

Five Questions for George C. Edwards III, Author of 'The Strategic President'

George C. Edwards III, a professor of political science and presidential expert at Texas A&M University, concludes that the ability of presidents to persuade Congress and the public on any given issue is more limited than commonly believed. Presidents can recognize and exploit opportunities to make significant changes, Edwards argues, but they can't create opportunities by themselves.

Q. *Is Obama in danger of overreaching?*

A. Given Republican opposition, moderate Democrats in Congress, the exploding deficit and public skepticism about some of his proposals, the chances of success in dealing with the economic crisis and substantially reforming health care, energy and other complicated issues in the space of one term are modest.

Q. *Does he know how to exploit opportunities?*

A. Exploiting opportunities requires understanding them first. The White House appears to have an exaggerated sense of the potential for change and the president's ability to move public opinion. Setting legislative priorities conserves scarce political capital and limits the scope of opposition.

Q. *Is it useless for presidents to use the "bully pulpit" to sell their policies?*

A. Presidents have little success in changing public opinion. Mostly, they preach to the converted. In doing so, they can counter critics and solidify their base, the first step in managing coalitions.

Q. *Can mass-mobilization drives such as Organizing for America make a difference?*

A. Mobilizing the base can stiffen the backbones of wavering Democrats, and this may be of critical importance. It is unlikely to move Republicans to adopt more moderate positions, however, because they have a different base.

Q. *Should we lower our expectations for presidents?*

A. Absolutely. Presidents cannot reshape the contours of the political landscape to pave the way for change. They have to compromise with their opponents, achieve only some of their legislative goals and frustrate their supporters in the process.

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