

The Roller-Coaster Election of 2008

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Theme: The year 2008 will see the most wide-open and interesting US Presidential election in decades.

Summary: The year 2008 will see the most open US Presidential election in decades as neither an incumbent President nor Vice-president is running. George W. Bush's unpopularity has handed Barack Obama and the Democrats an easy campaign slogan: 'Change'. In turn, John McCain, is not a typical Republican by any measure, which is why the race is relatively close. Nevertheless, America has changed less than some might believe. Its elites are still divided over social issues, its economy is a primary concern, its elections are still determined by the white working class voters and it can still summon up fascinating and marvellous characters during times of crisis.

Analysis: 'President Bush', wrote the *New York Times's* White House correspondent Peter Baker in August, 'eschews talk of legacy'. Even so, one particular Bush legacy cannot be in dispute. Neither Bush nor his Vice-president Richard Cheney is running for the presidency this year –Bush is term-limited and Cheney opted not to enter the race–. And this has directly contributed to 2008 being the most wide-open and interesting US Presidential election in decades. It is the first time since 1952 that neither an incumbent President nor Vice-president is running for another term. It is the first time in modern history that sitting senators are the presidential nominees of both parties. It is the just the second time in the last eight presidential elections that a Bush is not on the Republican ticket as President or Vice-president. And the established frontrunners in both parties in 2007 –Hillary Clinton on the Democratic side, Rudolph Giuliani on the Republican– lost, respectively, to a newcomer (Barack Obama) and an apostate (John McCain).

The 2008 election has had a way of upending expectations. One year ago, with the war in Iraq going badly, national security was the dominant issue in the campaign. Not anymore. Today Iraq is relatively stable and the US Financial sector is in chaos. One year ago, the noted political analyst Michael Barone envisioned an era of 'open-field politics' in which 'there are no permanent alliances, when new leaders arise with new strategies and tactics, when the voters, instead of forming themselves into two coherent and cohesive armies, wander about the field, attaching themselves to one band and then another'. Today the national polls and maps of swing states show a tight race not unlike the close presidential contests of 2000 and 2004. For the last year and a half, Barack Obama has deployed a message of 'change' to catapult from a freshman senator to the frontrunner for

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the American presidency. Today, in a brazen –one might say, audacious– move, Republican presidential nominee John McCain of Arizona has co-opted the ‘change’ message and is running on a platform of reform and opposition to the *status quo*. It has been a year of great reversals, when a party at its nadir of popularity (the GOP) nominated a candidate no conservative particularly liked (McCain) to run on a platform no one would have thought imaginable (‘Don’t like the direction of the country? Vote for the party that’s run it for the last eight years!’). What’s more, McCain may even win. Only in America.

Bush has shaped the 2008 campaign in a number of ways. Perhaps the most important is his unpopularity. The President has the highest disapproval ratings since the Gallup organisation began to measure the number. His approval ratings are negligible. These dismal numbers, combined with a record-setting number of Americans who believe their country is on the ‘wrong track’, handed the Democrats an easy campaign slogan: ‘Change’ versus ‘more of the same’. Conventional wisdom in Washington has been for some time that the Democrats would have to royally screw up in order to lose Election 2008. This is one reason why Barack Obama has remained relatively passive. His cool temperament lends itself to non-partisan appeals. When he speaks in his recent campaign advertisements, he does not mention Bush or McCain, Republicans or even Democrats. He does not have to. All Obama must do is present himself as a serious alternative to the Republican ticket. Meanwhile, while Obama takes the high road, campaign ads in which he does not appear make the case that McCain represents Bush’s third term.

It is a difficult case to make. McCain has a long history of breaking from his own party in search of bipartisan compromise. He voted against the Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003. He famously championed campaign finance reform with the liberal Democratic Senator Russell Feingold of Wisconsin. He went after corrupt Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff. He derailed a Boeing tanker contract because he thought it was a taxpayer rip-off. He broke with President Bush on climate change and the interrogation techniques used against enemy detainees. And he favours a liberal immigration reform that is at odds with most conservatives. McCain is not a typical Republican by any measure, which is why the race is relatively close. A typical Republican would be slaughtered in the current political environment.

