



Barack Obama, Federalism, and a Winning Coalition

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Barack Obama's community organizing background in Chicago gives him a special opportunity to expand his base of support to include the millions of Republican and Independent voters who identify closely with the principles of federalism. Federalism, a founding precept of the Republican Party more than 150 years ago and currently often lauded by the party's presidential candidate Senator John McCain, involves deference to states and localities in the management of their own affairs and social programs.

Community organizing and federalism share many of the same core values, such as decentralized decision-making, capacity-building at the local level in management and administrative functions, and self-reliance. Senator Obama ought to consistently connect his community organizing background to the ideals of federalism by describing how he has applied this deep and intrinsic principle through empowering people at the local level to improve their own lives. His sustained emphasis of how his experience connects with core federalist principles will particularly attract Republicans and Independents who deeply value federalism and who no longer support continuing the devastating war in Iraq as does Senator McCain.

Thus rather than simply mentioning his community organizing experience, which he often does during his political rallies and speeches, Senator Obama should spell out how it relates to the federalist perspective and how, as a result, he is uniquely qualified to apply its principles to dealing with many of the serious challenges the United States now faces and even explaining how those challenges came about. For example, the general failure of Iraq's reconstruction (when one considers potential versus actually attained benefits) is significantly rooted in the excessive and ultimately self-defeating level of foreign contractors involved, which has disempowered Iraqis, leaving far too many of them feeling that they do not have a stake in this effort. The failure here has in fact helped to feed the violent resistance. The United States has now come to realize its mistake and is working to correct it by involving Iraqis in the design and management of reconstruction projects. But Iraq's reconstruction as originally conceived and as undertaken up until recently was an affront to core principles of federalism, local control in decision-making, and community organizing. Seen from this perspective, the mismanagement by the Bush administration of the reconstruction effort is quite stark and can be viewed as a betrayal by many Republicans of the federalist ideals championed by their own party. Senator Obama should seize the opportunity to present himself as in the vanguard of federalist ideals; someone who has actually walked the walk as a community organizer, not a hypocrite who espoused the federalist ideals and then trampled on them.



Another example of how Senator Obama can utilize his community organizer/federalist experience and gain further support in his efforts to be president is through how he explains and deals with the social dislocation caused by international free trade. Free trade and globalization restructures economies, with brutal social effects as seen in parts of the United States and in developing economies, especially negatively impacting rural communities, such as in Mexico. When discussing these difficult conditions, Mr. Obama should highlight how community organizing and federalist approaches (i.e., empowering people) he is familiar with from first-hand experience can bring new opportunities to local economies and help create socio-economic initiatives that enable individuals and businesses to adapt and develop. Following this approach will help affirm the principle of federalism that many Republicans and others value and show its relevance in fashioning solutions to modern-day challenges at home and abroad.

The Obama campaign can legitimately conflate community organizing and federalism. After all, federalism is the political structure that enables and encourages local community organizing to occur. By presenting community organizing as a federalist process, the campaign will attract those Republicans and Independents who are disaffected by the Iraq war, but who would otherwise still support John McCain. This is why Senator Obama ought to continually use the federalist lexicon to describe the "bottom-up" strategies for social change that he clearly believes in. If he does so, Republicans and Independents will cross over to him and he will forge a coalition that should make him the next president of the United States.

Yossef Ben-Meir is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of New Mexico and president of the High Atlas Foundation (www.hihatlasfoundation.org), a nonprofit organization founded by former Peace Corps Volunteers who served in Morocco and dedicated to the rural community development of that country.

Yossef Ben-Meir

Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA

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