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Third Time's the Charm for Obama in Midterms?

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Barack Obama's return to the campaign trail may be just what Republicans need with eight weeks left until the midterm elections.

Democrats are hoping the former president can energize voter blocs that didn't support Hillary Clinton in 2016. He will appear in campaign videos, lend his name to fundraising mailers, and give stump speeches. For a taste of what's to come, on Friday Mr. Obama called the Trump administration "a threat to democracy" and accused President Trump of "capitalizing on resentment" and pandering to white supremacists. Even the Washington press corps noted his brazenness. "The sight of a former president going directly after his successor," reported the Hill newspaper, "was like nothing previously seen in modern political history."

Mr. Obama is perpetuating the same political division he denounces, and it's possible that such rhetoric will have the intended effect of jazzing up Democratic voters down the stretch. But the potential danger for Democratic candidates is that Mr. Obama's prominent campaign presence may also rile up an even larger number of Trump supporters.

It's still anyone's guess whether Mr. Trump can convince members of his base to go to the polls and pull the lever for Republicans nationwide when he's not on the ballot. What we do know is that Mr. Obama has been recruited to do something he was never that good at while president: getting other Democrats elected.

Mr. Obama won the presidency in 2008, but Democrats lost their House majority in the 2010 midterms. He won re-election in 2012, but his party lost the Senate two years later. In both midterm elections, the president proved unable to transfer his personal appeal to other Democrats running for office. He fared no better in trying to pass the baton to Mrs. Clinton two years ago.

During the Obama era, Democrats in state government went the way of their counterparts in Congress. According to the National Conference of State Legislators, the Democrats lost a net 13 governorships and 816 state legislative seats on Mr. Obama's watch, which is more than any president's party since Eisenhower. As the political website FiveThirtyEight once observed, "Barack Obama won the White House, but Democrats lost the country."

Despite this track record, Democrats are turning to Mr. Obama because he remains the biggest star in the party. They're also turning to him because they believe his brand of identity politics is the best way to beat Mr. Trump. Earlier this summer, Mr. Obama implored his fellow Democrats

to “engage with people not only who look different but who hold different views.” Apparently, he had second thoughts.

Between now and Election Day, Mr. Obama will not spend a lot of time reaching out to voters who once supported him and later swung to Mr. Trump. Instead, his focus will be on those minorities and progressives who could not abide Mrs. Clinton and who have little interest in colorblind political appeals. The Democrats’ read on 2016 is that external circumstances beyond their control cost Mrs. Clinton the election. They continue to fault Russian interference and fake news, not a flawed campaign strategy that was more focused on Mr. Trump’s personal shortcomings than on the concerns of his supporters. Tapping Mr. Obama to help them over the finish line this year is in keep with this interpretation.

But several political scientists with whom I spoke this week viewed Mr. Obama as an answer to a problem that may not exist. They also warned that Democrats could be underestimating how divisive a figure the former president remains, despite being adored by the party faithful. “The attitudes of Trump supporters toward Obama haven’t really changed,” said Emily Ekins, director of polling at the Cato Institute, whose research has focused on Trump voters. “He’s still very polarizing among them. It’s possible that Obama could be a net benefit, but he could also have more of motivating effect on the conservative side.”

The unusually strong Democratic turnout in this year’s primary elections is the best indication that Democrats may not need the former president’s urging to vote this year. Even if Mr. Obama helps his party at the margins in a few swing districts, it’s long been clear that Mr. Trump alone is doing more than anyone in the country to motivate Democrats.

Mr. Obama’s re-emergence gives Mr. Trump a legitimate target that he didn’t have before. Hillary Clinton effectively ran for a third Obama term. The country, in a sense, rejected both of them, and Mr. Obama’s return is a reminder of that. How ironic would it be if the former president inadvertently continued to damage Democratic prospects even after leaving office?