Barack Obama & the US Congress

Obama’s Leadership Capital Before and After the Federal Budget Crisis and the Government Shutdown 2013

Katja Wegmann & Mathilde Dupouy

1. Introduction

Although there is a strict separation of legislative and executive powers in the political system of the United States, President and Congress are mutually dependent concerning several important issues: political appointments, legislative politics and the annual budget (see Smith et al., 2011; Edwards, 2012). Hence, the presidential-congressional relationship may crucially determine policy-outcomes in US-American politics. With Congress, the US President faces a strong veto player, who can block his policy initiatives and political goals (see Tsebelis, 2002; 2013).

The potential for blockage of the president’s political plans results from the institutional arrangement of presidential-congressional relations, and can be exploited in certain majority constellations in order to damage the president’s reputation and hamper his policy. Indeed, whether a president is perceived as a successful leader also depends on his ability to ‘manage’ congressional politics and his “success in persuading Congress to accept his programmatic proposals has become a key factor in assessing his overall success in office.” (Rudalevige, 2012, p. 1274) Therefore, it is not surprising that Congress – more specifically, the Republican majority in the House of Representatives – used its veto on Obama’s proposal for the federal budget in order to force policy change, but also in order to damage Obama’s reputation by exposing him as weak leader (Weisman/Peters, 2013). However, polls also revealed that “Americans are blaming congressional Republicans more than President Obama for causing [the] federal government shutdown” (Clement, 2013). So did the congressional Republican’s strategy to block the President’s budget and his policy plans, which resulted in a very costly government shutdown, finally backfire? Which effect does this blockage have on the President’s authority?

This paper assesses the influence of Congress’ blockage on the President’s perceived authority in the context of the federal budgetary crisis and the government shutdown, comparing Obama’s leadership capital before re-election in November 2012, i.e. close before the beginning of the budgetary crisis that led to the government shutdown in October 2013, and during/after the shutdown.

2. Empirical Analysis of Obama’s Leadership Capital

The Leadership Capital Index “is a diagnostical tool for tracking the strength of a leader’s political mandate. It allows analysts to spot key variations in the nature and aggregate volume of a leader’s warrant to act over time and issues.” (t’Hart, 2014, p. 62) It encompasses several dimensions of a leader’s political capital (soft (s1) & hard skills (s2), relations (r1) and reputation (r2)) as well as the public perception of the leader’s authority (t’Hart, 2014; Bennister et al., 2014).

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1 This paper was written for the course “Understanding Political Leadership” at the Utrecht School of Governance in Fall/Winter 2014/2015.
Combining qualitative and quantitative data and accounting for multiple dimensions of leadership, the index is a comprehensive tool that allows for a nuanced evaluation of Obama’s authority before and after the budgetary crisis and shutdown. Thus, the comparison of Obama’s leadership capital before the budgetary crisis that led to the shutdown and his leadership capital during and right after this crisis indicates whether Congress’ blockage has diminished the President’s authority. Since t’Hart (2014) and Bennister et al. (2014) developed the index in order to evaluate party leaders, some adjustments to the original scheme had to be made in order to account for the US political context and institutional design.

Table 1 Leadership Capital Index of a US President

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Measurements</th>
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</table>
| S1 01 Political/policy vision | 1. Completely absent  
2. Unclear/inconsistent  
3. Moderately clear/consistent  
4. Clear/consistent  
5. Very clear/consistent |
| S1 02 Communicative performance | 1. Very poor  
2. Poor  
3. Average  
4. Good  
5. Very good |
| S2 03 Personal poll rating relative to rating at most recent election | 1. Very low (< -15%)  
2. Low (-5 to -15%)  
3. Moderate (-5% to +5%)  
4. High (+5% to +10%)  
5. Very high (>+ 10%) |
| S2 04 Longevity: time in office | 1. <1 year  
2. 1-2 years  
3. 2-3 years  
4. 3-4 years  
5. >4 years |
| S2 05 (Re-)election margin for Presidency (relative to rival candidate during presidential elections)  
| 1. Very small (<1% of public vote)  
2. Small (1-3%)  
3. Moderate (3-6%)  
4. Large (6-9%)  
5. Very large (>9%) |
| R1 06 Party polling relative to party polling at most recent election | 1. Very weak (< -10%)  
2. Weak (-10% to -2.5%)  
3. Stable (-2.5% to +2.5%)  
4. Strong (2.5% to 10%)  
5. Very strong (>10%) |
| R1 07 Levels of public appreciation/trust of leader | 1. Very low (0-20%)  
2. Low (20-40%)  
3. Moderate (40-60%)  
4. Strong (60-80%) |

