

George C. Edwards III. *Overreach: Leadership in the Obama Presidency*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. 248 pp.

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The contention George C. Edwards III posits in his latest study, *Overreach: Leadership in the Obama Presidency*, is that when Barack Obama won the American presidency in 2008, many Americans admired him as a transformational leader who would vitally revolutionise American political affairs and policy. What Edwards finds instead is that Obama did not garner the public support he expected and that Congress was at a standstill over many of his major guiding principles. The question that the American public posed was from where did the president's leadership flaw originate? The answer George Edwards proposes is that the difficulty was strategic, rather than tactical, theorising that in President Obama's first two years in office, he ruled on the hypothesis that he could create opportunities for change by persuading the public and some congressional Republicans to support his major initiatives instead of recognising that the essence of successful presidential leadership is, according to Edwards, understanding and exploiting existing opportunities, not in creating new ones through influence. As a result, Obama proposed a large, expensive, and one-directional programme in the middle of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, resulting in losing the 2010 midterm elections. Obama's success in passing important policies occurred only by rallying Democrats who were already inclined to support him.

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Edwards defines overreach as “presidents proposing policies that lack substantial support in the public or Congress, expecting to create opportunities for change by persuading a majority of the public and the Congress to support their policies” (2). What typically occurs is that leaders exceed their limits and this ultimately costs them the public’s confidence. Losing this leverage usually leads to failed election campaigns. A good example is the Democrat’s 2010 midterm election defeat that led the public to question Obama’s capability to guide the United States in for the rest of his term. For Obama, winning a second term is vital given that, barring unexpected circumstances, the public considers all successful American presidents two term ones. The problem Edwards finds is that all American presidents have overreached in some way. In his “Introduction”, Edwards argues that Franklin D. Roosevelt, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush each overreached during their presidency. Edwards notes that Roosevelt, Clinton, and Bush “overestimated the prospects for change on Supreme Court appointments, health care policy, and Social Security” (5), because they assumed that they could attain their goals “through persuasion” (5). This led to much greater problems than the failure to “achieve [their] immediate policy goals” (5). What occurred was that they lost the public’s support and confidence. Therefore, to avoid overreaching, successful presidents should be alert to the limitations of their power to persuade, rigorously assess the possibilities for obtaining public and congressional support in their environments, and have a perfect understanding of the situation they find themselves in. Daring leadership, in Edwards’s estimation, was at the root of the problem in Obama’s administration during its first two years.

The strong point of Edwards’ argument is the way in which he demonstrates the collapse of bipartisanship in Congress. He includes an impressive amount of data on public opinion and congressional voting records to support his claim. His detailed statistics clarify his stance on

trends on support for larger government, polarized job approval, health care, and several other key issues. The tables in the book offer the reader a clear indication of how Obama overreached during his first two years as president. Table 3.1.3 shows how Obama overreached when dealing with climate change with his “cap-and-trade” system that affectively set “a limit on the nation’s emissions of greenhouse gases” (100). The government subsequently “issues or auctions emission allowances that can be bought or sold by individuals, funds, and companies” (100). Under the “cap-and-trade” system, emitters of carbon dioxide will find greater incentive in “developing renewable energy sources and new technologies to limit emissions from coal plants” (100). Even though the “cap-and-trade” bill was accepted on a 219-212 vote on June 26, 2009, Obama had to convince the public that there was indeed global warming, that it was a serious problem, and that it was the result of human activity” (100). Obama failed to convey his point because a majority of the public believed that global warming was not a serious problem and that it was not a cause of human activity. The public considered global warming “the result of natural patterns in the earth’s environment” (100). Moreover, the public was more concerned with the effect that the “cap-and-trade” system would have on economic growth fearing that jobs losses would result.

I consider *Overreach* a crucial contribution to Political Science and studies on American presidents. Readers of American politics will enjoy Edwards’ study for its concise and clear argument that a triumphant leader must exploit the opportunities that already exist instead of trying to create new ones by using persuasion. It is particularly interesting to consider how Edwards’ book reflects the Obama administration with an election just a few months away. As Edwards demonstrates, Obama’s first two years in office were hampered by tactical flaws. Mitt Romney has addressed these errors like any strategic presidential candidate would. In addition,

by naming Paul Ryan of Wisconsin as his running mate, Romney has invigorated his campaign with someone who economic experts once labelled a prodigy. Experts like Alex Koppelman, Nicholas Thompson, and John Cassidy believe that Mitt Romney will use Paul Ryan to attack the architecture of Barack Obama's economic goals.

My only criticism is that the text lacks a concluding chapter that summarises the author's thesis and that offers an opinion as to the future of the Obama administration considering the consequences of his leadership flaws. The re-election example I have given invites the reader ask to themselves questions regarding the upcoming election. Although the study deals with the first two years of the Obama presidency, Edwards could have examined how Romney might exploit existing opportunities to win the 2012 Presidential Election. In doing so, Edwards could have made a valid conclusion without swaying from the argument's method and scope. Such a concluding chapter would also have allowed him to situate his theory in a more contemporary context.