

# How Obama Is Failing at the Dramatic Side of the Presidency

**Jeffrey Alexander discusses *The Performance of Politics*.**

By [Jessica Rettig](#) | Contributor **Jan. 7, 2011, at 3:51 p.m.**

Political strategists and spectators often chalk up election results to money and demographics. While those elements count for a lot, Yale University sociology professor **Jeffrey C. Alexander** says that numbers-based analyses often miss the bigger story. In his new book, *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power*, Alexander argues that it was Barack Obama's ability to portray himself as a moral hero that brought him success in 2008. Since becoming president, however, the author says, Obama hasn't given his audience a sufficiently convincing performance. Alexander recently chatted with *U.S. News* about why American politics is like a play and how Obama, the actor, can get back into character. Excerpts:

## **Why was America ready for Barack Obama in 2008?**

Nobody else could have generated the sense of hope and possibility that he did. He was seen as a direct line back to the past, to the hope of Martin Luther King Jr. People thought he would be the person to begin the liberal tradition again.

## **What was it about that election year that made it the right time for a liberal like Obama?**

The country at the social, cultural level had moved steadily to the left. You had tremendous racial transformation and the acceptance of a more multicultural America, you had strong affirmative action movements in many corporate and political institutions, you had the women's movement which was extremely successful, you had environmentalism, you had the gay and lesbian movement. What Obama represented was that the people who had cared most deeply about this underlying cultural transformation of the United States, who felt excluded from the political power, finally saw a person who could both symbolize their beliefs about what the society should be like, but also had the political smarts, the grace, and the rhetorical power to actually carry them back into the center of power again.

## **You say that American politics operates on a simplified moral system. Can you explain that?**

We have to accept the idea, but also be skeptical of the idea, that political arguments in the civil sphere are black and white, good and bad. It's very much a melodrama. Even though sophisticated people might turn up their noses at this vast simplification, it does course through our politics, and it makes American politics very much like a soap opera. We shouldn't be so cynical and think politics is just about money, or organization, or tricking people. Of course it is about those things, but it's also very much about morality.

### **It seems like since his campaign, Obama has been losing that moral battle. Why?**

A campaign is like a play where you write your own script while you're going along. When you take office, you have a number of things that are unchangeable. The challenge of the president, though, is to frame them in a poetic way, to engage, to continue his charismatic relationship with the American people. Obama seems to have decided, in some way, quite differently, that once he took office, his job of performance was over.

### **Why did he think that?**

He wanted to return to complexity and reasonableness, and move away from the binaries. But, in fact, meaning is made in American politics through this melodramatic process, and I think he withdrew from it and thought, "Well I don't have to do this anymore. If I produce good results, they'll speak for themselves." That's just not the case.

### **You say the voter is misunderstood. Why?**

We need to see that voters are not the rational, autonomous individuals that we see in the myth of American democracy. [That] myth is an important support for the democratic process. It's much better to think of voters as independent and rational than as rabble. But realistically, voters are an audience pretty much in the same way that people watching a play or a movie or a sporting event are an audience. Audiences don't separate fact and fiction that well. If you're watching a powerful play or a movie, you get completely absorbed in it and it seems very truthful. Just in the other way around, if you're watching an effective political performance, you identify with it, whether it's completely truthful, realistic, or not. The audience is wrapped up in hopes, in fictions, wanting a hero to transform the society.

### **Can Obama continue to govern as he has been and still have a chance in 2012?**

No. He has to start narrating and performing in a powerful way. He has to get back in touch with the imaginative nature of politics. In my book, I say meaning is difference. To make meaning, you have to make difference. He has to, in the next year, make himself unique and separate himself—through criticism, through humor, through his own performance—from the left and from the right. He has to create his own ground, [saying] that "I am the reasonable person in this room. I have the mission. And I'm going to carry this country through to the next stage."