2 Original scheme of the Leadership Capital Index for a political party leader (t’Hart, 2014, p. 65; Bennister et al., 2014, p. 8).
### R1 08 Likelihood of credible leadership challenge within next 6 months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likelihood Level</th>
<th>Code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Very high</td>
<td></td>
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<td>2. high</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Moderate</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. low</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Very low</td>
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### R2 09 Perceived support from the President’s party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Level</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Very low</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Low</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Moderate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. High</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Very high</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### R2 10 Perceived parliamentary effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness Level</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Very low</td>
<td></td>
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<td>2. Low</td>
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<td>3. Moderate</td>
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<td>4. High</td>
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<td>5. Very high</td>
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### 2.1. Obama before re-election & government shutdown

#### 2.1.1. Political/policy vision

During his campaign, Obama presented himself as a transformational leader (Bass & Avolio, 1994) wanting to change the system, inspire and challenge the status quo (Browder, 2013). He met citizens’ expectations who, in times of crisis, are more likely to elect a person who appears capable of establishing change and achieving a better future (Popa et al., 2011). Popa et al. (2011) have shown that just before the presidential elections in 2008, Obama managed to convince his audience of his transformational capacities. Respondents had to rate the two presidential candidates by using the Leadership Practices Inventory composed of five indicators, namely challenge, inspiring, enabling, modeling and encouraging. For each dimension, Obama obtained higher scores than his Republican rival, demonstrating that voters were convinced of his ability to change the system.

He promised to govern in total rupture with his predecessor Bush, especially by not acting unilaterally against the will of Congress and by promoting transparency of the political system. However, his actions proved at odds with his statements and similar to those of the Bush administration (Kelley, 2012). For instance, Obama continued to use the presidential signing statement, by-passing Congress.

Concerning foreign policy, Obama clearly claimed that his strategy will not follow the one of his predecessor and remains a liberal internationalist and does support the democratic tradition (Bouchet, 2011). This is underscored by the increase of US aid funding compared to the levels of his predecessor’s administration, despite the bad state of the economy and a rising fiscal deficit. However, some criticism emerges according to which Obama’s approach does not result in clear diplomatic actions, as for instance in Russia, China and Egypt (Roth, 2010).

However, the absence of real change is not only the President’s failure, but is also due to the institutional and political circumstances. Obama and his administration have overestimated their capacities, underestimating the importance and influence of public opinion, legislative preferences and the political environment (Rudalevige, 2013).
2.1.2. Communicative performance

Obama knows how to mobilise media spectacle, enabling him to promote his interests and helping him to implement his policy, celebrity politics thus becoming essential in an era when the media have a considerable influence on public opinion (Kellner, 2010). His meetings with international leaders since the beginning of his presidency and media coverage of these events facilitated his image as a leader using celebrity diplomacy to cope with global issues, with positive effects on his reputation. Communicative performance has become a strategic quality in that information circulates now at a considerable speed and given the influence it has on followers’ assessment of leadership (Bennett, 1995), strengthening the importance of “self-presentational strategies” of Presidents (Popa et al., 2011).

Although Obama is mostly depicted as an eloquent leader, communication is not always considered as his main virtue and some even judge that the President is not always efficient at giving plausible explanations to his preferences and the consequences they have, the conservative camp thus using this media coverage to attack him (Rudalevige, 2013). The President himself recognized that he had neglected too much the marketing aspect of his profession and thus at the same time public opinion that wants to be informed of developments occurring in the political field (Baker, 2010).

