

## Legendary Elections

The United States heard the promise of change throughout the previous election but did the American electorate truly appreciate the possible magnitude of this guarantee? Change has become an important institution of the electoral process. Although society today is becoming accustomed to heightened political interest and increasingly significant public understanding of key election concepts, the importance of the last two general elections must be evaluated in a historical context. After careful analysis of the 2004 and 2008 elections, many implications can be made regarding not only the current state of American democracy, but its future as well. While both of these elections were similar in nature, they also exhibit a gradual shift from the conventional campaign to one that is more adaptive to changes within the time prior to the election. By employing several key factors including the salient issues of each election, the strategy and campaigns of each candidate, and the amount of money raised for each campaign, political analysts and citizens alike can observe the unique differentiations of each election and also appreciate how the increasing value of party identification and voter participation, especially in younger generations, will influence the future of American democracy.

A candidate's ability to address the current salient issues to the general public is inevitably one the largest factors in any election, especially when the election is extremely close in the polls. When choosing what sort of issues to address to the general public, a candidate will most likely strive to stack the agenda with certain party-owned issues, or issues that the designated party perceives of having a comparative advantage, to emphasize his or her strengths and expose the weaknesses of the opponent (Damore 2004, 391). Although neither candidate had much choice as to what issues needed to be addressed during the 2004 presidential election, President George W. Bush implemented this tactic of issue ownership and used it to his favor by "playing toward his base" (Abramson et al. 2006, 139-140). An exit poll conducted by the National Election Pool discovered that 22% of the American electorate felt that "moral values" was the most important issue in their decision to vote between the two presidential candidates (2004). There were several discrepancies as to the legitimacy of this exit poll because of the phrasing for questions and ultimate abstraction of the issue choices (Langer and Cohen 2005). However, President Bush, in the duration of his

campaign, was able to capture the traditional voting tendencies of the Evangelical Protestants, giving him the ultimate advantage over his opponent, John Kerry.

With moral values as the key issue for the electorate, voters were not pressed to vote either prospectively or retrospectively, but rather a combination of both, especially in matters of foreign policy and the economy. In Change and Continuity in the 2004 Elections, this rare combination of the aforementioned voting patterns was explained by the importance of the individual voter's opinion of the issues, or the implication that there was the capability of the American electorate to participate in issue voting (Abramson et al. 2006, 146). The extreme polarizations between candidate issue policies included within the moral values category, such as abortion, gay marriage, etc., allowed for political extremists of both parties to enter the political threshold to an extent never before seen in an election of this magnitude, attempting to capture the independent vote. The ability of the individual to participate in issue voting ultimately led to an incumbent victory due to 80% supporting President Bush of the reported 22% of the voters who claimed that moral values was the key issue in making their decision at the voting booth (Pew Research Center 2004). With the economy in a relatively stable state, and the American voting public divided, incumbent runner President Bush was able to prevail in the election with a three million vote margin due to his ability to relate moral values with Americans who distinguished themselves as traditional conservatives.

Candidates of the 2008 presidential election also had a very limited amount of key issues to address in their respective agendas, though during this year, there would be a shift in the type of issues that would become salient to the American electorate from personal issues to those of an economic nature. According to a survey conducted by the National Election Pool, a staggering 63% of voters believed that the economy was the most important issue when making their decision as to who should be the next President of the United States (2008). The key difference between the two elections as to what issue the public felt was most important was the severity of the situation in which they were exposed.

With the economy shifting to a worsening state, ultimately to a recession, several interesting factors played into the constituent vote and whether it was deemed by a retrospective or prospective voting pattern. Ilya Somin discussed retrospective voting practices and the preconditions of such a voting pattern in his article, *When Ignorance Isn't Bliss: How Political Ignorance Threatens Democracy*:

“The retrospective-voting hypothesis holds that voters judge politicians by past performance rather than current promises. The argument is advanced that ‘retrospective voting requires far less of the voter than prospective voting’... As Fiorina puts it, retrospective can impose a kind of ‘rough justice’ on political leaders who have failed badly. If a policy failure is large, highly visible and easily attributable to a particular set of leaders, it is certainly likely that they will be voted out of office, as the elections of 1932, 1952, 1968, and 1980 suggest. Moreover, the bigger the failure, the less likely it is that the opposing party’s performance will be worse. The ability of voters to punish large and obvious policy failures by incumbents is one of the major advantages of democracy over dictatorship,” (2004, 12-13).

