

What Could Happen

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My usual attitude is one of skepticism toward politicians. They routinely disappoint. But, for a moment, let's take the opposite scenario. What's the most that we could hope for?

Barack Obama grew up middle class and black. Obviously intelligent, he left school knowing he wanted to make a difference, but unsure how. Inspired by the civil rights movement and SNCC, he joined various progressive organizations like NYPIRG and worked as a community organizer.

He then entered law school and graduated highly, but instead of taking a clerkship went back to Chicago to write a book about race relations and, later, run a voter registration drive. He taught Constitutional Law and joined the board of various progressive foundations. He turned his sights toward politics, where he's spent the last ten years, representing largely progressive districts.

Throughout his political career, he has been criticized for being overly cautious and moderate. But he's been taken unusual pains to reach out to left-wing journals (including fairly obscure ones) who have leveled such criticisms, talked to them personally, and tried to defend himself.

In his presidential campaign, he's raised hundreds of millions of dollars, much of it coming from small-dollar donors. He's built a grassroots organization never seen before in this country, with millions of well-coordinated members. Through an incredibly well-executed campaign and a series of eloquent speeches, he seems poised to take the presidency with both houses of Congress, a solid majority, and a strong mandate.

This is unique. He hasn't spent enough time in politics to get chewed up by the system. He hasn't become dependent on a handful of big-money donors. He comes from a background of progressive politics. And he has an army of cash and people behind him.

Let's say he wanted to reform health care, an issue towards the top of Americans' minds and a task that's necessary to balance the budget and get real wages rising again. The majority of the country supports a single-payer program, like in every other industrialized nation, but because of the vast influence of money in politics, it's often been considered politically impossible to achieve.

But Obama could pull it off. With his eloquence, he could easily sell the plan to the country. The Democratic majority in both houses would get him most of the votes he needed. With his fundraising and volunteer network, he could threaten to have primary challengers replace any Congresspeople who disagree. (Obama

personally has raised around \$700M. The average Congressional campaign costs less than \$1M.) With his tactical shrewdness, he could outwit industry lobbying groups.

Across a wide variety of such issues, it's possible to imagine a President Obama getting such things done. He has sufficient skill, background, and power to pull it off. It's hard to imagine a similar situation in history. (FDR, who Obama is often compared to, came from a very upper-class background and was strongly pulled by the far-left inspired by the Depression.)

Do I think it will happen? No. The far-right spent these final days shrieking that Obama is a closet socialist who will take this country into a new era of single-payer health care, strong financial regulation, revitalized unions, progressive taxation, a green economy, and universal voting rights. I wish it were so.

Instead, Obama has proposed the most moderate and cautious plan of all Democratic candidates, repeatedly refused to make ideological challenges out of fear of alienating voters, caved on even obvious questions like illegal wiretapping, surrounded himself with old centrist party hacks, and spent most of his campaign arguing for vague generalities like "change" rather than specific policy proposals. So all signs point to Obama being another cautious moderate.

But the striking thing is that none of these are dispositive. It's possible to imagine that, like W, Obama has run a quiet campaign focused on building an electoral majority which he plans to use to push through the policies he truly favors. It's implausible (the hardest thing to explain away is the FISA vote; even my most hopeful side can't think of any decent explanation for that) but it is possible. And it will only be more likely if we fight for it.

If we don't it seems Obama's most likely path is to become what the left's pundits call "a more competent steward of empire" — do a bunch of reasonable, sensible things that will probably have quite positive effects on the lives of most Americans, while leaving all the fundamentals untouched. But while that would be a welcome respite from the past eight years, let's not squander this rare opportunity for something more.

[*Now playing:* [Neil Young - "Flags of Freedom"](#)]