2.1.3. Personal poll rating, party poll rating & public appreciation/trust

Immediately after Obama entered office on January 20th, 2009, polling revealed that 67% of respondents approved of how he was handling his job (Gallup, 2015). His popularity at the beginning of his first term can be explained by the fact that he was presented as completely different from Bush who became highly unpopular at the end of his presidency, with merely 28% approving of him as President (Gallup, n.d.). Low approval of his predecessor and the increasing negative public perceptions concerning the economy discredited the Republican camp, favouring Obama, the electorate being also more likely to feel a time-for-change sentiment, wishing the opposing party in power (Abramowitz, 2008).

However, already in November 2009, 45% considered his handling of the economy as poor (Rasmussen Reports, 2009) while at the same time his approval rating began to decrease, remaining nevertheless quite high at 53% (Gallup, 2015.). After Bin Laden’s death, his approval ratings rose again but only three months after, during the debt ceiling crisis in August 2011, he experienced his lowest poll ratings, dropping to 40% (ibid.). The President’s popularity then slightly increased but approval ratings were never higher than 53% until the end of his first term.

Within the framework of a survey by Gallup (2008), conducted few days after the election of Obama, two thirds of respondents were optimistic and proud of the new President’s victory. Three days later, public trust of the leader’s capability to achieve his goals decreased significantly, only a quarter of respondents believing that the President fulfilled his promise to change the American system (AP-GfK Poll, 2011). However, these perceptions are at odds with the reality, in that Obama has achieved a lot of his goals, organizing the withdrawal of US troops in Iraq, Bin Laden’s death and adopting the Affordable Care and Patient Protection Act, a measure that can be considered as significant progress for the American social welfare system (Skocpol & Jacobs, 2012). Although Obama’s agenda in terms of policy change progressed significantly, these progresses mostly went unnoticed or not comprehended by a majority of citizens.

At the beginning of Obama’s presidency, a Gallup poll (2014) reveals that a majority approved of the way Democrats were handling their job in Congress. However, a year later, only 42% still had a favour-
able opinion of the Democratic Party. This corresponds to the moment when Republicans won the majority in the House of Representatives. The tendency changed again after Obama’s re-election in 2012, favourable ratings being up to 51%, the highest score the party obtained since 2009.

2.1.4. Longevity, Election Margin for Presidency & Likelihood of Leadership Challenge

Obama performs well in terms of longevity, since he not only completed his first term in office, but was also re-elected for a second term in 2012. Moreover, he won Presidency in 2008 with a large margin, outrunning the rival candidate by over 7% (see 2.2.4).

However, having disappointed during his first term, one could assume that his re-election was not very likely. The “Time for Change model” created by Abramowitz (2012), aiming to predict the election’s outcome, estimated the chances for Obama’s re-election. Considering the current era of partisan polarization, the two opposite political parties taking radically different positions, Obama’s advantage as incumbent was much lower than it was in the past for other presidents. This means that even under the same approval and economic conditions than before and the strengthening of a polarized era, it was harder for the President to win the election than it had been the first time. However, the model estimates that Obama had a two-thirds chance of being re-elected for a second term, which remains a quite high probability.

2.1.5. Support from the Democratic Party

Having benefited from a Congress with a strong Democratic majority during the first two years of his first term, the mid-term elections in 2010, in a context of economic crisis, unemployment, decline in the popularity of Democrats and rise of the Tea Party movement, confronted the President with a politically divided Congress for the next years. The elections to the House resulted in a Republican landslide victory while Democrats maintained their majority in the Senate with some loss (6 seats). In fact, polls showed that even if voters did not really think that Republicans would be more efficient than Democrats, they expressed their discontent about Obama’s presidency by making him lose his majority (Skocpol & Jacobs, 2012). Obama never benefited from Democratic margins in Congress as high as did previous Democratic presidents.

Criticism against Obama does not emanate only from his right-wing opponents, many in the center and even the left were disappointed by his presidency (Skocpol & Jacobs, 2012). Moreover, Democrats appeared to be divided concerning some policy areas and therefore did not give their full support to the President when he really needed it, Republican support being almost nonexistent even for issues they had previously supported (Skocpol & Jacobs, 2012).

