*In a wide-ranging exit interview, NPR's Steve Inskeep asks President Obama about Russian interference in the U.S. election, executive power, the future of the Democratic party and his future role.*

**Steve Inskeep:** Thanks for joining us one more time; I really appreciate it.

President Obama: Great to be with you, Steve.

**Over my shoulder here is Theodore Roosevelt. In 1884, Theodore Roosevelt was frustrated about an election and wrote a letter saying the voice of the people might be the voice of God 51 times out of 100, but the other 49, it may be the voice of a devil or of a fool. Which do you think it was this time in 2016?**

Well, it's hard to assess because we know for example that Hillary won the popular vote by a sizable margin. We know that there are a substantial number of voters out there who not only voted for me twice but currently support me who also voted for Donald Trump.

So I think we have a scrambled political landscape right now. There are some things that we know are a challenge for Democrats — structural problems. For example, population distribution, oftentimes younger voters, minority voters, Democratic voters, are clustered in urban areas.

**And on the coasts, sure.**

And on the coasts, and so as a consequence you've got a situation where there're not only entire states but also big chunks of states where, if we're not showing up, if we're not in there making an argument, then we're going to lose. And we can lose badly, and that's what happened in this election.

**Is this just a matter of showing up, or is there something wrong with the argument?**

Well. No, well, I don't think there's something wrong with the core argument that the Democratic Party has made for years. And the reason we know that is because on the individual issues that Democrats talk about there's strong support. For example, the minimum wage. In every survey across the country, people support a higher minimum wage. There are clearly, though, failures on our part to give people in rural areas or in exurban areas, a sense day-to-day that we're fighting for them or connected to them.

Some of it is the prism through which they're seeing the political debate take place. They may know less about the work that my administration did on trying to promote collective bargaining or overtime rules. But they know a lot about the controversy around transgender bathrooms because it's more controversial, it attracts more attention.

I think that on something like the Affordable Care Act, you have people who are benefiting right now from Obamacare who either don't know it's Obamacare or consider that as a given and then end up voting on Second Amendment rights. So part of the reason it's important to show up, and when I say show up, I don't just mean during election time, but to be in there engaging and listening and being with people, is because it then builds trust and it gives you a better sense of how should you talk about issues in a way that feel salient and feel meaningful to people.

And I've said this before. Part of the reason I got elected twice — and part of the reason why in a lot of these communities I still have pretty strong support. It was the incredible benefit that I had in first running for the United States Senate in a state that has a lot of rural communities and has a downstate that typically is suspicious of Chicagoans in the city. And just sitting down in people's living rooms and VFW halls and at fish fries and listening to people.

And then in Iowa, spending months traveling around the state and hearing people's concerns and them hearing me and getting a sense that I get it. So that even during my low points in the presidency, when, you know, poll numbers were bad and news cycle was critical, people always felt as if I still cared about them — which meant that in 2012, I might still lose the overall vote and some of these counties or some of these voting districts, but I might lose 55-45 or 60-40 rather than 80-20. That's as a consequence of not only them seeing me in these places but it's also a consequence of me actually being there and hearing them.

**Were Democrats failing to do that at every level because your party has lost the majority of races at almost every level at this point?**

Well, you know, I think that we haven't done it as well as we need to. For example, we know that the Republicans, funded through organizations like the Koch brothers, have been very systematic at...

**Building from ground up.**

Building from the ground up and communicating to state legislators and financing school board races and public utility commission races, and, you know, I am a proud Democrat, but I do think that we have a bias towards national issues and international issues, and as a consequence I think we've ceded too much territory.

And I take some responsibility for that. You know, when I came into office, um, you know, we were just putting out fires. We were in a huge crisis situation. And so a lot of the organizing workthat we did during the campaign, we started to see right away didn't immediately translate to, wasn't immediately transferable to, congressional candidates. And more work would have needed to be done to just build up that structure and, you know, one of the big suggestions that I have for Democrats as I leave, and something that, you know, I have some ideas about is, how do we do more of that ground up building?

**Do you intend to be involved or just give advice?**

Well, I think it's appropriate for me to give advice because I need some sleep. And I've promised Michelle a nice vacation. My girls are getting old enough now where I'm clinging to those very last moments before they are out of the house.

**But there was a political organization that was built around you that still exists.**

Well, I'm less likely to get involved in all the nuts and bolts of electioneering. In that realm, I'm much more likely to just give advice. What I am interested in is just developing a whole new generation of talent. There are such incredible young people who not only worked on my campaign, but I've seen in advocacy groups. I've seen passionate about issues like climate change or conservation, criminal justice reform, you know, campaigns for a livable wage, or health insurance, and making sure that whatever resources, credibility, spotlight that I can bring to help them rise up.

That's something that I think I can do well, I think Michelle can do well. That's part of what makes me optimistic about our future because I know those young people are out there ready to lead, and when they start moving into more and more positions of authority, then I think the issues that I care most deeply about are going to be well served.