In the exit poll evaluated earlier, when asked “Would McCain continue the Bush Policies?” the electorate was in a 48% deadlock, however, in another question shortly following, voters were asked if they approved how President Bush was handling his job, and an astounding 71% disapproved (2008). With the words of Somin in mind, the failure of the Bush administration to rectify the problems of the economy (which was mainly to their fault) was substantial evidence for voters to hold the entire Republican party at fault and assume that the opposing Democratic party’s platform of change would ultimately lead to an improved state of economy. In a sense, McCain’s presidential aspirations were cut short by his close association to President Bush and his policies; this is a relationship that President-elect Obama emphasized during the campaign. Even though retrospective voting occurred to a large extent of votes cast in November, the future public policy in the United States and exposed fear for the state of the economy was also taken into consideration to create somewhat of a prospective twist to a retrospective reasoning.

The issues addressed in the 2004 and 2008 elections set themselves apart from the historical context merely because voters are overcoming the issue ignorance illustrated by Somin (2004) and are continuously increasing the knowledge of the general issue or adopting a notion of “issue publics,” in which voters are well informed about a few salient issues addressed (Borre 2001). Because the issues were mostly pre-determined, the electorate was dealt a much easier situation to become familiar with the issues and how each candidate stood as to how to resolve potential future shortcomings from the issues. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center maintained that the rising engagement throughout the election was especially relevant in the voting age from 18-29, with these younger voters watching election news very closely increasing from 2% in the election of 2000 to 28% and 40% in the elections of 2004 and 2008, respectively(2008). Even though popular programming like the Daily Show with Jon Stewart has influenced the younger, millennial generation, the fact is that the increase of interest of each candidate’s

position on the issues resulted in the overall increases in participation and excitement for each political party during the course of the election.

While issues are extremely important in any given election, they are merely the foundation for the campaign of each candidate. The strategy and correct implementation of that said strategy for each candidate is one of, if not the, most influential weapons for the candidates to persuade the American voting public. Between the beginning of March and the end of July, Bush's approval rating ranged between 46% and 53%. This range positioned Bush right on the "historical borderline between victory and defeat, confirming the prospects for a real contest that either major party could win (Abramson 2006, 37). This particular election would show the clear importance of effective campaign strategy due to the proximity of those supporting either candidate. According to Wayne, there are several different types of typical strategies exhibited by candidates during an election and the choice between the strategies often depends if there is an incumbent running (2008). It became clear that because this presidential race was close in the polls, each candidate would have to fight strongly for the "battleground states," or the states in which both campaigns would be concentrating the majority of the time, money, and efforts in order to claim victory in November. With historical pretext in mind, President Bush would simply continue to be "presidential" by staging presidential events, creating a mobile task force, have someone else handle aggressive attack ads and statements toward the opponent, and establish messages that emphasized positive moments within the last four years (Class Lecture, October 30, 2008). Kerry, on the other hand, would have to establish a message that he could do a better job through more effective policy-making. He would also be inclined to directly attack the policies of the incumbent, while at the same time reserving the job of attacking his personal character to someone else, and emphasizing the importance of the need for change. Early within the campaign, Kerry had a marginal lead over the president; but this lead was to be short-lived; presidential candidate John Kerry, unfortunately, learned about the importance of personal character in the presidential election and the possibility of its negative effect.

The Bush campaign provided the basis for the Republican revitalization experienced when negative campaigns launched by the campaign itself in West Virginia and the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, successfully tearing away at the legitimacy of Kerry's capability to run the White House by coining the term "flip-flopper" and attacking his merits as a soldier of the United States (Abramson 2006). Kerry

then rebounded with his exceptional performances during the various debates held through the pre-election period, attempting to keep his responses to a minimum in order to more effectively relate to the public (Granato and Wong 2004). One of the key elements in the 2004 election that determined the outcome was each candidate's perceptions of the War in Iraq and if he included this war in the efforts toward the war on terrorism. Bush contended that the both wars were indeed being fought for the same cause, while Kerry argued that the two were distinct from each other and the War in Iraq would undoubtedly harm the efforts in the war on terrorism (Abramson 2006, 43). According to the 2004 exit poll, 55% of Americans agreed with Bush, whereas only 42% of voters agreed with Kerry, ultimately leading to an even larger disparity between party platforms (Pew Research Center 2004). With the conclusion of the election, several key aspects took light as why Bush had claimed victory and if another Democratic candidate would have been able to construct a more productive campaign. The main attribute playing toward the benefit of President Bush when evaluating the campaigning strategies of both parties was the fact that the country was in a time of war and "all four wartime presidents who ran for office were re-elected (Abramson 2006). The weakness of Kerry, as the Democratic candidate after September 11 and as an easy target for personal attacks, and the mobilization of the Republican party within increasingly important swing states was enough to effectively discourage many voters to vote for the Democratic candidate. Many analysts would concur that the disadvantage of the democratic ballot would have applied to any candidate and that it could not be certain if a change in campaign would have lead to another outcome in the 2004 presidential election (Abramson 2006).