2.1.6. Parliamentary effectiveness

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama promised to gather all Americans together without distinction according to political affiliations, introducing a post-partisan era and thus responding to citizens’ desire to overcome party disagreements and focus on important issues for the nation. He wanted to resort to two different approaches to presidential leadership, a nonpartisan leadership approach toward compromise and a partisan leadership that stays committed to party objectives (Milkis et al., 2012). On one hand, he wanted to resolve tensions between the two opposite parties; on the other hand, he knew that he had to pursue to a certain extent a partisan leadership in order to pass his liberal reforms, especially in the field of health care or budget. Health care reform is an example of challenge for the President to prove his effectiveness. Facing a probable Republican filibuster, Obama urged Democrat mem-
bers of Congress to act strategically to prevent the blockage from happening, and they actually succeeded, after having unsuccessfully tried to convince Republicans (The Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer, 2010). However, this approach has not proven to be effective, Obama being often “vilified by the right, castigated by the left and abandoned by the middle” (Baker, 2010). Indeed, Republicans systematically obstructed any propositions while Democrats feared that the President was doing too much compromises to gain their support. His failure in reconciliation of the different two parts, illustrated by the debt ceiling crisis in August 2011, led to an image of weakness while in reality this task was very difficult and risky.

2.2. During & after budgetary crisis & shutdown

The Republican-led House blocked the passing of a new budget in 2013 in order to delay Obama’s controversial health-care reform and achieve “a series of policy concessions […] in exchange for raising the debt ceiling” (BBC, 2013). Because of the budgetary crisis and the Republican’s refusal to approve an annual federal budget on time, great parts of the government had to cease operations.

However, the Republicans “conceded defeat […] in their bitter budget fight with President Obama over the new health care law as the House and Senate approved last-minute legislation ending a disruptive 16-day government shutdown and extending federal borrowing power to avert a financial default” (Weisman/Parker, 2013). Thus, in public perception, the Republicans and not President Obama have lost “the shutdown blame game” (Clement, 2013). But which effect did the budgetary crisis and the government shutdown really have on Obama’s leadership capital?

2.2.1. Political/Policy vision

Obama’s political vision prior to his re-election in 2012 was empowering, but diffuse (2.1.1.). Nevertheless, he rigorously pursued his major domestic “signature” project, the health-care reform (BBC, 2013; Weisman/Parker, 2013). He not only managed to pass the controversial ‘Obamacare’ through Congress by 2010, but also resisted the public pressure and the Congress Republicans’ vetoes concerning the annual budget that led to the government shutdown. As many journalists noted, the health-care reform was “Obama’s signature achievement” (BBC, 2013) that the President would not and finally did not compromise on (Weisman/Parker, 2013).

He resisted horse-trading with the Republicans and making concessions, which could have prevented the shutdown. Instead, he announced his veto to negotiated compromises on several important issues, even in case the Democrats-led House would agree (Yourish/Tse, 2013; CNBC, 2013). The result of the negotiations between Senate, House and President during the shutdown-crisis was a budget compromise that “makes virtually no concessions to the Republicans, other than some minor tightening of income verifications of people obtaining insurance subsidies under the new health care law.” (Yourish/Tse, 2013) Hence, Obama’s policy vision can be regarded as very strong at the time of the shutdown, since he did not water down his policy goal of health-care reform even under strong political pressure and in time of acute fiscal crisis.

2.2.2. Communicative Performance

Obama’s communicative performance was declining in the academic and public perception (see 2.1.2.). During his dispute with Congress, i.e. the Republican majority in the House, however, he successfully framed the “Republican shutdown” as “ideological crusade” (Obama, 2013a) caused by “bullies” in Congress (BBC, 2013). Obama and his Democratic supporters were quite successful with this public framing, since Americans mostly blamed Republicans for the shutdown and their poll ratings fell
dramatically (Weisman/Parker, 2013), while both Obama and the Democrats emerged rather unscathed (see 2.2.3.). Therefore, Obama’s discrediting of the Republicans’ strategy to block his major policy achievement indicates successful communicative performance.