**You want to be a talent scout and build the bench that Democrats have admitted they don't have.**

Well, not only a talent scout but I think also, you know, a coach, a friend, somebody who can build on the incredible work that has already been done by young people and that to a large degree was responsible for getting me elected.

**Did the Russian hack of the Democratic National Committee — and other targets — actually affect the results of the election in your view?**

There's no doubt that it contributed to an atmosphere in which the only focus for weeks at a time, months at a time, were Hillary's e-mails, the Clinton Foundation, political gossip surrounding the DNC. And that whole swirl that ended up dominating the news meant that number one, issues weren't talked about a lot in the coverage. Huge policy differences were not debated and vetted. It also meant that, what I think would have been a big advantage for Hillary objectively, her experience, her knowledge, her outstanding reputation around the world as secretary of state, all that stuff got lost. And I think in that scrum, in that swirl, you know, Donald Trump and his celebrity and his ability to garner attention and obviously tap into a lot of the anxieties and fears that some voters have, I think, definitely made a difference.

Now know how you would, this ...

**Could you say the election could have turned out differently? That's what I want to know.**

Well, elections can always turn out differently. You never know which factors are gonna make a difference. But I have no doubt that it had some impact just based on the coverage. And by the way, I'm talking about mainstream news coverage. I'm not talking about a whole separate set of issues around fake news. I'm talking about what was in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and on the nightly news and even on NPR. And it meant that the field where I think Hillary shone, the field of substance and talking about how we're actually gonna increase people's wages and how we're gonna provide health care coverage to people and how we're gonna deal with major issues like climate change — that wasn't the field in which the campaign was ultimately decided.

**Was that the media's fault for focusing on the wrong things or the candidate's fault for not finding ways to get her message through?**

Steve, you know, I'd say that Monday morning quarterbacking is always easy to do. And what I've said already publicly, and I'll repeat: There is something about our current political ecosystem — and we're all part of it, the parties, the candidates, the media, the voters — that leads us to avoid going deep into the issues that are really gonna affect people's day-to-day lives, that put a premium on what here in the White House we call the shiny object: the faux scandals, the trumped up controversies, the, um, you know, insults that are flung back and forth. So that it ends up being covered like a reality show or — at best, a sporting event.

And we lose track of the fact that this has an impact on some family that's trying to send their kids to college, or some veteran who's trying to get their benefits, or whether or not some of our young people get sent to a far away land to fight a war. And if we don't, you know, do some hard reflection — all of us — on how that happens, then we're like a body that is already weakened and then becomes more vulnerable to foreign viruses, becomes more vulnerable to manipulation and demagoguery and that's something that I'm also going to be thinking a lot about in my afterlife, my post-presidency.

**You talked about this with the comedian** [**Trevor Noah the other day**](http://www.cc.com/video-clips/7wnyql/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-barack-obama%E2%80%94-russia-s-election-tampering%E2%80%94-new-challenges-to-democracy)**. And you said a number of things in a row. You observed that there had been contacts between members of Mr. Trump's staff and Russian officials. You noted that Trump benefited from the hacks. Your spokesman, Josh Earnest, has gone on to say this week that it's obvious that Trump knew what was going on. To what extent are you suggesting some kind of cooperation between the president-elect and Russian officials here?**

Well, I'm, I'm not suggesting cooperation at all. Keep in mind that those statements were in the context of everyone now acting surprised by the CIA assessment that this was done purposely to improve Trump's chances. And my only point was that shouldn't be treated as a blockbuster because that was the worst kept secret in this town.

Everybody understood that. It was reported on. Steve, if you go back and look at your stories, if you read any mainstream publication, you would see that if you have a hack of the DNC and a hack of Hillary Clinton's most senior advisers' e-mails, and those things are then released in drip-drip-drip fashion over the course of months, and that seem to generate consistently negative coverage despite the fact that there's nothing in there that's particularly controversial, that it's mostly just, as I said, political gossip or routine emails between folks who are working in a campaign environment, then it's a pretty clear inference that people would draw, and did draw, that this was helping the Trump campaign and it was hurting the Hillary campaign.

That doesn't mean that the Trump campaign was coordinating. It just means that they understood what everybody else understood, which was that this was not good for Hillary Clinton's campaign. And when you combine that with the fact that the president-elect has been very honest about his admiration for Putin and that he hopes to forge a more cooperative relationship with him and focus on the threat of Islamic terrorism, then my only point was we shouldn't now suddenly act as if this is a huge revelation.

In October, we said, after being very careful about it because we had no interest in appearing as if we were putting our thumbs on the scales, we did what was almost unprecedented which was, every intelligence agency in the federal government arrived at a consensus, that the Russians had hacked the DNC. And the information that was now being released was as a consequence of a decision by Russian intelligence and Russian officials at the highest levels.

So what the CIA is now assessing, which was it was done purposefully to tilt the election in the direction of a particular candidate, shouldn't be a surprise to anybody. And in fact isn't a surprise to anybody.

And as I said before, the issue now is not relitigating the election. The issue now is for us to learn lessons so that we don't have an ongoing situation in every election cycle where you have substantial foreign influence in our campaigns.