In the 2008 election, Barack Obama found victory through his incomparable mobilization of voting constituents, substantially higher amount of public exposure, and his overall charisma and ability to relate to the American middle-class. The Obama mobilization effect grounded its efforts when the AFL-CIO, the largest federation of unions with over ten million members, endorsed him as their choice for president, successfully beginning the largest grass-roots effort to elect a president that this country has ever seen (Obama election homepage). The use of campaign information directed towards an act of mobilization is dependent upon three different factors: the partisan biases of voters, expenditures of the campaign resources, and preferences of other voters (Holbrook and McClurg 2005). Although both candidates used many different methods of public advertising and outreach, including a high level of

internet media, McCain simply did not have the electoral stamina to match the efforts exhibited by the Obama campaign, mostly due to the mistrust of the Republican party from the past eight years of economic insecurity and disadvantaging portrayals of the United States to other countries under the Bush administration. With the mobilization of millions of voters behind the Democratic candidate, Obama was able to raise a substantial amount of money over McCain through the effective use of campaign fundraising. In fact, the inequality between both candidates' amount of funds raised was a staggering \$279 million in favor of Barack Obama, with 90% of the contributions donated by individuals! (Pew Research Center 2008). The large disparity inevitably resulted in Obama's ability to defeat McCain in not only total press coverage (73% compared to McCain's 62%) but also in public visibility (71% compared to McCain's dismal 11%) (Pew Research Center 2008). The charismatic nature of Obama was observable from his primary opposition with Hillary Clinton but became even more substantial with the induction of his slogan of "Change" slogan, which in turn only helped his ability to relate to the American electorate. In the exit poll immediately following the election, 57% of voters said that Obama was in touch with the general public, compared to the 39% who said the same for John McCain (Pew Research Center 2008). Overall, Barack Obama was able to unify the Democratic party following the heavily disputed primary and created the largest mobilization of voters ever before seen in a presidential election.

John McCain, although unsuccessful in the election, was successful in creating moments within his campaign that effectively improved his standing in the race against Obama. While constantly attacking Obama's inexperience within the legislature and lack of foreign policy, McCain also found aid when he appointed Governor of Alaska Sarah Palin as his running mate in an attempt to gain Hilary Clinton supporters and to gather support from right-wing conservatives who didn't feel as if McCain had been the best choice for the Republican candidate. Although her appointment led to a small surge of promise for the Republicans, in the 2008 exit poll, only 38% of the American voting public believed that Palin was fit to become president if necessary (Pew Research Center 2008). These attempts of party reunification and creating the illusion of Obama's inability to perform the duties of president may have been successful in a campaign against another opponent, but Obama's campaign foundation was simply too strong for Republicans to penetrate.

The importance of the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections for American democracy can be summarized by the electorate's increase in voter participation within campaigning activities, including monetary donations and volunteering at a local office, the beginning of a revitalized youth engagement throughout the entire election process and also the increasing party identification experienced by partisan voters. The continuing developments of technological advances within the United States, or globally for that matter, will only allow further options as to how to appropriately contribute to a campaign. The increasing number of constituents using the internet to either research the candidate's position on key issues or donate a contribution to their preferred candidate is evidence of increasing electoral participation (Pew Research Center 2008). With the millennial generation coming to age, youth engagement will affect the electoral process in a much more active way; this renewal of the youth interest started four years ago with the first of many millennial young adults casting their vote for the first time (Wayne 2008). Although it is impossible to fully appreciate all of the ways in which American democracy will change according to these elections, objective implications show that there have already been some noticeable shifts and there will certainly be more in the following years.

With the obvious shifts in political participation and party identification among American constituents, it is clear that the United States is in the middle of a real change. The issues and campaign strategies exhibited by the candidates of the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections raise questions as to what will come next. What the American public must realize is that change isn't always necessarily easy, but the change in the electoral process will ultimately lead to a more fundamental democratic procedure to elect the commander-in-chief. Rather than a fundamental change in the process, these elections have proven that the change is occurring within the individual and how he or she will adapt a vote in future years. Barack Obama said it best while he was addressing the nation:

"I'm asking you to believe. Not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington...I'm asking you to believe in yours."

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