or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina—or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend Wright's sermons on every channel, every day and talk about them from now until the election, and make the only question in this campaign whether or not the American people think that I somehow believe or sympathize with his most offensive words. We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she's playing the race card, or we can speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies.

We can do that.

But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we'll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one. And then another one. And nothing will change (Obama 2008b).

The enthusiasm for Obama is due, in part, to the gratitude that millions of Americans felt when they heard those last lines. At last a leader cogently described what so many Americans sensed, albeit vaguely, with powerless frustration. At last a leader not only had helped them understand the gridlocked system within which the public, government, and media were trapped but also had actually provided a different paradigm.

It is also notable that in the week prior to his speech on race, Obama was caught not only in the flap about Reverend Wright but also in a back and forth with the Clinton campaign over comments made by Geraldine Ferraro, who said, "If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position. And if he was a woman (of any color), he would not be in this position" (Sniderbrand 2008). The Obama campaign called Ferraro's comments "outrageous"; Ferraro responded with the claim that she was being criticized because she was White. "Any time anybody does anything that in any way pulls this campaign down and says, 'Let's address reality and the problems we're facing in this world,' you're accused of being racist, so you have to shut up," she

told the *Daily Breeze* of Torrance, California. “Racism works in two different directions. I really think they’re attacking me because I’m white. How’s that?” (Sniderbrand 2008).

These two racially charged controversies could easily have damaged Obama’s campaign beyond repair. Yet, he had the systemic understanding, self-awareness, and self-control to stop the usual game of political spin and damage control and, overruling his advisors, to refocus the campaign and all Americans on the critical issues facing the country in his speech on race the next week.

[To have nothing change] is one option. Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, “Not this time.” This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can’t learn; that those kids who don’t look like us are somebody else’s problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a twenty-first-century economy. Not this time. . . .

I would not be running for President if I didn’t believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of Americans want for this country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation—the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election (Obama 2008b).

Obama’s campaign (and his behavior as a fallible human being during its course) was extraordinary, not because he voiced these ideals but because on so many occasions he seemed to act on them.

Willingness to Listen

In U.S. society, dominating a discussion is typically viewed as a strength. The person who can prove a point, “win” arguments, and outdebate and overpower others is respected and seen as powerful. The person who is silent, listening to others’ points of view, can be seen as weak. “Losing” an argument can feel humiliating or shameful because it damages one’s self-image. Research shows that people who are driven by self-image concerns feel weak, ashamed, powerless, and inferior when they experience setbacks (Moeller and Crocker, 2008). When self-worth and self-image do not depend on being right or winning an argument, it becomes less threatening to be wrong and easier to try to understand, rather than refute, others’ perspectives.

When people have an ecosystem perspective, they want to understand others’ perspectives and experiences; curiosity predominates. They view problems and difficulties with a learning orientation, trying to understand root causes rather than casting blame. Research shows that when people have an ecosystem perspective, they respond to problems by airing issues, listening to others, clarifying misunderstandings, reformulating issues, identifying root causes of problems, and accepting joint responsibility (Canevello and Crocker, 2008). This desire to understand and learn, rather than dominate, creates an atmosphere in which others can safely express opposing views, trusting that they will be explored, rather than “shot down.”

Leaders often espouse this nondefensive, listening stance, yet acting on it requires that leaders challenge their own thinking and assumptions. Reports from people who

know him suggest that for Obama, listening to other perspectives is a typical stance. His law students at the University of Chicago described him as a person who wanted to understand their points of view: “Some professors are just kind of going through the motions with you. He actually seemed to take everyone’s point of view seriously,” according to Andrew Janis, a former student quoted in the *Chicago Sun-Times* (Pallasch 2007). A *Newsweek* reporter embedded in the Obama campaign described him as “a good listener, attentive and empathic” (Thomas 2008). This willingness to listen to other perspectives was expressed in his victory speech in Chicago on November 4, 2008:

So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other. Let us remember that if this financial crisis taught us anything, it’s that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers—in this country, we rise or fall as one nation; as one people. . . .

