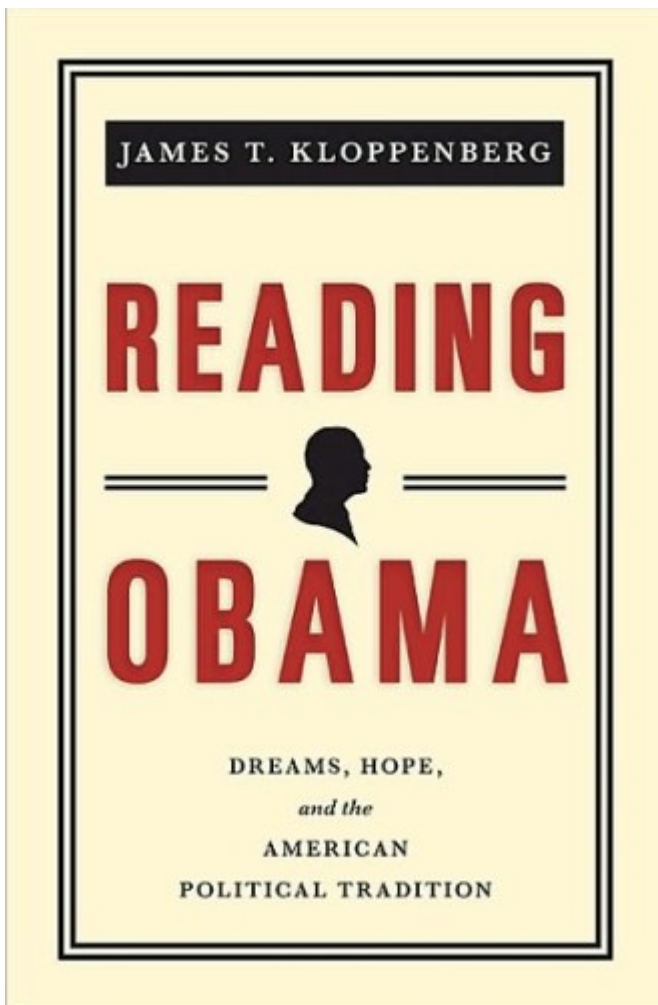


Reading Obama, by James T. Kloppenberg

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [October 4, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Reading Obama

By James T. Kloppenberg
Princeton University Press

Books on Barack Obama are proliferating. Recent additions include biographies, political analyses, a look into Obama's African family tree, books on his handling of specific issues and books on race and politics in American society. Among these, James Kloppenberg's intellectual contextualization stands out.

Kloppenberg began his study of Obama as an intellectual and political philosopher while lecturing at Cambridge University, and his engagement with European interpretations of Obama adds a fascinating counterpoint to his reading of American political traditions. Kloppenberg knows that Americans can be reluctant to perceive their most prominent politicians as philosophers, but he believes that Obama's philosophical commitments put his policies in perspective.

Kloppenberg places Obama's writings and speeches into a rich context of both historical and contemporaneous texts. James Madison, John Dewey, Ralph Ellison, John Rawls and Abraham Lincoln come into the story. Kloppenberg carefully explains each particular contribution to Obama's political thought. He acknowledges that Obama's own writings—especially his popular books *Dreams of My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*—were written for a general, not an academic, audience, but he believes that Obama is a gifted narrator who is able to interpret significant traditions of democracy and rearticulate them for a new political moment. Even while he does not agree with every Obama policy (he is especially critical of his actions on the economy and Afghanistan), Kloppenberg admires Obama's integration of these intellectual traditions.

Kloppenberg sees Obama's political commitments as rooted in philosophical pragmatism and a passion for deliberative democracy. He argues that Obama has come to see every assertion of truth as stemming from a particular point of view, and he has wrestled with how to understand that particularity alongside the universal ideals that guided his parents and grandparents and are articulated in his Christian faith. The resulting pragmatic platform values compromise, the admission of fallibility and the ever-changing dynamics of a democratic process.