Furthermore, Obama used the opportunity of the shutdown not only to blame the rival party, but also to gain the sympathies and support of “the dedicated and hard-working employees of the United States Government” (Obama, 2013b), addressing them in a stirring letter, praising their everyday work and giving thanks for their service (ibid.). Moreover, Obama appears to have succeeded in internal negotiations with Congress, allowing only for minor alterations to his budget and policy plans (Yoursih/Tse, 2013). As soon as the shutdown was over, he proposed talks and negotiations concerning the fiscal crisis, thus re-creating his “public image as moderate dealmaker” (Miller, 2013). Therefore, his overall communicative performance during and after the government shutdown can be regarded as very strong, preventing horse-trading but allowing for negotiations after the Republicans’ defeat, and by empathetically appealing to those who were affected by the shutdown.

2.2.3. Personal poll rating, party poll rating & public appreciation/trust

In the week after Obama’s re-election, Gallup (2015) measured an approval rate of 53% compared to a disapproval rate of 41%. Although this poll rating is significantly lower than his personal poll rating in his first year of office and immediately before his re-election (2.1.3), a declining approval rate in the fourth, fifth and sixth year in office is very common (see Jones, 2015). Nevertheless, right before the beginning of the shutdown, Obama’s approval rate declined to 44%, while the disapproval of his job performance climbed to 50% (Gallup, 2015). However, this polling rate stayed stable after the end of the shutdown and, in fact, for the whole year 2014 until the rating began to rise to 50% again very recently (Saad, 2014). Although the President’s personal poll rating has to be considered as moderate only, it is important to note that he was only marginally blamed for the shutdown by the public. CBS and Fox News polls revealed that a majority of Americans considers the congressional Republicans to be responsible for the crisis (Clement, 2013; see figure 1). “Just 26 percent in a pre-shutdown Washington Post-ABC News poll approved of the way Republicans in Congress were handling budget negotiations, compared with 41 percent who approved of Obama.” (Clement, 2013)
While Obama’s personal poll rates were still moderate and thus the level of public appreciation quite stable, the Democratic party lost approval compared to the polling rates right after their President’s re-election (Gallup, 2015). Moreover, figure 2 shows that after the shutdown in October 2013 only 43% of Americans were in favor of the Democratic Party, while it had been 51% in December 2012 (Dugan, 2014).

2.2.4. Longevity, Re-election Margin for Presidency & Likelihood of Leadership Challenge

Obama did not win the 2012 presidential elections with the same high margin as in 2008 – only 3.86% more than his rival candidate, compared to a margin of 7.27% in 2008\(^3\). Although his public appreciation and support, thus, have decreased significantly during his incumbency, the budgetary crisis, the blockage by Congress and the shutdown hit him at the beginning of his second term, when the likelihood of a credible leadership challenge is at its lowest, because of the institutional status of the US President during his incumbency – and electoral campaigns rather far away.

2.2.5. Support from the Democratic Party

Before his re-election, Obama did not only struggle with his lost Democratic majority in the House as discussed above, but also with an internally divided Democratic party (Skocpol & Jacobs, 2012). During the campaigns for the mid-term elections 2014, in which the Democrats lost their majority in the Senate, too (Roberts, 2014), many Democratic candidates even publicly turned their back on Obama (Sink, 2014; Jackson, 2014).

Although this might appear as a severe setback, since Obama’s own party seems not to back him anymore, the president himself clarified that “[t]hese are folks who are strong allies and supporters of me, and I tell them, ‘you know what, you do what you need to do to win. I will be responsible for making sure that our voters turn out.’” (Obama cited in Jackson, 2014) He specifically argued that the Democrats always supported “my agenda in Congress” (Obama cited in Sink, 2014). Indeed, especially during the fiscal crisis and shutdown episode, the Democratic support for Obama’s hardliner strategy against the Republican-led House was high. As journalists observe, “Democrats were never likely to make concessions on healthcare reform – Mr Obama’s signature achievement and a central issue in last year’s presidential election” (BBC, 2013). The Democrats completely supported the President’s strategy in Congress as well as the finally passed bill to end the shutdown (Weisman/Parker, 2013). While the Democrats, as a result, appeared as a united entity backing their President during this crisis, the Republicans appeared internally torn – and became so even more (Weisman/Parker, 2013).