Let us resist the temptation to fall back on the same partisanship and pettiness and immaturity that has poisoned our politics for so long. Let us remember that it was a man from this state who first carried the banner of the Republican Party to the White House—a party founded on the values of self-reliance, individual liberty, and national unity. Those are values we all share, and while the Democratic Party has won a great victory tonight, we do so with a measure of humility and determination to heal the divides that have held back our progress. As Lincoln said to a nation far more divided than ours, “We are not enemies, but friends—though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection.” And to those Americans whose support I have yet to earn—I may not have won your vote, but I hear your voices, I need your help, and I will be your President too (Obama 2008c).

After the election, President-elect Obama attended the National Governor’s Conference on December 2, 2008. *Politico* reported:

No one could remember a meeting quite like this. President-elect Barack Obama met with the nation’s governors Tuesday to hear their tales of economic pain—and won some points by telling Republicans in the room that he welcomed disagreements, “so feel free,” one participant recalled. “He said, ‘I don’t know you as well, let me get to know you, give me a chance, you might be surprised how helpful I can be,’” said New York Gov. David Paterson, a Democrat who recounted Obama’s words to the Republicans. “He said, ‘I’m a good listener, and I’m a better listener when people disagree with me,’” added West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin, the outgoing head of the Democratic Governor’s Association. . . .

For the most part, the governors, meeting at historic Congress Hall in Philadelphia for the annual meeting of the National Governor’s Association (NGA), were taken with Obama’s openness, policy depth and just that he showed up to engage in a real back-and-forth, a move none could recall on the part of a newly elected president (Smith and Martin, 2008).

Another example of his willingness to listen surfaced early on in the Democratic primary debates when Obama stated that the United States should meet with its enemies without precondition. He was harshly criticized for this and was forced to explain this statement right up through the presidential debates with McCain in October. Rather than being naïve or pacifist, this statement perhaps reveals an

ecosystem perspective with regards to foreign policy. One of the countries that often figured in this discussion was Iran. Seen by many as an enemy of the United States, Iran was declared a part of the “axis of evil” by George Bush. Iran might also be described as a proud country that wants to be recognized as a regional power, is afraid of a U.S. bombing invasion, and perceives the U.S. dismissal of their national interests as disrespectful. Is there another approach to our relationship with them? If the U.S. president listened to their concerns and earnestly sought to find win-win solutions with regards to mutual points of conflict, might Iran perceive the United States as less of a threat? Could that lead them to engage the United States with less mistrust and aggression? If Obama brings the approach he has brought to Republicans to his interactions with non-ally foreign entities, it is plausible he could generate a different set of interactions.

CONCLUSION

The remarkable support and enthusiasm that the Obama campaign generated earned admiration and respect from politicians of all political persuasions. We have argued that the enthusiasm for his candidacy was, in part, due to his capacity to communicate an ecosystem perspective.

Leaders with an ecosystem perspective who seek to respond to others’ needs become less ideological (and less partisan). Part of Obama’s unprecedented appeal was that many people saw him as rising above the ideological conflict that has paralyzed Washington for decades. He attracted not only swing voters but also hundreds of thousands of staunch Republicans. This attraction sprang not from packaging Democratic ideals into more palatable rhetoric but from his apparent commitment to govern for everyone. This commitment will be a central test of his administration: will he be seen as governing for all Americans, striving to incorporate their different needs and concerns, or will he be seen as using the Democratic Congress to get as much as he can for his base?

On a parallel front, much of the fervent international support for Obama may be tied to this same hope: will the United States again be a leader *for* the world, as opposed to simply a leader for itself, the most powerful country, acting almost exclusively for its own self-interest? Many in other countries see Obama as acting from this different mindset with more inclusive goals. This ability to see many sides of a controversy, to hold conflicting points of view simultaneously, is rare in leaders. When coupled with self-transcendent goals, it yields hope that this is really “change we can believe in.”

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