Thus Obama believes that there are no final solutions or absolute truths in democratic politics. This does not mean that there are no values, but instead that values must be contested in the public arena. Obama does not necessarily reject absolute truth for himself, but he knows that democratic governments cannot function by it. This is the paradox of democracy. On the one hand, writes

Kloppenberg, "we are constituted by the values we cherish, the principles we seek to realize, and the democratic process whereby we attempt to reach those goals." On the other hand, "we must not pretend that the meaning of those shared principles has ever been anything but contested." Even when two democratic citizens use the same vocabulary—justice, freedom, equality—they cannot be sure that their neighbor means the same thing. They must meet through a deliberative process to move their society toward these ideals, seeking common ground.

Obama has embraced what political philosopher John Rawls calls "overlapping consensus" as a political endeavor. This means that Obama seeks places where the commitments and goals of seemingly opposing groups come together, and then he works from that place. This is a form of philosophical pragmatism that is essential to democracy. Kloppenberg uses Obama's now famous 2006 speech on religion and the Democratic Party as an example. In this speech, Obama points out that Democrats and religious people share a great deal and that by seeking common ground, they can work to accomplish shared goals. Similarly, Obama sought this common ground when he spoke about race during the 2008 campaign. He did not deny the validity of individual perspectives, but he sought, through the use of empathy and dialogue, to draw various parties to the same table.

For many of Obama's critics, this pragmatic, empathetic and deliberative technique is considered a major weakness, but Kloppenberg sees it as a strength. He thinks that Obama is attempting to "resuscitate a much older way of thinking about politics" and that he is aware that this is a difficult task in the current environment. But Obama's view is a long one and will serve American democracy well. "The willingness to endure acceptable compromise instead of demanding decisive victory over one's opponents has been an enduring feature of American democratic culture," Kloppenberg writes, and he believes that Obama is reviving it with patience and skill.

Democracy is always unfinished. It always means another battle, another conversation, ever-widening circles of participation and a bumpy road toward commonly shared goals. Democracy involves constant opportunity for self-correction. It can be brutally slow, but it remains the best form of governance possible precisely because it has to rely on deliberation and correction. Kloppenberg sees Obama working from pragmatist philosopher Richard Bernstein's principle of fallibilism: all positions, however passionately held, are subject to correction when seen in a bigger context or examined from another point of view.

Kloppenberberg sees this stance as especially important for understanding Obama's Christian faith. Unlike his European colleagues, he does not believe that Obama used his membership at Trinity United Church of Christ for political expediency. He believes that Obama cherishes and draws on Christian traditions and virtues and that he sees community connection and identity as fundamental to full humanity. At the same time, Kloppenberberg sees Obama as more of a natural skeptic than a true believer. The tradition of philosophical pragmatism is at work when Obama turns to personal narrative to articulate his faith instead of making declarations of theological certainty. He puts his religious views in context, sets them against the beliefs and commitments of others and tries to evaluate them fairly even from his own limited perspective.

The pursuit of democratic ideals requires transforming self-interest into public good. Balancing freedom and equality is critical because only equal citizens can be truly free, and yet individual paths must be respected. Democracies face many dangers in this difficult equation: "Self-reliance and independence can morph into selfishness and license, ambition into greed, patriotism into jingoism, faith into self-righteousness, and charity into paternalism." Navigating these waters means drawing people out of their shells and into the public arena, where their views can be challenged and tested by the views of others.

Kloppenberberg sees Obama's presidency as potentially hinging on his ability to correct the vast economic inequality that has overtaken the United States in the last 30 years. Obama, along with political actors from Thomas Jefferson to Franklin Roosevelt, knows that economic inequality is a significant threat to democracy, which requires the participation of empowered actors who are relatively equal to one another, people who are well educated and capable of critical thinking. Extreme concentrations of wealth undermine these dynamics. While Kloppenberberg thinks that Obama is aware of the significance of economic inequality, he remains uncertain of Obama's ability to transform it. "Will Obama resist, or will he succumb to a vision of political economy that places the interests of investment bankers over those of unemployed job seekers? His long-term legacy will depend on that answer."

Beyond the moment's political wrangling, Kloppenberberg believes that Obama is committed to the ongoing work of democracy, however difficult. He is driven by a belief that Americans can find common ground and work toward common solutions. We share, Obama writes, a "tradition based on the simple idea that we have a stake in one another, and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us

apart." In Kloppenberg's view, any revival that Obama can bring of that democratic tradition will be a gift.