\(^3\) For a list of results of presidential elections, see http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/.
2.2.6. Parliamentary Effectiveness

At the beginning of his incumbency, Obama claimed not to bypass the Congress and “exhibited a willingness to work collaboratively” (Miliks et al., 2012, p. 58). However, as soon as he lost the Democratic majority in the House, his “sense of urgency had accelerated. [...] And the president seemed perfectly happy to move forward separately with one individual dictating the terms of the debate – so long as he was that individual.” (Rudalevige, 2012, p. 1273) As Obama himself put it, “[w]e can’t wait for an increasingly dysfunctional Congress to do its job. Where they won’t act, I will. [...] I’ve told my administration to keep looking every single day for actions we can take without Congress” (Obama, 2011). Indeed, Obama expanded the use of executive orders (see Kessler, 2014), trying to avoid struggles and negotiations with Congress.

“The Obama administration and the Republican-controlled House had come close to failing to finance the government in the past but had always reached a last-minute agreement to head off a disruption in government services.” (Weisman/Peters, 2013) However, the budgetary crisis and government shutdown is an example of Obama’s strategy to force Congress to accept his budget proposal without making any concessions to the Republican majority in the House (2.2.1): “Obama refused to compromise, leaving Republican leaders to beg him to talk, and to fulminate when he refused.” (Weisman/Parker, 2013) Although this is not a collaborative approach to Congress-management, thus not really indicating parliamentary effectiveness, he succeeded in realizing his political goals in this case, pushing them through parliament at the cost of government shutdown and against the political will of the blocking House majority. In fact, one has to keep in mind that “[n]ot a single systematic study exists that demonstrates that presidents can reliably move members of Congress, especially members of the opposition party, to support them. [...] Even presidents who appeared to dominate Congress were actually facilitators rather than directors of change.” (Edwards, 2012, p. 116) Therefore, that Obama finally subdued Congress, ending the blockage and the shutdown without concessions to his opponents, reveals a rather merciless relation to Congress, not one of effective collaboration. However, he finally did pass his political goal through Congress, which makes it an overall moderate parliamentary effectiveness during and after the government shutdown.

3. Diachronical Analysis: Impact of Shutdown on Obama’s Authority

The empirical analysis of Obama’s leadership capital before and after the budgetary crisis and the government shutdown revealed that the blocking strategy of the Republican House-majority during the shutdown episode did not undermine the President’s authority. Quite the opposite, his leadership capital increased from 25 to 37 after the end of the shutdown (table 2), thus rising from a merely “medium capital” to a “high capital” (Bennister et al., 2014, p. 9). Although this could be a temporary rather than a long-term effect, so that its character as a trajectory of a “comeback leader” (t’Hart, 2014, pp. 70-71) is hard to determine definitely, the rise in leadership capital indicates that Obama has profited from the counter-productive image of the Republicans and his own management of the shutdown-crisis. More specifically, a closer look at the four dimensions of the leadership capital reveals that Obama’s perceived soft skills (s1) and reputation (r2) rose considerably. Especially the tremendous increases in perceived support by the Democratic Party as well as parliamentary effectiveness seem to be directly linked to Obama’s success in coping with the blocking House-majority. Moreover, since he did not compromise on his major domestic policy achievements in times of high political pressure and disadvantageous political power relations, his political vision comes to the fore much clearer than the years before. Before the shutdown-crisis, many citizens who had placed much hope in him were disappointed, since he could not live up to his promise of change (Martosko, 2014).
Table 2 Obama’s Leadership Capital Before and After Shutdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Before Re-Election 2012</th>
<th>During/after Government Shutdown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1 01 Political/policy vision</td>
<td>(3) moderately clear/consistent</td>
<td>(5) very clear/consistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1 02 Communicative performance</td>
<td>(3) average</td>
<td>(4) good</td>
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<td>S2 03 Personal poll rating relative to rating at most recent election</td>
<td>(1) very low (-26%)</td>
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<td>(4) 4 years</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2 05 (Re-)election margin for Presidency</td>
<td>(4) Large (6-9%)</td>
<td>(3) Moderate (3-6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1 06 Party polling relative to party polling at most recent election</td>
<td>(2) weak (-3 %)</td>
<td>(2) weak (-8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1 07 Levels of public trust/appreciation</td>
<td>(3) moderate (53%)</td>
<td>(3) moderate (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1 08 Likelihood of credible leadership challenge</td>
<td>(3) moderate</td>
<td>(5) very low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2 09 Perceived support by President’s party</td>
<td>(1) low</td>
<td>(5) very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2 10 Perceived parliamentary effectiveness</td>
<td>(1) low</td>
<td>(3) moderate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leadership Capital (total) 25 37