Yet Obama has been relatively successful linking McCain to Bush’s economic programme and foreign policy. Moreover, McCain has made it easy for Obama to do this. For one, McCain reversed himself on the Bush tax cuts, pledging to renew and extend them if elected President. This won the confidence of economic conservatives. But it seriously cost him credibility, and allowed Obama to portray McCain as the champion of the rich, who are, as you may have noticed, not exactly popular these days.

On foreign policy, it has been good for the country –but perhaps bad for McCain– that after four years of dithering in Iraq, President Bush adopted the surge of troops and change in strategy that McCain had advocated since 2003. The troop surge has been an incredible success, reducing violence by considerable levels and allowing the first steps towards political reconciliation to take place. But that success also undercut McCain’s strength: national security. As Iraq receded from the front-page, it receded from voters’ minds as well. It became a secondary issue.

As has been the pattern in presidential elections following the collapse of the Soviet Empire, economics trumped national security. The 2002, 2004, and 2006 elections do not appear to have ushered in another era in which voters' primary concern is foreign policy. They seem instead to be an aberration. With Iraq on a path towards stability and relative peace, the voters have turned inwards. They do not like what they see. And they are therefore willing to support a relatively untested candidate whose economic programme is a stark contrast to the policies of the last eight years.

The financial crisis unfolding on Wall Street has given a considerable edge to Obama. Indeed, the race was tightening in the weeks prior to Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson's nationalisation of AIG, the world's largest insurer. That is no longer the case. At the time of writing, Obama has re-established a lead that is unlikely to fade as long as the nation's economy is in distress and politicians in Washington are unable to agree on, much less implement, an effective response.

It is the nature of that lead, however, that belies one of the myths surrounding this election. The myth is that 2008 is the 'most important election in our lifetimes' (partisans say this every election, of course) and will realign American politics in a liberal direction by introducing a huge new pool of voters to the electoral process. The Obama campaign, one of the most effective machines in recent memory, has gone to great lengths to register new voters among the three groups from which Obama draws the most support: African Americans, self-identified liberals and voters under 30 years old. The Obama high command reasons that these new voters will be enough to put Obama over the top. That is, in this view, Obama's support doesn't necessarily need to be broad in order for him to win the election; if support is deep enough among these three key groups, he should win. Everything else will be icing on the cake.

The problem with this theory is that it has been tried before... unsuccessfully. The Obama coalition resembles nothing so much as the coalition that George McGovern assembled in the 1972 presidential election – a coalition which got him the electoral votes of his home state and the District of Columbia and roughly 38% of the popular vote –. Suffice it to say that Obama does not want to be McGovern II. One may argue, as John Judis and Ruy Teixeira do in their book *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, that the groups which made up the McGovern coalition have over the years grown to such an extent that Democrats can win with those votes alone. Maybe. Another, more recent study by the centrist Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) argues that white voters without college degrees – otherwise known as the 'white working class' – have routinely determined the outcome of recent elections. 'Cutting into Republicans' traditional margin with these voters could well mean the difference between a broad Democratic triumph and a narrow Democratic defeat', the DLC authors write. Yet it is these same voters who have shown a reluctance to support Obama. That is why Obama has never risen beyond 50% support in the Gallup Daily Tracking Poll. It is why America remains, even after the tumultuous Bush presidency, a 50-50 nation.