A crisis can provide an opportunity for political leaders to construct their charismatic leadership, providing solutions and hopes (Weber, 1947). Obama was elected due to his “Hope and Change” campaign, citizens agreeing with the need for change but also aware that change takes time to be implemented. Nevertheless, their indulgence decreased over time and became very low when the promoter of change took a second term without clear positive results (Norpoth & Bednarczuk, 2012). Moreover, Obama faced the difficulty of establishing change without support from Congress, which contributed to the decrease of his leadership capital. Republicans resorted many times to filibuster, delaying and blocking the legislative process to prevent Obama’s administration from achieving its main reforms, such as climate or immigration legislation (Skocpol & Jacobs, 2012). Cooperation between the two parties was necessary during a national crisis, yet Republicans decided to systematically oppose all propositions, even when some of their ideas were taken into account. Without bipartisan support in a Congress with a Republican majority, chances of achieving goals were low. Finally, the fact that he had been elected in times of crisis and with an immense federal budget deficit made it harder for him to achieve progress and therefore to be perceived as a strong leader (Skocpol & Jacobs, 2012). All this explains why Obama’s leadership capital at the first measurement point indicates a “‘muddling through’ in the face of significant obstacles and divisions, yet with provisional licence to operate from (a small majority within) the authorising environment” (Bennister et al., 2014, p. 9).

Simultaneously, the sudden rise in leadership capital during/right after the shutdown – even if not a long-term effect– suggests that a crisis, if managed successfully by the leader, can provide an opportunity to strengthen his authority. The analyzed case, in fact, shows that even after a long period of political and economic crisis and political “muddling through”, windows of opportunity may open which can showcase the leader’s communicative performance, prove his (parliamentary) effectiveness and
sharpen his political visions, even if the “hard skills” and relational resources stay the same (Bennister et al., 2014, pp. 4-7).

Moreover, the analysis suggests that the strategic (ab)use of institutional veto powers in the US political system is not necessarily beneficial for the veto party. Indeed, the shutdown-episode teaches that such political sabotage may backfire; at least, the shutdown has hampered Congress, especially the Republican-led House, while it provided a chance for “medium-capital” Obama to raise his political reputation and pursue his policy goals.

4. Conclusion

This paper dealt with the question, whether the congressional blocking of the President, which resulted in a government shutdown, did actually lead to the intended decline of his leadership capital. Applying the leadership capital index, adapting it to the institutional and contextual specifics of the presidential system and US politics and, thus, gaining nuanced insight into several dimensions of the President’s political capital allowed for a nuanced empirical evaluation.

First, from a methodological perspective, the leadership capital index proved to be adaptable and applicable to a presidential system. The balance of qualitative and quantitative data provided a comprehensive analysis of the leader’s performance while allowing for the consideration of situational and contextual specifics. Thus, the case study exemplified the usefulness of the leadership capital index as a method to assess a leader’s (perceived) political authority. Second, the empirical analysis of Obama’s leadership capital before and after the shutdown-crisis illustrated how successfully managed periods of crisis can lead to an increase, rather than decline, of the leader’s authority. Finally, this paper suggests that the strategic use of institutional veto-power and the strategy of blocking the President and his political initiatives may backfire badly, not only paving the road to a considerable increase in the President’s authority, but also revealing one’s own internal fissures.

References


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