It is certainly possible that Obama will win the white working class vote and therefore the presidency in a landslide. The perilous state of the US financial system and John McCain's unsteady response to the banking crisis makes this possible and perhaps, if the economy worsens still, even likely. And if this were to happen, then the election really would be transformative – a realignment towards the centre-left –. But not because the McGovern coalition had triumphed. It would be because the white-working class had

returned in large numbers to the Democratic Party, reconstituting the New Deal coalition of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Time will tell. In the meantime, we can ponder yet another great reversal of this constantly changing campaign. John McCain gained traction this summer because he found an issue and a message. The issue was offshore drilling; McCain, in an effort to address high gasoline prices, wanted to lift the ban that has forbidden offshore drilling for oil. The message was that Obama is a vapid celebrity who can't be trusted with governing the country. Now both McCain's issue and his message are gone. The issue vanished because congressional Democrats, knowing they were being pummeled on energy prices, allowed the ban to expire on 1 October. The message disappeared because McCain chose the Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his Vice-presidential nominee.

McCain chose the forty-something Palin, two years into her first term as Governor, because he wanted to shake up the race, and because his first choice, the Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman, the pro-choice 'Independent Democrat', most likely would have resulted in a split in the Republican party and therefore defeat. The social conservative Palin immediately energised the pro-life GOP grassroots. Her electric speech to the Republican National Convention was the most widely viewed convention address in American history. She drew thousands of onlookers to campaign rallies. But her critics raised serious questions about her experience, judgment and ability to step in as President should McCain become incapacitated. For a while McCain and Palin were able to effectively dodge such criticisms.

But the cocoon in which the McCain campaign insulated Palin was self-defeating. Concealing her from the press made each interview she gave more important than the last; and her (to be charitable) uneven performances in these interviews soon unnerved even her most ardent supporters. Obama, though his experience on the national stage is not much greater than Palin's, looks well-informed, thoughtful and more presidential. He's no longer the vapid celebrity, all style and no substance. Palin is.

Palin's emergence reasserts the importance religious conservatives play in the GOP coalition. Her pro-life politics and association with evangelical religious currents in American life appear to be the dividing line between her supporters and her opponents. Palin's fans see this mother of five as an authentic representative of middle-class US conservative values –hard-working, church-going, with a big family–. Her opponents see Palin as a closed-minded prude who wants to export small-town folkways to the rest of the country. In truth Palin is much more than either caricature may suggest. She is a talented politician who rose from the mayoralty of an Anchorage suburb to Alaska's Governor by bringing down the establishment in her own party and taking on the oil executives who tend to view Alaska as their personal fiefdom. She is by one measure the most popular Governor in the US. It takes considerable political skill, and a great deal of willness, to achieve these things at such a young age.

Why, then, do the caricatures persist? Because McCain's choice of Palin did more than subvert the message on which he had been running against Obama. It also injected cultural conflict into what had up until then been a relatively staid and placid campaign. The most vociferous debates in American politics take place between not the poor and the rich but between those rich who seek to re-establish so-called traditional mores in the public square, and those other rich who seek to protect the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion in all trimesters of pregnancy as well as the judicially

sanctioned rights of ethnic, sexual and religious minorities. Although he opposes *Roe*, McCain –unlike George W. Bush– has never been an outspoken sociocultural conservative and tends to keep his religion to himself. Hence, prior to Palin’s arrival, the campaign was fought over national security and economic policy –issue clusters that, while important, nevertheless do not give rise to the same passions as do abortion, embryonic stem cell research, same-sex marriage, religiosity in the public square and the like–. McCain’s choice of Palin guaranteed that these issues would come to the fore, and bring with them all the vitriol that has stained American politics over the last eight years.

Conclusion: To say this is not to suggest that McCain purposely inflamed the culture wars. All issues need to be debated fully, and both sides are guilty of rhetorical excesses. But it is to say that, in an election year dominated by the idea of ‘change’, America has changed less than some might believe: its elites are still riven by differences on major social issues; its economy is once again the primary concern of voters; its elections are still determined by the white working class voters who for the last two decades have remained relatively unattached from either political party; and it still has the political genius for summoning up fascinating and marvellous characters –the first African-American presidential nominee in history, a war hero who has made a career bucking his party– during times of crisis. What a country. And what a campaign.

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